

**Title:** The Christian Moral Life (2): The Beatitudes—Defining Character  
**Date:** 9 July 2017  
**Occasion:** SSMC Sunday Worship  
**Text:** Mat 5:1-16

## 1. Introduction

- i. Sermon 1: The 10 Commandments—Our Creator’s instructions for living and enjoying life in the best way possible!

Mat 5-7: The Sermon on the Mount deals with the Christian way of life. In particular, the Beatitudes in Mat 5:1-11 define key aspects of Christian character!

ii. *Character defined*

- a. Character needs to be defined clearly. But it cannot be done by a word.
- It is a person’s inner moral constitution.
  - It is who you are when everything is stripped away—birth & family, wealth & possessions, race or social class, academic degrees and earthly accolades, your physical abilities and beauty or lack of it, etc.  
It is who you are when you stand stark naked before God on Judgment Day!
  - Proverbs calls it our heart: “Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flows the spring of life” (4:23); “My son, give me your heart and let your eyes observe my ways” (23:26).
  - “It is the stuff that gives us depth and makes us wise” (Swindoll 1987:19).
  - Traditionally in every culture, character has to do with virtues, with what is good and right, and represents moral excellence.

b. Character and virtues:

- Greek culture; cf. Plato’s 4 cardinal virtues: *temperance*, i.e. moderation and self-restraint; *prudence*, i.e. wisdom based on reason; *courage*; and justice.
- Chinese culture: what Confucius calls the ideal man or *junzi*.
- In Christianity:
  - Character is found in the qualities that we see in Jesus’ personal life
  - The fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22)
  - The 7 cardinal virtues (and their opposites) in the Christian tradition: humility (pride); kindness (envy); temperance (gluttony); chastity (lust); patience (wrath); charity (greed); and diligence (sloth)

iii. *The disregard of character in the modern world*

- a. Today’s world has lost sight of moral excellence and the need for character. E.g.
- Malaysia: When the 1MDB issue first blew up, one of Najib’s younger brothers wrote a piece that went viral:

When they were growing up, they had asked the father for a swimming pool. But Razak said, “No!” because it was to misuse taxpayers’ money. Again, once in the process of moving from one house to another, they had accidentally taken a fan. Razak made sure that it was sent back! One may wonder who that piece was directed at?

- America: I remember when I was still in school, one Presidential candidate was rejected by his party because he was divorced. But in 2016, of the two main party candidates, one was twice divorced and a fake news specialist. And public polls suggested that the other was not trusted by some 70% of Americans.
- Sum: The world today often looks not to character but to wealth and power and celebrity status!

b. But is the church any better?

I am not referring to the western church which has already by and large lost its spiritual bearings. Rather, the church in Asia.

The sad fact is that many of our leaders are caught up with church politics, empire-building, obsession with BIGness in numbers, buildings and money, and with worldly success!

Many aspire to be high profile leaders exercising power over others; few know what it means to be a servant.

The charismatic movement which brought much renewal and growth in the 1980s and 1990s, unfortunately also encouraged competition, pride and the pursuit of superstar syndrome.

Result: Many are building their own churches and empires in competition with others, hence the disunity we see among us. Like the world around us, we are often self-satisfied with our numbers, buildings, money and other measures of success, and there is no real hunger for God! The Malaysian church today may appear outwardly successful in the eyes of the world but lacks inner credibility.

## 2. **The Beatitudes Explained: Mat 5:2-12**

It is against this broad background that we need to look afresh at what Jesus says in the Beatitudes.

A definition of Christian character.

i. *The Beatitudes according to the world; cf. J B Philips’ version*

Happy are the pushers: for they get on in the world.

Happy are the hard-boiled: for they never let life hurt them.

Happy are they who complain: for they get their own way in the end.

Happy are the blasé: for they never worry over their sins.

Happy are the slave drivers: for they get results.

Happy are the knowledgeable men of the world: for they know their way around.

Happy are the trouble-makers: for people have to take notice of them.

The above gives you an idea of how the world thinks!

ii. *What does Jesus say instead?*

(See Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I never knew*, and John Stott, *Christian Counter Culture*.)

a. Eight qualities & eight privileges:

- “The eight qualities together constitute the responsibilities and the eight blessings the privileges of being a citizen of God’s kingdom. This is what the enjoyment of God’s rule mean” (Stott 1978:34).
- The qualities commended are spiritual qualities.  
The blessings are the comprehensive blessings of God’s rule, expressed in part now and in full in eternity.
- “blessed” translated from *makarios* (Greek)  
It is more than “happy,” a merely psychological state.  
It is more than a psychological state. It is an objective judgment, a real gift or blessing from God.

Yancey says it is like saying “Lucky you!” when you receive something genuinely good like a scholarship, etc.

b. The Beatitudes:

- v.3; “poor in spirit”:
  - humble and dependent on God  
Cf. Is 57:15 speaks of “lowly/humble” and “contrite”
  - “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”  
Not just salvation but everything in Christ!  
This includes the power of the Kingdom/heaven!  
Point: God’s kingly authority is released fully only in the humble and the meek!
- v.4; “mourn”
  - Should v.4 be translated “Happy are the unhappy”?
  - “mourning” for the sins of the world and the suffering that results  
But more, mourning one’s own sin!
  - Such shall know God’s comfort!
- v.5; “meekness”
  - In contrast to self-assertion about one’s rights, gifts and attainments.  
These often are the sources of our human pride towards God and others.  
“Meekness” describes a person who has a true estimate of oneself, with all our weaknesses, sins and brokenness.  
Recognition of this leads to true humility before God and others.  
Such a person does not assert oneself over others to take advantage of them.
  - “inherit the earth”; Jesus is drawing on OT promises which speaks of the meek inheriting the land (Ps 37:11).

- Note: Jesus is not saying that we should be door-mats for others to walk over. One can be confident and secure in oneself in true meekness, without being pushed aside wrongfully by others.
- v.6; “hunger and thirst for righteousness”
  - This is contrasted with the sins and evils in this world.  
Luther (in Stott:45): “This command to you is not to crawl into a corner or into the desert, but to run out ... and to offer your hands and your feet and your whole body, and to wager everything you have and can do ...”  
For what? To work for righteousness and justice!
  - Result: You shall be satisfied!
- vv. 7-12;
  - “merciful”: Contrast cruelty and revenge so common in the world.
  - “pure in heart”: You must be determined to pursue this if you want to draw near to God.
  - “peacemakers”: Nobody loves a peacemaker because everyone wants you to be on their side!
  - “persecuted for righteousness’ sake”

Note: We need to look at each in detail and meditate on Jesus’ words.

### iii. *Summing-up*

- The Beatitudes turns the values or practices of this world upside down!
- Further, the path to greatness in this world is UP; the path to greatness in the Kingdom of God is DOWN!

## 3. **Salt and Light; Mat 5:13-16**

### i. *Mat 5:13-16*

- Explain vv. 13-16  
Point: Where is the salt and where is the light?
- These verses do not form a separate section but are a continuation of vv. 2-12.  
When we live our lives out according to the Beatitudes, then we become truly salt and light!

### ii. *Example from the Early Church (Rodney Starks, 1997)*

- During Epidemics:
  - Galen, the famous Roman physician fled to his country estate and did not emerge until after the epidemic was over.
  - Thucydides said that people “were afraid to visit one another” and as a result, “they died with no one to look after them” (quoted in Stark, 1997: 85).

- Yet, there are clear records of pastors and leaders in the E Church caring for the sick and dying. Some of these pastors and leaders caught the diseases and died also in the process.
  - Early Church teachings included:
    - The Apostolic Constitutions specified that duties of deacons include being set apart for the support of the sick, infirm, poor and disabled (Stark 1997: 87).
    - Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, reminded his flock that the love commandment is not restricted to loving one's own kind.
 

“[T]here is nothing remarkable in cherishing merely our own people with the due attention of love, but that one might become perfect who should do something more than heathen men ... one who, overcoming evil with good, and practicing a merciful kindness like that of God, should love his enemies as well ... Thus good was done to all men, not merely the household of faith.” (Stark:87; quoting from Harnack)
  - Tertullian's defence of Christianity against pagan attacks: “It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness that brands us in the eyes of many our opponents. ‘Only look,’ they say, ‘look how they love one another!’” (Apology 39; quoted in Stark, 1997: 87).
- iii. What then does it mean to be salt and light in Malaysia today?  
 Towards the poor and needy like the Orang Asli?  
 Towards those who slander and malign us like some racial and religious extremists continue to do? Etc.  
 What would it mean to love our enemies and those who persecute us?

#### 4. **Conclusion**

- Jesus here is speaking about character.  
 The quest for character goes beyond the letter of the law! Cf. Mat 5:20!  
 One can be legal but not moral!  
 What Jesus is calling us to is to live in such a way that demonstrates what moral excellence mean in a world that no longer thinks about the importance of virtues and moral excellence.  
 Only then can the church impact the world as salt and light!
- The ultimate goal: Mat 5:48