

## **A Muslim Reflection on the Beatitudes** **by Safi Kaskas**

### **Day 1**

Do you know what the Beatitudes are? They are the opening lines of the Sermon on the Mount, spoken by Jesus as a guide to his followers and disciples.

If we Muslims want to live next to our Christian neighbors, we need to know what their Book teaches them. I will mention one of the Beatitudes every day and we will discuss it if you show interest.

Let's start:

**"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"** (Matthew 5:3).

What exactly does it mean to be poor in spirit?

Some propose that Jesus is speaking of financial poverty. While it is true that Jesus elsewhere warned against seeking riches (Matthew 6:24), that does not seem to be Jesus' point in Matthew 5:3. Jesus is speaking of being "poor in spirit"; i.e., being "spiritually poor."

To be poor in spirit is to recognize that without spiritual humility, without truly asking God's help, we have nothing and we are spiritually worthless.

The first step on the path toward God according to Jesus is to admit that we are spiritually nothing and God is everything.

### **Day 2**

**"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted"** (Matthew 5:4).

Why do we mourn? Because we experience losses, separation from loved ones and tragedies. We may not understand why God allows tragedy to strike, but we can rest in his infinite wisdom and tender mercies.

We also do some awful things sometimes and we feel sorry for doing them. We repent and we cry. Jesus is saying that those who feel sorry and awful for what they did wrong will be comforted by God.

The Qur'an teaches: Say, "My worshipers who have transgressed against themselves do not despair of God's mercy, for God forgives all sins. He is the Ever-Forgiving, the Mercy-Giver." (39:53)

### **Day 3**

**"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth"** (Matthew 5:5).

Who are the meek?

A dictionary will tell you that meek is a quiet, gentle, tame; submissive person. Yet, in a biblical sense, the meaning is very different. Being meek denotes strength brought under control. It describes one who has channeled his strength into the service of God.

He/she are strong with humbleness. Most importantly they are servant leaders. These are the kind of believers Jesus was talking about. Strong, assertive but humble. These are the same qualities describing a believer in the Qur'an. Jesus appears to be telling us, in the end, those people who submitted to God and dealt with others in a humble manner, serving God and not their own egos will be with God in His Kingdom.

## Day 4

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled" (Matthew 5:6).

What is this righteousness that Jesus is talking about? If we look around, we see many people who look like they are doing the right things. The way they dress, the beard they have and the communal prayers they attend five times a day. Is this the righteousness we should hunger and thirst for?

During Jesus time, there were many people who appeared to adhere to the religion, they did the right things and they said the right things. They were known as Pharisees.

But the righteousness Jesus is calling for here has nothing to do with looking upright and justifiable, it is rather righteousness of the heart. To seek God and to do what is God's purpose for your life. Much can be said about this but again Jesus defined it in two simple sentences:

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ... And the second is like it, you shalt love your neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Blessed are those who seek the pleasure of God in everything they do.

Jesus is telling us if you seek God, you will find Him. If you hunger and thirst for doing what pleases Him, you shall be filled.

## Day 5

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (Matthew 5:7).

Let's remember that Jesus was a Jew addressing Jews who had to live by the 613 commandments of the Law given to Moses. Jesus wanted to teach them to listen to their heart. The Law is important but it was created for us. We human beings are more important than the Law.

All of this was later confirmed in the Qur'an and the teachings of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Every single chapter in the Qur'an starts *"In the name of God the Merciful to all, the Mercy Giver."*

Islam teaches us to be merciful to the entire creation, to Muslims and non-Muslims, to friends and enemies and to the animals. Mercy (*rahmah*) in Islam has a very wide meaning that includes kindness, compassion, love, tolerance, patience with people, and treating others the way we would love to be treated. This Islamic value is at the core of the prophetic message and meaning of faith, just as it was confirmed by Jesus before Islam. Every Muslim needs to strive to be an agent of mercy on earth for all human beings and creatures.

## Day 6

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8).

The religious leaders of Jesus' day upheld a tradition of hundreds of laws created as a fence around the law given to Moses. Muslim leaders today call it سد الزرائع or preventing what leads to wrongdoing. This resulted in a religion of rituals focused on the form and not the substance.

Jesus challenged the prevailing religious thoughts and practices when he pronounced blessings on the "pure in heart." He put the emphasis on cleansing the inner life, and not the outer life. By saying this, he changed the formulas preached by the religious leaders of his time.

The purity of the heart was one of the defining characteristics of Abraham (peace be upon him). Allah said: "He came to his Lord with a pure heart" (Qur'an, 37:83-84).

Allah said: "He has succeeded who purifies his soul, and he has failed who corrupts it." (Qur'an, 91:9-10).

We learn from these verses that our success in the Day we meet our Creator depends upon the purification of our hearts in this life. We must purify our hearts from spiritual corruption such as greed, malice, envy, arrogance, and worldliness. In their place, we must adorn the heart with spiritual virtues such as generosity, compassion, benevolence, humility and loving our Creator and His creation.

## Day 7

If we Muslims want to live with our Christian neighbors, we need to know what their Book teaches them.

In the Gospel according to Matthew. It is related what Jesus said:

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

Peacemakers are those special individuals who care enough to strive for peace. They leave everything in order to resolve other people's conflicts. Jesus is putting emphasis here on the importance of getting believers engaged in conflict resolution.

Among our Christian brothers and sisters, the primary conflict they will think about is what they call the alienation of human beings from God and they consider that Jesus main mission was to reconcile us back to God.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:9 that people who have become peacemakers have some of the characters of their heavenly Father. We know from Scripture that the heavenly Father is a "God of peace" (Romans 16:20; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 13:20), that heaven is a world of peace (Luke 19:38), and most important of all, that God is a peacemaker (2 Corinthians 5:19; Colossians 1:20).

A true understanding of Jesus' teachings will turn every true Jesus follower into a peacemaker.

Muslims see the main conflict as one of submitting and seeking harmony with God's will. The Arabic word Islam is derived from the same root *salam* and has the same connotation as the Hebrew word shalom. The best definition of the word Islam is to establish and promote inner and outer peace, in harmony with the will of God.

But along with the calls for peace in the name Islam, as well as in references to God as Al-Salaam, the source of all peace, Islam's religious text, the Quran, also references the importance of peaceful living and coexistence for the entire human community.

*"Enlightenment has now come to you from God and a clear Book. (5:15) Through it, God guides those who follow what pleases Him to ways of peace and by His permission, He will bring them out from the darkness of ignorance into enlightenment and will guide them to a straight path."* (Q 5:16)

A Muslim who understands his/her faith will always be a peacemaker.

## Day 8

Today I like to discuss the eighth and the final Beatitude. It is, in my opinion, the most powerful as if Jesus was preparing us for the "persecution for righteousness' sake."

We Muslims love Jesus and honor him, but need to know what he taught in the Gospels if we want to live with our Christian neighbors.

In the Gospel according to Matthew, it is related that Jesus said:

"Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Some people will understand that Jesus is specifically talking about those who will be persecuted because of faith or doctrinal issues. Persecution in today's world, however, happens for many reasons such as protecting our freedoms, opposing discrimination against women, the racially different, the immigrant, the poor. People are persecuted today because they support justice and they speak truth to power.

"Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way, they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Matthew 5:12.

Jesus is saying stand up for righteousness despite the persecution that you might face because great is your reward in Heaven.

Do Muslims have a similar belief? How does the Qur'an define righteousness? The Qur'an teaches:

"Righteousness is not a matter of turning your faces eastward or westward. Rather, righteousness is believing in God and the Last Day and the angels and the Book and the prophets; giving money for the love of Him to relatives, orphans, the poor, stranded travelers, beggars, and to free slaves; performing prayers and paying the purifying alms; keeping promises, and enduring misery and hard times in time of threat. It is they who prove themselves true, and it is they who are mindful of God" (02:177).

Standing for righteousness might lead the believer to face persecution. Does the Qur'an teach the Muslim to stand up for the truth despite the danger of persecution? Islam puts great emphasis on upholding truth and justice under all circumstances.

"Believers, uphold justice and bear witness to God, even if that witness is against yourself, your parents or your close relatives. Whether a person is rich or poor, God can best take care of both. Refrain from following your own desires, so that you do not act unjustly. If you distort the truth, God is fully aware of what you do." (Q 4:135)

Prophet Muhammadﷺ said, "Speak the truth even when it is bitter" (narrated by) Abu Dhar Ghifari.

A Muslim will endure many trials throughout his/her life. God tests us with hardship and/or prosperity in order to validate the sincerity of our faith. Those who endure and are patient are rewarded to be with God in Heaven.