Teaching the Beatitudes to Children

The Beatitudes are the "overture" to the Sermon on the Mount, found in the Gospel of Matthew. The entire Sermon contains the essence of the teachings of Jesus, and is the evidence and demonstration of the character of Christ. These teachings were a rude awakening to people used to the idea of "an eye for an eye" and judging righteousness by how closely a person upheld the strict interpretations of the laws of the Old Testament. With the Beatitudes, Jesus introduced his followers to the more spiritual concept of happiness, dependent upon letting go of self-centered and self-protecting thinking and actions, as well as yielding up unloving thoughts in order to trust God with our lives.

If the Ten Commandments serve to guide our actions while we are taking the first steps in our spiritual journey -- sort of like traffic signals that tell us when to stop and go and yield -- the Beatitudes might be said to serve as guide posts, or direction signs, along the way. We know we are heading in the right direction, if we find that we are successfully demonstrating the qualities and attitudes that Jesus recommended for our happiness, and if we are also expressing more of the character of the Christ, and the nature of God.

The Beatitudes (Matthew 5, King James Version of the Bible)

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.
Blessed are the meek: for the shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.
Blessed are the merciful: for the shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.
Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Background Information:

Taking the time to do a little research in Bible commentaries or dictionaries, will often result in a better understanding of the intended meaning. The following details are some you might want to share if you are teaching your children or a Sunday School class:

Matthew 5, verses 1 and 2, opens the scene for the Sermon on the Mount as follows:

"Seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set,
his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying . . .”

From Bible commentaries, we learn more about the meaning of these introductory verses than is at first clear from the English translation of the King James Version. A brief explanation of these phrases will help us appreciate the Beatitudes we will be studying.

The phrase “and when he was set” – in other words, "Jesus sits down" – tells us that his teaching was important and official, as opposed to the more casual instruction which Rabbis of that time might give as they stood or strolled about with their pupils.

“And he opened his mouth” is a translation of a Greek phrase which indicates serious and intimate utterances. The Sermon is Jesus speaking from the heart and soul.

When understood in the Greek, the phrase “he taught them, saying,” gives a whole different meaning. It indicates that the teachings that follow in the Sermon on the Mount were not spoken at a one-time event, but were taught repeatedly by Jesus. As William Barclay paraphrases it: “This is what he used to teach them.” (The Gospel of Matthew, Volume One, page 87)

We now have a little bit clearer picture of the whole Sermon on the Mount, of which the Beatitudes are the overture, or opening. When Jesus exclaims how blessed we are, as our attitudes conform to his teachings, we can be assured that we are witnessing and sharing in the very character of Christ. Through the Beatitudes, Jesus reveals to us ascending steps which can bring us to see our place as God’s children in the kingdom of heaven.

Teaching the Beatitudes to Little Children

The Beatitudes are an easy way to remember the important points that Jesus taught and lived. But the words in the Bible are not always so easy for children to read and understand. Just for fun, I've written a rhyme that little children can learn and act out. These short phrases might help them recall simpler meanings of each Beatitude and how to put them into practice in our daily lives. The full rhyme appears at the end of the Beatitude summaries and there is a link to a small poster to print and share.

I have tried to use very simple language in explaining the meanings behind each Beatitude to use with young children. You may need to simplify even more for the youngest in your Sunday School class, and, of course, rephrase for older children and make it your own.

Christ Jesus taught us that we are all the children of God. He knew that we may not see that fact so easily. So, he taught us some steps to take that would lead us to behave as the children God created. We might call these our “stair steps to heaven,” because each
step taken brings us closer to an understanding of our ever-present heavenly home in the kingdom of God.

Explain to the children that these steps have another name: the Beatitudes. You can read the Beatitudes in the book of Matthew from the Bible. They are the very first words of an important talk given by Jesus to his followers, which is called the "Sermon on the Mount."

Jesus was not the kind of person who just talked about living a good and pure life. He proved that he was willing to do exactly what he asked of others. He gave us the example to follow. We can read about his life in the New Testament of the Bible.

One more point to teachers: The Beatitudes are often taught to children along with the Ten Commandments. They go together really well, but are a bit different from each other. The Commandments are important rules from God that teach us what to do or not do to. But the Beatitudes are all about “feelings” – you might call them “attitudes to be.” Remember that when acting out the rhyme below. Really put your feelings into it! But when you make the Beatitudes part of your everyday life, let those feelings spring from your sincerity and true desires.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”

This means that we will be filled with great joy whenever we find that we need God’s help. When we see that we are poor in spiritual things – such as pure thoughts, good ideas, a feeling of being loved and wanted, or a sense of purpose in life – we have no place to turn except to God. God is the divine Mind, and is rich in wisdom. Through our sincere prayers, we reach out of the darkness of our fears, for the light of divine Mind. We will then be able to see that God has already provided us with what we need. We just forgot He was there! Some people do not look to God for help until all else has failed them. They suffer because they feel separated from God’s goodness. But we can all expect much joy when we pick ourselves up and return to the open arms of our Father-Mother God. In this home – the kingdom of heaven – we are greatly loved and showered with blessings. We no longer feel poor in spirit.

The kingdom of heaven is a special place filled with the light of wisdom and Love, where all of God’s spiritual children get along with each other in perfect harmony. There is no evil there, no sadness, or sickness, or loneliness, or things to frighten us. God rewards us with this kingdom, when we prayerfully look to Him for all our needs. We find that heaven is within our own thinking! It is right here with us on earth, not a place far away in the sky. We can never be separated from the kingdom of heaven, as long as we accept the ideas that God gives to us. This is the wonderful reward promised to those who see they are “poor in spirit.”
NOTE: The "Steps" are individual lines of the Beatitudes rhyme. Pantomime suggestions are directed to little children, but a teacher or parent will need to guide them through this game the first few times. Feel free to add to the ideas!

**Step One: Ask God’s help to get it done.**

For our “Stair Steps to Heaven,” act out how you would turn to God and plead for His help. Maybe you quietly pray or maybe you reach out with your hands and beg. But show you really feel it. This is our first step to heaven, or harmony.

**“Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.”**

This means that we will be filled with great joy whenever we find ourselves sad. How can we be sad and joyful at the same time? One reason is that in our sadness we might pray to God for comfort. Whenever we turn to God for help, we can find the truth that sets us free – free from troubles and worries and wrong thinking. If we are sad because we have lost a dear friend or relative, we learn from God that He is the divine Life of everyone. He continues to care for them no matter where they are. Sometimes, we are sad because we learn we have to give up a wrong way of acting or thinking. But, we do not have to be sad for long. It is good when we finally separate ourselves from the bad. We can be happy for the new way of life ahead of us, filled with more goodness and freedom.

If we are feeling sad and mournful, it is nice to have someone around to cheer us up and make us feel better. Someone who does that is called a “comforter.” They bring us “comfort.” Being comforted can make us feel strong enough to stop our mourning or self-pity, and to get on with living our life. God is our Number One Comforter. When we are mourning, and turn to Him for comfort, He will lift us up, and make us feel loved. If we are sad because of something we have done wrong, God will help to separate us from the sin. This “comfort” from God is the reward for those who feel sorry for the wrongs they have done. He sets us free, and we are ready to stick more closely to God in the future.

**Step Two: Cry boo hoo!**

For the second stair step to heaven, you can pretend to be really sad about something you are mourning. Show how you might reach out for comfort. How would you comfort another who is sad? Are hugs in order? A pat on the shoulder? A listening ear?

**“Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.”**

This means that we will be filled with great joy whenever we are willing to do things God’s way. God has gifted us with “dominion,” which is the ability to control our thoughts and actions in a good way. For instance, we can choose to be kind and gentle, instead
of mean. We can be calm, instead of scared or excited. We can be willing to forgive wrongs done to us, instead of wanting to fight back, and we must learn to control our tongue, so that we do not say harsh or angry words. We can turn to God who is all-knowing, instead of thinking we always know what is right, and that we must have things go our way. We must meekly pray to God daily, and ask for His guidance. There is great power in being meek like this, but it is God’s power to give.

To “inherit” something is to be given a gift. Usually it is something that first belonged to our parents or other relatives. God is your heavenly Father-Mother, and it is His joy to give you “the earth.” This is another way of saying that those of us who are willing to be as meek as little children, and let God be the Supreme Ruler in our lives, will be given the gift of self-control, or dominion, over our world, or “earth.” In a way, our world is made up of the thoughts and ideas that come to us. We can decide which thoughts we will act out and which ones we will toss out! This gift of self-control over our world of thought and action is the reward for being meek.

**Step Three: Get down on bended knee.**

For the third step to heaven, you can kneel down on one or both knees and bow your head before God, showing that He is “King” and you are His willing servant; or perhaps you act as a soldier awaiting the King’s instructions. You meekly listen for His commands and obey them with confidence. You put God and His kingdom, including His “children,” your brothers and sisters, before your own personal interests. You do not run wild, but use self-control to be a good representative of God, the Supreme Ruler.

**“Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.”**

This means that we will be filled with great joy whenever we find ourselves wanting to be good, do good, and see good in the world, with as much feeling as someone who had not eaten in days would desire some food, or someone dying of thirst would want a drink of water. It is such a strong feeling, that we will do almost anything to see that it happens. “Righteousness” is the habit of thinking and doing all that is right and good. This Beatitude does not say we will be blessed, or happy, when we have become righteous, but that we are blessed because of our strong desire for righteousness. That strong desire, which is as deep as someone starving for food and drink, will force us to take action, and do what is necessary to see that we do what is right, and that others are treated justly.

To “be filled” is to have a feeling of fullness, or to know for sure that you have everything you need. For instance, after eating a really good meal, your tummy is no longer empty, but “full.” This Beatitude suggests to us that if we continue to “hunger and thirst” for righteousness – all that is right, and good, and just – we will be filled with the ability to do good. However, we do not get that good feeling of fullness just so that we can sit
back and enjoy our own personal comfort. No! Our continued blessing comes from using what we have proven to be true in order to help others. This is the reward of those who have such a deep desire to know and do good, they will make the effort to do something about it, in order to save themselves and others from evil.

**Step Four: Hunger for goodness evermore.**

For the fourth step to harmony, or heaven, act out what you might do if you were dying of thirst and starvation. Would you just sit still and wish for food, or would you do something to get to a place with food and drink? What would you do to get the attention of someone who could help to feed you? Show what you would do or say to get food. Show how you would eat what you would be given. What would you do after your tummy was full? Would you help to feed others who are starving, knowing how badly you felt? Act out how you would feed your friends who were hungry. Now what if you were hungry for goodness and fairness and truth. In that case, we must ask God to feed us. How would you do that?

**“Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.”**

This means that we will be filled with great joy whenever we are kind or merciful to someone who really needs some kindness. That is because our reward is having mercy shown to us when we need it. We are being merciful, for instance, when we care for someone in trouble, and try to help them as best we can. Have you read the story of the “Good Samaritan” in the Bible (Luke 10:25-37)? That story shows what mercy, caring, and compassion really are, and Jesus tells us that these qualities are the sign of a good neighbor. We can also show mercy to others by forgiving someone who may have hurt us in some way. This is what Jesus always did. Mercy also means that we should never say or do cruel or hurtful things to other people or animals. Can you think of some ways you can start showing mercy and kindness to your friends and family?

Every human makes mistakes in life. No matter how hard we try to be good, there are times when something causes us to make a mistake. For instance, we may say something mean in the heat of anger, and we fear we will not be forgiven. How wonderful it feels when that person we have hurt lets us know that everything is okay, and he or she is still our friend! Mercy and forgiveness are divine qualities that come from God. We must use these qualities generously with others. Then, God will see that we are shown mercy when we most need it, and God will “forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.” This mercy which we get, or “obtain,” from God, is the reward for those who are always merciful.

**Step Five: Be kind to all alive.**

For the fifth step to heaven, pretend you are doing something kind to another – maybe you can hug someone, or gently stroke a little pet, or give a surprise gift to another. Think how nice it would be to forgive someone who has hurt you and feels sorry. Take
a moment to say in your heart, "I forgive," and then say what you forgive. You can even forgive yourself! Mercy brings true freedom.

**“Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.”**

This means that we will be filled with great joy when we have cleaned out all bad or wrong thinking, and let our heart fill with only pure, good, and true thoughts and desires. When we do that, we are able to see God and His creation better than we did before. Have you ever had to clean your room when it was real messy, and you suddenly came across a favorite toy you thought was lost? It wasn't lost after all. It had only been hidden by the clutter! Doesn't this prove that it is best to keep out unwanted clutter and dirt in our thinking, too, so that the treasures of God are not hidden from our view? We cannot be fully God-like while we are clinging to the clutter or pollution of evil thoughts and habits. We can purify our thinking through daily prayer and watchfulness.

Although we cannot see God in the usual sense of looking at Him with our eyes, we can “see” God through our understanding of Him. That just means we get to know Him a lot better. We know God and His children that He made in His “image and likeness” when we know the truth about them. We should not react to what we only believe may be true, of what someone else may have told us. Have you ever had someone tell a lie about you? You want others to know the truth about you, don’t you? Well, God wants us to know the whole truth about Him, too. Knowing or “seeing,” God is the reward of those who have become “pure in heart.”

**Step Six: Keep evil out of the mix.**

For this stair step to heaven, show some ways you might keep something or someone bad out of your house: put your hand up to stop them, close the door quickly, pull your curtains shut. Maybe sweep dirt out of your home. Show how you would stop listening to bad thoughts by putting your hands over your ears. Make good thoughts welcome. This keeps your thinking pure from evil. Chase evil away, and then make sure that Truth and Love fill up the space so the bad cannot return! Give a big smile and try to glow with radiance and purity – like the sun or a shining star.

**“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.”**

This means that we will be filled with great joy when we learn to make peace with ourselves, with God, and with all of God’s creation. What is peace? It is freedom from fights, disagreements, wars, quarrels, crime, and fear. It is having a sense of harmony in which everything around us is agreeable. Peacefulness is when our thoughts and our world are calm, quiet, happy, and friendly. Now, it is not enough to simply love peace, or talk about it. You must want to do the WORK needed to make peace happen. Our blessedness, or happiness, comes from knowing our work as peacemakers shows we
are one of God’s sons or daughters. Can you think of ways you can start making peace in your home or school? Can you be gentle and kind with friends and family, for instance? Can you pray daily to God to bring peace to your own heart and mind? Can you obey His Commandments? This is being a peacemaker. This is Love in action!

We learn from the Bible that God made man in His own image and likeness. That means we are actually the spiritual children of God, and He is our heavenly Father-Mother. But we need to know that, and to act like children of God. What better way than to work hard to destroy evil, or anything that would cause people to hate God, or each other, or want to cause trouble in the world. Letting God’s Love shine through us in every situation makes us active Peacemakers. Our reward for peacemaking is receiving the special title: “child of God.”

**Step Seven: Stop all fighting, child of heaven.**

To demonstrate this seventh step, show what you might do to stop a fight among your friends or siblings; or how you might turn yourself away from another who wants to fight you. Show how you might put your finger over your lips to stop yourself from saying something rude or unkind that might hurt someone’s feelings. What else can you do?

“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

This means that we will be filled with great joy when we discover that we are living God’s goodness so well that people sometimes tease us, or make fun of us, or are mean to us because of that goodness. It is not always easy to be good or do the right thing. It is especially hard if our friends say bad things to us, or about us, because we want to obey what the Bible teaches us about honesty and love and good deeds. When others try to make us suffer for who we are, that is called “persecution.” Sometimes persecution even comes in the form of our own thoughts. These thoughts might suggest to us that being good can sometimes bring us trouble, and maybe it is more fun being bad. But, since these suggestions and lies are not from God, we must replace them with Truth. God gives us the truth to help us defend ourselves against the persecution that may come to us because of our efforts to be good and true.

Do you remember that in the first Beatitude those who are “poor in spirit” are also promised “the kingdom of heaven” as a reward? Perhaps being “poor in spirit” and feeling “persecuted” are both attitudes that force us to turn to God in prayer for help. Through prayer, we gain a sense of the presence and power of God. We learn that we are cared for by God. We are not targets of evil. We also learn that heaven is ours because it is right within our own thinking, just as Jesus said. This feeling of being at home with God in heaven is the reward for those who are persecuted for all the good and right things they do.
Step Eight: Be brave if attacked by hate.

For this step, show how you might bravely face verbal or physical attacks by others who are being used by the “devil” to hurt you, because you are trying to live a good and Christian life. Hold your chin up high and think about how Jesus could love those who hated him and wanted to harm him. Even if tempted, do not strike back at others. Have courage that you can endure any hateful acts from others. Know that God protects you and all who side with truth and goodness. Be glad that you have a safe place in the kingdom of heaven right here on earth. Your prayers can take you there. Show how you might meekly pray for those who seem to be your enemies.

“All blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”

This means that we will be filled with great joy when we are willing to do the works that Jesus commanded us to do in preaching the good news of God’s kingdom, and teaching others how to do the same, even though people might not like what we are doing. To stop our good works from reaching out into the world, some people might say mean and untrue things about us, or try to harm us in some way. But we should know that Jesus, his pupils, and the wise old prophets we read about in the Old Testament of the Bible, were also persecuted by those who hated Truth. So, when we try to teach and heal others, as Jesus wanted us to do, we come to see that we are part of the family of God’s children in the kingdom of heaven. For that reason, we should “rejoice, and be exceeding glad”!

Although the other Beatitudes promise rewards that come to us right away, this one promises a “reward in heaven.” We don’t really know exactly what that reward is, but we are told it is “great.” Sometimes we have to be patient to receive the blessings that are sure to come to those who live a pure, Christian life on earth, and have been brave Christian soldiers in the fight against evil. If you have been persecuted, or treated badly, for using prayer to heal the sick, or teaching others about God, go ahead and be happy anyway: your reward to come is GREAT!

Step Nine: With the prophets, stand in line!

When you reach this top step, go take your place with all the others before you, who have been true to God and the teachings of Christ Jesus, and who have tried to teach and help others as best they could. You may be the target of further persecution, but you can be glad for the rewards to come. So, everyone line up and let your light shine!

* * *
Summary

These “attitudes to be” are the feelings we want to grow in our hearts on a daily basis. We want these attitudes to change our character – to help our spiritual selves shine through the material beliefs that would cloud our true being. The Beatitudes are like sign posts along the highway telling us we are headed in the right direction! But they are also like “stair steps” leading up to new levels of thinking until we experience the harmony of heaven – right here on earth!

[Note: the full version of the rhyme appears separately on next two pages, the first a simple list; the second is an image of a small poster. Since originally appearing on my former web site, this rhyme has been posted in the Sunday School rooms of other denominations, and at least one other adaptation has been posted, giving credit to my original verse.]

*The Beatitudes: Stair-steps to Heaven*

*A Rhyme and Pantomime*

Step One....... Ask God’s help to get it done.

Step Two....... Cry boo hoo!

Step Three.... Get down on bended knee.

Step Four....... Hunger for goodness evermore.

Step Five....... Be kind to all alive.

Step Six.......... Keep evil out of the mix

Step Seven.... Stop all fighting, child of heaven.

Step Eight...... Be brave if attacked by hate.

Step Nine....... With the prophets, stand in line.
The Beatitudes for Children
"Stair Steps to Heaven"

Step Nine-----With the prophets, stand in line!
Step Eight-----Be brave if attacked by hate.
Step Seven-----Stop all fighting, child of heaven.
Step Six-----Keep evil out of the mix.
Step Five-----Be kind to all alive.
Step Four-----Hunger for goodness evermore.
Step Three-----Get down on bended knee.
Step Two-----Cry boo hoo!
Step One-----Ask God's help to get it done.

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