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Chapter 6

THE CHARACTER OF THE CITIZEN OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

We have learned from the last chapter that the Kingdom of God has a very short constitution. We must love God above everything else and our neighbor as ourself. That is the essence of the Kingdom of God: our relationship to God must be right, but also our relationship to our fellow human being. That is only possible through a large chunk of love, love which we receive from God, who Himself is love.

Everything else in the Kingdom of God is actually derived from the constitution and character of God. Today we will take a look at the most important speech of the Lord Jesus, namely the Sermon on the Mount. There are 19 shorter and longer speeches of Christ recorded in the four Gospels. The Sermon on the Mount is the speech in which Christ explains much about the Kingdom of God and thus gives us enormous insight into what the Kingdom of God is. The Sermon on the Mount is the longest speech of Jesus and covers three chapters, namely Matthew 5, 6 and 7. In this chapter we will only discuss the beatitudes and will see that they also connect to the main characteristics of righteousness, peace and joy of the Kingdom of God (see chapter 2).

The beatitudes

Jesus was in Galilee and many people followed him. When He saw that crowd, Jesus went up on the mountain and sat down somewhere. And his disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. The Sermon on the Mount is thus a lesson (lecture) for the disciples. Probably other people gradually came to listen and they were not turned away. But keep in mind that Jesus is speaking primarily to believers here, namely to his disciples.

The lesson of Jesus begins with the beatitudes (Matth. 5: 3-12). These are eight statements, each beginning with the word "blessed."¹ To bless means to convey God's favor and protection. So, in each of the beatitudes, Jesus wishes the one who complies with it God's favor and protection. The Greek word for blessed also means happy or glad. The Beatitudes are seen as indicators of the character that a citizen of the Kingdom of God should have if he/she is truly serious about following Christ. Character refers to characteristic features of someone i.e. a quality that someone shows so often that you will recognize that person by it. Thus it is not something that you happen to do once, but that is ingrained in your personality by doing it frequently. So, Jesus wishes blessings and joy to those who display a certain quality, for they are on the right track.

Real change

¹ The word beatitude is taken from the Latin word beatitudo, which is derived from beatus (= blessing, happiness).

Before we start with the Beatitudes, a few remarks. If you are a citizen of a certain country and live in that country, you are a citizen for 1 x 24 hours. You cannot say that you do not feel like following the laws of that country today, but maybe you will tomorrow, because that is not how it works. Every country tries to form good citizens, so that living together is pleasant. The leaders of that country must also set a good example every day. Unfortunately, we do not always see that happening anymore.

We are citizens of the Kingdom of God and in this Kingdom the highest standards apply. The King Himself sets the best example every day. He has given us His book of directions and many examples to study. At a certain point, it must be tested to what extent the citizens actually do what their King says and if they really follow His example. Christ tests our character, for if we are a follower of Him, then after a time we must become like Him. John states, "*He who says he abides in Christ ought himself also to walk just as He walked*" (1 John 2:6).

If you want to become a good goalkeeper, you don't watch the matches of a bad goalkeeper who lets all the balls through, but preferably you watch a good goalkeeper. You learn the most from a good example and not from a bad example. So as a follower of Christ we should learn from someone like the apostle Paul, but even more from the best example i.e. Christ Himself.

When we become a citizen of the Kingdom of God, it is clear that we cannot continue our old life (otherwise there was no need for repentance). We have come to Christ precisely because we were tired of our old life with its wrong habits. So, it can never be the case that one day we repent and the next day we go on with our lives as if nothing had happened. No. Paul writes to the church in Rome that we are not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2). Thus we must shed our old thinking and old habits. Yet it seems that for many who call themselves Christians not much has changed in their lives. If so then something is wrong. Today we will test to what extent you have changed and what still needs to change.

1. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

This should be a fundamental characteristic of every Christian. Only when you admit that you are spiritually poor can you enter the Kingdom of God. This was the problem with many of the scribes and pharisees, who thought they were spiritually rich. Jesus therefore had to explain it very well to Nicodemus i.e. that he had to be spiritually as small as a child (cf. also Matt. 18:3). But even if we have repented, we should not think that we are spiritually great, for again Jesus teaches this to his disciples. In Isaiah 57 verse 15, God himself says "*I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones*" (cf. also Isa. 66:2). Only when God sees that we are poor in spirit, He can work through us and in us (cf. Peter who had denied Jesus, regretted it and only afterwards became useful, or Saul who became Paul). We must remain spiritually poor and dependent so that the Holy Spirit can do His work in our lives. Pride is the opposite of being poor in spirit.

2. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted

When we mourn about the things we have done wrong and confess our sinful deeds, we can find comfort. This too is not a one-off conversion, but must become a characteristic of us. We

must also grieve for the sins of others, grieve for the souls that are about to be lost, grieve for our neighborhood, our city, our country. Jesus himself mourned for Jerusalem (Luke 19:41-44). The world says let's eat and drink and be merry. The world does not like people who grieve for sin, but wants us to pretend that everything is fine. The world sees evil as good and those in power nowadays reward evil instead of good. The superficial joys of the world are of little use to us. Christ, however, warns the worldly revelers "*Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep*" (Luke 6:25b). The follower of Christ, who is poor in spirit, is one who mourns and prays for the sin he or she sees around him/her. When we do that Christ comforts us and we experience deep joy again (cf. Isa. 62: 2,3). So, we would rather grieve for our sins and then laugh, rather than laugh first and cry later when we have missed the boat.

3. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth

There is a proverb in Dutch which says that the rude ones own half the world, but here Christ says that the meek shall inherit the whole world (cf. Psalm 37:11). In the world, people look for assertive people, and aggressive people impose themselves. But in the kingdom of God meek persons are sought, those who are poor in spirit, who grieve for their sins and have become meek because of it; their harshness and callousness is gone. Christ himself was a meek man, who allowed himself to be abused, mistreated, and crucified. It all seemed to have been for nothing at the time, but afterwards we see that He is the king of kings. Meekness is different from slackness and also means something different from being nice or easy-going. Moses, David, Abraham, and Jeremiah were no wimps; they had a strong personality and great authority, yet they were meek. A meek person is not sensitive to what people say about him/her. He/she is not concerned with himself/herself. A meek person is willing to learn from and listen to others.

4. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled

People look for happiness, they long to be happy. But happiness and joy are not things that you can seek directly and that is why many miss it. Happiness is something you experience when you seek something different. We must desire righteousness. What is righteousness? It is the desire to be free from sin and from every manifestation of that sin, free from all desire for sin. It is the desire to be in a good relationship with God and fellow man. Such a person wants to correct everything that has gone wrong in his or her life and pay the price for it, just to be in the right relationship with God and with his fellow man. Such a person does not hide behind others, but admits his own mistakes and confesses his sins. Our conduct must also radiate righteousness, and therefore we cannot be corrupt or dishonest, for then we will not hunger and thirst for righteousness. When he/she does that, God blesses such a person and he is satisfied (cf. Psalm 107:9, Isa. 55:1,2). When you have confessed your sins, God forgives them and you feel satisfied with that forgiveness. When you are really hungry and thirsty, you don't delay, but look for food and drink until you find it. Likewise, our desire for righteousness should not be an occasional thought, but a constant urge. If righteousness is part of your life, then you must continue to desire it for your family, for your neighborhood, for the country, for the world. One who hungers and thirsts for righteousness for himself and for others, intercedes much, cries always to God. (see also chapter 2).

5. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy

The Lord Jesus was the epitome of mercy towards others and He calls us to be merciful too. That is an important mark of the character of a follower of Christ. Even if the world is tough, we must still be merciful and have an eye for our fellow man. The merciful person is not focused on himself, but on the other.

“Mercy is having a heart for the unfortunate, poor or miserable and the commitment to help him or her. Three things happen to the merciful: 1) He perceives the distress of the unfortunate. 2) He takes it to heart and he is moved inwardly. He has a feeling for the suffering of the other. 3) He helps, he 'shows mercy'.” (translated from www.Christipedia.nl)

Mercy or compassion therefore not only means that you feel sorry for someone else, but that you do something about it. Many people feel sorry for others, but never take any action. That is not mercy. The priest in the parable of the Good Samaritan saw the victim and must have felt sorry, but he did nothing, he walked past the victim; he was not merciful. When we help others, Christ assures us, that we will receive help also.

6. *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God*

This beatitude is about those who have a cleansed heart, a heart that is pure, which is not divided, but is completely focused on God. The Lord Jesus says that out of our heart (from within) come all kinds of bad things (Matth 15:19) and therefore the heart must be clean. Nowadays people blame their environment and others for everything, but the Bible always says that people must take responsibility themselves and not look elsewhere for the blame. Make sure your life is clean and ask the Holy Spirit to help you with that. In Psalm 24 the question is asked, *"Who may ascend into the hill of the Lord?"* and the answer (verse 4) indicates *"He who has clean hands and a pure heart"*. The problem of many Christians is that their hearts are divided. They do not live completely for God and do not entrust everything to Him, in that respect their hearts are not pure. David apparently suffered from this too, but he asks the Lord for help to unify his heart so that he could fear God's name (Ps. 86:11).

7. *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God*

In chapter 2 we saw that the Kingdom of God is characterized by righteousness, peace and joy (Rom 14:17). Making peace is not an easy task, because the world promotes strife and war. Sin drives people apart and to each other's destruction, but God wants to take away sin so that people can come together again. So, the follower of Christ should not participate in the works of sin, but rather try to make peace. Peace does not mean putting aside all injustice and pretending nothing happened. No, peace comes when we get people to confess their sins and ask each other for forgiveness.

How can we be peacemakers in our actions. Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones mentions four aspects:²

- a) Know when not to speak. You do not have to tell everything to someone else or express every thought. James says, *"Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger"* (James 1:19).
- b) Do not take everything personally, but look at every situation in the light of the gospel. So don't just talk too quickly, but also think carefully about where something can lead.

² Martyn Lloyd-Jones: Studies in the Sermon on the Mount. WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan. One volume edition 1981. This chapter makes good use of the line of thought in his book.

- c) Do something positive to those who want to argue. “*When your enemy is hungry, feed him*” (Rom. 12:20, Prov. 25:21).
- d) Be open to others and do not build a wall around you and do not be selfish. Pay attention to the interests of others.

8. *Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*

In fact this beatitude is elaborated in verse 11 and 12 where Jesus says: “*Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you*”.

Persecution of Christians is still going on in the world in more than 50 nations. Even within so called Christian nations there is persecution in various ways. We need to be more aware of this and they need our support and prayers.³

In this last beatitude, however, Christ is dealing with the individual who is being persecuted. They are persecuted because they follow Jesus and in doing so they become targets for people and institutions who do not like that. But Jesus qualifies their persecution i.e. it has to be for righteousness’ sake. Some people may be political active and claim that they are being persecuted for their faith or they may block a road with a banner which says “Jesus loves you”, but are clearly a danger for oncoming traffic. People can come in conflict with the law or be the target of others because they are very fanatic or are doing something stupid. That is why Jesus elaborates and explains that it has to be for righteousness’ sake and that people say evil things falsely about them. By being righteous, someone is just doing something good and nothing wrong, but still people bother that person, because that person is different and they cannot stand it or they are jealous. Jesus Himself did nothing wrong, to the contrary he helped many people, but still he was a nuisance to the established religious elite and they persecuted and even killed Him.

Those who are being persecuted for their faith, get several promises and also instructions from Christ. They will enter the Kingdom of Heaven and will get a great reward in heaven. Many persons who were persecuted were actually killed and so their reward is in heaven. For those who survive, the Lord says “*rejoice and be exceedingly glad*”. This seems very difficult. Jesus does not say that we have to retaliate, or feel resentment or become depressed. Our natural man would like to react in those manners, but if we serve Christ, we have to behave like Him. We find the answer to this challenge in Hebrews 12:2 “*We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame.*” Persecution can be painful, just as the cross was to Jesus, but he endured it because of the joy of the resurrection and His role in heaven and as king of the Kingdom of God. So what Jesus says to those who are being persecuted is look beyond this suffering and see the reward; rejoice and be glad because you are on the right track, you are on the narrow road, and you will arrive at the right destiny. Don’t rejoice because of the persecution, because it may be terrible, but because of the reward that follows.

³ You can find information about persecution of Christians at organizations such as Open Door Ministries (started by Brother Andrew).

Exercise for personal or group study

Song: Jess Chamblee: The Beatitudes <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yxs5wFpnGg>

Read Matthew 5: 1-12 (the beatitudes)

Read this chapter once more so that you grasp what it is that you should be evaluating.
Evaluate yourself in the table below for each beatitude from 1 to 10 (10 being the highest)

	Test of my character	Evaluation now	Evaluation 5 tot 10 years ago	Personal remarks
1	Poor in spirit			
2	Mourning			
3	Meekness			
4	Hunger after righteousness			
5	Merciful			
6	Pure of heart			
7	Peacemaker			
	Total			
	Average			
8	Persecuted for your faith	often/sometimes/never	often/sometimes/never	

Add the score of number 1 through 7 and divide by seven to get an average score.
If your score is between 8 and 10, you may praise God for what He has already done in your life.

With a score between 6 and 7, you can certainly also be grateful and still praise God, but realize that there is still work to be done.

With a score between 4 and 5, you are probably sad that you have not grown as much as you could have as a believer. You will need to identify areas in which you score poorly and really need more grace from God and ask the Holy Spirit to help you.

With a score between 1 and 3 you will have to conclude that most likely not much has changed in your life and that your life is not a witness to others. You really need to get more serious about your quiet time and ask the Holy Spirit for special guidance.