

## CHAPTER 1

# **CHRIST'S DEFINITION AND DESCRIPTION OF A CHRISTIAN MATTHEW 5:1-6**

The Sermon on the Mount begins with a thorough and complete definition and description of a Christian. Keep in mind that this comes from no less authority than Jesus Christ, the founder of the Christian faith. This first part of the Sermon on the Mount is commonly called the "Beatitudes." Quite simply we are talking about Christian attitudes at this point. The beginnings of Christianity are always found in what a person is rather than what he does. These verses deal with just that, what a Christian is. The Beatitudes are the foundation stones for all the rest of this great sermon. None of it really makes sense if you skip this beginning. There is really no point in talking about what a Christian does until you have defined who he is.\*

This definition is sorely needed in our day. Error in definition comes at two points. First, there are those extreme legalists who would reduce Christianity to a list of do's and don'ts, thou shalt and thou shalt nots. This is a tragic misrepresentation of the Christian faith, and undoubtedly many have been turned away from faith in Christ because of this sort of legalistic negativism. If this is all there is to Christianity, then we do not need Jesus Christ. We can make up a rather long and imposing list of taboos in the name of any one. Any time you begin to describe a Christian as one who does not drink, or who does not smoke, or who does not attend movies or any such thing, then you have missed the point entirely. Of course there is a place to discuss and decide what things a Christian should or should not do, but never in

the context of definition.

There is another dangerous form of error in the matter of definition. This is just the opposite of the legalistic negativism. This form of error would attempt to define a Christian simply in terms of what one believes with little or no reference to his life and conduct. This sort of heresy has been with the church from the very beginning in one form or another, and with various names. In the days of Paul there were those who said, "If salvation is by faith alone, then let us sin the more that grace may the more abound." Paul rightly exposed this mind set as being opposed to the Christian faith. This line of thought would equate freedom from the curse of the law with freedom from the requirements of the law. In our day this takes the form of situational ethics or the new morality. This too stands condemned by the Word of God.

In rejecting both extremes, the Christian turns to the words of Jesus Christ which give to us a full and balanced definition of a Christian. Before we actually begin to attempt an analysis of this definition, let us keep several things in mind. First of all, the picture of the Christian man we see emerging in these words is obviously something which man cannot produce in and of himself. Nothing is more obvious than the truth that the new birth by the Spirit of God is an absolute necessity. Apart from this, there is no possibility of any man ever being a Christian.

Here we have a definition of all Christians. The Bible knows of no class distinctions in the Kingdom of God (a fact we should constantly keep in mind in our dealings with other people). There are those who would divide Christians into two classes, regular Christians and saints, or as some say, real Christians. This is foreign to the teachings of our Lord and any other part of the Bible. Either this definition is for all believers or for none. Another principle to keep in mind is that all of these qualities mentioned in the Beatitudes are meant for all Christians. You might be tempted to pick and choose and excuse yourself at certain points. For instance you

might say, "I may be able to be a peace maker, but I'll have to leave the meekness to others." That's no good at all. To be sure, some Christians may possess more of certain virtues than others, or to a greater degree, but all of these descriptive phrases apply to all believers.

Each one of these spiritual attitudes carries with it a promise of blessing. This is a very exclusive thing. Only those who mourn as Christ meant it can be comforted. Only the meek can inherit the earth, etc. Like love and marriage, the requirement and the blessing go together. It cannot be otherwise.

The first word, "blessed", is a very key word to understanding the message of the Beatitudes. What does it mean in this context? Really there is no simple easy way to explain this term as Jesus used it. I think that the several modern translations of the Bible which attempt to translate this word to make it read "happy" are off the mark. That is much too shallow and superficial. The word "blessed, as Jesus used it, carries with it the idea of an eternal relationship with God. It means that one is under the favor of God and in a right relationship with Him. It speaks of contentment and fulfillment in the inner man. Keep these things in mind as we proceed.

1. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Who are the poor in spirit and why does the Kingdom of Heaven belong to them? This is not only the first step in defining a Christian, but the first step in becoming one. Let us first of all notice what this does not say. It does not say, "Blessed are the poor." Ever so often you will hear someone who speaks as if it were a blessing to be poor or that the poor deserve the blessing of God simply because they are poor. Since we could become so hopelessly entangled in something that is completely aside from the point, we will move on. Neither does this say, "Blessed are the poor mouth", nor "Blessed are the depressed and nervous." The Lord did say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," and this has a very

particular meaning. We go back to the 6th chapter of Isaiah to discover something of what this means. Isaiah has just seen a vision of the majestic holiness of God in all His splendor, and as a result, he truly sees himself for the first time. Listen to the words of one poor in spirit: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.” It was a completely shattering experience for him. He saw himself as a sinful man, one wholly deserving of God's wrath, and without hope except in His mercy. The one who is poor in spirit has seen himself in light of God's might and holiness, and pride and self-sufficiency are no more.

The blessing of such an experience is expressed in this promise, “For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This experience is an absolute necessity for entrance in the Kingdom. Human pride and self-righteousness must be obliterated. We enter the Kingdom singing, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.” We will never begin our trek back to the Father's house until, like the prodigal, we come to ourselves, awaken to our lostness and decry our estrangement.

You see, the first step toward the Kingdom is realizing and confessing that you are in fact outside the Kingdom. The Kingdom is entered only by those whose pride has been broken and who have humbled themselves before God.

2. “Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted.” This is the natural sequence. Once you are aware of your spiritual poverty, a deep sense of sorrow and repentance wells up within you. How often this Beatitude is quoted out of context. It is almost universally read at funeral services, and it has absolutely nothing to do with the mourning caused by death. In fact, it is quite obvious that all who mourn are not comforted. Only as we see this in its proper context and sequence do we understand the Lord's meaning. Once again we turn back to the pages of the Old Testament to gain insight into the meaning of these words.

The prophet Ezekiel writes of his nightmare-like experience of seeing the destruction of Jerusalem in a vision. It was a terrible thing for him to endure, but in this experience there was one thing which throws light on these words of our Lord. Before the judgment fell upon the Holy City and before the destroying angel was unleashed, a messenger from God went through the city putting a mark upon the forehead of those who mourned and sighed for sin. When judgment fell, these alone were spared.

This is basically a call to heartfelt, sincere repentance. Jesus said at one time, "Except you repent you shall likewise perish." His public ministry began with this call, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The one who mourns in this sense is heir to the promise of divine comfort. The comfort promised is forgiveness and acceptance from God the Father. This is abiding comfort that endures all the cares and trials and sorrows of life. Once you are assured that God is your Father, that you have been adopted into His family, and pardoned for your sins, you have the comfort promised by our Lord.

3. "Blessed are the meek, for the meek shall inherit the earth." Having seen myself in the light of God's holiness and truth, and mourning deeply and repenting before Him in sincerity, my pride and vanity, my haughty disdain for others is transformed into gentle meekness. And what is meekness? Meekness is basically a matter of self being brought under the controlling, loving yoke of Jesus Christ. He said, "...take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly of heart..." What is meekness? It is Jesus taking the little children in His arms and blessing them. It is Jesus talking with concern and compassion to the woman at the well. What is meekness? It is Jesus girding Himself with a towel and washing the feet of His disciples while they were arguing about who should be greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven, While the servants battled for prestige and position, their Lord and Master washed their feet. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus."

What is meekness? It is not weakness. It is strength under the control of the Master, harnessed to do His will. As a little boy one of my most exciting times was early in the spring when Father hired a farmer to come to our house and plow up the garden for spring planting. I used to sit on the back fence and watch those powerful animals easily pull a plow that I could not even lift. Their muscles rippled under their satin-like flanks, lathered in sweat. One day the kindly farmer turned to me and said, "Hey, boy, come on down here and drive the team for me while I guide the plow." There I was in all my nine year old glory, proudly guiding and controlling two powerful beasts who were many, many times in my own strength. They were meek but they were not weak.

The promise is almost startling. "For they shall inherit the earth." Oh no, that cannot be, anyone can see that the strong and the forceful inherit the earth, or do they? What did the Lord have in mind when He promised this? Surely he could see it was the proud Roman, not the meek believer, who inherited the earth. This promise speaks of something much richer and grander than conquest of territory. It speaks of an attitude and quality of life that enables one to be content and grateful. It is a promise of inner peace and abiding satisfaction. Perhaps some of you remember the often quoted prayer that says, "I asked for all things that I might enjoy life, but I was given life that I might enjoy all things." For the Christian, however, there is an even deeper meaning than this. We are promised a new creation when Christ shall have finished His glorious plan and restored all things. This too will be our inheritance.

4. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled." Once again we look at the ascending order of these words. Because we have become poor in spirit, recognizing our guilt and estrangement from God, therefore we mourn in true and deep contrition and repentance, and our attitude toward ourselves and toward others undergoes a change. However, this still leaves us far short. We begin to desire to be more than we are. We hunger

and thirst after righteousness. This means we begin to hate the sins which once we cherished and cultivated. We begin to take seriously the words of Christ, "If any man would be my disciple, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." There is a powerful negative in the Christian life. There is a place for "no." But righteousness is more than just an absence of sin. Righteousness is a positive relation to God, and a positive inner experience.

Notice the words, "hunger and thirst." These are strong words. They speak of one who is desperate. Not the casual appetite that comes because it has been an hour or so since last you ate but the driving, maddening hunger of one who is near starvation and must have food to live. Not the casual thirst of seeing a fountain and being reminded that you have not had your quota of water for the day, but the thirst of a man stranded in the burning sands of the desert whose life depends upon water, and quickly. I think this is the sense in which we must hunger and thirst after righteousness if we are to be filled. It must take first place. You must hunger and thirst enough to do something about it. Only then can we claim the promise that we shall be filled. Righteousness comes only to those who pay the price, who diligently search, who desperately hunger and thirst.

Having come this far, we arrive at something of a break, a subtle change in direction. The first four Beatitudes are concerned primarily (though not exclusively) with our relationship to God, and the rest deal primarily with our relationship to the world and our fellow man. This is a good time to stop and reflect for just a moment on the implied warnings involved in these Beatitudes. These promised blessings can come only to those who meet the demands. When we say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit", we are thereby implying, "Cursed are the proud and self-sufficient, for they shall never know the Kingdom of Heaven." This same implication carries right on through all these words of Jesus. We might not like the implication and choose to ignore it, but it is there and we really need to face it.

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Look up and read the portions of the Sermon on the Mount which Mark and Luke record.
2. Note how the different ways of saying the same thing serve to bring out the truth more clearly. Luke 6:20-49 and Mark 4:21-23.
3. Does Christ's definition of a Christian invalidate Acts 16:31?
4. Note verse 32 (Acts 16).
5. Would this suggest a more complete explanation of verse 31?
6. Does this definition rule out growth and development within the Christian life?
7. Think through the word "blessed". Try to develop the idea of blessedness more fully.
8. Read Isaiah 6:5 and Luke 5:8. Does this explain "poor in spirit"?
9. What are some marks of one who really "hungers and thirsts" for goodness?