

Bible Studies for Life: Distinct in my character

January 6, 2016

- *The Bible Studies for Life lesson for Jan. 24 focuses on Matthew 5:1-12.*

In Matthew 4, Jesus began his teaching ministry by saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 4:17). A change in life was necessary to participate in the kingdom.

Repentance means one is going the wrong way. The person must stop, change directions and go the right way.

In Matthew 5, Jesus explains how the repentant one should live and the direction that should be taken. The way is distinctive, and as Matthew 5:1-12 reveals, the way will be blessed by God. To fulfill the teaching of this passage, followers of Jesus must let the words hit with the forceful power with which he meant them.

God blesses our dependence upon him (Matthew 5:1-6).

Matthew sets the scene noting Jesus taught on a mountainside. Throughout Scripture, mountains are places where significant events took place. None of these events was more important than when Moses went up the mountain to receive the law from God. In Matthew 5:1-6, Matthew shows Jesus as a second Moses, and his teachings are on par with the very teachings of God.

On the mountain, Jesus gathered his disciples to teach them. The crowds gathered behind the disciples. The scene suggests an open invitation exists for others to follow Jesus, too. The way is difficult for true followers of God to live for Jesus and not themselves.

Matthew 5 is the opening chapter of the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew 5-7. The opening section of the sermon (verses 1-12) is called the Beatitudes. Those who have the traits described in each verse will experience extreme blessedness.

As a whole, the Beatitudes could be understood as perspectives on life everyone should set as goals to be attained. These would be lofty goals. The Beatitudes also could be understood as addressing those who already were living in the situations described. Thus, those who already are poor in spirit will possess the kingdom, so the beatitudes describe the specific blessing each person will receive on account of his or her situation in life.

Each Beatitude begin with the word “blessed” or “happy.” The Greek word used is difficult to translate. It describes a person in a good situation in life, even an envious situation. Thus, the translation “happy” does not mean the individual “feels” happy. It refers to the positive outlook the person has, which comes as a blessing from God.

Also, each of the Beatitudes describes a great reversal. The down-and-out of society will be exalted. They will be blessed for their traits that focus on God and on others.

In verse 3, the “poor in spirit” are told what their blessing is. These who recognize they have no standing before God will experience the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom should not be thought of as a geographic location or realm. Instead, the kingdom of heaven (kingdom of God in the other gospels) is the activity of God. It’s what he’s doing. It’s God in action.

In verse 4, “those who mourn” are told they will be comforted. These individuals have a deep concern about specific situations. They possess an extreme empathy.

Verse 5 is one of the more familiar Beatitudes. The meek are promised the blessing of the earth. Those who are “God-tamed” will be able to navigate

life in the best of ways that please God.

The average person in Jesus' day knew what it was like to hunger and to thirst for the necessities of life. In verse 6, Jesus noted some hunger and thirst for righteousness in the same way. These individuals would be satisfied with God's salvation. They would be able to feast on righteousness.

God blesses our actions toward others (Matthew 5:7-9).

The next Beatitude in verse 7 addresses the merciful. These people open themselves up to God's mercy, as they extend mercy to others. The type of mercy these individuals show may be described as acceptance to the unacceptable.

In verse 8, those who are "pure in heart" are addressed. These individuals hold the utmost integrity. For their principled lifestyle they will see God. And they will see him in the world today, not just in the future in heaven.

In verse 9, the "peacemakers" are told they will themselves experience peace. Those who struggle to reconcile others will experience wholeness, completeness and salvation in their own lives.

God blesses our joy in the face of persecution (Matthew 5:10-12).

The last three verses of the Beatitudes address a life-experience faced by those who are genuinely accomplishing the difficult task of following Jesus. What these individuals face is persecution. Blessing comes to those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, so not just any suffering is in mind here. These individuals will receive a great reward. Their blessing will be the highest because their suffering is the worst.

As one reads the Beatitudes, a realization comes that Jesus' teaching is difficult, unsettling, even unnerving. To follow Jesus is not an easy task. In

fact, to follow Jesus in the way these verses describe is impossible. Thus, God's grace is needed to accomplish them. God's grace empowers his followers to do something they could not do on their own. May all believers live and experience this grace every day.