

## Matthew 5:3 A New Way of Living

### Introduction

The beatitudes spoken by Jesus in the opening verses of the Sermon on the Mount are qualities that a high proportion of people are happy to commend as a good way to live, but far too often most people, including many Christian people, think they are an idealistic vision of how things ought to be, rather than a declaration of what God desires in our lives in the world today. This type of statement was not new to Jesus. There are plenty of examples in the Psalms that use a similar form. For example: Psalm 1:1-2: *Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, <sup>2</sup>but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on His law day and night.* Or Psalm 32:1-2 *Blessed is the one whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. <sup>2</sup>Blessed is the one whose sin the Lord does not count against them and in whose spirit is no deceit.* Or Psalm 94:12: *Blessed is the one You discipline, Lord, the one you teach from Your law;* What is particularly importance to notice is that all these statements are intended to describe a present reality not a future aspiration. They are like a series of mirrors on a wall that invite us to stop and reflect on what we see and consider how close to what we ought to be is the image portrayed powerfully in front of us. Mirrors or photographs when not altered by photoshop or some similar technology are a statement about what is actually seen on the day in question! There are few of us alive who have never grimaced at a photograph of ourselves and declared that it is not going to go in the family album- if you are still creating them! The truth is not always particularly pleasant. None of us is getting any younger. New clothes or a haircut may enable us to look better for a time but they cannot halt the march of time! In I Timothy Paul uses this word *makarios* (Blessed) with reference to God in I Timothy 1:11: *...the gospel concerning the glory of the blessed God, which He entrusted to me.* And also in I Timothy 6:15: *...God, the blessed and only Ruler, the King of kings and Lord of lords.* In essence, the kinds of qualities referenced when this word is used are associated with the character of God and how He conducts Himself. They are a model for a right view of ourselves and the basis for relationships with other people in our families, church and wider community. In secular Greek the writer Heroditus (484-425BC) used this word *makarios* to describe an oasis in the desert (Heroditus 3:26); in contrast to the inhospitable sand of the endless arid desert and the toll it takes on the traveler through its terrain, the oasis by contrast is a place of refreshment and renewal, enabling a weary traveler to regain their resources for the next step of their journey. Therefore, what Jesus is saying here to His followers who had taken time out of their regular schedule to be with Him was here are some character qualities to cultivate that will in time refresh and renew your lives and enable you to fulfil the potential God desires in your life. It is an appropriate section of God's Word to study at this, the start of another new year. After the introductory remarks from Matthew that set the scene for this famous Sermon, in Matthew 5:1-2, Jesus declares the first beatitude in Matthew 5:3: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

### 1. The confusion about this quality - What it does not mean

(a) Mean-spirited There are a vocal minority of people in our land who might fit into this category. They may make loud and belligerent noises that we stop, for example, the international aid budget and spend all the money on people in need at home. Our reply to such people will

always be a ‘yes-but’ response; needy people at home should be taken care of from public funds, that is one reason why we pay our taxes to the Government. In what I understand is the fifth richest country in the world everyone should have a roof over their heads, clothes on their backs, food on the table and the basic necessities of life that enable each individual to participate in society. Yet to restrict our vision to the needy at home is inadequate. As one of the most significant countries on the international stage we must play our part in helping the genuinely needy overseas as well. The majority of people get that thankfully. There are so many circumstances in daily life covered here. Life can never just be about me and my needs; it must always be about us collectively and our needs. In a family, Church family, local community or country this principle is applicable across the range of life circumstances. Modern individualism is the significant downside to the so-called eighteenth century ‘Enlightenment’ and must be challenged by the follower of Jesus as a most inadequate way to live. We have to be wise stewards of the Lord’s resources, but we must also always consider other people and their needs as well. Proverbs 28:27 states: *Those who give to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to them receive many curses.* A mind and heart that has been converted by God will also find that the wallet or purse is affected by the work of the Holy Spirit as well! Proverbs 11:25 states: *A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.* I was delighted when I first had significant contact with this church in early 2007 finding out about the financial generosity to mission work overseas; quarterly donations to a variety of causes and Christmas offerings to local causes, in addition to the emergency special collections for major disaster relief work; It is no accident that God has provided for our needs when we have been willing to reflect something of His generosity in sharing with other people.

(b) **Intellectual poverty** There are people who boast about not knowing things; about not having qualifications for anything; this is not at all pleasing to God. ‘Ignorance can never be bliss’ or be welcomed. I remember my former College Principal, a fairly mild-mannered man, overhearing a fellow student boasting about not taking time to study something. We got a passionate speech from him about the sin of ignorance committed by those who have opportunities to gain knowledge or skills and choose not to bother. The book of Proverbs again has plenty to say on this subject. Proverbs 3:13-14: *Blessed are those who find wisdom, those who gain understanding, <sup>14</sup>for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold.* Another reference on this topic is even more pointed. *The beginning of wisdom is this: get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding* (Proverbs 4:7). In case anyone has missed it, the topic returns later in Proverbs 23:23: *Buy the truth and do not sell it – wisdom, instruction and insight as well.*

(c) **a poor self-image** One of the most important qualifications to be made here is that it does not mean having a poor self-image or envisioned as someone with serious self-esteem issues so that they have little confidence in anything for themselves, let alone for others or for God. This is not what this beatitude is about! There are plenty of people who struggle with their self-image or self-esteem because of their appearance in a world where photo-shopped, brushed up images of glamorous models star out of the pages of magazines with figures and an appearance that has only a passing semblance to the person who got out of bed that morning. The problem is that too many people actually think these individuals look like that in real life when too often it is not the case or that they literally starve themselves of adequate nutrition in their diet to look horribly thin to please the clients that hire them for photo-shoots. Eventually ‘size zero’ models will be phased out and more natural and normal images of individuals will appear in fashion magazines, but there is still a battle to be won, and until that day too many young women and some young men

will suffer emotional or psychological or even suffer from self-harm trying to become something God and the vast majority of society never wished them to be. We live in a society that values people in accordance with their social status, their wealth or their occupation; over the years I have met a few people who looked down on others and were not afraid to say so. Thankfully only once or twice have I experienced it in a church context. I was profoundly shocked to hear one particular individual who was volunteering to be added to a door-stewarding rota not because they were particularly keen on welcoming new people in, but in order to keep unsuitable people out! They were much more specific than that, but that individual was kept away from visitors to that church as far as the leaders could manage it. Genesis 1:26-27 states: *Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.'* <sup>27</sup> ***So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them.*** Every human being on the planet of both genders must grasp the truth of these verses. You are special because God created you equally in His image as much as the Queen or the Prime Minister or as a beggar on the streets. There are no exceptions! This is a fundamental issue to grasp if we are going to accomplish anything at school, in our career or vocation or whatever we do with our lives. If my life is valuable then I must take care of my body to feed it appropriately; exercise it adequately and get the rest I need to renew and refresh it, for example; likewise with my mind I can be so enriched and stimulated with books I can read; music I can listen to or other forms of intellectual stimulation that may be for pleasure not always for work! All of creation is God's – arts as well as sciences and we can be blessed by experiencing something of a range of diverse and profitable stimuli in these fields.

(d) **temperament** There are some very confident charismatic personalities who can sometimes be fun to be around. But there are equally others who are naturally shy and retiring and find it hard to speak in public or do certain things that someone with an extrovert personality wouldn't think twice about. Our temperaments are God-given and part of who we are; God intended us to have a mix of temperaments otherwise social interactions in a range of settings would be, for example, less stimulating and less creative.

(e) **false humility** The character Uriah Heep in Charles Dickens's novel *David Copperfield* was always reminding people that he was 'but a very 'umble person'. It was believed that this character was based on someone Dickens knew personally, but there are individuals who exhibit similar insincerity in every generation. In some cases it is a mannerism practiced by people who are constantly fishing for compliments. By contrast it can be an excuse used by others to try and get out of tasks they are more than qualified to undertake. We might see Moses in this category, in Exodus 4:10-13, where he pretends he is inadequately qualified to lead the nation of Israel despite the fact that his high school education had been undertaken in the Egyptian equivalent of Eton College alongside crown princes and the sons of other leading figures in the nobility in that land. *Moses said to the Lord, 'Pardon Your servant, Lord. I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since You have spoken to Your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.'* <sup>11</sup> *The Lord said to him, 'Who gave human beings their mouths? Who makes them deaf or mute? Who gives them sight or makes them blind? Is it not I, the Lord?'* <sup>12</sup> *Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say.'* <sup>13</sup> *But Moses said, 'Pardon Your servant, Lord. Please send someone else.* (Exodus 4:10-13)

## **2. The Characteristics of this quality in my life: what it does mean**

(a) **Knowing yourself** All of us have strengths and weaknesses; all of us have interests and desires, hopes and ambitions; a range of skills that may include certain sports or the ability to play musical instruments or dramatic skills, for example. If the church is short of a pianist one morning and the duty deacon, hypothetically requested someone to volunteer. It would not be inappropriate for individuals who have never learned to play this instrument declining to consider responding to such a call. There are times when all our skills come in handy. Praise God for a few multi-talented people who seemed to be highly qualified to do many things and treasure them! When we know ourselves well we know there are strengths we can increase and have an idea how that might happen. There are some areas of weakness that may never be strengths but we can by significant effort make them less of a weakness. Knowing ourselves can help avoid making sometimes serious mistakes in career choices or help us form more healthy relationships with other people, for example, than might otherwise be the case. The people who have accepted who they are in Christ are more able to accept other people for who they are. A person seriously struggling with their own identity may have real issues accepting other people and developing quality relationships with them. A person who is constantly feeling the need to 'put down' other people or who finds it really difficult to applaud the achievements of others has probably either failed to come to terms with their own identity or has yet to reach the place where they can accept it.

(b) **Accepting yourself** God created you to be you. You might have preferred to look like someone else you admire; you might have wished to have gifts and abilities you observe in other people rather than the apparently lesser ones you yourself possess. What is important here is to grasp that God does not make mistakes. He created you and me to be that person. Once we can come to terms with who we are then it can make some aspects of life less difficult to handle. It can also more positively affirm some of our strengths that we had overlooked by trying to be someone else. It is good to be ambitious and to set ourselves goals. But if you are over forty and have never displayed conspicuous skills with a football in earlier life there is no point hoping to get picked to play professionally with Dundee or Dundee United. It isn't going to happen! There is though a place for all of our skills. It is true in church life too as Paul explained with his image of the body in I Corinthians 12:16-20: *And if the ear should say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,' it would not for that reason stop being part of the body.*<sup>17</sup> *If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?*<sup>18</sup> *But in fact God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be.*<sup>19</sup> *If they were all one part, where would the body be?*<sup>20</sup> *As it is, there are many parts, but one body.* The disciples of Jesus during his earthly ministry had issues here. Repeatedly they were asking who was the greatest in their ranks. In Mark 9:33-37 it states: *They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the road?'*<sup>34</sup> *But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.*<sup>35</sup> *Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.'*<sup>36</sup> *He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them,*<sup>37</sup> *'Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me.'* This is an issue that should be left behind in childhood as part of a growth towards adulthood and greater maturity, but it is surprisingly common in society, and within the Christian Church as well as outside it. A person may have a high social status or gain great wealth but may struggle through life just as much as a person without these apparent advantages

if they have not come to terms with their own identity. This was so evident, for example, in the reaction of King Saul becoming jealous of the Israelite people singing about David's military successes. *Whatever mission Saul sent him on, David was so successful that Saul gave him a high rank in the army. This pleased all the troops, and Saul's officers as well.* <sup>6</sup>*When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lyres.* <sup>7</sup>*As they danced, they sang: 'Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.'* <sup>8</sup>***Saul was very angry; this refrain displeased him greatly.*** *'They have credited David with tens of thousands,' he thought, 'but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?'* <sup>9</sup>*And from that time on Saul kept a close eye on David.* (I Samuel 18:5-8).

(c) **Accepting circumstances** How do I handle circumstances that do not go the way I think they should? Do I react angrily and let myself and the Lord down by the words I use or the attitude I have taken? All of us at times will have situation like this maybe at home; certainly in the workplace; and yes, even in church meetings there will be those times when we need to pause for reflection and think carefully before uttering words. Can I view situations from the perspective of another person or other people? Do I understand where someone else is coming from, even if I do not agree with their line of argument? This is very important because if we can understand why someone else might come to a different conclusion to ourselves then it is much more likely that our tone of response will be more moderate and considered than if we feel unfairly treated or deeply disappointed if a decision does not go our way. The apostle Paul wrote these powerful words in Philippians 4:11: *I am not saying this because I am in need, **for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.*** <sup>12</sup>*I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. **I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.*** I know that I still have a lot to learn on this matter. I suspect it took Paul a lot of years before he could honestly say these words. His fiery temper in his youth had to be conquered long before he could even contemplate writing or thinking these words of guidance to this lovely Greek congregation. Accepting circumstances does not mean that we are committing ourselves to things we genuinely think were wrong decisions though there are times when we will have to leave things with the Lord as there often appear to be no possibility of reversing decisions that with hindsight might have been wrong. A person who is *poor in spirit* will not continue to complain about past wrongs to God and to other people, but will seek to reach a place of entrusting things to God who can put actual wrongs right in His time.

(d) **A right attitude to possessions** A person who is genuinely *poor in spirit* does not find their highest satisfaction and joy in acquiring things; rather their desire is supremely to delight in God and to serve Him. Paul in the same letter continued with these words: *I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. **I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want*** (Philippians 4:12). People who are *poor in spirit* do not value a person who comes into their local church on the basis of their wealth or social status but genuinely welcomes each and every newcomer who comes in. Jesus, in response to an invitation to arbitrate between two men over the contents of a will made this comment in Luke 12:15: *Then He said to them, 'Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; **life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.***' It is alarming in our Western society how many professing Christians make shipwreck of their spiritual lives because of having too great a focus on acquiring more money through a better paid job, but at too high a personal and spiritual cost. Success in business can be something honouring to God, but it can also be the exact opposite. It depends on how a business is conducted. Jesus' story of the rich

farmer in Luke 12:16-21 illustrated that perfectly when God's verdict on that man's life was this: *'But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?"*' <sup>21</sup> ***This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich towards God.*** Paul, in I Timothy 6:10 explained what the problem was here. *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.* Jesus put it this way in Matthew 6:19-21: *'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.*' <sup>20</sup> *But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.*' <sup>21</sup> ***For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.***

(e) **Accepting God's will for your life** This can be a real challenge for us. Sometimes we know exactly what God wants us to do in a situation and things go to plan. However, there are many and sometimes more situations where we may genuinely be unsure what is God's will for me in this situation? It may be a good work situation where two options come up both of which are available and appear equally appropriate under the circumstances. If we genuinely have prayed to the Lord openly willing to accept His choice and both paths remain open it may be that either may be equally acceptable in the will of God. It may not be the case that in every situation there has to be a wrong and a right choice; equally both choices may be out or both choices available. Other factors will need to come into play as we seek to discern what the Lord might be saying in the situation. Often what God has laid on our hearts takes much longer to come to pass than we had expected and sometimes that pathway never opens up for us. We need to entrust things to the Lord and leave them with Him when we face these puzzling situations. We must also be cautious that God declining our request may actually be a blessing to us. There are situations where we do not realize some of the consequences of God granting our request, this is especially the case of us asking for something that will be harmful for us. In the desert wanderings Israel repeatedly made inappropriate requests. Psalm 106:15-16 states: *In the desert they gave in to their craving; in the wilderness they put God to the test.* <sup>15</sup> ***So He gave them what they asked for, but sent a wasting disease among them.*** There will be times in our lives when if we really saw the full picture we would say 'thank you' to God for declining our requests.

### **3. Cultivating this quality in my life in summary**

(i) **Accepting God's view of my life** Trust that God knows what He is doing with our lives. Romans 12:3 states: *For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.* We must believe that our loving Father is watching over us and our needs.

(ii) **Acknowledging His lordship over my life on a daily basis** Jesus said in John 15:5: *If you remain in Me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing.* Through our devotional life to seek to cultivate a close relationship with the Lord;

(iii) **Keeping Jesus as the model we emulate** Humility primarily comes not from focusing on our sins and lamenting them, but meditating on the goodness of God and His kindness to us (Romans 2:4: ***Or do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, forbearance and patience, not realising that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance?*** )

(iv) **Taking opportunities given to us in service** ...*Serve one another in love* (Galatians 5:13); If God has greater blessings to come allow Him to open the door in His time, for Jesus' sake, Amen.