



MOMENTUM

*PURSUING GOD'S
BLESSINGS THROUGH
THE BEATITUDES*

COLIN S. SMITH

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Colin Smith is the senior pastor of The Orchard Evangelical Free Church and the teacher of the daily radio program *Unlocking the Bible*. Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, Colin was raised in a Christian family and felt the call of God to pastoral ministry from an early age. He trained at The London School of Theology, where he received a BA in theology and a master of philosophy.



Colin was the pastor of The Enfield Evangelical Free Church in north London for 16 years and during that time served in various capacities in The Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, including president.

In 1996 Colin began serving at The Orchard. A vibrant, multicampus church in the northwest suburbs of Chicago, The Orchard is committed to seeing the gospel expand rapidly through the lives of believers as they follow Christ. The mission of the church calls Christians to put down deep roots in the Word of God, live life through the Spirit of God, and bring forth fruit in service for God.

A much-appreciated conference speaker, Colin has had the opportunity to minister at a range of Bible-preaching conferences and seminars, including The Gospel Coalition and Moody Founder's Week. Colin's ministry can be accessed at UnlockingtheBible.org.

Colin met his wife, Karen, while studying at The London School of Theology. The Smiths now live in the Chicago area and have two married sons and four granddaughters. Connect with Colin on Twitter [@PastorColinS](https://twitter.com/PastorColinS).

Ryan Lokkesmoe helped develop and write this Bible study. Ryan is the lead pastor of Real Hope Community Church in the Houston area. He earned his master's degree in New Testament at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and his doctorate in biblical studies at The University of Denver. Ryan is the author of *Blurry: Bringing Clarity to the Bible* and has written for LifeWay Press and *Relevant Magazine*. He and his wife, Ashley, have two children.

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

This Bible study provides a guided process for individuals and small groups to explore the Beatitudes and discover ways these teachings by Jesus enable us to make progress in our spiritual lives. This study is divided into eight key areas:

1. The Way to Move Forward
2. The Enigma of Empty-Handedness
3. The Power of Spiritual Mourning
4. The Freedom of Total Submission
5. The Energy of Renewed Affections
6. The Joy of Complete Forgiveness
7. The Focus of Single-Mindedness
8. The Gift of Making Peace

One week of Bible study is devoted to each of these topics, and each week is divided into three sections of personal study:

1. “The Big Idea”
2. “Digging Deeper”
3. “Gospel Application”

In these sections you’ll find biblical teaching and interactive questions that will help you understand and apply the teaching.

In addition to the personal study, eight group sessions are provided that are designed to spark gospel conversations around brief video teachings. Each group session is divided into three sections:

1. “Start” focuses participants on the topic of the session’s video teaching.
2. “Watch” provides key ideas presented in the video and space to take notes.
3. “Discuss” guides the group to respond to and apply the video teaching.

If you want to go deeper in your study, you may want to read the book on which this Bible study is based. *Momentum* (Moody Publishing) is ISBN 978-0-8024-1386-4.

TIPS FOR LEADING A SMALL GROUP

Prayerfully Prepare

Prepare for each group session with prayer. Ask the Holy Spirit to work through you and the group discussion as you point to Jesus each week through God's Word.

REVIEW the weekly material and group questions ahead of time.

PRAY for each person in the group.

Minimize Distractions

Do everything in your ability to help people focus on what's most important: connecting with God, with the Bible, and with one another.

CREATE A COMFORTABLE ENVIRONMENT. If group members are uncomfortable, they'll be distracted and therefore not engaged in the group experience.

TAKE INTO CONSIDERATION seating, temperature, lighting, refreshments, surrounding noise, and general cleanliness.

At best, thoughtfulness and hospitality show guests and group members they're welcome and valued in whatever environment you choose to gather. At worst, people may never notice your effort, but they're also not distracted.

Include Others

Your goal is to foster a community in which people are welcome just as they are but encouraged to grow spiritually. Always be aware of opportunities to include and invite.

INCLUDE anyone who visits the group.

INVITE new people to join your group.

Encourage Discussion

A good small-group experience has the following characteristics.

EVERYONE PARTICIPATES. Encourage everyone to ask questions, share responses, or read aloud.

NO ONE DOMINATES—NOT EVEN THE LEADER. Be sure your time speaking as a leader takes up less than half your time together as a group. Politely guide discussion if anyone dominates.

NOBODY IS RUSHED THROUGH QUESTIONS. Don't feel that a moment of silence is a bad thing. People often need time to think about their responses to questions they've just heard or to gain courage to share what God is stirring in their hearts.

INPUT IS AFFIRMED AND FOLLOWED UP. Make sure you point out something true or helpful in a response. Don't just move on. Build community with follow-up questions, asking how other people have experienced similar things or how a truth has shaped their understanding of God and the Scripture you're studying. People are less likely to speak up if they fear that you don't actually want to hear their answers or that you're looking for only a certain answer.

GOD AND HIS WORD ARE CENTRAL. Opinions and experiences can be helpful, but God has given us the truth. Trust Scripture to be the authority and God's Spirit to work in people's lives. You can't change anyone, but God can. Continually point people to the Word and to active steps of faith.

Keep Connecting

Think of ways to connect with group members during the week. Participation during the group session is always improved when members spend time connecting with one another outside the group sessions. The more people are comfortable with and involved in one another's lives, the more they'll look forward to being together. When people move beyond being friendly to truly being friends who form a community, they come to each session eager to engage instead of merely attending.

ENCOURAGE GROUP MEMBERS with thoughts, commitments, or questions from the session by connecting through emails, texts, and social media.

BUILD DEEPER FRIENDSHIPS by planning or spontaneously inviting group members to join you outside your regularly scheduled group time for meals; fun activities; and projects around your home, church, or community.

WEEK 1

***THE WAY
TO MOVE
FORWARD***



START

Welcome to session 1 of *Momentum*. Ask participants to introduce themselves by answering the following questions.

What's your name, and what's one thing you're looking forward to about this study?

If someone asked you about the strength of your faith, what would you tell them? In what areas have you made progress in your spiritual growth, and in what areas do you need to move forward?

What do you think it means to be blessed by God?

We all want to make progress in our Christian lives, but it's easy to get sidetracked and stuck as we follow God's call. We settle for what we have, and we give up on moving forward in our spiritual lives.

Everyone wants to be blessed, but how do we move forward to receive more of God's blessings? No one knows where blessing is to be found more than Jesus Christ, and so when He speaks about blessing, as He does in the Beatitudes (see Matt. 5:1-12), I want to listen, and so should you.

Over the next eight weeks we'll explore what it looks like to make progress in our spiritual lives, and we'll learn ways some of Jesus' most famous teachings, the Beatitudes, can help us move forward in our faith.

Read Matthew 5:3-12 together as a group. Then watch video session 1, in which Colin starts us on our journey of spiritual growth by helping us understand the basic meaning and structure of the Beatitudes.

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WATCH

Use the statements below to follow along and take notes as you watch video session 1.

The Beatitudes are not telling you how to become a Christian. They tell you what a true Christian looks like.

The Beatitudes do more than describe the blessed life. They give us a road map for pursuing it.

The Beatitudes show you how to make progress in the Christian life.

The Beatitudes give us a practical plan for pursuing the blessing of God.

- A grid for growth
- Directions for discipleship
- A road map for mentoring and counseling

The starting point is to embrace the truth that we are not yet what God calls us to be.

DISCUSS

Use the following guide to discuss the video. Colin covered a lot of ground to launch our study together.

What stood out to you about Colin's teaching? Did anything seem unexpected or challenge you in a special way?

Colin pointed out that the blessed life that Jesus described doesn't include anything about a happy marriage, financial stability, or gifted children—things we often associate with God's blessing.

How did Colin's statements challenge your view of God's blessing?

One of the key points Colin made was that the Beatitudes tell us what a Christian looks like, not how to be a Christian. If we make the Beatitudes a list of tasks to make God accept us, we're in danger of trying to earn our salvation. That would be the opposite of the gospel.

Do you struggle with trying to earn God's love? What causes you to strive this way?

Why do you think it's easy to confuse the way we must be saved—by faith alone—with the actions God calls us to do after we're saved?

Again read the Beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-12, as a group and identify any details that stand out after hearing Colin's introduction.

Pray and thank God not only for saving you but also for providing a means to make forward progress in your spiritual growth through the Beatitudes.

Complete the following three personal-study sections before the next group session. One section will focus on the big idea, the next section will dig a little deeper, and the final section will focus on application.

THE BIG IDEA

Somewhere deep in your heart there's a longing for more. You want to live under the blessing of God. You want to enjoy His smile and His favor. You want to be able to say with David that your cup overflows (see Ps. 23:5). But you face some serious challenges. What does a blessed life look like? How do you move in that direction? Where do you begin? And what can you do about all the stuff that gets in the way?

How would you describe God's blessings in your life? Record a few thoughts here.

What do you think are the primary obstacles in your life to experiencing God's blessings?

Everyone wants to be blessed. We want to be blessed in our relationships, in our businesses, and in our churches. We want to be blessed in life, death, and eternity. But what does it mean to be blessed? The Greek word used for *blessed* in the New Testament is *makarios*, which essentially means *happy*, but it's not a superficial happiness. It has the connotation of joy that results from receiving some sort of favor (in this case, divine favor). In fact, the very name Beatitudes derives from the Latin equivalent *beatus*, which means *happy* or *fortunate*.

How does this definition expand your understanding of what it means to be blessed?

Shouldn't all Christians be joyful because of the gospel? Why is it so hard to maintain that feeling?

Our aim in this study is to make progress in the Christian life, and in order to advance, we need to have a clear understanding of the goal.

Think with me for a moment about bird spotting. Birds are known by their distinguishing marks. You know an American goldfinch by its distinctive yellow color, and you know a spotted sandpiper by its long beak and distinctive spots.

But how would you know a true Christian? What are the distinguishing marks of a person who lives under the blessing of God—someone who derives their joy from the gospel? The starting point for making progress in the Christian life is to know for sure that you're in fact a Christian. But how would you know a true Christian if you saw one?

I invite you to open your heart with me to the searching gaze of Jesus in order to examine your interior life and discern your spiritual condition. Are the distinguishing marks of a life under God's blessing evident in you?

The Beatitudes tell you what a true Christian looks like. They don't describe the process by which a person becomes a Christian. The goldfinch is known by its distinctive yellow color, but the yellow color didn't make the bird a goldfinch. The bird is yellow because it's a goldfinch. Its nature gave rise to its color, and its color reflects its nature. Painting yellow dye on a blackbird wouldn't make it a goldfinch.

This distinction is really important when it comes to rightly understanding the teaching of Jesus in the Beatitudes. A Christian is known by the distinguishing marks set out by Jesus in Matthew 5:1-12. But these marks are the evidence of new life in Christ, not its cause. Salvation through faith in Christ is what gives us new life. The practical nature of this Bible study should in no way give you the impression that you can work your way toward God's love. He already loves you so much that He died for you!

Take a few moments now to read the Beatitudes carefully. Even if these verses are familiar to you, read them as if you're reading them for the first time.

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

MATTHEW 5:1-12

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What stands out to you about these verses? If you were familiar with this text, did you notice anything new?

What did you find most challenging when you read the Beatitudes?

What do these verses tell you about God's view of blessings? How does it compare with the rest of the world's definition of blessings?

There's a definite order in the Beatitudes, and each one flows from the others that went before. Two metaphors illustrate this process. The first illustrates the stages of growth of a plant.

You'll find that the first three Beatitudes deal with our need. We're poor in spirit (see v. 3) because we don't have what it takes to live as God commands. We mourn (see v. 4) because our sins are many. We become meek rather than self-willed and defiant (see v. 5) because we don't have the ability to direct our own lives wisely. These are the roots of a blessed and godly life.

Out of these roots come the shoots of the Fourth Beatitude, a hunger and thirst for righteousness (see v. 6). God uses the root of recognizing your spiritual need to produce the shoot of a deep longing to grow in righteousness. Then, when the roots of the first three Beatitudes are nourished, a great desire for righteousness springs up in your life.

Continuing the metaphor, the roots produce shoots, and the shoots bear fruit. The fruit of this blessed and godly life is, first, mercy or forgiveness (see v. 7), then purity (see v. 8), and finally peace (see v. 9).

Our Lord also gave us an Eighth Beatitude: "Blessed are those who are persecuted" (v. 10). This one is different from the rest because the others all reflect character that God's people are to actively pursue. Persecution is different. We aren't to pursue it, but we're to understand that when we seek the blessed, godly life that Jesus lays out for us in the Beatitudes, persecution will pursue us. Those who are blessed by God will be persecuted in this world. (You'll find an expanded version of this roots, shoots, and fruit metaphor on p. 136.)

The order of the Beatitudes shows us how to make progress in the Christian life. We can view our progress by looking at our second metaphor—gymnastics rings in a gymnasium. We'll use this metaphor throughout this study to help us understand the process of spiritual growth.

When you climb the platform, the first ring is within your reach. If you pull it back and swing on it, your momentum will bring you within reach of the second ring, and swinging on the second will bring you within reach of the third. Purity of heart is the sixth ring, and there's only one way to get there. You have to climb the platform and swing through the first five. The cumulative momentum builds as you swing from one ring to another. That's the big idea of this session:

There's an order to the Beatitudes, and each one propels you toward the next.

Try to grasp this simple analogy in your mind. The only way to get to the fifth ring of forgiveness, the sixth ring of purity, or the seventh ring of peace is by means of the rings that come before. You can't start from the fifth, sixth, or seventh ring. Each has to be reached, and the Beatitudes show you how. Together they're a road map for progress in your Christian life.

If you're a believer in Christ but you feel stuck in your Christian life, this study is for you. If you're battling a compulsive sin or addiction and long to have greater strength in your struggle against temptation, this study is for you. If you have the privilege of mentoring, counseling, or discipling other believers, this study is for you. If you have a great desire for holiness but feel that the progress you've made is much shorter than the distance you still have to travel, this study is for you.

Welcome to the gym. The rings are suspended above you. Climb the platform with me, take a firm hold on the first ring, and get ready to swing.

Finish this section of study by praying this prayer:

Dear Lord Jesus, I want to follow You with my whole heart. I know that following Your teachings in the Beatitudes is a key way to do that. Please help me, by the power of Your Holy Spirit, to reach out and grasp the first ring. Give me courage to step off the platform and hold on tightly to Your Word. Carry me from one ring to the next and help me exhibit the undeniable characteristics of a Christian. I trust You to help me. I love You, Lord, and I trust You. Amen.

DIGGING DEEPER

I recently spoke with a new Christian who told me that, for all the joy she had found in Christ, she was feeling worse about herself than she did before she became a believer. Was this normal, she wondered? Was she doing something wrong?

Have you ever felt like this? What did you do in response?

I tried to explain to this new Christian that before she became a follower of Jesus, she had been deaf to the Holy Spirit and blind to the glory of Christ. But when the Holy Spirit began His saving work in her life, He opened her ears and eyes to the truth, making her aware of her sinfulness.

Look at Jesus' words on this subject from the Gospel of John:

I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.

JOHN 16:7-8

In this passage Jesus was offering comfort to the disciples on the eve of His crucifixion. He told them that after His departure He would send “the Helper” (v. 7), who is the Holy Spirit. One role of the Holy Spirit is to convict people of their sin.

Why do you think Jesus called the Holy Spirit the Helper? What does this term tell you about our spiritual needs?

In what ways is a healthy awareness of our sin helpful? How does this awareness make our spiritual lives more difficult?

A couple of well-known leaders in the early church openly expressed an awareness of their sin. In these honest moments these leaders set good examples for us.

THE WAY TO MOVE FORWARD

Let's start with Peter. When Peter, the leader of Jesus' handpicked 12 disciples, first encountered Jesus, he was confronted with his own sin.

Read Luke 5:1-10, noting anything that stands out to you.

¹ On one occasion, while the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, he was standing by the lake of Gennesaret, ² and he saw two boats by the lake, but the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ Getting into one of the boats, which was Simon's, he asked him to put out a little from the land. And he sat down and taught the people from the boat. ⁴ And when he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." ⁵ And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." ⁶ And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. ⁷ They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. ⁸ But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." ⁹ For he and all who were with him were astonished at the catch of fish that they had taken, ¹⁰ and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. And Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching men."

LUKE 5:1-10

After witnessing Jesus' power, what was Peter's first reaction (see v. 8)? Why would a similar response be significant for our own spiritual growth?

What do you think of Jesus' response to Peter's admission of sin (see v. 10)? What do Jesus' words mean for your own relationship with Him?

The presence of Christ drove Peter to an awareness of his sinfulness. Similarly, when we encounter God's holiness, we also become acutely aware of our sin. But God lifts us out of our guilt and shame and gives us a purpose, as Jesus did for Peter.

Later in the New Testament we see that the apostle Paul was very aware of his sinfulness, as he expressed on several occasions in his letters. In 1 Corinthians Paul referred to the earliest teaching he received about Jesus' death and resurrection. He wrote:

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³ I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁴ that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, ⁵ and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. ⁶ Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. ⁷ Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. ⁸ Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me. ⁹ For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. ¹⁰ But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:3-10

Paul was most ashamed of his preconversion sins of persecuting the church. What sins in your life cause you the most shame? What transgressions do you believe disqualify you for having a growing relationship with Christ?

What reason did Paul give for his deliverance from guilt (see v. 10)? How has God's work in your life given you the same mentality toward your sins?

Being convinced of sin means you have a growing awareness of how far you fall short of the life to which God has called you. Seeing that gulf, you quickly realize that righteousness is far beyond your reach and that apart from Jesus Christ you would fall under the just condemnation of God. Maybe you haven't had this realization before, and it's only because of the work of the Holy Spirit that you're experiencing it now. Moreover, it's because you see these realize your need for Christ that you cling to Him. You find peace, hope, and joy, not in an assessment of your own progress or lack of progress in the Christian life but through the grace you have in Jesus.

Why are we spending so much time this week on an awareness of sin? What does this have to do with the Beatitudes? It's our awareness of our own sinfulness and God's holiness that drives us to reach for the first ring. We're blessed if we're poor in spirit—if we know we're sinful and need God's help to make progress in our spiritual lives (see Matt. 5:3). We can't even begin the process of growing closer to Christ without that acknowledgment. Peter acknowledged his sinfulness, and God used him in mighty ways. Paul did the same. We must follow their example and reach for the first ring.

Jesus told a powerful parable on this subject in Luke 18. In this passage we meet a tax collector, a man who was despised in first-century Israel because of his dealings with the Roman occupiers. This tax collector is a vivid illustration of what it looks like to be poor in spirit.

Carefully read Luke 18:10-14.

¹⁰ Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

LUKE 18:10-14

In what ways do you view yourself the way the Pharisee viewed himself in this parable? Do your prayers ever resemble his? How so?

What would it take for you to adopt a posture and attitude similar to the tax collector?

Finish this section of study by praying this prayer:

God, I know You're holy and I'm sinful. I acknowledge my sinfulness and my need for You to continually deliver me from my sins. I know I'll never grow closer to You or make progress in my spiritual life without Your divine power and cleansing. Like the tax collector of Jesus' parable, help me regularly and openly acknowledge my sin. Please use me in spite of my sin, as you used Peter and Paul. Holy Spirit, use my awareness of sin to motivate me to reach for that first ring. I want to be poor in spirit. Show me what that attitude of heart looks like. I love You, Lord. Amen.

GOSPEL APPLICATION

What does a blessed life really look like? Is it having a happy marriage? Gifted children? Good health? Fulfilling work? Financial stability? Opportunities to travel? A healthy church? All these are rich blessings indeed, and you could add to the list, but before you do, think about this. Not one of these gifts is included in our Lord's description of the life that's blessed in Matthew 5:1-12. Not one! That's a surprising reality for most of us.

It's clear that God uses a very different measurement than we do to determine what a blessed life looks like. So how can we know what that is? How can we know we're blessed according to God's definition?

In the Beatitudes Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are the happily married" but "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (v. 3). He didn't say, "Blessed are those who enjoy good health" but "Blessed are those who mourn" (v. 4). According to Jesus, the greatest blessings aren't found in the places where we normally look but rather in places that we may not be inclined to explore.

In fact, Jesus said, God's blessings come through difficulty and reliance on Him.

Have you ever experienced something difficult that later turned out to be a blessing? Briefly explain that experience.

How did you handle it during the experience, and how did you feel when you reflected back on it after the fact?

What would you do differently in the future if you experienced something similar?

The Beatitudes are enigmatic. Being poor means you don't have resources. Nobody wants that. But Jesus spoke of a kind of poverty that makes you rich! Mourning means you have great sorrow, and that's probably not on your wish list. But Jesus spoke of a kind of mourning that leads to joy.

Read the Beatitudes again, Matthew 5:1-12, with fresh eyes.

In this passage, when Jesus described a person who's blessed, do you feel that he was describing you? Why or why not?

Jesus' words are penetrating. They cut through the shallowness and cheap talk that too often fill our churches.

As we saw in this week's "Digging Deeper" section, it's God's grace that overcomes sin in our lives and puts us in a position to receive all the blessings promised in the Beatitudes. *Grace*, then, is one of the most important words in all of Scripture. We must understand this word in order to reach out for the first ring and make progress in our faith.

The smile of God's favor is yours when, through faith, Christ becomes yours, and you become His. Being in Christ brings you into an entirely new position before God in which He cleanses you from your sins, removing them from you so completely that they can't be charged against you either now or in the future. Jesus reconciles you to the Father, transforming your relationship with God from that of a sinner facing impending judgment to that of a son or a daughter anticipating a glorious inheritance. And Jesus breathes His Holy Spirit into you, filling you with the power and presence of His own life. That changes your nature, and this is where the Christian life begins. Having been justified by faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, you now have peace with God and access to His grace.

These are Paul's words on the power of God's grace:

Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.

ROMANS 5:1-2

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In what ways does your present state of grace provide hope for making progress in your spiritual life?

Standing in grace is really good news. Grace isn't a stepping-stone on which we rest for a moment before moving on to something else. Rather, grace is the solid foundation where we stand at the beginning of the Christian life and where we remain until its end. Because the root of sin remains in you, you'll be as dependent on God's grace on your last day as a Christian as you were on your first.

A Christian stands in grace, but standing in grace and striving for growth belong together in the same way a goldfinch and its distinctive yellow color are inseparable. A person who stands in grace has a heart for holiness, and without holiness no one will see the Lord (see Heb. 12:14).

Again, our holiness isn't the reason we'll enter heaven and see the Lord. God's gift of grace is. But the pursuit of holiness is the distinguishing mark of a person who stands in grace, and the two belong together because they're found inseparably in Christ. In other words, if Christians are goldfinches, then our pursuit of holiness is our yellow feathers. Our desire to be holy is the evidence that shows we're true Christians—people who understand the gospel and have fully entered God's grace.

Here's how you know you're standing in grace: you start pursuing holiness. And this pursuit of holiness is exactly the type of spiritual growth pictured in the Beatitudes. Your will, in substantial measure, has been realigned with God's will, and your great desire, mirroring His, is that you'll fully reflect the beauty of Jesus, who now lives in you.

How are you pursuing holiness in your life? What does that look like?

What are some things you want to leave behind, and what new things do you hope to weave into your life?

In every Christian life God's grace brings about a beginning of holiness, a beginning of purity, a beginning of contentment, a beginning of peace. Love for God and love for others, though far from complete, are begun in the life of every believer, and what God has begun in you He will certainly complete (see Phil. 1:6).

The good news is that the first ring of spiritual growth is within your reach. Jesus began the Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matt. 5:3). That means blessing begins when you realize you don't have what it takes to grow in the Christian life. In the kindness of God, the need you feel for His forgiveness, purity, and peace in your life is the realization that gets you onto the first ring of growth and blessing.

Have you ever tried to reach out and grasp the first ring of being poor in spirit? If you have, what was the experience like? What challenges did you face?

If you haven't tried, what do you think it would take for you to be willing to reach out for that ring? What's holding you back?

Finish this week's study with this prayer:

God, I want to be blessed in the ways You want to bless me, according to your definition of blessing. I want to pursue holiness in my life—to exhibit the defining characteristics of a Christian. I need Your help to do this. Help me, Holy Spirit, to understand Your grace as I make conscious decisions about living a holy life. Please help me not to pursue holiness from a desire to earn Your love or to be a good person in the eyes of other people. I want to pursue holiness because I know in that pursuit I'll experience Your grace and the fullness of the blessings You want to give me. I pray that You'll use this study to shape my heart and equip me to make the kind of progress in my spiritual life that You want me to make. I love You, Lord. Amen.