

**SPIRITUAL FORMATION**  
**Christ's Keys for Successful Living**  
**Matthew 5:1-6**  
**Dr. George O. Wood**

We're going to be turning together to the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5-7. The apostle Paul prayed that Christ might be formed in us. The Sermon on the Mount really does form the personality of Jesus into our lives.

Years ago when the congregation was very small, Dr. Robert Frost one Sunday morning was on the platform and led the morning prayer. He prayed a petition that has always stuck in my consciousness. Simply "Lord, help them to build foundations that are strong enough to place the weight that you will later put upon them." I've thought of that many times in the building of our church, many times in the building of my life. Lord, form foundations strong enough in my life that are strong enough to support the weight.

It seems to me as I look on the Sermon on the Mount that's exactly what the Lord is doing. He's putting foundations in our life, forming us.

This sermon immediately follows Jesus' healing ministry. He healed people instantaneously. But the changing of the inner man involves a process of time and thus the Sermon on the Mount includes the possibility that we will be becoming Christ's people over a course of time. His emphasis as he begins in the Beatitudes is upon being. They are the B-attitudes. Later in the Sermon on the Mount he will talk about doing. But before we do anything, before we're called to activity, we are called to character. We are called to being. The Lord seeks to develop in our lives eight characteristics, which his own life involves.

The first characteristic, which the Lord wants in us, the behavior pattern, is that we might be persons who stand in the place of need. "*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*" The Greeks had two words they could employ for the word "poor." One word simply stood for the kind of poor that most of us have had a familiarity with where you're broke. Maybe you just got one of your utilities turned off this week. It's embarrassing and awful and you hate to be that broke. That's a kind of poverty.

A second kind of poverty is destitute poverty and the Greeks had a word for it. It stood for the kind of poverty that was so broke that you were destitute and you would not even make it through the day unless somebody came and gave you food or gave you shelter. You had a total inability of resources. No resources. That's the word that the Lord employs here about the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who are destitute poor. Blessed are those who are totally, totally broke. Broken spirit.

Why? What's he saying? He's saying that the poverty of spirit that he seeks is the kind of atmosphere in our life which realizes we have nothing at all at our disposal to get into God's kingdom. We don't have anything to purchase forgiveness of sins, anything that will gain us eternal life, nothing to give God that will give us fellowship with Him. It's all God's activity given to us. We, if we're to enter the kingdom of God, because the poor in spirit have the kingdom, must start from a position of total dependence upon God. God, you must give me salvation, you must give me forgiveness, you must give me everything if I'm to be in your kingdom.

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When we begin with that poverty of spirit Jesus says we enter into a condition of blessedness and we enter into a condition of being in the kingdom.

Not only is poverty of spirit to characterize the entrance into the kingdom, it's to characterize our continuance. Jesus himself modeled that poverty by depending upon the father and by being emptied. Jesus says when we come to the point where we say, "I'm rich. I'm increased in goods and I have need of nothing," we've come to a position we are no longer in an attitude and spirit of dependence upon him. Is my life marked by a genuine dependence upon the Lord to meet my deepest needs? Poor in spirit.

A second quality that the Lord wants developed in us is that we may feel sorrow over the presence of hurt and sin. "*Blessed are those who mourn.*" This beatitude doesn't really have anything to do with the expression of grief at funerals and such expression is normal and natural. It's a right human emotion. But yet at funerals both believers and non-believers grieve. The Lord isn't so much here talking about funerals. In fact he's not at all. He's talking about life in the kingdom. He is linking mourning to the kingdom and saying it involves personal sensitivity to what hurts God and what hurts ourselves and what hurts other people. It is the opposite of a spirit, which says, "I don't care what happens to them. They've got what's coming to them. It serves them right." It's an opposite attitude of nonchalance or passivity or non-involvement. Those who mourn are a Mother Teresa who takes dying children in her arms and loves them with the love of God. A parent who's concerned over the waywardness of a child and waits before the Lord that that child might come to themselves. A person who on their knees is sensitive to the hurts and needs of other people and identifies with that hurt and grief. A mourning person is person who has not locked themselves in a place where they are safely isolated from the world of pain and hurt and anger and regret. When we selfishly pursue our own gratification we move away from identifying with the man of sorrows. The man of tears. The man of compassion. But those who mourn, those who identify with hurt and need enter in to identify with the Son of God and receive comfort and help from his own hand. The mourning shall be comforted.

Am I a person who genuinely feels sorrow for the hurts I have caused and who empathizes with the hurts in others?

A third mark which Jesus seeks to develop in his disciples is that we practice the gentle strength of discipline. "*Blessed are the meek.*" How did I ever get "gentle strength of disciple" out of the word "meek"? From the original. "Meek" is sort of an insipid word and it's had terrible press. Meek, meaning mild, milquetoast, timid, weak, effeminate. Just the kind of person you don't want to be. Meek stands for patsy. Not a sought after word in our culture.

But in the Greek language "meek" was used in a number of ways in literature outside the New Testament. It's used to describe for example a wild stallion that has been caught and broken so that it now has its energies channeled. It no longer has its energy spurting off in all directions. It's energy of working, controlled energy. The word is used to describe a person that's between extremes. For example, there are some people who hoard all their money and others who spend all their money. A meek person is in the center that rightfully spends, and rightfully saves and has it in balance. Jesus uses that word here to describe the kingdom – blessed are the meek. Those who have their energies channeled and under discipline. The meek inheriting the earth only makes sense when we understand that it is the disciplined person, the channeled person who

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can run things well. That's exactly what the Lord is saying here about his disciples – blessed are those who know the gentle strength of disciple. Because meek can also have an understanding of gentleness to the word. Meek and lowly of heart.

So the Lord calls us to be these kinds of persons to bring our lives in submission and moderation. Am I seeking to become a disciplined person, a balanced person, a gentleperson?

The fourth quality, which Jesus wants in us is that we “...*hunger and thirst after righteousness.*” We can all recognize differing levels of hunger and thirst. The hunger and the thirst we have for a snack after 2 or 3 meals in day is considerably different than the hunger of a person whose only had one bowl of rice to eat all week long. Jesus in this beatitude is speaking of people who have a deeper hunger, a desperate hunger. A hunger that is so deep that it must be satisfied or death will eventuate.

So many times our life goals involve things that are outside of ourselves like a car or house or job or a financial investment of some kind. But every goal that I seek outside myself is a loseable goal. It may be taken from me. When everything is taken from me what have I left? Jesus says the person whose goals are in the right place is seeking first an inner development, an inward righteousness, an inward standing and integrity. He asks us to hunger and thirst for those things, which cannot be removed from us but are within us – righteousness. He says that they who seek righteousness will experience God and be satisfied.

Is my inner life marked by a deeper longing to experience God and to have his righteousness dwelling within me?

A fifth personality goal that Jesus sets before us is that we might learn to take on the shame of others. “*Blessed are the merciful.*” He's telling us to practice mercy, to identify with the different and the hurting and the merciful receive back what they give. They give mercy and they are given mercy.

Question for reflection: do I stand aloof from or do I identify with the shame and the needs in others?

A sixth mark of a disciple is one who welcomes cleansing in the inner life. “*Blessed are the pure in heart.*” What a difficulty we have struggling with that phrase. Often when we hear it we identify it with our own effort. “I've done everything I can do to get myself clean and it still hasn't worked. How can I ever see God if I'm not pure in heart?” But this beatitude is so beautifully placed. You'll find as you put the beatitudes into operation one by one in your life it creates the possibility for the later beatitudes to be happening. If you begin by moving into the kingdom by being poor in spirit and then you begin to identify with those who hurt, by being a mourner. If you move past that to the gentle strength of disciple and hunger and thirst after righteousness and begin to practice mercy, suddenly you find that your life is opening up in purity of heart to God and you're being cleansed by becoming the person that he wants. And no cleansing is a self-act. All cleansing is God's act toward us. The cleansing of the Holy Spirit. It reminds us when we have failed and helps us through the power of forgiveness and the blood of Christ to be cleansed from that sin.

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Some have said that the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives is equivalent to the tear duct gland in the eye. Sure impurities get in the eye but the tear duct gland is there to flush that impurity away. And sure in our Christian experience impurities land upon the landscape of our soul but the Holy Spirit is there to bring the flushing of the water of his word and the water of his forgiveness so that we become pure in heart. You know that when you commit an act of sin that you become distant from God in that moment. You do not see God. You do not feel like praising God. You don't feel like singing to God. You don't feel like praying or anything. You feel like distancing yourself because sin is an impurity and it removes us from seeing God. But when we come into God's presence through the cleansing of the Holy Spirit we see him. *"Blessed are the pure in heart, they will see God."*

A seventh personality goal the Lord desires for us is that we might be persons who make peace. *"Blessed are the peacemakers,"* Jesus says. Loving peace and making peace are not the same thing. You know that. Making peace involves moving away from your seat in the grandstand where all the peace lovers are and getting out on the field where the real activity takes place. And understanding what peacemaking involves is to first of all look at how Jesus made peace. To make peace is to settle disputes between people who are in disagreement. The first mission of Jesus as peacemaker is to end the hostility between God and us. The wrath of God that means that we are separated because of our sin and our inadequacy. Jesus comes to bridge that and to make peace between us and God. He becomes the reconciler. One of the first functions therefore we have as a peacemaker is to be a witness to others who do not know him that we might help them to bridge the gap between God and themselves.

Then peacemaking moves beyond that to being a peacemaker with others. To helping with the estrangement that takes place between husband and wife, parent and child, friend with friend, enemy with enemy. Bridging the gap and being one who makes peace. Am I a person who brings peace into troubled relationships and who seeks to bring the unsaved into reconciliation with God?

An eighth quality trait that Jesus wants in our lives is that we might learn to bear the cross. *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake."*

Over the years my attitude toward the beatitudes have changed considerably. I used to think of the beatitudes as something very innocuous, very harmless. When you read the beatitudes and see that the last beatitude is a recognition by Jesus that the person who walks in the character personality described in the first seven beatitudes is not a namby-pampy milquetoast individual, some sort of harmless person everybody dismisses as "nice." But the beatitudes form a kind of character that's dynamic. So dynamic that a person who wants to be hostile to God is threatened by a person whose life is thoroughly revolutionized by the character of Christ. Jesus knows that inevitable consequence of letting your values be shaped by him rather than shaped by your peers or the world is that there will be people who will not appreciate your profession of faith nor the development of your character and will not accept the way you are. In school or on the job with non-Christians they will mock your values. You will be persecuted for righteousness sake because you are putting into operation in your life the character of Christ.

Persecution in our culture is entirely different from what it is in other cultures. Persecution in our culture is like the persecution the apostles experienced at Athens (Acts 17). They're too sophisticated at Athens to ever take sticks and stones to anybody with a competing philosophy.

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They just laugh at them, sneer at them, ridicule them, down them. Jesus says, "*Blessed are you when people shall persecute you for righteousness sake for yours is the kingdom of heaven.*"

Am I a person who has God's approval on my conduct and life and that approval is more important than anyone else's?

Living with these beatitudes brings us into a condition of being blessed. That's the word that's used repeatedly here. What does this word "blessed" mean? It really means two things. It means that we are in a state of being approved or accepted by God. When God blesses us it means God is approving us, God is accepting us. God accepts the poor in spirit, those who mourn, etc.

The second thing about blessed is that it produces a responsive wellness within us. We become joyful because we learn that we are moving in God's approval and acceptance. Some translators have had a rough time with this word blessed because it's not used much in secular talk. They've substituted the word "happy." But the word "happy" really doesn't do it. Happy is from the old English root "hap" – something *happened* to us or we are *happy*. Most often when we use that word it describes something outside of us going on. I'm happy because things have happened to me. When nothing good happens to me then I am not happy.

"Blessed" goes way beyond that. It's not involved in circumstances because circumstances can't touch it. It's an inner quality in our life that remains constant and steady in the ups and downs of life. It's the knowingness of the deepness of the soul that God approves and accepts us and we can be satisfied with that.

We must be careful to not treat these beatitudes as laundry list or as a test list. These are not one of those disposable lists. These are the lines on a blueprint. These are essential for our development and the Lord wants us to take them into our heart and not only know them by heart but put them into operation in our life. Because these are the qualities he seeks to develop in us.

The person who lives in the manner that the Lord gives who is spiritually formed as the Lord wants us to be spiritually formed will salt the earth and light the world. Jesus says that's the influence of the people who live by the beatitudes. They're going to salt the earth and light the world. It's an audacious statement when he first gives it because on the hillside setting there with him is a group of Galilean nobodies. He says "*You are going to salt the earth and light the world.*" Incredible faith statement on the Lord's part. But he says it again to us today, to ordinary people. *You live by the pattern that I give you to live with and you'll salt your earth and you'll light your world.* The person that lives by my characteristics will dynamically effect change and will be blessed of God.

Our Father we thank you that we may come to you once more today and bring our character in line with what you teach us. Form your life in us Lord so that we may not lack any dimension of your personality that you seek to give us. We ask this in your name and we ask as we come now to this time of communion and look again at your sacrifice for us that our hearts may be made glad and we may know once again of the unconditional acceptance that you have given to us in your cross. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.