

He is an American Billionaire. He is an industrialist, ingenious engineer and playboy. He suffered a severe chest injury during a kidnapping. His captors wanted him to produce a weapon of mass destruction. Instead, he created a powerful suit of armor to save his life and escape captivity. As his life moves forward, he adds to his suit with weapons and other technological devices he designed through his company. He uses the suit and subsequent versions to protect the world. He builds a skyscraper bearing his name and fights against communism, terrorism and evil.

Who is he? Tony Stark – a fictional character and superhero who appears in Marvel comics and Iron Man films. Marvel seems to have found the perfect person to play Tony Stark in the actor Robert Downey Jr. He plays Stark to a T and seems to have the intelligence to go with the imagined smarts of Ironman.

The Ironman movie series has been wildly successful. According to [Boxofficemojo.com](http://Boxofficemojo.com), Iron Man 3 is the 6<sup>th</sup> highest grossing movie of all time pulling in 1.215 Billion dollars. The other two Iron Man movies pulled in over 300 million dollars. There is something that people like about Iron Man. It could be the special effects. It could be the storyline. But could it also be the image and values that Iron Man projects? Could it be that even though we know he's a fictional character, we admire him and dream a little of being like him?

Let's say we had to come up with a character sketch of Tony Stark. It might go something like this. "Tony Stark is a self-confident, competent and self-reliant businessman. But he's not all work. He loves having a good time and inviting others to join him in it. He regularly hosts parties for the beautiful people in his LA mansion. He is proud, powerful and very important. He experiences much satisfaction in life and is very well adjusted. He's able to take care of himself and respects others who can do the same. He's sophisticated, open-minded, competitive and aggressive. He's adaptable, popular and he won't rock the boat with the way other people live their lives." Now that kind of person might be someone you'd hang around with.

But let's look at Tony from another perspective for a moment. What might Jesus think of him? Would Jesus appreciate how Tony takes up the fight against evil? Probably. Would Jesus' affirm Tony's genius? Maybe. But what if every character trait I just listed for you goes directly against Jesus' description of people in the kingdom of heaven? Does Tony Stark starkly represent the opposite of Jesus?

To answer this question, we will plunge into Jesus' teaching today. We have completed the first four chapters of Matthew which describe Jesus' arrival on earth. We have seen Jesus' be baptized, overcome the devil's temptations and establish His public ministry. Last week we saw Him proclaim "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." We learned that the kingdom of heaven is the reign of God over the universe, world and individual lives. Now Jesus will stop and do some teaching.

### **What is the Sermon on the Mount?**

This section is called the Sermon on the Mount because it took place on a mountain. In this message, Jesus will describe what it looks like for His disciples to live out a radical kingdom life in their everyday world. **He explains how to live life on this earth in light of the kingdom of heaven's arrival.** We will be spending several weeks in Jesus' sermon which includes the Lord's Prayer, His teaching on judging, dealing with lust, loving enemies, combatting worry, the golden rule and building your life on rock or sand

### **The Beatitudes – What are they?**

It begins with a famous section of sayings known as the beatitudes. Beatitude comes from the Latin "beatitudo" meaning happiness. Our English versions of the Bible start each saying with the word "Blessed." But what are the beatitudes? Are they commands? Standards? Something we can just do on our own if we really try hard? Christian writers throughout history have struggled with this. Are they entrance requirements into the kingdom of heaven? Are they impossible ideals? Examples for another age or an optional elitism for Christians who really wanted to be serious about their faith?

I agree with writers who conclude the Beatitudes are for every Christian. But they are not really commands. **They describe the life of those who accept the demands of God's kingdom in contrast with the attitudes of the man of the world.** They explain how a repentant person ready for God's rule should live. I want you to watch and see if the Tony Stark character lines up with or goes against Jesus' descriptions. So we have some work to do. We first need to find out what these beatitudes say. Then we will ask why would anyone want to be like the people Jesus describes? Finally, we'll consider how we actually get these qualities in our lives.

Matthew 5:1-12 (ESV)

**5** Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

<sup>5</sup>“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup>“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

<sup>7</sup>“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup>“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

<sup>9</sup>“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

<sup>10</sup>“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup>“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

What does it mean to be “blessed?” Is it happiness? Happy are the poor in spirit? Happy are those who mourn? Happy are those who hunger and thirst? Most people aren’t happy about mourning, hunger, thirst and persecution. The situations Jesus’ describes do not always include happy circumstances.

So blessed must mean something different. Instead of an emotion or a happiness that depends on things going well, Blessed means one who is fortunate or well off in their perspective on life. It is more a condition you experience rather than a feeling. You can tell if you are blessed from Jesus’ perspective if you have certain qualities in your life.

### **What are the qualities of a disciple living in the kingdom of heaven?**

**1 – Blessed are the poor in spirit.** A disciple living in the kingdom of heaven will experience a sense of well-being when they admit their spiritual poverty. Jesus is not talking here about lack of money though most of the people listening were poor people. Poverty doesn’t automatically bring the state of blessedness Jesus describes. Those who recognized their poverty of spirit would be blessed. Those who admitted their spiritual bankruptcy had a sense of well-being. Why would such poverty bring blessing?

To understand this we need to consider realities a poor person faces. He or she owns little. They've most likely received anything they have. They have no reserves. They don't have the ability for self-reliance. But if someone comes along with resources they experience great blessing. That describes everyone's spiritual life apart from God.

Only when we admit our spiritual poverty and we recognize our great need for God, can we enter the Kingdom of Heaven. We recognize we have a great lack spiritually that only God can fill. Our awareness of this need causes us to turn towards God constantly. So in our walk with God recognizing our poverty is the gateway to life in the Kingdom of Heaven.

We see this condition when a person first comes to Christ in repentance and trust. They finally recognize that they do not have the resources in themselves to overcome their spiritual bankruptcy. They do not have what it takes to earn favor before God. No one can. So they come as spiritual beggars to a God waiting to pour out His spiritual riches to them. This is one reason why material wealth can be such a great obstacle to the spiritual life. We can deceive ourselves into thinking that we are not spiritually poor because we are materially prosperous. Yet so many wealthy people discover that accumulation of stuff fails to satisfy. Though they are rich they find themselves poor and outside the kingdom of heaven.

**2 – Blessed are those who mourn.** A person is fortunate or well off in their life if they mourn. But mourn about what? Commentators are divided on this. Some say this means mourning over anything. So whether you are bereaved by the loss of a loved one or saddened by the loss of a job, God will comfort you. That certainly is true. God is a great comforter in the midst of His people's suffering. Yet I agree with those who argue that these beatitudes follow kind of a progression in the Christian life.

Once you admit your spiritual poverty and come to Christ you enjoy the newness of life in Christ. You enjoy forgiveness. But as you grow in Christ, you become more and more aware of your sin. You see entrenched sinful attitudes. You recognize what you did 15 years ago was sin. Or you see where our nation has gone far from God. It grieves you.

There are 9 words for mourning in the New Testament. This one talks about the worst kind of mourning – like the loss of a child. But it's mourning over our own sinfulness. It's weeping over the way we have gone against God. When you actually experience that, you taste blessing. You experience great healing in relationship between you and

God. It's like when an adult child realizes some great pain they caused their parents in times past. Or when a parent realizes that they sinned against their child. Then they come and acknowledge and apologize. There is a great reconciliation. When we mourn over our sinfulness before God, we experience increasing closeness in our relationship with Him. We can stop avoiding that dark area which we think He doesn't know about and instead come clean before Him. How fortunate and blessed is such a person.

**3 – Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth.** Jesus does not say weak but meek although most people equate meekness with weakness. But the meekness Jesus talks about here is hardly weakness. It takes great strength. To be meek implies one is free from malice and a vengeful spirit. Meekness does not include aggressive, harsh or domineering behavior. Instead it includes gentleness and a willingness to be inconvenienced. A meek person does not throw their weight around to try to get their way or the attention of others. They instead rely on God to give them their due. Matthew will stress throughout this Gospel the meekness of Jesus. How balanced, fortunate and blessed is a person who is meek.

**4 – Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they will be filled.** This brings us back to the image of poverty. The poor hunger and thirst. For many of the people listening to Jesus that day, hunger and thirst were never far away. They lived from hand to mouth. One bad famine could threaten their survival.

But Jesus does not talk about physical hunger and thirst. He talks about longing and thirsting for righteousness. Now remember we defined righteousness in Matthew a few weeks ago when Jesus was about to be baptized by John. John objects to baptizing Jesus. But Jesus encourages him by saying "Let it be so now for it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." We learned there that righteousness here means conforming to God's will especially in the area of His saving activity." What conforms to God's will? God is pleased when His people live righteous lives by the power of the Spirit and when the society conforms to His standards of justice. Kingdom disciples hunger and thirst for their own lives to conform to God's saving activity. God didn't send Jesus just to save us from Hell and His wrath. He saved us to be conformed to the likeness of Jesus. When we begin to want and desire that, we are fortunate. We are blessed, for we will be filled.

**5– Blessed are the Merciful for they will be shown mercy.** Mercy embraces forgiveness for the guilty and compassion for the needy. Mercy is a central biblical theme. In God's great mercy, he does not give humans what they

deserve which is judgment but gives them forgiveness. The merciful demonstrate forgiveness to the guilty and compassion to the hurting. But this mercy is more than just a single act of forgiveness or one visit to help in a soup kitchen.

It involves identifying with the one we show mercy to. We must imagine crawling into somebody else's body to see what they see, feel what they feel and suffering like they suffer. A person filled with themselves cannot practice mercy. They must stop, think, learn and feel what that other person experiences.

So far we have seen that kingdom disciples acknowledge poverty in spirit. Such knowledge will bring greater awareness to one's own sin. So this will lead them to mourn over their sinfulness. When you recognize your sinfulness, you become less proud and more likely to demonstrate meekness. When you're meek, you become more aware of the need for righteousness in your own life and around you. So a desire and thirst after righteousness grows. One way to display righteousness and accomplish God's saving purpose is to show mercy to others.

**6 – Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.** When we see or hear the word pure we immediately think moral or sexual purity. Though pure in heart includes those, it is much broader. It actually refers to an undivided heart with respect to God. The greatest commandment describes this kind of heart – You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with your entire mind and with all your strength. Such a person is single-minded in their devotion to God. They do not allow division in their heart from competing loyalties. They focus on love for God.

Pure thinking and behavior flow from a pure or undivided heart. A person who loves God with all their heart will aim for moral and sexual purity out of love for Him. You can have what looks like a pure life externally while entertaining impure thoughts. So if you want to strengthen your desire for purity give all of your heart love to God. An undivided heart internally produces a pure life externally.

**7 – Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called sons or daughters of God.** Kingdom disciples experience peace with God. But this peace with God leads them to desire peace for others. So they become peacemakers themselves. Notice that Jesus did not say “blessed are the *peacekeepers*.” Blessed are the *peacemakers* – those who intentionally go between two warring parties and help them move towards a complete peace. They aren't interested in just seeing hostilities cease. They want to help others experience completeness, wholeness and reconciliation in their relationships.

Friends, when it comes to disagreements with other people, where do you find yourself? Are you a peacemaker or warmonger? Some Christians have no idea about peace making. They just take sides. They find fault in others and willingly share about another's faults. They believe that peacemaking is someone else's responsibility. If that describes you, then you may need to take a good hard look at yourself.

I'm not talking about sweeping wrongdoing under the carpet. But we can be so quick to justify our positions when it comes to disagreements. We can hastily share our disapproval of another person with a friend. That's how the world functions. But kingdom disciples are profoundly different. They are not quick to take sides between people but are quick to work on peace making. The only relational war we Christians are allowed to engage in is war against the spiritual forces of evil. We fight them. But we don't fight one another. If you have been at war against someone else then you must make peace. This is a characteristic of kingdom disciples.

**8 – Blessed are the persecuted for righteousness' sake for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.** The kingdom disciple will endure persecution for the advancement of God's saving purposes. So this does not describe the person who is a jerk and gets persecuted for it. That's deserved persecution. But persecution for righteousness' sake means you get grief because you're a Christian. You suffer some disadvantage because you did right or you stood up for Christ.

So that is a very quick look at the beatitudes. Hope you will look more deeply at them. Jesus gives reasons why anyone would want to have the qualities of one living in the kingdom of heaven. You shall be comforted. You shall inherit the earth. You shall be satisfied. You shall receive mercy. You shall see God. You shall be called sons of God. Yours is the kingdom of heaven. Most of these are future blessings with a taste of them today. Remember the Kingdom of Heaven is an already have but not yet fulfilled Kingdom.

But there is **A problem of the beatitudes**. Remember the character sketch we drew of Tony Stark earlier? Well let's draw a character sketch of a person who has some of these qualities. They are poor, sad, meek, hungry, thirsty and persecuted. Would you like to hang around with a person like that? You might want to help them in their sorry state. But it's unlikely you'd call them to go out for a good time. It's more unlikely you want to be like them. A quick glance at a person like this and you'd conclude that Jesus wants a weakling; a pushover; a loser.

A professor gave a message on the beatitudes. After he concluded a woman came to speak with him. She told him that her son dropped Christianity and left the church because of the beatitudes. He was a strong, intelligent military

man. He concluded that if a Christian was someone who was poor, sad, weak and mild he could not be like that. So he left the faith. If that's the picture Jesus' paints here, such a response is understandable. It can seem pretty wimpy at first glance.

But we must recognize how much strength these qualities actually require. To admit that you're poor in spirit requires more guts than putting on a brave front. To mourn over sinfulness takes more courage than covering up. To show the restraint required for meekness requires more fortitude than unbridled release of aggression. To hunger and thirst for righteousness demands more self-control than giving in to whatever temptation comes along. Showing mercy calls us to swim against the stream of selfishness to be selfless. An undivided heart demands focus instead of the undisciplined array of divided loyalties. Peacemaking requires way more effort than taking sides. Standing firm in persecution can cost you your life. The picture Jesus paints here is no wimp but a person of incredible character.

#### **How can a disciple gain these qualities?**

Well we've said they're not commands but descriptions. When we realize how difficult and how much strength these qualities actually require, we are quickly brought to the end of our own resources. These qualities will accompany the transformation that occurs in the life of each disciple as each submits to Holy Spirit's work. **Kingdom qualities come through changed minds and compliant hearts.** I don't think we produce these qualities by trying really hard. We must change our minds by the power of the Spirit from Tony Stark's values to Jesus values. That's repentance – to change one's mind. We need the Holy Spirit to renew and change our minds about values. But we also need compliant hearts. We need to cooperate with the Holy Spirit. Slowly but surely He changes us and grows these qualities in our lives. Michael Wilkins – Professor of New Testament at Talbot writes “The Beatitudes are neither a means of entering nor of advancing in the kingdom. They are expressions of a Spirit-produced kingdom life, revealing to the entire world that a transformation of creation is beginning in Jesus' disciples.”

But can this really happen? Can it even happen to Tony Stark like people in our world today? Well Michael Wilkins thought he was like Tony Stark in High School. He shares his own story of struggling with the beatitudes.

“In my teens I renounced my Christian identity and church. I clearly remember sitting in youth group meetings where the characteristics of the Beatitudes were held up as ideals for us to emulate. I remember snickering in the back row with my buddies as the youth leaders cajoled us to cease being cocky and macho and become meek and mild. We

were three-sport athletes in high school! This picture of the Christian life from the Beatitudes seemed lamely pathetic. As I think back, our youthful cockiness and machismo were probably just as pathetic, but the Christian life painted by that church had nothing to offer us as a viable, robust alternative.

Not too many years after ruling out the Beatitudes for real life, I sat under the brilliant stars in a jungle in Vietnam and their significance overwhelmed me. I was a member of a cocky airborne infantry combat battalion. We were a well-trained, exceedingly efficient war machine. That night as I sat on guard duty after one especially ravaging battle, I experienced the reality of what Jesus addressed in the Beatitudes. I had killed gleefully that day. I had ripped the life from other young men without a twinge of conscience. I saw the bodies of my nineteen-and twenty-year-old squad members ravaged by other young men who were our hated enemies. Yet probably none of us on either side could really offer any adequate explanation for our animosity.

That night I experienced brokenness. I became poor in spirit as I recognized the depth of my depravity and shuddered as I considered the possibility of my fate before God, if he existed. I mourned at the evil in me and at the evil that I saw emerge so quickly in all of us. For the first time in my young life, I understood that I was not the invincible captain of my ship. I could be killed at any moment. So from that very night I began to realize that there was a different way to live. I did not say it that night in these words, but meekness, righteousness, mercy, purity, and peacemaking all became so much more clearly preferable than the way that I'd pursued significance and success.

I saw for the first time the horror of my life as a human apart from God. I desperately needed something, but what it was, I had no clue. I experienced the condemnation of my old cockiness and self-sufficiency, and above all, the condemnation of my arrogant abuse of people in my quest to satisfy my own lusts. This transition in my life readied and enabled me to accept Jesus' invitation to the life of the kingdom of heaven two years later."

What about you and me? Some of you here today do not know Christ. Maybe you were convinced that Tony Stark was the real deal. But God's worked on your heart through our time and you realize you're need for Him. Will you receive Him in a moment when we pray?

Some of you are Christians. But you still think the Tony Stark ideal is the way to go. Maybe your values need some profound reshaping according to Jesus' description. Will you admit this to the Lord today and acknowledge your need to comply with the Holy Spirit's work?

Some of you need affirmation because you see these qualities growing in your life. But the world scorns them. Or you've seen other Tony Stark like people seem to gain more than you have. Will you let the Holy Spirit encourage and affirm you in your spirit today as He shows you His work in you?

Some of us need to acknowledge that we really lack one or some of these qualities. We need to change our minds – to repent and ask the Lord to work in us. Will you repent today?