

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THE BEATITUDES AND THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT (2)

Matthew 5:1-12

We saw in our previous lesson that there is an internal unity in the Beatitudes, and we described this unity in terms of the relationship between the Beatitudes and the fruit of the Spirit. We mentioned that the Beatitudes have to do with the qualities of the heart of the Christian whereas the fruit of the Spirit deals with the work of the Holy Spirit in the person who has these qualities.

Grace and responsibility

Such a view of the Beatitudes might have caused some discomfort to certain people because it seems to imply that we have to try hard to get the qualities described in the Beatitudes in order to be able to reap the fruit of the Spirit. So we work it out ourselves. We try to be poor in spirit. We try to mourn for sin. We try to be meek, to hunger and thirst for righteousness. But how can that be? It seems to be so contrary to the gospel of God's grace. Because this is all human effort. Are we saying that by an effort of will, we can manage to become the blessed man that Jesus talks about in the Beatitudes? Where is the grace of God in all this? I thought that it is God who enables us to be poor in spirit. That it is God who helps us to be meek. That it is God who inspires us to thirst and hunger for righteousness.

So the question that we are asking is this. The spiritual qualities of the Beatitudes, are they qualities that we seek to attain or are they qualities that God puts in us? Isn't there a contradiction? This is a very good question and it highlights the importance of keeping a good balance between the grace of God and the responsibility of man.

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes. Now this Sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, should not be considered simply as a collection of ethical teaching that tells us how to be good. The Sermon on the Mount is a spiritual teaching that deals with the constitution of the kingdom of God. And there is a difference between ethical teaching and spiritual teaching. Ethical teaching tells you to be good and exhorts you to strive to be good. When somebody says to you, 'Don't do bad things; try to be good,' that is an ethical statement. Spiritual teaching is much more than that. It doesn't just tell you to be good. It is telling you to enter into a new way of life in which you are utterly changed and transformed by God's power.

Spiritual teaching is impossible to fulfill if God's power is not at work in you. In the kingdom of God, you will achieve nothing on your own. But we must also understand that God's power cannot be at work in you without your consent. God is not going to force you to be changed if you don't want the change to take place in your life. The Scripture constantly appeals to people as those who are able

and responsible to answer to God's grace. That is what we mean by having a balanced view of the grace of God in relation to the will of man.

Sowing to the Spirit

Now, let's examine carefully this question. We are going to return to the letter of Paul to the Galatians. After making his point about the fruit of the Spirit and the works of the flesh, he says in Galatians 6:7, *Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.* Here, Paul is simply saying that what you reap depends on what you sow. If you want to reap the fruit of the Spirit, you need to sow something to the Spirit. Then in the following verse, Paul develops this idea of reaping. He says in v. 8, *For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.* There are two possibilities in front of us, and depending on what you sow, you will get either life or death. If you sow to the flesh, you will reap corruption and death. But if you sow to the Spirit, you will reap eternal life.

Notice this. Who does the sowing? Is it God? No. It is man who sows. 'Whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.' It is man's responsibility to sow. And the kind of harvest that you will get in due time will depend on the nature of what you sowed. If you did not sow anything, don't expect to reap anything. Don't expect any spiritual growth either if you sow to the flesh. But if you sow to the Spirit, that is when you will reap the fruit of the Spirit. And how much you sow will determine the size of your harvest. Paul says in 2Corinthians 9:6, *He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.* Each person is responsible for what he sows and how much he sows. And God's power is fully available for the person who sows to the Spirit.

Striving for spiritual virtues

But what does it mean to sow to the Spirit? What does this spiritual action involve? Let's consider this question in the context of the Lord's own teaching. In Luke 13:24, Jesus says, *Strive to enter through the narrow gate.* The verb 'to strive' means 'to labour fervently,' 'to exert to the fullest,' or 'to endeavour with strenuous zeal.' Entrance into the kingdom of God involves this kind of attitude, a whole-hearted dedication and effort. The point is not that a person can be saved by working hard. The emphasis is on the attitude of the heart. Such a person sets himself totally upon God for salvation. He diligently seeks God and refuses to be committed to anything else.

The Beatitudes describe what every citizen of the kingdom of God ought to be in terms of their spiritual qualities. It is the picture of the Christian in the ideal and we are to strive, by God's grace, to become such a person. In that sense, we aim to be poor in spirit. We aim to mourn for sins. We aim to be merciful. These qualities become an aim in our life. We want them to be part of our being.

Paul likes to use the Greek word *dioko*, often translated by the word 'pursue.' This verb expresses a certain intensity in which, for example, you are hunting down a prey. You are pursuing it relentlessly. And so, you run as fast as you can so that you don't lose the prey. In Philippians 3:12, Paul says, *Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on (dioko) toward the mark.* Do you see the intensity of Paul's determination? He is pressing forward, striving in the Spirit toward the goal.

Now, that is sowing to the Spirit. The Beatitudes describe the characteristics of the perfect Christian, and every disciple of Christ should press on whole-heartedly toward that mark. By the grace of God, I shall pursue with zeal to be poor in spirit. I shall come to God like a spiritual beggar who is completely depending upon God and wholly committed to Him. If you have this kind of attitude, God will fill you with all His fullness because you have opened the door of your heart to Him. You have

sown the spiritual attitude which allows God to give you the spiritual harvest. And this is true for all the other Beatitudes.

In the Sermon on the Mount, the Lord Jesus is teaching us what we are to sow. He is showing us what we are to pursue. You see, God's grace is available for anyone who is willing to accept it in faith. But you must have the right attitude. If you refuse to open your heart to God, the Holy Spirit cannot empower you to become the kind of person that the Lord Jesus speaks about in the Beatitudes. It says in Matthew 13:58 that Jesus did not do many mighty works in Nazareth *because of their unbelief*. The unbelief of the people of Nazareth held back the grace of God by becoming a hindrance to His favors. We must, in faith, aim to be the kind of person that is described in the Beatitudes. We must desire to become a Christian characterized by these spiritual qualities. And as we open our hearts to God, as we sow to the Spirit, God will fill us with all His fullness.

Both a commandment and a work of the Holy Spirit

Having said all this, we can now answer our initial question, i.e., How can we strive for something as spiritual as the Beatitudes? How can we say that God enables us to become the person described in the Beatitudes, and at the same, that we must aim to have these qualities? There seems to be an obvious contradiction. Well, not too fast.

Take for example the fruit of the Spirit. The Bible tells us that the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, and so on so forth. But although it is a fruit of the Spirit, it is still a command to us. 'You shall love the Lord your God. You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Jesus says in John 13:34, *A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another.* Love is a command that we must strive to obey. But on the other hand, it is something that God enables us to do.

We find the same thing in the words of Paul. He is the one who tells us that love is a fruit of the Spirit. But Paul is also the one who tells us that love is something that we must pursue. In 1Corinthians 14:1, he says, *Make love your aim.* Love is your goal. You pursue it. In 2Timothy 2:22, Paul says to Timothy, *Flee also youthful lusts; but pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace.* Paul is asking Timothy to make these things his goal, to strive for the fruit of the Spirit. So there is God's work and our desiring of God's work in us, two factors that constantly interact with each other.

'Save yourselves'

The same principle applies to the matter of salvation. We all know that the Scripture tells us that it is God who saves man. Man does not have the capacity to save himself from the righteous judgement of God. Now, look at Acts 2:40. What does it say? *And he testified with many other words and exhorted them, saying, Save yourselves from this crooked generation.* The apostle Peter was preaching to the people in Jerusalem and at the end of his sermon, he says to them, *Save yourselves from this crooked generation.* Now, how can Peter say that? Who saves? Is it God who saves us or do we save ourselves? Well, again, there is no contradiction here. There should be no doubt in our minds that it is God who saves us. But He doesn't save us in spite of what we think, against our own will. If we decide that we don't want that salvation, God is not going to try save us by force. When God saves man, it is always with his agreement.

In this passage, when Peter tells the people to 'save themselves,' he is actually stressing man's responsibility in salvation. He is telling them about the response that they should have in order to be saved by God. How do we save ourselves then? Let's return to Peter's sermon. Just before he makes this statement, 'Save yourselves,' he says in Acts 2:38, *Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* Repent, that's what we have to do. God does not save us and cannot save without our repentance.

And then, if you look at the beginning of Peter's sermon, we are told about another thing that we need to do. We are to call upon the name of the Lord. Peter begins his message by quoting the prophet Joel and the last sentence of that quotation reads like this: *And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved* (Acts 2:21, from Joel 2:32). That is something else that we must do if God is to save us. So we 'save ourselves' by availing ourselves of God's gift of salvation. And we avail ourselves of His salvation through repentance and through calling upon the name of the Lord. That is our part in the process of salvation.

We can picture this point in this way. God stretches out His hand to save us. His free gift of salvation is offered to us. But in order to benefit from God's offer, we must stretch out our arm and take hold of His hand and of His gift. That is the act of faith. Both elements are involved in salvation.

We mentioned earlier in this lesson these words of Jesus: *Strive to enter through the narrow gate* (Luke 13:24) for the difficult way leads to life (Matthew 7:14). God, in His grace, has opened the door of His kingdom. He has made life available to us in Christ Jesus. But God doesn't push us through the door. We must desire to have this life. We must strive to enter in through the door. So we must be careful to keep these 2 factors in balance, i.e., God's grace, and our responsibility to respond to His grace. We should not emphasize grace in such a way that man has no kind of responsibility at all. And we should not emphasize man's responsibility to such an extent that grace doesn't appear anywhere at all. We must avoid both these errors.

Depending on God's strength

In the Scriptures, it is God who takes the initiative in making His grace available for the salvation of man. It is God who presents to us eternal life in Christ Jesus. Without God's initiative, no man could be saved. But God doesn't expect us to be entirely passive. We must take hold of His grace. It is our responsibility to accept that grace, to possess it, to make it our own. God has given us a spiritual direction and a goal in life, and He has given us the strength to press toward the mark. That is what Paul means when he says in Philippians, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*. I seek to attain that goal and God's grace enables me to do it.

Our desiring and God's enabling is also seen in the letter of Paul to the Romans, and more specifically in Romans 7:18: *For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find*. Paul says that he can will what is good. He can discern what is good and he desires to have it. But his problem lies in the fact that he cannot do it. He knows what is good, but when it comes to do it, he finds that he has no strength of himself to do the good that he desires. And this is precisely where God's grace comes in. I cannot do it myself, but God can make me do it. That's what he says in Romans 7:24-25.

*Romans 7:24. O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?
25 I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord. So then I of myself with the mind, indeed, serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin.*

I thank God, that through Jesus Christ, I can do the good that I desire. And that's why Paul can say in Philippians, *I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me*. The grace of God provides the strength that the Christian can rely on.

Coming back to the Beatitudes, we can desire to be this blessed man that the Lord Jesus speaks about. Maybe God was talking to you through your study of His word, or through the preaching of the Bible, or through some hard experiences. You see how bad sin is. Then you feel that you desire righteousness. You desire meekness. You desire purity of heart. But although the desire is

there, you realize that these spiritual qualities are beyond your reach. You just can't be like that. And you realize also how much you must depend on God's grace and God's power.

The Beatitudes, a subject for prayer

So we see that both these aspects of the Christian life are placed side by side in the Scriptures. That is why Paul is able to say on a one hand that love is a fruit of the Spirit, and on the other hand, he telling us that we must pursue love, that we must make love our aim. We can say the same thing about the Beatitudes. On a one hand, God enables us to become this type of person, poor in spirit, pure in heart, merciful, etc. But it is for us to desire intensely these qualities, to press toward that mark. God is not going to make us to be poor in spirit if we don't even have the sincere desire to be poor in spirit. We don't suddenly become all merciful on the day we decide to follow Christ. God's grace is effectual in a heart that seeks to obey God's commandments. Conversely, a rebellious heart will quench His Spirit.

In His teaching on the Beatitudes, the Lord Jesus sets forth the characteristics of the citizens of the kingdom of God. Every subject of the kingdom of heaven must long for these qualities. Every Christian must desire to be this kind of person. And if you are truly desirous of these spiritual qualities, you will make the Beatitudes a subject for prayer. Have you ever thought about it in this way, that the Beatitudes is something to pray for? Pray that God will enable us to be poor in spirit. Pray that God will open our eyes so that we can see sin as it really is, and that we mourn over it. Pray that God will make us to be hungry and thirsty for righteousness. Pray that God would be pleased to give us the grace to become this kind of a person, a blessed person in God's eyes.

In our next lesson, we will study the Beatitudes in the context of prayer. And we will see the connection between the Beatitudes and the Lord's Prayer.