

The Real Meaning of the Beatitudes
Matthew 5: 1-12
Charles R. Page, II
Jerusalem Institute for Biblical Exploration

One of the familiar texts in the Bible is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount - the Beatitudes. There have been volumes written about the meaning of the Beatitudes, but I would like to add something totally new and, perhaps, shocking for the Western reader.

I have a good friend who is a priest in a small Galilean village named Ibillin. This humble man has been serving God in this village for over three decades. His name is Father (Abuna) Elias Chacour. Not only does he serve the people of his parish, but he also is the founder of a great school for students from kindergarten into college. His students are Christian, Muslim, and Jewish. The faculty at his school also is from different faiths and nationalities. Abuna Chacour has received many international peace awards in his ministry of justice, peace and love in Galilee and throughout the world.

One of the many gifts of this remarkable servant of God is that he is also an excellent Bible scholar. I wrote to him to see if he might be able to write this article. Unfortunately his schedule will not allow this. However, I remember much of his lecture on the topic. So I will present his understanding as best I can in his absence.

In Greek the word translated as “blessed” is *makarios*. The word literally means “supremely blest, fortunate, well off or happy.” The Beatitudes are:

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

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

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

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5: 3-13).

The word *makarios* is passive. So we could quite literally translate them as “Happy are the poor in spirit,” or “How fortunate are those who mourn,” or “How well off are the meek,” and nothing would be required of the “poor in spirit, those who mourn, or the meek.” All the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek and the others have to do is to be that one thing and they will “inherit the earth,” or “receive mercy,” or “see God,” etc.

Abuna Chacour is an Aramaic scholar and has translated some of the New Testament from Aramaic into Arabic and English. In Aramaic there are two words which have been translated as *makarios* in Greek and “Blessed” in English. These are “*ashrei*” and *to vahoun*. Unlike their Greek counterpart, these words are active and not passive. Abuna Chacour says they are properly translated as “**WAKE UP**” or “**GET UP.**” In Aramaic, the language of Jesus, the proper translation of the Beatitudes is as follows.

Get up you who are the poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

Get up those who mourn, for you will be comforted.

Get up you who are the meek, for you will inherit the earth.

Get up you who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for you will be filled.

Get up you merciful, for you will receive mercy.

Get up you pure in heart, for you will see God.

Get up you peacemakers, for you will be called children of God.

Get up you who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

Get up when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

(Matthew 5: 3-13).

Unlike the passive *makarios*, the active *ashrei* and *to vahoun* call us into a participatory role in our discipleship. You have to be actively involved in extending mercy to receive mercy. If you are a peacemaker, you cannot passively sit or stand by while war rages around us. You cannot be filled unless you **get up** and actively seek righteousness.

Therefore, instead of our reading the Beatitudes as a warm and fuzzy, feel good introduction to the Sermon on the Mount we must see the Beatitudes as Jesus' call to action. We cannot passively wait for the “kingdom of heaven” to become ours. We have to be willing to risk persecution for the sake of discipleship to challenge people with God's truth. Never, in the history of our planet, has there been a greater need for people to stand for the principles of God. It is time to be prophetic-time to **GET UP**.