

# INTRODUCTION

## AGAINST THE GRAIN - Part 1

### Ben Rudolph

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Good morning Life Fellowship. Happy New Year to all of you and I hope you had a great celebration with your family and friends. Let's turn in our Bibles to Matthew Chapter 4 this morning as we are going to be going over The Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are this list of sayings of Jesus that are so core.

I know since it is January that many of us are starting our Bible reading and usually we start in either Genesis or Matthew. We have probably read the Beatitudes, or heard teaching on them many times. But the Beatitudes are one of those lists of sayings that are kind of simple, but they are also very deep. So as we start teaching this series I think there are some things that, maybe even if you have been a Christian for a long time, or maybe you are new to church and trying to discover what it means to follow Jesus, we can find some profound things that we can learn from this series.

I want you to think back to a time when you felt like an outsider. When you felt like everything around you made you different and you did things differently. I remember when that time was for me and it was when I was in the fifth grade. My parents had moved from the DC area up to Pennsylvania. My dad was a pastor for the first ten years of my life, and then we had moved up to Pennsylvania so my dad could take a job at a Bible College. And that was quite a drastic change for us.

When my dad was a pastor I had gone to a Christian school, but when we moved up to Pennsylvania my dad had taken a pay cut to take the job with the Bible College. So we were enrolled in a public school. Previously, before becoming a fifth grader my entire life had been in a church and Christian school bubble, and now I was going into a different environment in a public school. And it felt like I was walking into a different world. It was so radically different from what I had been used to with different language, and in what was acceptable, that I felt this tension inside of me as a ten year old. I wanted to fit in, I wanted to be a part of the group, or the tribe that was my fifth grade class, and yet everything that was around me was antithetical to what I had been brought up to believe on how to live.

So there was this tension inside of me. And I think that is a tension we can have whether we are young, or whether we are old, where we can feel this tension around us where society is telling us that this is normal, this is good; plus we have the natural inclinations of our heart to want to do things. And then we have the words of Jesus. We have the way of God that tells us that He wants us to live this way and He wants us to follow Him.

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We have entitled this series ‘Against the Grain’ because when Jesus is calling us, whether it was Jesus when He walked on this earth in the flesh, or whether He is in the flesh now in Heaven, there is this ‘going against the norm.’ Jesus said He wants us to follow Him and to live like a Christian, and that is going to rub things that may seem natural in us, and to people around us, in the wrong way. And that tension that we feel of wanting to be accepted, of wanting to just go with the flow of things, is going to be challenged with Jesus.

So this will be an introductory sermon. I love reading the introductions to books, because I kind of have to know why the person wrote the book. And so this is an introduction sermon to this series, and then Pastor Dan and I will get into the Beatitudes over the next eight weeks. Today I want to use the analogy of a puzzle because I like puzzles. My family makes fun of me because I like puzzles. They tease me that I am training for retirement. But I am one of those people who would love it if I get a thousand piece puzzle. And putting that together would be a good day for me.

I know that I am weird, but my kids surprised me at Christmas this year with a two thousand piece puzzle. Now I had never done a two thousand piece puzzle before. But I dumped that whole puzzle out and I finally finished it last night. I was not going to preach this sermon without having that puzzle finished.

Have you ever gotten to the point in doing a puzzle where you walk away from it because your eyes literally hurt? Do we have any puzzle people here today? All right! See I am not alone, kids. What is the first thing puzzle people do when you start a new puzzle? What I do is dump out the puzzle and pray that all the pieces are there. Then every piece has to be flipped over. And while doing that I look for the edge pieces of the puzzle because the edge has to be completed first.

So I laid all the pieces out of this two thousand piece puzzle and found the edges first which took me at least forty-five minutes to just do that. Every single piece of the puzzle has to be flipped to its right side and then I have to separate out all the edge pieces. So what we are going to do this morning is to flip over some pieces of the puzzle of The Beatitudes. And each piece of the puzzle is to put this picture together for us this morning to find out what The Beatitudes are all about.

And every week I want you to think about this one big picture that Jesus painted in The Beatitudes. The first puzzle piece we are going to flip over is the puzzle piece of the audience. Who is Jesus talking to when He gives The Beatitudes? He is not saving them to the Pharisees, He is not saving them to the Roman Centurions; He is giving them

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to an audience, and we need to get a picture of who this audience is that Jesus is talking to in this text.

So I want to read the last section of Matthew Chapter 4, because it gives us a clue to the audience. If we just start to read in Chapter 5: “*Seeing the crowds, He went up on the mountain, and when He sat down, His disciples came to Him,*” we would not know who these disciples (or the audience) were. And these disciples were not just the twelve He had called. Look what it says in Chapter 4 beginning in verse 23 where it says this:

*“And He went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. So His fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought Him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and He healed them. And great crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.”*

So Jesus is beginning His public ministry here. He has gone through the public baptism with John the Baptist, He has gone through the temptation in the wilderness and He has called His first disciples. Four of the twelve we know were Peter, James, John and Andrew who were fishermen. And now He is teaching and preaching in these tiny villages and He is healing people. And who are the people who are coming out to be with Jesus? It is people who are desperate - people who are sick, and people who are oppressed.

If you look at this list of people you will see that it is a list of people that you would say were not the cream of the crop. If I was Jesus and I was looking to start a revolution and a movement of God, I would not start with these people. I would want the people who are the sharpest, the smartest, and the best leaders. In fact I remember when I planted a church in Denver a number of years ago. I had gone through the training and a kind of boot camp to prepare me to plant a church. And they told me to plant a church the core group needed to be leaders. They said I would need leaders on the team to help plant the church and then to lead the church.

Now that sounds great and I think it works, especially in an entrepreneur context with businesses, but when you are talking about the kingdom of God, and when you are talking about what Jesus did, we see that He didn't start with the cream of the crop. He didn't start with the people that were the sharpest or the smartest. He didn't start with people that you and I would select if there was a lineup of people that you wanted to start

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a movement of God with. We would pick the people opposite of these people here who were sick.

And here is what we also need to understand. The list of sick people that are coming to Jesus here were people who had the mindset of the first century Jew. And that meant if you were sick, or oppressed, or had some kind of disease you were someone that God looked down unfavorably upon. They believed that you would not be sick, or have these problems if God really liked you. So these were people who already think that God doesn't like them. They were people who are not the elite.

The word disciple was actually a word used in that culture to describe the very highest select people, because in every synagogue there would be a rabbi that would take the one percent of the smartest, brightest children to train them with what the Old Testament taught. And yet Jesus is saying that His disciples are not the smartest, they are not going to be the sharpest; but they are going to be the people that have the most need. They are going to be the people who are most desperate.

Jesus attracted the people who were the outsiders. And this should give us great encouragement because I think all of us, if we are to be honest with ourselves, are desperate people; we are needy people. We need God, whether we acknowledge it on Sunday mornings or not. And maybe you need God this morning because of your family, or your marriage. Maybe you need God because of a health problem. Maybe you need God because of some personal conflict. Maybe you need God because of your addiction. Maybe you need God because of something going on at your workplace, or uncertainty in your finances. I don't know what you need, or what you are desperate for, but God does.

This is what Jesus is saying. If you are desperate, and if you are needy, you can come to Him. The Beatitudes are for people who are desperate. And I think if we are honest that describes all of us. The Beatitudes are not for the people who have life all figured out, or for the people who have it all together. So this is the audience that Jesus is talking to here in Matthew Chapters 4 and 5.

The second puzzle piece I think we need to flip over is the puzzle piece of the setting, the setting by which Jesus is teaching. And the setting is found in verse 1 of Chapter 5. It seems very innocent, maybe even nondescript. It says: “*Seeing the crowds, He went up on the mountain, and when He sat down, His disciples came to Him.*” So Jesus goes up on this elevation, and His disciples come to Him.

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Now here is what you need to understand. Matthew is painting a picture for us to always draw our eyes back to the Old Testament. The book of Matthew was written to Jews. The original audience was the Jewish population, so it would have been people highly versed in the story of the Old Testament. So that is why you see a lot more Old Testament scripture quoted in the book of Matthew than in the other gospel accounts.

What person in the Old Testament do we know that went up on a mountain to receive the Word of God and then to teach it? Of course it was Moses. Exodus Chapters 19 and 20 tells of the receiving of the Ten Commandments, the Law of God that Moses went up to receive. Moses went up to receive the Word of God and to see God. And here is what we know - in Exodus Chapters 19 and 20 Moses rescues these Israelites, that had been slaves, and he leads them out of Egypt. So the parallels are already there. Matthew is paralleling this sick crowd, these outcasts, these desperate people to the book of Exodus and the Israelites who had been slaves in Egypt. These are people who have been oppressed and depressed. Jesus is now coming as a true and greater Moses, and He is going up on the mountain to teach.

But here is what is so different about this picture. In Exodus Chapters 19 and 20 God tells Moses not to let anyone come up with him on the mountain, because He is holy and they are sinful. He told Moses to put a barrier around the mountain so that no one could even touch the mountain or they would die. But here you have something different happening because now Jesus is going up on the mountain and the people are following Him. The disciples are coming up on the mountain to be with Jesus.

See Matthew is painting this picture for us that Jesus is the only access point to God, and that is because He is God. He is the true mediator between God and man. He is the one who takes our sins and gives us His holiness. So unlike the old story of Moses going up on the mountain and then coming back down with the Word of God, we are now invited to go up with Jesus and receive the Word of God ourselves, and to see the face of God ourselves. That is what Jesus offers us, and that is an amazing invitation.

Jesus coming and doing these things is saying that the kingdom of God was close because of Him. The kingdom of God is not far away from us because of how we have lived; it is not far away from us because of our backgrounds, or because of our ethnicity, or because of our socioeconomic status. The kingdom of God is right here and we need to understand that. It is here through Jesus. That is the second puzzle piece.

The third puzzle piece we need to flip over is the structure of The Beatitudes. We have to look at the structure because Jesus has these sayings in a very unique structure. I

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want you to notice there are some things in here about the structure that again paints a part of the picture. So let's read verses 3 through 10 this morning.

***“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.”***

Now did you notice anything that was unique about the structure of what we just read? Well, every statement begins with what word? It is the word – ‘blessed.’ Blessed are these kinds of people. He describes these kinds of people, and then He talks about the benefits these kinds of people will receive. Blessed are these people who will receive this. And it is repeated a number of times.

There is something interesting about the first one in verse 3, and the last one in verse 10. In verse 3 He says: ***“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*** And in verse 10 He says: ***“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*** Now this is not a mistake. It is not like Jesus is saying, ‘oh wait, the kingdom of heaven is for the first one and not the last one.’ Jesus had not made a mistake with that description. These are bookend statements. He is saying the kingdom of God is found within these ideals, in these teachings He is giving. This is His perception of the ideals He is giving. And this is the entry point for the kingdom of God, and this is the end point as well.

If we look at the entry point it says: ***“Blessed are the poor in spirit.”*** We need to understand that the entry point is poverty, the poverty of our soul. It is our desperation and our need of Him, and without understanding that we cannot enter. It is January now and it is a fair shot that a number of you have made either health or dietary resolutions or goals over the last week. We don't have to raise hands, but we know. It just happens in the New Year. So the starting point of eating healthy and working out is the New Year. Now what is the starting point to eating healthy? The starting point of eating healthy is deciding not to eat a bag of chips every night, or like Pastor Dan, a giant tub of Cheetos.

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Remember his sermon about the Cheetos? That was one of my favorite illustrations he gave during the Covid time. When I was at home for three months I heard him use that illustration and it was one of my favorites. But the starting point of eating healthy is not opening up the cupboard and grabbing the bag of chips. That is not the starting point. The starting point is when you are at the grocery store and you resist buying the bag of chips. That is the starting point. The starting point for working out is not showing up at the gym, or hiring a personal trainer. The starting point is setting your alarm and then actually responding to it. That is the starting point.

I think sometimes we don't understand the entry point. The starting point is this idea of being poor in spirit. Pastor Dan is going to be teaching on this next week, and it is so important that we see this. When Jesus is describing these things it is a progression. It is a progression of what happens to a person who lives by God's kingdom ideals and beliefs. And here is what is so fascinating. If you think about this, from the first being poor in spirit to the last being persecuted for righteousness sake, The Beatitudes are telling the story of Jesus.

This was Jesus' life, because who else took on poverty more than Jesus? The Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, being worshipped at all times in many ways in the throne room, came down and put on human flesh to be vulnerable and to take on human weaknesses. If anyone has experienced poverty in the greatest way possible, it is Jesus. He became poor for our sake. Paul said that in II Corinthians Chapter 9. And how does His life end up? He was persecuted not because He did anything wrong, but because He lived the perfect life, and people hated Him for it. Not only did they persecute Jesus, but they beat Him and they killed Him on a cross for you and for me.

The Beatitudes is not a list of dos. It is not a list of rules. It is not just a Christian version of the Old Testament's Ten Commandments. This is the life of Jesus, and this is the life that He is inviting us to. He is saying that if we want to follow Him, if we want to be like Him, this is what it looks like. It is about being this kind of person because this is what Jesus was. We need to understand that many times we think about following Jesus meaning we will get an ascent in our lives, that if we follow Jesus then we are going to get more of whatever. But really it starts with poverty and ends with persecution, and that is not an easy message to receive.

The fourth puzzle piece is the word 'blessed.' We have to flip over this puzzle piece and understand what blessed means. Jesus said, "***Blessed are the poor in spirit; Blessed are those who mourn; Blessed are those who are meek; Blessed are those who hunger; Blessed are those who are peacemakers.***" All the things that Jesus is saying

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are blessed, but most of us would not attach blessing to those statements that follow the word blessed. Because when we think of the word ‘blessed’ what do we think of? How do we use the word ‘blessed?’ The word ‘blessed’ is used in the context of us receiving something good, or of having favorable circumstances. Blessed is when good things happen to us.

Many times driving around Lake Norman I have seen someone’s really nice car and their license plate says something like ‘Blessed.’ And if they are really obnoxious the two SS’s are dollar signs. And I just look at those people and think ‘blessed?’ Is that what blessed means when God says “***Blessed are those?***” No, we need to realize that our understanding of blessing is so much different than what God’s meaning of blessing is.

To understand this word ‘blessed’ we need to go back to the original languages. And there are two words for it in the Hebrew in the Old Testament and there are two words in the Greek that were written in the New Testament that refers to this idea of blessings. And they correspond with one another. The one Greek word corresponds with the other Hebrew word, and the second Greek word corresponds to the second Hebrew word. So the two Hebrew words are *barak* and *Asher*.

*Barak* is the most prominent usage of blessing. We find it in Genesis Chapter 1 when God blessed Adam and Eve and told them to be fruitful and multiply. It is the blessing that God gives to Abraham when he tells him He will multiply his seed and make him a father of a great nation. It is the blessing that we read in Numbers Chapter 6 where it says, “***The Lord bless you, the Lord keep you, the Lord make His face shine upon you.***” It was those kinds of blessings. It is the multiplication of God’s goodness on our lives. That is one kind of blessing. And the Greek word that corresponds to that is *eulogeo*, which is two words that are mashed together meaning ‘good speech’ or ‘good word.’ And the idea is to say a good word about someone, or blessing someone. So *barak* corresponds with *eulogeo*.

And then there is this other word in the Hebrew and Greek that Jesus uses. It is the not so common one. The Hebrew word is *Asher* and the Greek word corresponding is *makarias*. And *makarias* is this idea of being fully satisfied, that there is something inside of us that is full. We don’t lack anything. And *makarias* is not used much, but when they were translating the Old Testament into Greek, we see it a few times being used. And Psalms 32 is one example where it says: “***Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.***” That is the idea of awe because my sins have been forgiven. God is not holding my sin against me anymore.

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When Aristotle was using the word makarias, he was saying it was the opposite of being in need and being desperate. That is how Aristotle used it. And Jesus is using it meaning that we can receive something from God that can truly satisfy our soul.

Now every one of us in this room, even though we are at church, we have our own definition of blessing. We have a natural definition of what a blessed life looks like. And they center around these four key words – power, possessions, popularity or pleasure. One of those four words just clicks with you naturally. Whether it is your family of origin, or the environment you grew up in, or the environment you are living in now, one of those four things is always tempting you to believe you would be blessed if:

*‘If I just had more. If I just had more control, more power, more people answering to me. If I just had more stuff, more money in the bank, a better job that paid this. If I just had a bigger house, more cars, more clothes, more stuff. If I just had more financial security.’ If I just had more popularity, more praise. If I just had more people liking my posts. If I just had more friends. If I just got more attention from people. If I just got more adoration that would be the good life. If I could just have more of this drink, or more of that drug, or more shopping, or more sex, or whatever it is that we find our joy, we find our ultimate in.*

Every single one of us thinks blessings center around one of those four key words - power, possessions, popularity or pleasure. So let’s not lie to ourselves, but be honest. Every one of us defines the blessed life naturally from one of those four ways. And Jesus comes along and says, no, blessing means to be full, to receive something that only He can give us. We can think we can find blessing in other ways, but to receive what Jesus can give us is the only way to truly be satisfied.

The people who are listed in The Beatitudes had their minds blown, because Jesus said that the people who were poor would be satisfied or blessed. That didn’t make sense to them. “***Blessed are the poor in spirit,***” goes against every inclination, because when we are making our New Year’s resolution none of us start out saying, ‘*This year I want to be poorer. By December I want to have less money in the bank, less stocks, less financial security, because that is my goal this year.*’ That wouldn’t make sense to us. So Jesus calling them to be desperate, saying only desperate people, only needy people that come to Him can be satisfied, was hard for them to understand.

And that leads us to the last puzzle piece which is the nature of the teaching. The nature of this teaching, which I have already referred to, kind of grates on our nerves.

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Out of these statements that we read, the poor in spirit, those who mourn,' and so on, how many of us really want to weep and cry and be sad? No, what we normally do is say things like: *'I need to do this activity with friends, I need to watch this series on Netflix, I need to take this substance so I don't feel bad.'*

As Americans we are living our lives to not feel bad, and Jesus said, "***Blessed are those who mourn.***" What is that? See, all of us want the end of The Beatitude where it says, "***for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven.***" We want that. And we want the "***for they shall be comforted.***" Yes, sign me up for that. "***Inherit the earth,***" sounds good to me. "***Shall be satisfied,***" I want that. "***They shall receive mercy,***" "***They shall see God,***" yes, I want that too. To be called "***Sons of God,***" that would be such an honor.

We want every single one of those things we can receive, but every single one of those sayings also has a middle statement, and that is going to confront something within our hearts that Jesus knows is a different way of life, a different ideal, and a different belief. And we know that Jesus was here to confront us, and the very thing He was preaching was to repent for the kingdom of God was at hand. Repent is this idea of turning around. It doesn't mean we just feel bad and are crying about our sins. Repent means I was going in one direction and now I am turning and going in the other direction.

Jesus was saying that He wants us to repent and receive the kingdom. And all these things that are referring to the kingdom are going to naturally grate on our nerves and our souls in the wrong way. And I am inviting you for the next eight weeks to be confronted and bothered. That is what I am doing this morning. We are going to go against the grain culturally, because let's be honest, as Christians we are to live with a different king, and a different kingdom. Jesus invites us to be a part of His kingdom, His movement, but we have to first confront the things inside of us that are going along with our natural inclinations, and with the flow of the world.

I think what our world needs to see today is the kingdom of heaven. We need to see the kingdom of heaven in our schools, we need to see the kingdom of heaven in our workplaces, and we need to see the kingdom of heaven in our homes and our neighborhoods. The kingdom of heaven, and this is the big picture, after all of this what we have to say is the blessings of God's kingdom are available. That is what Jesus is saying. The blessings, the full life that every human being on this earth is craving, what they are looking for can only be received from God. It is available. It doesn't matter if they come to church every Sunday or never darken the doors, it doesn't matter if they are a Democrat or a Republican, it doesn't matter if they are black, white, Asian, Hispanic, or any mix of ethnicity, it doesn't matter if they are rich or poor, suburban or rural, it

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doesn't matter what classification they have, the kingdom of God is available to all. It is available to you this morning. It is available to that person in your life that you see is so far from God. The kingdom of God is closer than you think to every person.

I love what Jesus said later on in the gospel account. He said that the people who were closer to entering the kingdom of God before the religious people, before the Pharisees and the Scribes, were the tax collectors and the sinners. See, we have to be confronted with this idea that just because someone is living a life that seems so antithetical to the biblical morals, ideals and ethics doesn't mean that they are not looking for God.

In fact I would say that the person who is addicted to drugs, completely strung out this morning, or as a sex addict, is more in tune with their desperation for God than sometimes we are. There is something that they are desperately looking for. We cannot sign anyone off, even ourselves. The kingdom of God is available to all. And here is what we are invited to – we are invited to receive. It is not something that we earn. It is not a list of do's and don'ts. This is something that we either receive from Jesus or we don't receive from Jesus.

So the invitation this morning I want to offer is to receive the king. I don't know everyone in this room, so maybe there is someone here who has grown up in church and you are trying to follow God the best you can. Or maybe you are someone who does not really understand much about church and God and the Bible. But it doesn't matter whether you have gone to church for decades or you are new to the discovery of faith, the kingdom of God is available. We are all on the same level playing field and that is the beautiful thing about people coming to Jesus. There are no special treatments, there are no special categories. So this morning I want to invite you to receive the kingdom of heaven that you can only get from Jesus.

Two questions and then we are done. Number one, how would you define the good life? Right now what is your life pursuing? What are the goals that you have, what are the ideals, the beliefs, the philosophies, and the perspectives? Everything in your life is driven toward something that you think is the good life. And Jesus comes to flip that definition upside down, or to confront that in a very deep and profound way. Will you let Jesus define the good life for you?

The second question is this. What do you need to turn from to receive the kingdom? Again, Jesus calls all of us to repent. And it doesn't matter if you are a pastor, or a person sitting in one of those seats, whether you have been a Christian a long time or

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a short time, all of us need to always be repenting from a direction we are going and to turn around.

So every week over the next eight weeks we are going to be called to turn from something to something that is not natural or normal. It is an invitation to go against the grain and to be the people of Jesus that our friends, our neighbors, and our family members need to see. I invite you to that. Let's bow our heads, close our eyes and I would like to invite you right now to listen to the Holy Spirit. I asked you to think about that question, but how would God answer that question for you right now? What is the good life? How do you define the good life? What is the Holy Spirit saying to your heart and soul this morning? Would you just listen to Him?

*Jesus, we come before you and we are asking you to do a work in us, to confront us where we need to be confronted. Lead us to a place where we know we have received the kingdom of heaven and that we are living in the kingdom that we have inherited. And God, the blessings from the kingdom are the joy of our heart. God, satisfy us, those of us who are desperate, those of us who are needy, those of us who are oppressed, those of us who understand how much we don't have and how much that you have. God may we be a people who receive from you today. And God, we ask that every week that we are here over this series you would show us how to be the people of God. We pray this in the precious name of Jesus. Amen.*

*The preceding transcript was completed using raw audio recordings. As much as possible, it includes the actual words of the message with minor grammatical changes and editorial clarifications to provide context. Hebrew and Greek words are spelled using Google Translator and the actual spelling may be different in some cases.*