

PREFACE

Please turn to Matthew 5.

How are we to consider ourselves? As followers of Christ, how are we to think of ourselves? This is not the equally important question, How are we to *live*?—that is, What choices should we be making? What actions would correspond to our faith?—but this question is, What should be our mindset? If we could turn our gaze around 180 degrees and see within our own mind and heart, what would we see? More to the point, What *should* we see?

Before we examine our passage in 1 Corinthians, we need to establish our “baseline”: Against what will we later measure the mindset (and, of course, behavior) of the believers in Corinth as described by the apostle Paul? I would like us to fill our minds with Christ’s ideal answer to that last question—What *should* we see in our mind and heart?—found in the introduction to His Sermon on the Mount, which we refer to as The Beatitudes: God’s *counsel* for living other-worldly. We will look at just the few Beatitudes that are pertinent to our text in 1 Corinthians.

THE BEATITUDES

Philo of Alexandria wrote, “Only the deity attains to blessedness; He alone is blessed. Men share in this only in so far as the divine nature penetrates the creation.” As Philo tells us, the source of true blessedness is only God Himself; we only know and experience the true joy of blessedness as we live in close communion with Him. So Christ’s bullet-point definition of blessedness becomes our baseline, our goal by which every other standard is measured—and found wanting.

v6: hunger

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.”

If we are hungry and thirsty, what are we hungry and thirsty for? If we are *not* hungry, what then has already filled us? Jesus says, in v6, that those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness are not just blessed; they are *satisfied*, or filled. It then follows that if we are *not* hungry for righteousness, we must be filled with something else—something that is *not* righteousness.

v3: poor

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

The poverty spoken of in the Beatitudes has nothing to do with any lack of funds.

Albert Barnes: To be poor in spirit is to have a humble opinion of ourselves; to be sensible that we are sinners, and have no righteousness of our own; to be willing to be saved only by the rich grace and mercy of God; to be willing to be where God places us, to bear what he lays on us, to go where he bids us, and to die when he commands; to be willing to be in his hands, and to feel that we deserve no favor from him.

To be “poor in spirit” is to understand that in ourselves we are utterly unworthy before God, deserving nothing, but that through Christ we are granted the right to stand before Him with confidence. To be poor in this world is to have an empty purse; to be spiritually poor is to have one’s heart filled with God rather than self.

Then make note what their reward is for this holy submission: “the kingdom of heaven.”

v8: pure

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

Blessed are those who have not committed violence with either their hands or their heart. Blessed are those whose lives are marked by honesty, morality, shunning that which is evil or self-serving. Blessed are those who tell the truth—who do not say one thing with their lips, while holding something else in their heart.

Those who are pure in heart will “see God.” This is more than just a promise of heaven; this means that even now, before heaven, the pure in heart see God as He truly is. They are able to “discern clearly” who He is, and see Him in His word.

v5: gentle

“Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.”

To be gentle, or meek, does not mean one is a wimp, nor does it mean one is a ninety-eight pound weakling.

Charles Swindoll: “Gentle” is strength under control. It is used of a stallion that’s been broken: still strong, all the muscle structure still in that body, but under control. With a pull of the reins that horse obeys.

v10: persecuted

“Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Barnes: We are not to seek persecution. We are not to provoke it by strange sentiments or conduct; by violating the laws of civil society, or by modes of speech that are unnecessarily offensive to others. But if, in the honest effort to be Christians, and to live the life of Christians, others persecute and revile us, we are to consider this as a blessing. It is an evidence that we are the children of God, and that he will defend us.

These verses from the Beatitudes give us our baseline; this should be our mindset.

Let's read our passage. [Please turn to 1 Corinthians 4.](#)

Paul now sets out to shame the Corinthians by reciting, in a manner dripping with irony and sarcasm, how the Corinthians think of themselves—what is, apparently, in *their* hearts.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:8-10.

The Corinthians have much in common with the Laodiceans, as described by Christ Jesus in John's revelation.

Read Revelation 3:17-18.

How Paul described this church at the beginning of the letter—how that “in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you, so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:5-7)—was the truth, but instead of instilling humility, it had fed a sense of self-satisfaction and superiority in them.

v8

You are already filled, you have already become rich,

These three conditions describe one state of being, but let's also consider them individually. First Paul says that the Corinthians are *already* “filled.” This is a reference to the condition of their belly, and means that they are not just *essentially* filled, but crammed full, i.e. glutted or sated. It is the picture of someone sprawled on the living room sofa, loosening his belt after the Thanksgiving feast.

Why would this be a put-down? What's wrong with being full? To answer that we need to leave our time and step back into the Middle East of the first century. Our contemporary life-style and eating habits—especially here in the United States—bear no resemblance whatsoever to those in the time and place Paul was writing this. With some exceptions, of course, even lower income individuals and families have more than enough to eat. Our typical standard is that when we experience the slightest twinge of hunger, we immediately grab something to eat (and often more than we need), whereas the typical standard for the average person in the first century would be to pretty much always be hungry, and meals rarely accomplished more than just meeting essential needs.

So in that time having more than enough to eat was associated with extreme wealth (“you have already become rich”), gross indulgence and licentiousness. However, like today, while those with empty bellies would ridicule the wealthy and replete, they at the same time wished they were wealthy as well.

Paul, of course, is not preoccupied with the Corinthians' eating habits. He employs these terms ("filled," "rich," "kings") as metaphors with which to address not their physical but their *spiritual* condition. Not only did they not "hunger and thirst for righteousness," but what they were "already filled" with were the rhetoric and philosophies of the fallen culture in which they dwelt.

Regarding "already," "now"

(The respected Gordon Fee has a habit of seeing eschatological reference everywhere he looks in Paul's writings—primarily because he believes *the apostle* is preoccupied with the end-times realization of Christ's kingdom. Nonetheless, I believe his interpretation here is measured—and correct.)

We see the eschatological reference in the structure and word choices of the first half of this sentence: "You are **already filled**, you have **already become rich**, you **have become kings** without us" (emphasis added). This does not point to the end times at the expense of the here and now; here is another use of the common "now—not yet" realization of certain blessings/attributes for the follower of Christ—yet here presented with ironic sarcasm. That is, the Christian in the here and now, because of the indwelling Spirit, is "filled" in ways the world will never know or even understand, and the Christian has a measure of "wealth" the world can never obtain. But the Christian also understands that there will come a day when what he has *now* in Christ will then seem like slim pickings when compared to the outpouring he will receive in glory.

The Corinthians, however, are living as if they consider that what they have by means of the Spirit in the here and now has already filled them to overflowing; they already have all there is or will be. Paul is not saying (nor is Fee interpreting his rhetoric to mean) that the Corinthians *literally* believe they are already living *in* the end times—in the kingdom on the other side of Judgment Day, as did some of the Thessalonians. As Fee puts it, for the Corinthians, "already but not yet"

is one of "already" with little room for "not yet." Having received the Spirit, they have already arrived; for them spirituality means to have been transported into a whole new sphere of existence where they are "above" the earthly, and especially "fleshly," existence of others.

It's not that the Corinthians believe Christ's judgment has already occurred; their problem is that they aren't thinking about it at all (Garland). To convince them into realizing that they are *not yet* filled with what they can consume of God, that they are *not yet* overflowing with His riches, Paul seeks to shame them from their pride, into humility and gratitude for what they *do* have.

D. W. Kuck: [The Corinthians] already see themselves as morally and spiritually perfected, without having to experience the bodily struggles which Paul sees as the sign of life in Christ.

This brings us to the third—and most presumptuous statement.

you have become kings without us;

First, the NASB is not the best translation here, because the word translated “kings” really refers to the activity of reigning—that is, not the state of being a king, but reigning as a king. The KJVs have it correctly, and the difference we can see by comparing the original NIV with the new NIV:

original NIV: You have **become kings**—and that without us!

new NIV: You have **begun to reign**—and that without us!

This correction fits with what we know about the role of believers during the Millennium and beyond. I can find no reference in God’s word in which it says that believers will be kings (KJVs excepted); rather it says that we will be part of a kingdom, and will *reign with, or under*, the one King—such as what the living creatures and elders declared when the Lamb that was slain took the book of seven seals.

Read Revelation 5:9-10. (NOT KJVs)

“kings” in the KJVs is better rendered “kingdom”; as JFB says, “read, ‘A kingdom.’ They who cast their crowns before the throne, do not call themselves kings in the sight of the great King.”

...without us;

This does not mean “apart from our help,” but “without our having share in it.” *Look at that: you have been granted kingly rule even before your leaders and teachers!*

and indeed, I wish that you had become kings so that we also might reign with you.

Here Paul concludes, rather wistfully with a sigh, if it were true that the Corinthians really were now reigning, it would mean that the Kingdom of Christ in the end times had truly arrived, and Paul and the rest of their teachers would be reigning as well. Sadly, however, that was not the case.

CONCLUSION

A comparison of this verse (and v10) to the Beatitudes gives us a very clear picture of how far off-track the Corinthians had moved from the ideal. And even if we might conclude that none of us are nearly as arrogant or self-absorbed as many in the Corinthian church, we still dwell in a practically identical environment—and that society, that culture, can seep into our lives, our church, just as easily as it did in Corinth.

Let us keep returning to our baseline for living *other-worldly*: the truly blessed life as described by Jesus in His Beatitudes.