

# Christ's Portrait of the Christian

*Rev. B. Elshout*

## **The First Seven Beatitudes: A Perfect Description**

In Matthew 4 we read that Jesus went about all Galilee teaching in synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom. Neither before nor since has anyone preached the gospel in such an extraordinary fashion. After all, the Lord Jesus Christ Himself is the embodiment of the gospel—the glad tidings of the Living Word of God (John 1:1).

What a profoundly unique experience it must have been to be in His audience—to hear the Living Word of God expounding His own written word! Such was the privilege of the multitude that heard Him explain the Old Testament Scriptures that He had inspired by His Spirit, an exposition commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5–7).

Before we explore the opening verses of this sermon (Matt. 5:3–9), we need to recognize Jesus' intention and purpose for preaching it. We need to remember that the great mission for which His Father had sent Him into the world was always foremost on His mind (John 3:17; 4:34). During His earthly ministry, He was profoundly conscious of the fact that He had come into this world to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10) and to give His life as a ransom for many (Matt. 20:28).

The Sermon on the Mount derives its name from the location where Christ preached it, on a slight elevation on the northwestern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Thus, positioning Himself so that His audience could hear Him well, the Lord Jesus Christ began to deliver this remarkable sermon, the lengthiest of His recorded discourses in the New Testament. It is commonly referred to as the greatest sermon ever preached, but there appears to be a prevailing misunderstanding regarding His objective in preaching it. Some maintain that Jesus' only objective was to provide His audience with in-depth instruction regarding biblical morality. Although there is much instruction in this sermon about biblical morality (the spirituality of the moral law), Christ had a far more compelling motive.

As we stated earlier, “the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). Thus, when Jesus walked among men and addressed an audience, He was profoundly aware of being surrounded by perishing sinners who needed to believe on Him for their salvation. Sadly, the majority of His countrymen were oblivious to their need. They were unaware that their entire conduct failed to measure up to God's standard of impeccable righteousness.

To capture their attention, the Lord Jesus made a bold pronouncement in Matthew 5:20: “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” This was a stunning statement indeed! The ignorant and misguided people whom He was addressing believed that their spiritual leaders—the Pharisees and scribes—had achieved the highest level of spirituality and were the ultimate standard of righteousness. Now Jesus tells them that their righteousness falls short of God's impeccable standard. He confronts them with the unsettling truth that if they have nothing better than the flawed righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven. As Jesus progresses in the proclamation of this sermon,

He begins to expound the law of God. He does so for one purpose: to confront these sons and daughters of Abraham with the fact that they were transgressors of the law. Why was this so necessary?

Unless they perceived themselves as transgressors, they would never understand their need of a savior. Jesus therefore goes beyond the letter of the law and sets before them the spirituality of the law. He did so, for instance, by saying, “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart” (Matt. 5:27–28).

Having been taught erroneously by the scribes and Pharisees, these people believed that as long as one observes the letter of the law—as long as one’s life is in order outwardly—all is well. The Lord Jesus therefore zeroes in on this erroneous teaching by saying, “Though you may have heard this from your teachers, let Me now tell you what the law really means.” He wanted them to recognize that to be righteous before God, their inner motives and inclinations needed to conform perfectly to His law.

The Christ who is speaking here is none other than the Lawgiver Himself. As the Angel of the covenant, He spoke at Mount Sinai and gave the law to His people in Israel (Acts 7:38). As the Lawgiver, Christ is thus expounding His own law to these men and women, who needed to understand that in their innermost being they were law breakers.

Only when we understand this experientially will we understand our need for a savior. Only then will we value a gospel that proclaims the glad tidings that we have a savior who, on behalf of law breakers such as ourselves, has obeyed His own law perfectly, has paid the full penalty for our breaking it, and has silenced its curse. His righteousness alone exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees! Only by believing on Him can law breakers be reconciled with God.

With these general observations in mind, let us now focus on the remarkable introduction of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus begins by describing and defining who the citizens of His kingdom are. Again, the ignorance of His audience moved Him to do so. These people had an entirely wrong perception of who the Messiah would be. They were looking for an earthly king, a Messiah who would deliver them from the bondage of the Romans. Yet Jesus had not come to deliver them from the Romans but rather to deliver His people from their sins (Matt. 1:21). He wanted to teach them immediately that His kingdom is entirely different from any earthly kingdom—it is spiritual, and its citizens have spiritual rather than political qualifications.

Jesus therefore proceeds by describing the citizens of His kingdom in a way that was so contrary to any common understanding of what constituted blessedness. These people thought, “If only I could be either a Pharisee or a scribe, I would be blessed indeed. If only I would possess great wealth, I would be blessed indeed.” How many are there today who think, “If only I could have all the pleasure, all the leisure, or all the possessions I want. If only I could have power and prestige, I would be happy and blessed indeed!”

However, Jesus here tells us in dramatically different terms what real blessedness looks like. More than that, He says we cannot consider ourselves blessed or happy unless we match His description of the genuine citizens of His kingdom. In these opening verses, Christ is therefore defining for us the distinguishing traits of a true believer.

Following this chapter, we will devote a chapter to each of the first seven Beatitudes. But before doing so we will first examine the entire and composite portrait that Jesus gives us in these seven beatitudes, beginning with “Blessed are the poor” and ending with “Blessed are the peacemakers.” This comprehensive portrait (Matt. 5:3–9) is followed by a description of how an ungodly world will respond to the citizens of God’s spiritual kingdom. The ungodly will persecute genuine believers and will revile them and speak all manner of evil about them (Matt. 5:10–12).

Before giving you a bird’s-eye perspective of the first seven beatitudes, I first wish to address their remarkable arrangement. To use a common analogy, we first need to consider what the forest looks like before examining the individual trees. A remarkable structure emerges upon examining the interrelatedness of these beatitudes. Regarding this structure, I wish to posit the premise that the fourth beatitude—the central beatitude of this seven beatitude structure—represents the heart of Christian experience. In a subsequent chapter about the fourth beatitude, I will endeavor to supply the exegetical support for this premise.

Presently, we will therefore first briefly consider the core activity of Christian experience as expressed in verse six: hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Second, we will consider the internal disposition of the Christian, found in verses three through five, that results in this hungering and thirsting. Third, we will examine the external disposition of the Christian. He who is filled with the righteousness of which verse six speaks will manifest this by the fruits of his life. We will see, as Scripture says, that such will be merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers.

Matthew 5:3–9 is the preeminent passage in all of Scripture to teach us what a Christian looks like. It is a flawless verbal portrait drawn by the Living Word Himself. It is not accidental that this portrait consists of seven components, for the biblical number seven is the number of perfection. We may therefore conclude that verses three through nine set before us a perfect portrayal of every believer that ever has lived or will live until Christ returns.

Having said that, however, we need to understand that we cannot simply pick and choose the individual components of this spiritual portrait, saying, “Well, that pertains to me, and perhaps that also pertains to me.” Rather, we need to understand that these seven marks are true at all times and at all seasons in the life of every believer—although not necessarily to the same extent. In some believers we see the features of this portrait more clearly than in others—just as there may be both clear and blurry photographs of a given individual. Even when you look at a blurry photograph, you will still be able to determine who is being depicted. This spiritual portrait thus consists of seven components that constitute an organic whole.

We also need to realize that the order in which Christ gives us the components of this portrait is not arbitrary. In other words, we cannot take these seven marks, juggle them, and then present them in just any fashion. Rather, Christ articulates these traits in a very deliberate, precise, and cumulative order: one beatitude presumes the previous one and anticipates the next.

Thus, they who are poor in spirit will mourn, they who mourn will be meek, they who exhibit all three will hunger and thirst after righteousness. Upon being filled with the righteousness they seek, they will be merciful, pure in heart, and peacemakers.

The seventh beatitude therefore most appropriately concludes in verse nine: “They shall be called the children of God.” Today we would say that this is the “bottom

line.” Jesus is saying, “Those of whom this is true, and thus exhibit all of these marks, they, and they alone, shall be called the children of God.” The Greek word rendered as “children” in verse nine is a word that means “They shall reflect the character of God.” It is as though He is saying, “They will prove themselves to be the sons and daughters of the living God.”

Let us first look at the core experiential trait of the citizens of God’s kingdom, for grasping its meaning is crucial to understanding the rest. Jesus says, “Blessed [that is, supremely happy, supremely blessed] are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness.” We all understand what it means to be hungry and thirsty. They are two of the most fundamental human longings, and God created us in such a way that we will be compelled to meet these basic needs. We cannot live unless those desires are met.

Jesus thus uses an analogy that is relatable to everyone. He is saying that the people of His kingdom, the children of God, will be men and women who hunger and thirst—not after physical things but rather after righteousness. In other words, a true Christian is someone who cannot be satisfied unless he obtains that righteousness for which he yearns so intensely.

What does Jesus mean by the word *righteousness*? Its literal meaning is “that which is right.” God defines for us in His Word what is right and wrong. Jesus’ standard of that which is right is not measured by human standards. He therefore said, “Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven.” Therefore, righteousness is not what is right by human standards but rather what is right by God’s standard.

Christians yearn for that righteousness in a twofold way: they will yearn to be in a right relationship with God and to live a life that is right—one that conforms to God’s righteous standard. A true Christian cannot be satisfied unless he knows within his own soul that he is reconciled with God. However, since he loves God, he will also desire to live a right life—not to earn God’s favor but rather as an expression of love for God.

Can you identify with that? This inner yearning is absolutely fundamental to true Christianity. Do you understand in some measure what it means to hunger and thirst after righteousness—that is, to yearn to be reconciled with God and to live a life that is pleasing to Him?

Jesus here brilliantly merges these two fundamental aspects of the Christian life: a yearning for *imputed* righteousness and for *imparted* righteousness. Imputed righteousness is that righteousness which God credits to my bankrupt account as a sinner—namely, the righteousness of His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. However, we also need imparted righteousness. We need the work of the Holy Spirit enabling and equipping us to live a life that is pleasing and honoring to God. Or to put it differently, a true believer longs to be redeemed by and conformed to Christ: to be united to Him and be like Him.

That is the essence of the Christian life! To put it in theological terms, the Christian hungers and thirsts for justification and sanctification. Both of these foundational components of salvation are combined in this word *righteousness*.

And this is not something a Christian desires only once. Rather, he yearns for this his entire life. It is significant that all the beatitudes are written in the present tense, which in Greek expresses an activity that is ongoing, continual, and/or repetitive. In these beatitudes, Jesus is therefore saying, “Blessed are they who are continually poor in spirit, who continually mourn, who are continually meek, who continually hunger and

thirst after righteousness, who are continually merciful, who are continually pure in heart, and who are continually peacemakers.” This is descriptive of a Christian’s disposition during his entire lifetime.

The question now needs to be asked, “What produces this spiritual hunger and thirst? What causes sinners to seek righteousness?” Naturally we have no such desire. By nature we seek for our blessedness in everything other than this righteousness, and we are ignorant of our need of it. Therefore, the very first thing Jesus mentions is being poor in spirit. He says, “Blessed are they who are spiritually poor.” As we will see when we examine this beatitude in depth, the poverty that Jesus describes here is a radical kind of poverty—the state of a man who literally does not have a penny in his pocket.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Why does Jesus begin here? He does so for the simple reason that without an experiential awareness of our spiritual poverty, we will never hunger and thirst after His righteousness. This prompted Jesus to say, “They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick” (Matt. 9:12). He therefore posits that blessed or happy are they who recognize their spiritual bankruptcy before God. How happy are they, indeed, because they realize that they need an alien righteousness outside of themselves—they need a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ! When the Holy Spirit works savingly in the heart, He will always begin by confronting us with our spiritual bankruptcy. If you cannot relate to that, you are missing the most foundational mark of a Christian.

Christ is saying here that this is always true—even for a man like the apostle Paul, who groaned and said, “Oh wretched man that I am!” (Rom. 7:24). He was deeply conscious of his spiritual poverty, which resulted in experiential mourning. As stated earlier, these beatitudes are cumulative, and this mourning represents the Christian’s emotional response to his spiritual poverty. In other words, recognition of one’s spiritual bankruptcy is not something that a Christian takes lightly. It causes him to grieve deeply.

Again, Christ chooses His words carefully, for the word *mourning* used here describes the grief over losing a loved one. It is reflective of a loving disposition. The reason the Christian grieves and mourns over his spiritual poverty is because the love of God has been shed abroad in his heart (Rom. 5:5). When that happens, sin becomes so ugly and vile! What a grievous matter it then will become to us that we are indeed poor in spirit! The psalmist says, “I am poor and sorrowful” (Ps. 69:29). The two are connected. Thus, there will never be such a thing as a Christian who boasts of his poverty. Rather, a true Christian grieves over it.

And that leads us to the next beatitude, “Blessed are the meek.” *Meekness* is a rather difficult word to define, but you can think of it as the disposition of a person who knows his proper place before God. Thus, a Christian is humbled by his poverty of spirit, and that painful recognition will cause him to bow and surrender before God and to realize who he is in His presence.

We frequently encounter that meekness in Scripture. For example, Moses had an explosive temper, but after forty years of dwelling in the wilderness, his fiery spirit was broken. God dealt with him in such a way that he became the meekest man on earth. In Ephesians 4:1–2, the apostle Paul also speaks of that meekness: “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness.”

Thus, a meek person is someone who sees himself as God sees him, prompting him to take his proper place before God and to humble himself in dust and ashes. A meek person recognizes the gravity of his sin and that he is deserving of God's displeasure and disfavor. We hear this meekness in the confession of David in Psalm 51:4: "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight."

A recognition of one's spiritual poverty, the mourning and grieving over that poverty, and the humbling of oneself before God will culminate in a hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Such experiential awareness will cause us to realize that as spiritually bankrupt sinners, we cannot be made right with God with anything that comes from ourselves. We need a righteousness outside of ourselves. That realization will cause the Lord Jesus Christ to become, and continue to be, so very precious.

These spiritual realities are present at the beginning of one's spiritual life and will continue until death. A believer never gets beyond being a poor sinner in himself—never. As long as we live, we will mourn over sin. As long as we live, we will need to humble ourselves before God. However, that will lead us time and again to the remedy—the Lord Jesus Christ—and that will make Him increasingly precious to our souls.

All of this is implied when we say that the Holy Spirit "makes room in our hearts for Christ." This is what it looks like! The Holy Spirit engages in this emptying work throughout the life of the believer. When a believer by renewal takes refuge to Christ, what is it that propels him to go to Him, look to Him, and rest in Him? It is the experiential realization (not just intellectually!) that he is poor in spirit, and he mourns over that. He humbles himself before God, looks outside himself, and yearns—hungers and thirsts—after the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ.

All who have such a hunger and thirst for righteousness will also "be filled." The word *filled* is rich indeed. Christ says that when you hunger and thirst after righteousness, your soul shall be filled to overflowing. We know that those who believe in, trust, and are united to Christ become like Him. That affirms the genuineness of our Christianity. Our faith is not real unless in some measure we begin to resemble Him in how we think, speak, and behave. Thus, there is an inseparable connection between imputed and imparted righteousness—the righteousness that renders me acceptable to God and the righteousness by which I demonstrate that I am righteous. God's Word therefore declares that "he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous" (1 John 3:7).

Christ then proceeds to describe how this grace manifests itself, highlighting the essential components of a Christian life. The citizens of His kingdom are a merciful and compassionate people because they themselves are the recipients of God's mercy. When we have become acquainted with our own spiritual need, we will have a burden for the spiritual needs of others. For instance, when the Lord saves a father or mother, they will be burdened with the spiritual need of their children as never before. Why? Having learned what their own spiritual needs are, they now understand their children's spiritual needs. Being the recipients of mercy makes us merciful and compassionate toward others.

One striking feature of the structure of the Beatitudes is the direct parallel between the external and internal disposition of the Christian. If you were to take a sheet of paper and list the first three beatitudes on the left side; then place the fourth, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, in the middle; and finally list the last three beatitudes on the right side, doing so in parallel fashion with the first three, you would

discover the obvious connection between the internal and external marks of grace: they who are merciful will recognize their own spiritual poverty. They will understand this experientially, and that makes them merciful and cognizant of the spiritual poverty of others.

Jesus then posits that the citizens of His kingdom are also pure in heart, thereby teaching that the moral purity of a true believer's life proceeds from within. In other words, a true Christian is not a Pharisee who cares only about keeping the outside of the cup clean. Keeping the outside pure was all that mattered to the Pharisees. Christ confronts this by teaching that the citizens of His kingdom have hearts that have been made pure by the work of the great Sanctifier and Purifier, the Holy Spirit.

Again, there is a parallel with the inner disposition of true Christians. They who mourn over sin are also pure in heart. These two marks are inseparable. We thus observe that one's inward disposition will manifest itself outwardly. Those who are pure in heart will take sin seriously, grieve over sin, and yearn after holiness. A true believer is therefore not satisfied by having his act together outwardly. A true believer will wipe away many tears about matters that others will never have any knowledge of. They will grieve quietly and secretly about their sinful inclinations and desires—matters that no one will know except God. Why? Because they have been made pure in heart.

Christ also says, "My people, the citizens of my kingdom, will also be peacemakers." This is the culmination of Christ's description of the Christian, for He significantly describes the peacemakers as the children of God. What a remarkable truth this is, for, by nature, we are troublemakers! Because of our fallen nature, we are naturally inclined to hate God and our neighbor. Because of our fallen nature, our natural disposition is to live in hostility, and our world is filled with wars and rumors of war.

What a remarkable fruit of grace it is when a sinner, naturally inclined to be warlike, becomes a peacemaker! Only the transforming and renewing grace of God will produce such fruit.

Please also note that Christ does not say, "Blessed are the peace lovers." Rather, He said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." He clearly implies that God's children distinguish themselves by taking the initiative to live at peace with others. Thus, a peacemaker does not wait for the other person to make the first move; rather, he will make the first move himself.

Paul expresses this in Romans 12:18: "If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men." As Christians we are called to do everything in our power to have harmonious relationships with our fellow men. Therefore, should any relationship not be harmonious, we must have a clear conscience that we have made a prayerful and diligent attempt to make peace. We are called to be peacemakers.

Again, there is a parallel with the inner disposition of the Christian. The meek, those who know their proper place before God, will also be peacemakers. We can readily see how the two belong together. Why are so many people troublemakers? It is because of a proud spirit. We are inclined to think too highly of ourselves and easily become offended by others. As a result, we live in discord with others.

But when we take our proper place before God, all pride and arrogance will be gone. We cannot be peacemakers unless we are willing to take the lowest place. I have a wonderful little book about living the Christian life by the German author Georg Steinberger. How striking is his opening statement: "On the cross, our Head took the

lowest place, thereby giving us, His members, the lowest place. The ‘brightness of [God’s] glory’ (Heb. 1:3) became ‘despised and rejected of men’ (Isa. 53:3). Since then we have but *one* right, namely, to be the lowest and the least. If we believe ourselves to be worthy of more, we have not yet understood the cross.”<sup>1</sup> Think about that!

Peacemakers are willing to take the lowest place. Years ago, a godly man taught me an unforgettable lesson. He said, “When you are involved in conflict, the best way to resolve it is to act as if you are 99 percent at fault and the other person is 1 percent—even if in reality it is the other way around. Take the lowest place.”

“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” The apostle articulates this in Hebrews 12:14: “Follow peace with all men.” Paul speaks the same language: “God hath called us to peace” (1 Cor. 7:15) and “Be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace shall be with you” (2 Cor. 13:11).

Since God Himself is the great Peacemaker, Jesus is saying, “They who are peacemakers manifest something of the character of their heavenly Father.” Peacemakers resemble their Father, the great Peacemaker, who sent His Son into the world to bring peace on earth. Rather than waiting in vain for us to take the initiative, He took the initiative by sending His Son to reconcile sinners unto Himself. This prompted the angels to sing in the fields of Ephrata, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men” (Luke 2:14).

In summary, God’s children will have an internal disposition of being poor in spirit, mourning, and being meek, causing them to hunger and thirst after righteousness. Then, the righteousness for which they yearn will spill over into their lives and cause them to be a merciful, pure of heart and life, and peacemakers.

The manifestation of such fruits will provoke an ungodly world to hate us. The world has no problem with nominal Christianity, but it is offended by true Christianity. Jesus therefore said, “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.” True Christians do not seek to provoke the world, but their genuine godliness provokes the ungodly, who would love to eliminate such Christianity. Jesus tells the children of God that a hostile world will say “all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.” But He then adds, “Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”

Thus, we have attempted to give you a global overview of Christ’s portrait of the Christian. We have taken a look at the whole forest before examining the individual trees in the chapters that follow. In the Beatitudes, Christ defines true blessedness. Only in proportion to our experience of these beatitudes will we experience biblical happiness or blessedness. The opposite is also true! Cursed are they who are not poor in spirit, who do not mourn over their sins, and who are not meek. Cursed are they who do not hunger and thirst after righteousness. Cursed are they who are not merciful, who are not pure in heart, and who are not peacemakers.

To which category do we belong? There is no other alternative! Do you recognize yourself in the portrait of the Beatitudes? Do they in some measure describe your inner

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<sup>1</sup> Georg Steinberger, *Kleine Lichten auf den Weg der Nachfolge* (Stuttgart, Germany: Christliches Verlagshaus, GMBH), p. 5. The original text: “Am Kreuz hat unser Haupt den untersten Platz eingenommen und hat auch uns, Seinen Gleidern, den untersten Platz gegeben. Der “Abglanz des unsichtbaren Gottes” (Heb. 1:3) wurde der Allerverachtete” (Jes. 53:3). Seitdem haben wir nur *ein* Recht, nämlich der Unterste und Letzte zu sein. Wenn wir auf etwas mehr Anspruch machen, haben wir noch nicht das Kreuz verstanden.”

disposition, your soul's yearning, and your walk of life? If you do not recognize yourself at all in this portrait of true spirituality, you do not yet belong to God's kingdom. You need to take refuge in the Christ who has provided us with this portrait. You need to cry out that He would instruct you by His Spirit, that the distinguishing marks of the Beatitudes will also become an experiential reality for you.