

# Salt, Light, and a City

## The Beatitudes (part 1)

Summary: “The Beatitudes” are the preamble to “The Sermon On The Mount”, the most famous sermon ever delivered. The Beatitudes describe the outcome in attitude of those who follow the wisdom given in the sermon. In this preamble various images are used to describe the witness of the blessed.

Scripture: Matthew 4:23–5:16<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

#### Public Speaking 101

On a recent episode of the *Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast*, Nieuwhof interviewed Chris Anderson, the head of TED, famous for its conferences and idea-spreading videos on *Youtube*.<sup>2</sup>

Born in Pakistan to missionary parents, in 1985, Anderson launched *Future Publishing*, which grew to become a company publishing more than 130 magazines, with 1,500 employees. In 2001, he took over leadership of the TED Conference.

For many people, public speaking rates as their top fear. Few people are born with a natural confidence for public speaking. The majority of us have to develop the courage for it.

Despite heading the top public speaking channel in the world, Anderson himself gave a talk to the people who were invested in TED back in 2002, but did so quite shakily, for he was not as practised at the art and skill of public speaking as was his audience.<sup>3</sup>

Anderson admits that, back then, he was not a good public speaker, so he was nervous. He admits he often comes across as awkward, so for his vision-casting address he didn't stand up, but sat down in a chair.

Anderson believed that to win this community committed to the TED conference, he had to be vulnerable and honest, and to tell them what he really thought about the future direction of the conference.

Anderson's advice to public speakers, based on his experience with TED:

Say less. Pick one thing but go deeper into that one thing, develop it, show it in a way that makes people curious and makes them laugh and take people on a curiosity journey that has a satisfying outcome. (Chris Anderson)

That sounds like a lofty ideal and is quite intimidating, even though true.

If you are assigned to speak publicly and are not sure where to start, then remember this straightforward piece of advice for your preparation: Tell them what you're going to say; say it; then tell them what you said.

For example, I am going to give you an introduction to the Beatitudes of Jesus, so that our witness in this neighbourhood would be like salt, light and a city. I am going to explain what those symbols mean for us.

Now if that advice sounds too simplistic, as I introduce the Beatitudes, let me start by telling you something like this advice is happening in Jesus' famous "Sermon On The Mount".

## Explanation

### The Preamble to the 'Sermon'

*The Gospel of Matthew*, chapters 5 to 7, contain the most famous public speech ever recorded. Known commonly as "The Sermon On The Mount", it is Jesus' most well known sermon and contains the famous statements starting with, "Blessed are the . . .", which have been labelled as The Beatitudes.

If we take it at 'face value', this sermon was Jesus' first speech to the general public, maybe even his first speech to his disciples.

Now, it is important to note here the sermon was intended for both Jesus' disciples and the crowds, for believers and unbelievers. While the opening words,

When he saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to teach them... (Matthew 5:1-2)

give the impression Jesus avoided the crowds, retreated up a mountainside to teach his disciples (Mt 5:1-2), the closing words of the sermon,

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, because he was teaching them like one who had authority, and not like their scribes. (Matthew 7:28-29)

make it very clear he was speaking to the crowds as well.

Also, it is worth noting it is naïve to think this is a transcript of an actual sermon of Jesus. While presented by Matthew this way, this "sermon" was more likely a summary of the core of Jesus' teaching, given in many places at many times. Presenting it this early in Jesus' ministry is better understood as Matthew's way of describing how these teachings were delivered by Jesus often and in many places. This is his good news; the core of his teaching on the life of faith. It should not be treated as a verbatim of a single sermon.

Let me give you an example of this at work: The song, "Indescribable", was written and composed by Laura Story and Jesse Reeves, but was then performed and made popular by worship leader Chris Tomlin, who has long been a member of the Passion Conferences, a Christian organization founded by Louie Giglio in 1997.

Giglio was so inspired by the song performed by Tomlin, he developed a sermon and visual presentation called "Indescribable", and took it on tour in October 2005. Since then it has become one of the most widely-shared talks in modern Christian culture, reaching more than 1 million views and downloads.

I had the pleasure of seeing Louis Giglio present this talk at the 2007 Hillsong Conference—and I know some others in our community were present there too. The conference organisers themselves have stated on social media, "[Giglio] left us in awe of the wondrous work and creativity of the Father".<sup>4</sup>

Now here's my question: even though Giglio wrote a talk, with accompanying visuals, and presented it in multiple places around the world, do you really think he presented it exactly the same way, all the time?

I know for a fact he didn't because at the Hillsong Conference, there was a heckler who kept yelling, "Tell 'em about Jesus!", to which all of us wanted to yell back, "Shut up and let him finish!"

Giglio was forced to adjust to the disruption, so had to change his presentation when he lost his momentum.

Like Giglio, we can expect Jesus had a core set of teachings he taught wherever he went and whenever he could. He also responded to questions and to the changing situations he found himself in.

*The Gospel of Luke* presents a similar "sermon" in chapter 6, but there are some differences with Matthew's "sermon" because Luke wrote his gospel for a different audience, so identified a slightly different set of Jesus' teachings as his core.

And that's okay!

Now let me get back to The Beatitudes.

A beatitude is a statement declaring certain people to be in a privileged, fortunate circumstance.<sup>5</sup> Or as Bible scholar R. T. France wrote:

"Blessed" is a misleading translation of *makarios*, which does not denote one whom God blesses (which would be *eulogētos*, reflecting Heb. *bārûk*), but represents the Hebrew *'ašrê*, "fortunate", and is used, like *'ašrê*, almost entirely in the formal setting of a beatitude. It introduces someone who is to be congratulated, someone whose place in life is an enviable one. "Happy" is better than "blessed", but only if used not of a mental state but of a condition of life. "Fortunate" or "well off" is less ambiguous. It is not a psychological description, but a recommendation.<sup>6</sup>

Matthew presents these beatitudes of Jesus as wisdom, as in "you would be wise to...", or "you are to commended for..."

When we read, "blessed are...", do not think if you do these things God will be forced to bless you, although he might. The sense here is more that one is fortunate, possible even happy, it is a good thing for you to be and do these things.

In this way, then, the Beatitudes are the preamble to Jesus' "Sermon On The Mount" in *Matthew*, for they present the summation of the points of the sermon. If you follow all of Jesus' wisdom and advice in his sermon, then you will be fortunate, possibly even happy, it is a good thing for you to be and do these things.

### **Why This Series?**

We begin today, therefore, a sermon series on the Beatitudes. We will look at each of The Beatitudes to better understand their implications for our faith and lifestyle.

It is important for the friends of Jesus to appreciate the Beatitudes because they serve to reset our hearts. None of us, not even Christians, are naturally inclined toward the Beatitudes. In fact, we are inclined toward the opposite. Yet, they remain strangely alluring.

This can be seen in the story of Émile Cailliet.

Philosopher Émile Cailliet was born in a small French village near the end of the 19th century. His early education was committed to naturalism, leaving no room for God or supernatural intervention in human affairs. But his naturalistically inspired studies in philosophy proved of little help during his front-line experiences as a lad of 20 in World War I. Confronted with the horrors of war, he asked:

“What use is ill-kept, ancient philosophic banter, when your own buddy—at the time speaking to you of his mother—dies standing in front of you, a bullet in his chest. Was there a meaning to it all? A person can endure anything if only it appears meaningful ... I, too, felt—not with my reason, but with my whole being—that I was naked and, war or no war, destined to perish miserably when the hour came.”

One night a bullet found Cailliet, too. An American field ambulance crew saved his life, and after a nine-month hospital stay, he was discharged and resumed his graduate studies. But he had to admit that the books no longer seemed like the same books, nor was his motivation the same. Reading at length in philosophy and literature, he found himself probing in depth for meaning. He testified:

“During long night watches in the foxholes I had in a strange way been longing—I must say it, however strange it may sound—for a book that would understand me. But I knew of no such book. Now I would in secret prepare one for my own private use. And so, as I went on reading for my courses, I would file passages that would speak to my condition, then carefully copy them in a leather-bound pocket book I would always carry with me. The quotations, which I numbered in red ink for easier reference, would lead me as it were from fear and anguish, through a variety of intervening stages, to supreme utterances of release and jubilation.”

At last, the day came when he put the finishing touches on, as he said it, “the book that would understand me”. He describes a beautiful, sunny day in which he sat under a tree and opened his precious anthology. As he read, however, he was overcome by a growing disappointment. Instead of speaking to his condition as he expected, the passages only reminded him of their context—of the circumstances of his labour over their selection. Then, Cailliet says, he knew that the whole undertaking would not work, simply because it was of his own making. It carried no strength of persuasion. In a dejected mood, he put the little book back into his pocket.

On that same day, Cailliet’s wife had come into the possession of a Bible by extraordinary circumstances. Emile had always been adamant that religion would be taboo in their home, and at the age of 23 had never even seen a Bible. But at the end of that disappointing day, when she apologetically tried to explain how she had providentially (as he would later realize!) picked up a copy of the Bible, he was eager to see it. He describes what happened next:

“I literally grabbed the book and rushed to my study with it. I opened it and “chanced” upon the Beatitudes. I read and read and read—now aloud with an indescribable warmth surging within.... I could not find words to express my awe and wonder. And suddenly the realization dawned upon me: This was the Book that would understand me! I needed it so much,

yet, unaware, I had attempted to write my own—in vain. I continued to read deeply into the night, mostly from the Gospels. And lo and behold, as I looked through them, the one of whom they spoke, the one who spoke and acted in them, became alive in me.”<sup>7</sup>

This story demonstrates how the Beatitudes are a portal into the deeper questions of human existence. Simple yet profound, they meet us where we always live: on earth, yet at eternity’s edge.

The Beatitudes offer a reality check for how to live as friends of Jesus in His Kingdom.

### **Symbols of Discipleship**

Throughout “The Sermon On The Mount”, the faith and lifestyle of a friend of Jesus is conceived as life within the community of faith, a community charged with a mission to the world. When the community is in the blessed state, they bear the image of God to the world, which is symbolised in verses 13-16 as being like salt, light and a city on a hill.

#### *Salt*

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It’s no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled under people’s feet. (Matthew 5:13)

The metaphor, “you are the salt of the earth”, is very evocative and is used throughout the Bible in multiple ways, including in sacrifice,<sup>8</sup> to facilitate loyalty and covenant fidelity.<sup>9</sup>

“Sharing salt” was a symbol of friendship and hospitality, and ancient conflicts concluded with a meal consisting of bread and salt as a symbol of friendship.<sup>10</sup>

Salt was also a metaphor for purification,<sup>11</sup> and was used as seasoning<sup>12</sup> and as a preservative.

In using this symbol then, Jesus described the blessed life as being like salt, valuable and life-giving, enhancing flavour, fostering unity and loyalty between and with our neighbours. Being ‘salty’ is a worthy sacrifice and pleasing to the Lord.

If we lose our ‘saltiness’, if we do not fulfil our purpose in our neighbourhood, what good are we? We are certainly not to be commended and God will not bless us.

#### *Light and A City*

You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. (Matthew 5:14–15)

Jesus then described the blessed life as like light.

The light metaphor depicts the blessed as illumination for the world, to the nations. The primary function of light is not to be seen itself, but to let things be seen as they are. That is why you don’t want to hide a light. It is only useful if it is allowed to radiate.

In a provocative contrast, the metaphor of the city on a hill presents the blessed as inevitably and unavoidably being seen.

Interestingly, this metaphor draws our mind to the prophecy of the city of God, Zion, to which the nations flow at the end times.<sup>13</sup>

### *Let Your Light Shine*

In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matthew 5:16)

Finally, the community of the friends of Jesus are called to the active mission of “letting their light shine” to “all”, but the light they shine is not their own. They do not generate the light any more than salt generates its own saltiness.

These metaphors picture the Church as having-been-lit, we are recipients of a light from which God is the source. We have been lit not for our own sakes, but for the sake of the world.

When the crowds saw [Jesus both heal the paralytic and forgive his sins], they were awestruck and gave glory to God, who had given such authority to men. (Matthew 9:8)

And as Jesus’ deeds point not to his own glory but to the glory of God,<sup>14</sup> so the purpose of the friends of Jesus engaging in acts of righteousness and justice before the world is not for their own sake but to glorify God. The disciples’ mission is authorized and presupposed by Jesus’ own mission and continues it.<sup>15</sup>

The community of Jesus’ friends, then, is light for this dark world, just as is Jesus himself, for we read,

When [Jesus] heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee ... This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ... The people who live in darkness have seen a great light, and for those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned. From then on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (Matthew 4:12–17; cf. Isa 9:2)

Jesus is the light that has dawned. Throughout his life AND his public ministry he shone his light into this dark world, and it continues to shine.

Jesus’ good works were plentiful and were evident to all. When John the Baptist’s disciples approached Jesus to ask him if he was the promised Messiah:

Jesus replied to them, “Go and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor are told the good news, and blessed is the one who isn’t offended by me.” (Matthew 11:4–6)

If John the Baptist could look at the ministry of Jesus and see he was truly the Promised One sent by God, then so too could those among whom Jesus lived and loved and laughed and shared the good news of the Kingdom. And so too can we!

**Jesus was like salt.** He joined in local feasts, was the guest of honour at many dinners, provided the wine for a wedding. Jesus enjoyed life and helped others to enjoy life, describing their reception into the family of God would be like joining a Great Feast, for we read:

But the father told his servants, ‘Quick! Bring out the best robe and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then bring the fattened calf and slaughter it, and let’s celebrate with a feast, because this son of mine

was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!' So they began to celebrate. (Luke 15:22–24)

All of Heaven rejoices when one sinner is welcomed into the family of God!<sup>16</sup>

**Jesus was like a city on a hill.** While sometimes he instructed those he healed to not speak of him<sup>17</sup> and his disciples not to tell anyone they thought he was the Messiah,<sup>18</sup> nevertheless his fame spread quickly and widely<sup>19</sup> and he certainly entered Jerusalem to much acclaim:

Now he came near the path down the Mount of Olives, and the whole crowd of the disciples began to praise God joyfully with a loud voice for all the miracles they had seen: Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord. Peace in heaven and glory in the highest heaven! (Luke 19:37–38)

Jesus did not invite this response, although he did adopt the symbolism of a servant king, in contrast to the approach of the governor Pontius Pilate entering Jerusalem.

Jesus' own entrance to Jerusalem could not be hidden and all the fame and notoriety of his public ministry over, at least, the previous 3 years blossomed into crowds gathering and declaring him the fulfilment of the nation's hopes and dreams.

Love him or hate him, follow Jesus or not, there is no denying he remains the most influential person of history! And that is because he was like salt, light and like a city on a hill, and remains so through his Church.

## Application

But what happens when the Church is not like Jesus? Is not like salt, light, nor a city on a hill?

The world accuses the Church, its leaders and the friends of Jesus of being hypocrites, of being abusive, of being no earthly good, among other things. Sometimes these accusations are correct. At those times, we are not like Jesus, nor are we blessed.

The Beatitudes are clear: adopt these attitudes and you will be commended. Then, and only then, will your commendation come because you have been like salt, like a light, like a city on a hill, and your community has blessed those roundabout. In this there is great joy!

## Conclusion

The Beatitudes are the preamble to the famous "Sermon On The Mount" of Jesus. Everything in that sermon is summarised by those beatitudes. Adopt the posture of those attitudes and we will be like salt, light and a city on a hill, following the example and taking up the mission of Jesus to fulfil God's Eternal Purpose.

If we follow all of Jesus' wisdom and advice in his sermon, then we will be fortunate, possibly even happy, it is a good thing for us to be and do these things.

## Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).

- 2 Carey Nieuwhof, “TED’s Chris Anderson on Why and How Ideas Spread, Behind the Scenes on TED’s Massive Growth, How TED Got Rejected by Network Television, and His Advice to Preachers and Communicators”, *The Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast*, episode 544, <https://replug.link/6884e0c0> (accessed 3-Feb-2023).
- 3 Chris Anderson, “TED’s nonprofit transition”, *TED.com*, 2002, <https://replug.link/4a9c8d30> (3-Feb-2023).
- 4 You can watch a video of Louie Giglio’s presentation, “Indescribable”, on his *Youtube* channel, <https://replug.link/29314b50> (accessed 3-Feb-2023).
- 5 M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew”, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 8 (Nashville, TN, USA: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), pg 176.
- 6 R. T. France, *Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 1, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL, USA: InterVarsity Press, 1985), pg 114.
- 7 Émile Cailliet, *Journey into Light* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Zondervan, 1968); as quoted in James R. McConnell, “The Importance of Examining the Scriptures”, Franklin United Church, 19-Apr-2009, <https://replug.link/4687f800> (accessed 2-Feb-2023). For more information, see Émile Cailliet, “The Book that Understands Me”, *Christianity Today*, 22-Nov-1963, <https://replug.link/38bff6e0> (accessed 2-Feb-2023).
- 8 Lev 2:13; Ezek 43:24.
- 9 Lev 2:13; Ezek 43:24, BE:NT.
- 10 Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 7.2.46; Cicero, *Treatise of Friendship* 19.67.
- 11 2 Kgs 2:19–22.
- 12 Job 6:6; Col 4:5.
- 13 Isa 2:2–5; 42:6; 49:6.
- 14 Mt 9:8.
- 15 Mt 10:1.
- 16 Lk 15:10.
- 17 Lk 8:56.
- 18 Mk 8:30.
- 19 Mk 1:28.