

2011–2012 *Horizons* Bible Study
Confessing the Beatitudes
Main Points Outlines

The material in these outlines is pulled from each lesson of the 2011–2012 *Horizons* Bible study, *Confessing the Beatitudes*, by Margaret Aymer. Each portion will provide you with a brief outline that covers the main points of each lesson. In most instances, there are direct quotes from the lessons—these are identified with Bible study page references. In other instances, there are summaries on a larger scale to help condense lesson content. For participants who may not have had time to read the entire lesson for each meeting, this outline will be very helpful. It will also help leaders identify some of the key points to highlight at each meeting. May this outline empower you as you participate in and/or lead the *Confessing the Beatitudes* study!

Introduction—Reading the Beatitudes in Context

The Beatitudes are some of the most loved and familiar teachings of Jesus. They are also some of the most pointed, and as followers of Christ, we must be sure we don't *miss* their point! We must consider them in context. Consider the following contexts as you approach the study:

1. Literary Context—There are two lists of Beatitudes in the Gospels and we will look at both:
Matthew 5:1–12
Luke 6:20–26
2. Historical Context—Roman-occupied Palestine in the first century AD
3. Cultural Context—Palestine under the rule of the Roman Empire, an often-cruel and brutal regime

Confessing the Beatitudes (page 4; 5 in the large-print edition)

One of the most exciting aspects of this study is the opportunity to write a group confession. In Latin, this is known as *processus confessionis*, an ancient Christian practice of truth-telling. Confession means telling the truth about the glory and grace of God, and the fact that we, in our humanity, never fully live up to that grace. The process of writing a group confession includes three parts:

1. Recognizing and stating what is true
2. Educating ourselves about what is true
3. Confessing what is true

Going through this process together will help us move from the thoughts and emotions we might experience as we read this study to taking action in our lives and communities as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Creating a group confession provides a concrete way for us to make the Beatitudes a part of our journey of discipleship as we move from confession to action.

The Accra Confession (page 5; 6 in the large-print edition)

Written for the 2004 gathering of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Accra Confession is a Reformed confession of great importance. We can look to it as a guide while we write our group confessions and learn how to confess the Beatitudes throughout this study!

Lesson One—Greatly Honored Are the Poor!

Key Idea: Jesus calls his disciples to honor the destitute while he calls the wealthy to account.

Setting the Scene: A Word About Context (page 7; 8 in the large-print)

Before we look at the Beatitudes, we must first think about the time and place in which Jesus taught them.

In the culture of first-century Palestine, honor in the community was more important than wealth, and public shame was one of the worst things imaginable. When Jesus teaches the Beatitudes in both *Luke* and *Mark*, he is actually teaching us about honor.

One of the most common translations of the Beatitudes is “Blessed are . . .” but the Greek word Jesus uses—*makarios*—actually means *honored/honorable*. Thus, when Jesus teaches the Beatitudes, he is actually turning his culture’s understanding of honor on its head—for example, when he teaches “Greatly honored are the poor”—Jesus names as honored those whom his culture calls shameful.

The First Beatitude According to *Luke* (page 7; 10 in the large-print)

In *Luke 6:20*, Jesus teaches, “Greatly honored are the poor.” It’s important to identify who “the poor” are in this context: these are not the working poor (such as the laborers in the vineyard [*Mt. 20:1–17*]). Here, Jesus is talking about a group called the *ptōchoi* in Greek—a word which means “the destitute.” These are the people who could not work for their daily bread—those with physical disabilities, those too young or too old, women and widows without sons in a world in which men made the money. In Jesus’ day, the *ptōchoi*’s destitution is seen as a consequence of God’s displeasure over some sin that person committed. The destitute are looked down upon, despised and scorned.

In the Gospel of *Luke*, Jesus preaches the Beatitudes to a crowd of people gathered on a plain. This crowd would have been largely comprised of people who were destitute—people who had nothing to do all day except follow a preacher and healer. Imagine their surprise when Jesus turns to them and says, “Greatly honored are you who are destitute!” (*Lk. 6:20a*)

Even more surprising is that Jesus tells them, “The dominion of God is yours.” This sort of language is deeply political. The Roman Empire held dominion over first-century Palestine, but Jesus says that the destitute are the true owners of God’s dominion. *They* are the ones to be honored.

The First Beatitude According to *Matthew* (page 8; 12 in the large-print)

For the first beatitude in *Matthew*, we find Jesus in a different context: here Jesus is speaking to the disciples on a mountain. He uses the same Greek word that means “destitute” (*ptōchoi*), but he reveals to the disciples that these people who are destitute are not able to provide for themselves economically *or spiritually*—their inner resources have run out. Yet, Jesus claims again, these are the citizens of heaven!

The First Reproach: *Luke 6:24* in Context (page 9; 13 in the large-print)

One of the major differences between the beatitudes in *Matthew* and *Luke* is that each of the four beatitudes is paired with a reproach in *Luke*, often translated as “Woe to . . .” In keeping with the concepts of honor and shame so prevalent in the culture of Jesus’ time, this could also be translated as “Shame on . . .”

This first reproach probably surprised the people on the plain, because Jesus says, “Shame on you who are affluent, for you are receiving your comfort” (*Lk. 6:24*). The *affluent* (*plousioi* in Greek) were those who were so wealthy they didn't have to work. They functioned as patrons, deciding whom to help and whom to ignore. No one in that time or culture would have considered the rich shameful, but Jesus did.

In Jesus' day, no one was supposed to be significantly richer than anyone else—families had inherited family lands that were to be passed on from one generation to the next. But the Roman Empire began taxing the working poor heavily. When the poor could not pay, they lost their lands, thereby making the rich richer and causing the poor to come even closer to destitution. Jesus knew that the affluent became rich by pushing the working poor toward destitution. Such exploitation is shameful in the dominion of God.

Processus Confessionis: Recognizing, Learning, and Confessing What Is True (page 10; 14 in the large-print)

This study is centered around the act of confession. Confession marks Christians as a people who recognize the truth, learn more about the truth, and speak the truth—both about God and about ourselves. Some beatitudes will lead to uncomfortable confessions of sins and shortcomings. Others will lead to joyful confessions of hope and transformation. However, all confessions can be hope-filled, if balanced with confessions of the love, mercy, justice, and forgiveness of God through Christ Jesus, our Lord. As we consider the first beatitude, we recognize that Jesus honors, and calls his disciples to honor, those who are destitute and those whose destitution has led to hopelessness—great news for

anyone who has done ministry with those who are destitute or hopeless. The destitute are greatly honored, and God's coming reign belongs to them.

Learning from the Accra Confession (page 11; 17 in the large-print)

In 2004, in Accra, Ghana, our Reformed brothers and sisters from around the world, after spending long hours in study, prayer, and reflection, joined voices to make confession about the rich and the poor. They confessed, in part: “The annual income of the richest 1 percent is equal to that of the poorest 57 percent and 24,000 people die each day from poverty and malnutrition” (see page 79 in the study, paragraph 7; page 122 in the large-print). They went on to confess that “the current world (dis)order is rooted in an extremely complex and immoral economic system defended by . . . a system of domination led by powerful nations to protect and defend their own interests” (see page 80 in the study, paragraph 11; page 123 in the large-print). For many of us in the United States and Canada, this means that, to the rest of the world, *we* are the affluent! Our Reformed sisters and brothers understood what Reformed Christians have understood for generations: that confession—the discipline of telling the truth as we understand it about God and ourselves—is a central and important task of disciples of Jesus. The first beatitude might lead us to confess that Jesus came among us to preach good news to the destitute and the hopeless poor. With Christ's help, we will seek to order our lives in ways that increase our understanding of poverty and wealth, and in ways that meaningfully honor those who are poor.

Lesson Two—Greatly Honored Are the Mourners!

Key Idea: Jesus calls his disciples to honor the mourners, and he calls to account those who live a life of laughter unaffected by their neighbors’ tears.

The Second Beatitude in *Matthew* (page 15; 23 in the large-print)

Remember that there are two lists of beatitudes in the New Testament: the list in *Matthew 5* and the list in *Luke 6*. We will follow the more familiar order found in *Matthew*, and this leads us to the second beatitude—a statement about mourners.

In *Matthew*, Jesus is teaching his disciples on a mountain, and he uses a rare Greek word to define the mourners of this beatitude—*penthountes*. Jesus says, “Greatly honored are the *penthountes*, the mourners.” The use of the word *penthountes* indicates that these were people who practiced a sort of ritualized public mourning. Women and men who dressed in dark clothes essentially grieved publicly on behalf of the entire community.

For this beatitude in *Luke* (when Jesus is speaking to the crowds on the plain), Jesus uses a synonym. He says, “Greatly honored are you *klaiontes*, you weepers.” These people would not have belonged to a formal group, but there may not have been much practical difference between these weepers and the mourners in *Matthew*. The words often appear in the Bible as synonyms. Mourners and weepers grieve death (such as the crowd that wails outside of Jairus’ house at the death of a girl in *Mark 5:38–39*), and they grieve personal shame (such as the unnamed woman who weeps at Jesus’ feet in *Luke 7:37–38*).

Rome Makes Matters Worse (page 16; 25 in the large-print)

Grief is a natural and expected part of life. However, some economic, political, and social realities beyond our control can worsen our grief or increase the likelihood that some of us will experience grief too soon and too often. We need think no farther than the impact of years of governmental neglect on the levees of New Orleans and the tragic aftermath of Hurricane Katrina as an example.

In Jesus’ time, as in ours, shame and death and grief were common. But the economic, political, and social realities caused by Roman control of the Mediterranean basin often worsened the grief of the people, and increased the likelihood that some of them—particularly the poor and destitute—would experience grief too soon and too often.

Like many human, preventable causes, Roman occupation made illness and death more prevalent in Jesus' time. Roman policies of exporting the food of Palestine to the city of Rome led to an impoverished diet and malnutrition for those remaining in Palestine. The Roman Empire crucified people—a brutal and constant cause of death.

The Roman Empire also contributed to the shame of the people of Jesus' day. While Tiberius Caesar had no personal responsibility for the woman weeping at Jesus' feet, Rome's policies—economic, social, and political—may have pushed her to the point of desperation and forced her to make the choices for which she was later ashamed. Similarly, while Herod did not require Peter to deny Jesus, the empire's crosses and its willingness to execute might certainly have added to Peter's fear and ultimate shame.

Greatly Honored? (page 17; 27 in the large-print)

Today, it might not seem odd that Jesus identified the mourners and weepers as those who are greatly honored. But for those among the elite in Jesus' day, too much public mourning and weeping was seen to be a sign of weakness and excess.

Jesus sees nothing shameful in acts of public grief; he calls those who grieve publicly honorable—public grieving functions as a protest against an unjust world. Jesus honors those whose public expressions of grief stand against the myth that everything is all right, when in reality, everything is *not* all right.

Jesus declares that God's divine reign will bring consolation and laughter to those who mourn. This is a bold proclamation of a divine intervention into history that will upend the status quo.

Shame on the Laughers (page 18; 28 in the large-print)

In the parallel rebuke to this beatitude, Jesus says “Shame on you *gelōntes*, you who laugh now” (*Luke 6:25b*). Jesus essentially is telling the people on the plain, “You who are weeping will one day mock those who now mock you.” He is promising them a direct reversal of fortune. It also is possible that Jesus is challenging those who live lives of unconcerned joy and who lack awareness of those who mourn (such as the rich man and Lazarus in *Luke 16:19–31*). This is, by far, the more “dangerous” reading, for it challenges all of us who live a life of joy and laughter, unaffected by the sufferings of others.

Processus Confessionis: Recognizing, Learning, and Confessing What Is True (page 18; 29 in the large-print)

The joyful confession that comes from this second beatitude is that God hears the cries of those who weep and mourn. Jesus calls them honorable *and* calls us to honor them, as well.

Yet, our confession of who God is causes us to reflect on who we are and how we are to live our lives of discipleship among those who mourn and weep: those who are poor, soldiers living with post-traumatic stress disorder, refugees, people living with AIDS and HIV, and so many others facing injustice, disease, shame, and death.

We are called to consider the ways in which our lifestyles make others' mourning and weeping worse. It might be that fewer people would mourn if we, Jesus' disciples, called for policies that led to better nutrition and cheaper medicines for those affected by HIV and AIDS. There might be less scornful laughter if the body of Christ stood against the mocking and scorn faced by the many people who are HIV-positive. Weeping might subside if we stood with those who try to speak truth about the pandemic, even in the face of exile or death.

We cannot live lives of laughter when our sisters and brothers are mourning and weeping. We must seek to honor the mourners by listening to them, standing with them, and telling their truth when they cannot.

Lesson Three—Greatly Honored Are the Humbled!

Key Idea: Jesus renews God’s promise to those whom society humbles, a promise that they shall inherit the earth.

That Word *Meek* (page 23; 35 in the large-print)

Today, we rarely hear or use the word *meek* outside of church. Yet, in the third beatitude of *Matthew*, Jesus calls us to honor a group whose description traditionally has been translated “meek.” The Greek word here is *praeis*, which might also be translated as “humbled.”

Like the word for “mourners,” the word *praeis* is quite unusual in the Bible—in order to understand its meaning, we must first investigate who “the humbled” are in the context of the Beatitudes. There are three possibilities:

The people most commonly referred to as “humbled” in the Bible are those who are oppressed or downtrodden; the psalms provide many images of this group.

A second group are those who are the opposite of proud or mighty; Jesus and Moses are examples of people who might have been in this group; people in this group are not necessarily poor, but neither do they live in ways that are unjust.

The third and most unusual use of “humbled” refers to those who are guided by God and seek refuge in God.

While all three groups of people help us to understand this beatitude, the first group—the oppressed—seem to be at the heart of it.

***Psalm 37* and the Third Beatitude** (page 24; 37 in the large-print)

In this third beatitude, Jesus is quoting a verse from *Psalm 37*, almost verbatim. By following Jesus’ lead to *Psalm 37*, a psalm that teaches its readers more about how *they* should live, we also learn more about those who are humbled.

The concern of *Psalm 37* is “the wicked.” *Psalm 37* describes their attributes—they are violent against the poor and needy, they are oppressive, and they plot against those who are just. These wicked ones seem to be the same sort of people as described in the first and second rebukes in *Luke*: the rich and the laughers—those who, through injustice and derision, oppress and shame the poor.

The humbled, by contrast, are those who face the oppression of the wicked, but do not have the power to stop their oppression.

The psalmist encourages the humbled to be patient and to wait on God, for they will inherit the earth.

The Humbled and the Roman Empire (page 24; 38 in the large-print)

When Jesus' disciples heard *Psalms 37*, it would not have been hard for them to make the connection between the wicked in the psalm and the system of oppression that the Roman Empire brought to Palestine.

The empire controlled Palestine with violence, and those who were affluent lifted up their abundance as evidence of divine pleasure; those who ruled kept the poor moving toward destitution. The disciples might even have heard Jesus' teaching (that the humbled "shall inherit the land") with a sense of irony. Inheritance was a source of economic stability, and family identity was directly connected with family lands that were to be inherited by future generations, yet the taxation system brought to Palestine by the Roman Empire resulted in peasant farmers becoming so indebted that they had to sell their inherited lands, sometimes even themselves, to the affluent.

Jesus regularly protests against this system of accumulation that allows the wicked and affluent—who rule by the sword and impoverish humbled folk—to inherit the land (see *Lk. 12:16–21* and *16:19–31, Mk. 10:17–25*).

Jesus' time was very different from our own—in the twenty-first century, wealth is understood as something that can be created and saved without adverse impact on anyone else. But in Jesus' day, one became wealthy at someone else's expense, often in unjust ways. Jesus reminds his disciples to honor the humbled, who may be oppressed but who know to rely on God.

"Can You Hear Me Now?": The Voice of Congo (page 26; 40 in the large-print)

We should consider who the humbled might look like today. Sadly, there are many examples throughout the world of communities that face life controlled by military power, in which the rich remove from the poor what little they have and oppress them. The Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) is one such place.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is rich in minerals used to make laptops and cell phones on which so many rely. Yet, the presence of these minerals has caused a few powerful, wealthy people with weapons to turn the rest of Congo into the humbled.

Warring militia groups control mines and land with force, driving people from their homes and forcing children to labor in the mines. To keep the people of the land intimidated and humiliated, they engage in extreme and horrific tactics of terror. The people also face disease and malnutrition. Many of us inadvertently support these wicked systems through our unconsidered use of electronics.

The good news for the people of Congo is that God will one day bring justice and these will be the people to inherit the earth. Likewise, for us followers of Christ who are protected from such realities by distance, we are still called to honor these sisters and brothers of ours by remembering them in our prayers, standing with them in our buying habits, and calling for policies in our own nation that allow us to choose not to buy “blood” minerals.

Processus Confessionis: Recognizing, Learning, and Confessing What Is True (page 26; 41 in the large-print)

As we enter into confession, we remember that we come before a God who has, generation upon generation, promised to stand with the humbled against the wicked.

Christ commands us to honor those who face the wicked daily with no recourse except God. Globally, locally, when we remember our call to discipleship, our efforts to live our lives in obedience to the gospel, we can give hope to the hopeless and humbled. With Christ’s help, we should always look for ways to honor the humbled through our prayers, our choices, and our uplifted voices.

Lesson Four—Greatly Honored Are Those Who Are Famished and Parched for Justice!

Key Idea: Jesus promises sustenance to the famished, but calls the “stuffed” to account.

You Who Are Famished: The Version in *Luke* (page 31; 47 in the large-print)

Jesus teaches this beatitude both to the disciples in *Matthew* and the crowd in *Luke*—each is slightly different, and each reveals to us different truths about the nature of God and about Christ’s call to discipleship.

Recall that in *Luke*, Jesus is sitting on a plain among the poorest of society, the destitute. To this crowd, Jesus says, “You who are *peinontes*, you who are famished are greatly honored.”

The Greek word Jesus uses here is deeply descriptive, speaking of the chronic, deep-seated, life-threatening hunger that the poorest of the poor know on a daily basis. When this word occurs in the Bible, it often describes those who are fasting for extended periods of time (*Lk. 4:2*), or those experiencing famine (*Gen. 41:55*). To be famished is to understand viscerally the need for daily bread. Under Roman imperial rule, the famished were everywhere—what nutritious food there was went to feed the affluent of Rome’s colonies. The poor, those who had nothing better to do but follow a wandering preacher such as Jesus around, would have known nothing but daily, persistent hunger. It would have astonished the affluent *and* the destitute to hear Jesus call the famished honorable.

Those Who Are Famished and Parched for Justice: The Version in *Matthew* (page 32; 49 in the large-print)

In *Matthew*, Jesus’ teaching is a bit different. He says, “Greatly honored are those who are famished and parched for *dikaiosyne*, for justice.”

Most English translations use the word *righteousness* here, based on a sixteenth-century translation of *dikaiosyne* to the word that would eventually become *righteousness* in the English language.

This led to an assumption that there was a distinction between righteousness (seen as an individual state of morality and holiness) and justice (seen as something imposed on us from the outside). The chasm became so great that some argued forthrightly that justice was not a key concept in Christianity.

But, in the time of Christ, *dikaiosyne* most certainly meant justice, and it referred to a state of right relationship with God and neighbor. It meant dealing as fairly with the poor as with the rich.

In *Matthew*, Jesus charges his disciples to honor those who are famished and parched for justice, for the kind of right relationships between people and God that were the original vision of God. Even if those famished and parched for justice are not mourners or destitute or humbled, they yearn for right relationships among people.

Fed or Stuffed? The Rebuke in *Luke* (page 33; 51 in the large-print)

Both in *Luke* and in *Matthew*, Jesus makes the same promise to those who are famished, either for food or justice: “They shall be *chortazo*.” The verb form of this word means “to feed,” and derives from a word that means “pasture” or “grass.”

One way to translate this is “they shall be filled” or “they shall be satisfied.” Jesus’ use of *chortazo* hearkens to the promise that God will shepherd God’s people; those who are famished, or famished and parched for justice, will receive a response from a loving, life-giving God who provides for their needs as a shepherd provides pasture for flocks of sheep.

In *Luke 6:25a*, Jesus rebukes the crowd with a word that means “sated” or “stuffed.” Jesus says, “Shame on you who are filled now, you who are stuffed.”

Jesus heaps shame on those who fill their bellies full while others around them are famished. If one is eating that much, surely one has enough to share with the famished.

Poetry and Parallels (page 34; 52 in the large-print)

Jesus uses parallelism to explain each of his teachings in more detail.

He begins by explaining who is honored, and, in the second half of each beatitude, goes on to explain why they are honored. The destitute and the destitute in spirit are not honored for their destitution, but because God’s reign is made of them.

The mourners and weepers are not honored for their grief, but because God will comfort them. The humbled are not honored for their humility, but because they are the true heirs of the earth. The famished are honored not for their want, but because God will pasture them.

In each of these teachings, Jesus makes it clear that these groups are not honored for what they are facing, but because God will intervene on their behalf.

Jesus also uses parallelism to repeat himself, for all four of these honored groups, taken together, give us a picture of a single group of people: a group of people who often are forgotten by society, but who are central to the heart of God.

Processus Confessionis: Recognizing, Learning, and Confessing What Is True (page 34; 53 in the large-print)

In turning to confession, we face the good news that God cares for those whom the world forgets: those who are hungry and thirsty, and those who are famished and parched for justice. God promises to recognize and honor them, and Christ calls us to do the same.

Even as we recognize God's providence, we must also acknowledge Jesus' rebuke of the stuffed. We live in a nation where many are constantly on diets, yet some in our nation go to bed truly famished.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, promises that those who are famished for food and justice ultimately will be fed. He calls us to honor our famished brothers and sisters, to honor them with our prayers, our gifts, our voices, and our actions.

Lesson Five—Greatly Honored Are Those Who Show Mercy!

Key Idea: Jesus calls disciples to imitate God by showing mercy through emotion, action, and dedication.

Verse Two (page 39; 59 in the large-print)

The Beatitudes are poetry that Jesus uses to point us to those whom we should honor. In the first four beatitudes of *Matthew*, Jesus describes those people we are called to honor: those who are destitute, mourning and weeping, humbled, and famished for food and justice. The fifth beatitude (*Mt. 5:7*) begins verse two of Jesus' teachings from the mountaintop. This second verse describes a different group of people—people who are less oppressed but just as much the concern of the God of heaven and earth. The first characteristic of the people of the second verse is that they show mercy.

Showing Mercy (page 39; 60 in the large-print)

Mercy is difficult to define, especially when defining it for another culture in another time. In Jesus' time, mercy would have carried at least two meanings, depending on whether your background was Jewish or Gentile.

Christians from Jewish backgrounds would have connected the Greek word for mercy, *eleos*, with the “covenant loyalty” or “steadfast love” of God for God's people. This word was used most frequently to describe God's steadfast love in the Hebrew scriptures. They would have heard, “Greatly honored are those who show steadfast love, or covenant loyalty, for the same will be shown to them.” Christians from Gentile backgrounds would have connected *eleos* to the Latin word that meant “pity” or “clemency” for one who deserved to be punished. They would have heard, “Greatly honored are those who show pity or clemency, for the same will be shown to them.”

In the multicultural mix of the early church, these definitions combined, becoming something in which a little of each culture was preserved. To show mercy was to take pity, and show both clemency and favor to those in need in a way that demonstrated an ongoing covenant loyalty or faithfulness to them. In this broad definition, mercy consists of three components: **emotion**, **action**, and **dedication**. One who shows mercy feels emotion when faced with the pain of another, takes action on behalf of that person, and demonstrates ongoing dedication to that person beyond the initial crisis.

No one shows mercy better than the God of Israel. God shows “steadfast love to the thousandth generation” (*Ex. 20:6*), and at the same time, God’s mercy is marked by compassion, clemency, and faithfulness to God’s people (*Is. 54:8*), along with the promise to save (*Hos. 1:7*).

The various facets of the mercy of God correspond to the broader, three-fold definition of mercy: mercy as emotion (compassion or pity); mercy as action (salvation); and mercy as dedication (steadfast love).

It’s important to consider what a merciful person might look like, based on these standards. The parable of the Good Samaritan give us such an example (*Lk. 10:25–37*).

Reacting with **emotion** upon seeing the man on the side of the road, the Samaritan is moved with pity.

He then takes **action** by going to the man, binding his wounds, and bringing him to a safe place.

Finally, he **dedicates** himself and his finances to the well-being of this stranger, covenanting with the innkeeper to provide for all of the victim’s needs.

The Samaritan is the only one in the story who shows mercy.

The Consequences of Mercy (page 41; 63in the large-print)

There are consequences to showing mercy. If you allow yourself to feel compassion for another, to act on behalf of another, and to dedicate yourself and your resources to another, they might take advantage of you. You could find yourself in a far worse place than you anticipated, hoodwinked by those who do not value your good deeds. And yet, Jesus instructs his disciples that the merciful are not naïve; they are honorable.

Convincing people in Jesus’ day that mercy was a virtue was a tough sell—many Roman philosophers and Pharisees alike considered showing any pity to be shameful.

Yet mercy is so central to Jesus that he not only bears community shaming for his dedicated acts of mercy, he rebukes leaders of the faith community for their lack of mercy (*Mt. 23:23*).

Jesus teaches that, for those who take the foolish risk of feeling compassion, doing acts of kindness, and dedicating themselves in covenant loyalty to those who need it most, there is a divine reward.

The promise of the fifth beatitude is that those who show mercy shall be shown mercy. Those who take action on behalf of those who cannot act for themselves will find that God acts in an equally merciful way toward them.

Jesus teaches that those who are merciful will experience the compassion, intervention, and dedication of the God of mercy—even when their merciful actions seem to be good deeds waiting to be punished.

Processus Confessionis: Recognizing, Learning, and Confessing What Is True (page 42; 65 in the large-print)

Feel, act, and dedicate yourself to those in need: this is mercy in a nutshell. It is a call that each generation hears in particular ways, both in the relative privacy of local churches and at national and global levels.

The call to mercy has gone forth from Martin Luther King Jr., Ryan White, and Michael Jackson—whether calling for racial equality, acceptance of those affected by HIV and AIDS, or singing about the need to feed a famine-starved people, each of these individuals showed mercy.

In confession, we must remember that the God of our salvation is a God whose very nature is to show compassion and steadfast love, and who has done so from one generation to the next.

In confession we must remember that Jesus shows us God's mercy by how he lived and ministered and died, even calling for forgiveness from the unforgiving wood of the cross.

In confession we must remember that the Holy Spirit teaches us to show mercy to those who have not known mercy, even as we have been shown mercy beyond our deserving.

We must dedicate ourselves to the practice of mercy that Jesus calls honorable.

Lesson Six—Greatly Honored Are the Pure in Heart!

Key Idea: Jesus upholds those who, with genuine hearts, wrestle with God, are changed, and live in a way that strengthens the whole people of God.

Heart Conditions (page 47; 71 in the large-print)

In teaching the sixth beatitude, Jesus reveals that the heart is the seat of emotion, passion, thought, and important decisions. Speaking to the disciples on the mountain in *Matthew 5:8*, Jesus says, “Greatly honored are the *katharos*, the pure in heart.”

This Greek word would have evoked something clean, unmixed, unpolluted, or genuine. Yet, this description does not tell us much—hearts are described as pure very rarely in scripture, and there is almost no instruction attached to any of the descriptions.

We do have descriptions of those who are impure, or unclean in their hearts, and we can derive from the description of their heart conditions what a pure heart might be like.

According to *Matthew 15:19*, the unclean heart is full of “evil intentions, murder, adultery, prostitution of others, theft, the bearing of false witness, and slander”—all qualities that are manifested outwardly. Evil intentions lead to evil actions.

Thus, the impure heart is dangerous not simply because of the thoughts it carries, but because of the actions those thoughts produce. Further, anyone might have an unclean heart, even one who appears to be upright.

Those who are pure in heart are the opposite of those with unclean hearts—they have good or noble intentions that manifest themselves in good or noble actions.

They preserve lives and families, rather than destroying them for personal gain and pleasure.

They protect and defend others, rather than attacking and destroying them.

They do not slander or speak false witness—they speak the truth.

“Pure in heart” not only describes what one *does*; it describes who someone *is*. One does not *do* clean; one *is* clean. These are people who live with integrity.

One who is pure in heart is not perfect, but is genuine. She both claims to love God and neighbor *and* thinks and acts in ways that demonstrate her belief.

Jesus honors the pure in heart.

Seeing God: Promise, Peril, and Prophetic Witness (page 49; 74 in the large-print)

There are at least two ways to understand the promise made to the pure in heart—that they shall “see God.”

It is an eschatological promise that will happen when this age ends and God’s just reign begins, when Jesus Christ comes to renew the world.

It is a promise steeped in the history of God’s revelation to God’s people.

In considering this second way, it is helpful to think of Jacob’s encounter with God in *Genesis* 32:22–32. Here, Jacob, one without much integrity, meets a stranger who engages him in a wrestling match until dawn. From this place of wrestling, Jacob emerges with a new name: Israel, which means “the one who contends with God.”

From Jacob, we learn that when one sees God, one enters a place of struggle and of renaming, a place of discovering one’s own strengths and weaknesses. Those who see God, Jacob warns us, are changed forever. They are weaker, but truer. They are purified by the struggle.

We find other examples in scripture. One such example is the call of Isaiah (*Isaiah* 6). After seeing God, Isaiah becomes a prophet, revealing that the pure in heart bear witness to God’s justice and mercy in the community. Mary of Magdala also saw God in the resurrected Christ, and she testified to the truth of God’s justice that is able to overcome even the injustice of crucifixion.

There are consequences to living with integrity and bearing witness to the presence and power of the Triune God, particularly when one’s witness is a prophetic challenge to “how things are done.” Still, those who respond to the call to be a genuine witness for the Lord, to relate the good news of God, will bring wholeness and healing to their communities and to the world.

At the heart of the matter, then, is a spiral: those who are genuine, who live out their faith with integrity, will be drawn toward the face of God, where they will wrestle, be renamed, and be purified. Then they will be sent out to bear witness and face community shaming, by what they say and how they live. And, in living out their lives with integrity, they will be drawn in to see God’s face once again.

***Processus Confessionis*: Recognizing, Learning, and Confessing What Is True** (page 50; 77 in the large-print)

After the first five beatitudes, which speak to the injustices of the world and the need for mercy, it is tempting to become self-righteous. We might think, “How could *they* mistreat the poor and powerless?” The sixth beatitude holds up to each of us, and to our communities of faith, a mirror.

The sixth beatitude calls us to consider whether our confession of the sovereignty of Jesus Christ is borne out in how we live our lives.

Many of us in the global north are more a part of the global system of consumption and greed than we care to admit. The truth is there are no easy answers to the challenge of living in such a way that we do not further impoverish the destitute of the world. Yet we are called, like Jacob, to wrestle with our complicity in these systems and discern how to make lifestyle changes that reflect our solidarity with those who are hurt by our global systems.

The God of heaven and earth is a God who values integrity. God honors those who live with integrity—with a heart condition that leads to life and wholeness, rather than death and destruction. Jesus promises that those who are pure in heart will see God; and scripture teaches us that seeing God is a process of further purification and of commissioning—a cycle that continues throughout the life of discipleship.

Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, we, the church, are called to live into that integrity before God and on behalf of our neighbors. And even when we fall short of this call to purity, the radical gift of redemption through Jesus Christ calls us back into the heart cycle of God, where we are purified and sent out once more.

Lesson Seven—Greatly Honored Are the Peacemakers!

Key Idea: Jesus honors those who work for *shalom* as his own sisters and brothers, children of God.

Making Peace (page 55; 83 in the large-print)

As the beatitudes in *Matthew* continue, a more complete image emerges of the second kind of person that Jesus calls his disciples to honor. That person is not only merciful and lives with integrity, but also, as Jesus reveals in the seventh beatitude, is a peacemaker.

This seventh beatitude raises two questions: What is peace? Who is a peacemaker?

Peace, shalom in Hebrew, is an all-encompassing word found all over the Bible. For Jews, like Jesus, “Peace” would have been the traditional greeting, similar to “*Aloha*” for Hawaiians. When someone greeted you with “Peace,” they were voicing their hope for your wholeness and your welfare in all of your life—spiritual, physical, emotional, economic, even political. This traditional greeting is sometimes given in the modern-day passing of the peace in many Christian churches.

Although a wish for peace was a common greeting, some early church leaders like James understood that true *shalom* requires taking steps to make sure that *all* sisters and brothers have *shalom*—the ability to be well, to be whole.

This is why Jesus does not honor the “peace wishers,” but honors the peacemakers. Peacemakers do more than simply speak the words—they find ways to make *shalom* a reality. Peacemakers break down hostilities and ensure that their neighbors are well and whole.

God’s “Sons”: The Promise to the Peacemakers (page 56; 85 in the large-print)

Many English translations translate the second phrase of this beatitude as “they shall be called the children of God.” While this translation is a good one, the original Greek text helps us better understand the promise.

The Greek text, literally translated, reads, “they shall be called sons of God.” The world of Jesus was exceedingly patriarchal. In those days, family name, inheritance, and status passed from fathers to sons, regardless of whether the son was the result of procreation or adoption.

Jesus is intentional about calling peacemakers “sons of God” because, in the historical context of the Beatitudes, a *son* of God would receive God’s family name, God’s property, God’s inheritance, and even God’s status.

The emperors of Rome knew this. Caesar Augustus called himself the “son of God.” As if in response, Jesus’ teaching quietly challenges both the imperial peace and the imperial title, for Jesus is saying that, rather than the leaders of Rome being sons of God, those who make peace are the sons of God.

The radical nature of Jesus’ proclamation, both in his day and ours, is that we should raise those who work for *shalom* above celebrities and politicians, business people and church leaders—we honor the pacemakers because Jesus, himself the Son of God, proclaims that these are his siblings.

The *Pax Romana*: Peace at What Price? (page 57; 87 in the large-print)

Rome, of course, had a different understanding of peace during the time of Jesus. The emperor and his empire claimed to be the bearers of peace, the famous *pax Romana*, or “peace of Rome.”

The *pax Romana* could also have been called the “victory of Rome,” for Roman “peace” started with the conquest and colonization of the lands on all coasts of the Mediterranean, and extended well inland.

Roman “peace” was maintained by civic religion, by relationships with local rulers who depended on Rome, and by the strength of Rome’s military.

Civic religion, the religion of the empire of Rome, often was the first line of defense in Rome’s “peace.” The majority pagan culture worshiped multiple deities, so, when Rome started to call its emperors divine and set up temples on their behalf, the people simply added Rome and its emperors to the rest of their gods. It was commonly understood that if one wanted peace, one should offer sacrifices and prayers to placate the gods, including the emperor.

The second line of defense for the Roman “peace” was the group of local officials who relied on Rome for their power. They made sure that peace—or the absence of conflict—reigned. In Jesus’ day, these local officials included all of the Herods, as well as the leadership of the temple in Jerusalem. Thus, when Jesus’ ministry seems to be causing social upheaval, they seek to kill him, because “everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation” (*Jn. 11:48*).

These officials had reason to fear, for, if these two lines of defense failed, Rome could, and did, create peace at the point of the sword. For less extreme troublemakers, Rome preferred public, humiliating forms of capital punishment like crucifixion. However, if a people were to rise up against Rome, as Jerusalem did in the 70s AD, Rome would lay siege upon and destroy a city.

In the face of such power and violence, it took great courage for the little Christian communities of Jesus’ day and shortly thereafter to proclaim as honorable those who make *shalom*.

Processus Confessionis: Recognizing, Learning, and Confessing What Is True (page 58; 89 in the large-print)

In honoring the peacemakers, Jesus challenges us to be peacemakers, as well, and to live into our identity as children of God.

This means that we are called to a cessation of violence against one another, and that we are called to work for the cessation of *all* violence.

Making peace also means that we provide for the needs of our brothers and sisters, working for the wholeness and well-being of all our neighbors.

When we grasp the fullness of what peace, what *shalom*, can mean, we begin to see how Jesus' seventh beatitude fits with the others, for *shalom*-makers alleviate the needs of the poor and the poor in spirit, materially and systemically.

Shalom-makers comfort those who mourn, individually and within the community.

Shalom-makers stand with, and empower the humbled.

Shalom-makers feed those who hunger, and quench the thirst of those parched for justice.

Shalom-makers are merciful.

Shalom-makers live with integrity.

In short, to be a peacemaker, a *shalom*-maker, is to live into the heart of the Beatitudes.

Lesson Eight—Greatly Honored Are Those Who Have Been Persecuted for the Sake of Justice!

Key Idea: Jesus calls his disciples to honor those who have faced persecution for the sake of justice.

Facing the Consequences (page 63; 95 in the large-print)

In the last three beatitudes, Jesus has taught his disciples to honor those who are merciful, have integrity, and make peace. One might expect another pious characteristic to follow—such an ending would have neatly summed up the second verse of the beatitudes. Instead, the final beatitude seems to say, “Blessed are those who have faced the consequences of discipleship,” for persecution may well be a consequence of Christian discipleship.

Christians eventually faced empire-wide torture and death in the arenas of Rome, but not until two centuries after the death of Christ. Persecution in Jesus’ day, and in the very earliest church, was subtle. Christians faced persecution in the family, the local community, and the cities ruled by clients of Rome.

Persecution in the family depended on the wishes of the head of the family, the oldest male or father of the household—*paterfamilias*. If an action of any family member conflicted with the will of the father, he had the right to discipline you in any way he saw fit, including putting you to death.

For a new Christian, things would go relatively smoothly if the father of the household was a Christian, or tolerated Christianity. But if the father was a pagan, he might not look so kindly on someone in his household honoring the poor and marginalized. Such activity could bring shame on the father—both because of the nature of the association and because he was unable to control his household.

In the local community or city, Christians who stood with the voiceless and powerless could find themselves marginalized economically or socially, ostracized for hanging around the wrong sort of people and showing them undue respect.

In a world that valued maintaining one’s honor, not only could such treatment be dangerous personally, it could place one’s entire family in a permanent state of dishonor, a fate as feared as death.

A Persecuted Savior (page 64; 98 in the large-print)

The ultimate example of one persecuted for the sake of justice is Jesus, himself. Jesus' life exemplified the teachings he gave his disciples from the mountain in *Matthew*. Therefore, Jesus, the worker of justice, was the one persecuted for the sake of justice.

Although we later followers understand Jesus' death as redemptive, in his day, Jesus' death was the ultimate persecution. His betrayal, trial, and crucifixion were intended to stop the one who, through his actions, was raising up a following that looked suspiciously like an insurrectionist mob. The intent of his crucifixion was to shame him and them, to silence him and them.

In his persecution for the sake of justice, Jesus became powerless, like the destitute and the mourners.

Jesus was not alone in his persecution: John the Baptist lost his life in his call for justice, Daniel was thrown into the lion's den for refusing to give up prayer to God, Mordechai and Esther faced ridicule for showing obedience to God.

Jesus' eighth beatitude reminds the disciples that although these heroes had been shamed in their day, heaven had vindicated them—and that the dominion of heaven consists of people such as this.

Poetry, Parallels, and *Inclusio* (page 66; 100 in the large-print)

In reading the Beatitudes carefully, one notes that the first beatitude and the last beatitude end in exactly the same way: "heaven's dominion is made of them." Jesus is using what, in literary studies, is called an *inclusio*, a repetition of the first and last phrases of a poem.

Jesus' use of *inclusio* here serves two main purposes, both of which help us to understand better the message of the eight beatitudes that he teaches from the mountain.

Inclusio draws the boundaries around a poem. When one reaches the point of repetition, the poem is over. In the Beatitudes, the *inclusio*, "heaven's dominion is made of them," underscores that Jesus has finished teaching his disciples about the groups of people who are "honored." Jesus teaches his disciples that heaven's dominion is not beholden to society's understanding of honor.

An *inclusio* also emphasizes the point of a poem. In this case, the point of the Beatitudes is that all of those whom Jesus has named are the concern of heaven: the destitute in material wealth and in spirit, those who mourn and weep, the powerless, those famished for food and justice, the merciful, those with integrity, those who make peace, and those who face persecution for the sake of justice. God's heart, Jesus teaches the disciples, is with those who face shame because they are oppressed,

or because they stand with the oppressed. These are the honorable ones in your community. They are honorable because, among these people, heaven chooses to make its dwelling.

Processus Confessionis: Recognizing, Learning, and Confessing What Is True (page 67; 102 in the large-print)

The God who calls us into relationship challenges us to face the consequences of discipleship—consequences that might mean lions’ dens and royal death sentences, family rifts and community scorn. Jesus the Christ, our Savior and example, walked that path of persecution for doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God, even suffering the humiliation of crucifixion and death.

God raised this Jesus from the dead and, through the power of the Holy Spirit, raises up disciples who are imperfect but called to follow, even in the face of persecution, trusting that, in times of trial, the Spirit of God will give us the words to speak.

We confess that we are not always fearless followers, but with the help of the Triune God, we grow more faithful every day.

Lesson Nine—Greatly Honored Are You Who Put Your Honor on the Line for Christ’s Sake!

Key Idea: Jesus calls his disciples to take the joyful risk of putting their honor and their lives on the line for his sake and the sake of the gospel.

You and When (page 71; 107 in the large-print)

In the last beatitude, we saw that Jesus finishes his teaching to his disciples on the mountaintop with an *inclusio*, a repetition of the first phrase at the end of the poem. Yet, just as the disciples might be shifting their focus, Jesus issues a final teaching.

With this final teaching comes a change in language. Until this point, Jesus has been saying “Greatly honored are those who” In this final teaching, Jesus shifts to a far more pointed and personal, “Greatly honored are *you when*”

“You” shifts the focus of the Beatitudes to the lives of the disciples. Here, Jesus is moving the teaching from the abstract to the personal. This is no longer about “those who” act in ways that concern heaven.

On the mountain, Jesus is now directing his teaching at the lives of his disciples. Meanwhile, in *Luke*, Jesus has *always* been speaking in terms of “you.” On the plain, Jesus has said, “Greatly honored are you who are poor.” The shift is in *Matthew*, in the teaching to the disciples on the mountain. Jesus is giving them a way of life by which they, too, can be “greatly honored.”

To understand this way of life, we need to consider Jesus’ second shift of language. He shifts from “those who” to “you when.” The second word changes everything.

“You when” speaks directly to the future life of discipleship that the mountain audience will face. The life that Jesus describes is not particularly appealing. It is a life facing revulsion, persecution, and false slander for Jesus’ sake. Such a life is unpalatable, ignoble, dishonorable.

Worse, Jesus does not say, “Greatly honored are you *if*” these things occur. He says, “Greatly honored are you *when* you are dishonored by the world on my account.” A life of discipleship is a life of dishonor.

Shame on You Who Have a Good Reputation (page 72; 110 in the large-print)

In the Gospel of *Luke*, this beatitude comes with a reproach. “Shame on you,” says Jesus, “whenever all people speak well of you, for in this way, their ancestors treated the false prophets” (*Lk. 6:26*). Jesus is basically saying, “Shame on you, if you have a good reputation all the time.”

Jesus’ reproach squarely contradicts his culture and even some of the scriptures that he would have known. *Proverbs 22:1*, for example, teaches, “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.”

Jesus, however, links having a good name with being a false prophet. Such an assertion is nothing short of a cultural reversal. If discipleship means choosing to honor the destitute, weeping, humbled, and famished over the rich, happy, powerful, and full, a group of very powerful people will be displeased.

If discipleship means choosing to honor those who exhibit mercy, integrity, peacemaking, and willingness to face the consequences, rather than those who exhibit cruelty, duplicity, warmongering, and insistence upon a good name at all costs, another group of very powerful will be displeased.

For those who live this way consistently, the “when” of persecution should be expected and accepted as one of the costs of discipleship. By contrast, those who choose their reputation over the needs of the first group, or over the faults of the second, are the focus of Jesus’ rebuke.

Shame on you if your good name is more important than heaven’s dominion.

Rejoice and Be Glad? (page 73; 111 in the large-print)

With teachings such as these, the disciples on the mountain (in *Matthew*) and the crowd on the plain (in *Luke*) would likely have been very confused. Yet, Jesus’ final statement is even more shocking. He says “Rejoice! Be overjoyed! Leap about!” The command is to outlandish, outsized jubilation.

Jesus commands his hearers to rejoice not *because* of persecution, but *despite* persecution. Jesus expects the disciples to rejoice because they know the source of their hope.

The promise in the coda to the Beatitudes is that there is a greater reality and source of authority than the empires of this world. This promise underscores that all who put themselves on the line for the sake of the gospel are the concern of heaven. In God’s justice, those who face persecution on behalf of the good news of Jesus Christ are no less the concern of heaven than those who are oppressed.

The source of joy is the trust that God is faithful, and that, if we are faithful despite the hardships that discipleship will bring, God also will be faithful to us.

Like so many of the promises of the Beatitudes, this promise points to another age, an age when God's will is done on earth as in heaven. It is a promise that, in the end, God ultimately is in charge and that God's reign ultimately will prevail.

However, it is too simple to make this a promise about the hereafter. The promise is that, even in the midst of persecution, the Triune God of our Christian confession is concerned with, and is, in ways seen and unseen, standing with Christ's faithful disciples.

Since God is with us, even now, we can dare to take the step of discipleship, even in the face of persecution. For truly, if we live as disciples, in life, in death, and in life after death, we belong to God.

Processus Confessionis: Recognizing, Learning, and Confessing What Is True (page 74; 113 in the large-print)

The Accra Confession is a truthful and courageous document. It is truthful because, like the coda to the Beatitudes, it names rightly the cost of living into a discipleship that includes stewardship of the earth and of its peoples.

For many of us in the global north, acting on our confessions may not cause us persecution, although certainly, if we stand against community norms, we will reap the displeasure of our neighbors. Still, most of us will never live in fear of imprisonment or worse. We live, instead, in fear of alienating members of our congregations, looking strange to the neighbors, and of meddling in what they might say are none of our affairs. We live in fear of the implications of living into the Beatitudes.

Yet, the promise of the Beatitudes is not only the "when" of revulsion, persecution, and slander. The promise of the Beatitudes also is the call to live into the outrageous joy that marks us as citizens of the dominion of heaven, brothers and sisters of Christ—in short, as children of God.

We are called to live out the gospel of Jesus Christ, a gospel marked by unearned and overwhelming grace, to which we respond in faithful discipleship.

With disciples of ages past, we must follow the way of Christ, honoring those who are destitute, weeping, humbled, and famished for food and justice; patterning our lives after those who are merciful, walk with integrity, and make peace; and living into the outrageous joy that comes from the promise of the dominion of God, now and in the age to come.