

The Beatitudes at Work

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Matthew

The Sermon on the Mount opens with the beatitudes—eight statements beginning with the word blessed. Each beatitude declares that a group of people usually regarded as afflicted is actually blessed. Those blessed do not have to do anything to attain this blessing. Jesus simply declares that they have already been blessed. Thus the beatitudes are first of all declarations of God’s grace. They are not conditions of salvation or roadmaps to earn entry to God’s kingdom. Those who belong to each blessed group experience God’s grace because the kingdom of heaven has come near.

Although the primary purpose of the beatitudes is to declare the blessings given by God’s kingdom, most scholars also regard them as painting a picture of the character of that kingdom. As we step into God’s kingdom in our places of work, we hope to become more like those named as blessed—more meek, more merciful, more hungry for righteousness, more apt to make peace, and so on.

For example, if we embrace being “poor in spirit” in our work, we are able to bring an honest appraisal of ourselves to our work. We don’t inflate our résumé or boast about our position. We know how difficult it is to work

with people who cannot learn, grow, or accept correction because they are trying to maintain an inflated picture of themselves. So we commit ourselves to honesty about ourselves. We remember that even Jesus, when he started working with wood, must have needed guidance and instruction. At the same time, we acknowledge that only with God at work within us can we put Jesus' teachings into practice on the job.

The second beatitude "Blessed are those who mourn" builds on our mental recognition of our poverty of spirit by adding an emotional response of sorrow. Those blessed with mourning about their own failings can receive comfort by admitting their errors. If we make a mistake with a colleague, student, customer, employee, or other person, we admit it and ask their pardon. Without the emotional blessing of sadness over our actions, we would probably never muster the guts to admit our mistakes.

The third beatitude is "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Many assume that "meek" means weak, tame, or deficient in courage. But the biblical understanding of meekness is a refusal to inflate our own self-estimation. To be meek is to accept our strengths and limitations for what they truly are, instead of constantly trying to portray ourselves in the best possible light.

In the workplace, the arrogant and powerful seem to win, but in the end they lose. They don't win in personal relationships. No one wants an

arrogant, self-seeking friend. Nor do they win in financial security. They think they possess the world, but the world possesses them. The more money they have, the less financially secure they feel.

In contrast, Jesus said that the meek “will inherit the earth.” In God’s time, we will receive by God’s grace the good things the arrogant fruitlessly strive for in the present earth, and more. And even now, in a broken world, we can find peace by accepting our true strengths and weaknesses in the light of God’s love.

The other beatitudes deal with being “pure in heart,” “peacemakers” “righteous” —similar ways that believers can embody God’s coming Kingdom in the workplace. These characteristics matter, because, as Jesus explains in the next section of the Sermon on the Mount: You matter. “You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world.” (Matthew 5:13-14)

If you are a follower of Jesus living the beatitudes, you have an important role to play in your workplace. You are the salt that helps preserve what is good in the culture. You are a seasoning agent; you can bring the distinctive flavor of God's values to make life palatable. You are also light, touching everyone around you. At work, we touch many people who do not encounter Christ in church. It may be our most effective place to

witness to Christ, but only if we are careful not to stint our employers, create divisions, or undermine our message by doing shoddy work.

“Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good deeds and glorify your father who is in heaven.” (Matthew 5:16) The beatitudes spell out some of those good works. In humility and submission to God, we work for right relations, for merciful actions, and for peace.