

Make the Most of Your Bible Study

How to Use the 2011–2012 *Horizons* Bible Study

by Joyce MacKichan Walker

Confessing the Beatitudes

It is wise for us to beware of popular understandings of familiar Bible verses that lull us into thinking the Christian faith is all about being happy, feeling warm and loved, and receiving God's blessings in the form of answered prayers, a comfortable life, and a heaven peopled with our ideas of "happily ever after." Nowhere in the Bible do we find more words interpreted this way than in the Beatitudes. And nowhere else do we risk being more surprised by whom Jesus calls "blessed" and by what that implies for our lives of faith.

This year's Bible study is supported by so many extra web resources that you have everything you need to teach it, lead it, supplement it, facilitate it, apply it, even watch it, as author Margaret Aymer shares some behind-the-scenes thoughts on the study through the online videos! And you can even watch the author teach the study, if you have the companion DVD (see the outside back cover of your Bible study for more information).

And *here*, in "Make the Most of Your Bible Study," you have an opportunity to see it with yet another fresh set of eyes. Here, you will be empowered to reflect on and respond to the unique, fresh, and thought-provoking art created by Ann Kim. You will immerse yourself in symbolism and color, metaphor and prayer, so that the artful and poignant might draw you into beauty and insight.

You may want to print this guide so you can keep it with your copy of the study and the removable poster in the center of the book. Then you can look at the full-page images at the beginning of each lesson whenever you choose to meditate on the art using these simple guidelines. Use them alone, as part of a lesson, or in reflective moments in circle meetings or other small group gatherings. Many women will respond to the opportunity to explore the Beatitudes with new eyes, tantalized by art that engages and leads to fresh insight.

PREPARATION FOR MEDITATING ON THE ART

Begin with the art poster. The first thing I notice when I look at the whole set of images is the solid, dark backgrounds. Artist Ann Kim says of this series, "Paint was applied through a layering technique, working from a black background up to increasingly brilliant colors, with a minimum use of white" (see page 5 of the Bible study, or the reverse side of the art poster).

Look for the black in the nine images. As we begin to use these images as meditation pieces, remember that, although black is an absence of color because it reflects no light, it is indeed considered a color—there *are* black dresses, and you *can* buy black paint. Thus, as we begin, I urge you not to assume that the color black represents the things we sometimes associate with it—fear, evil, even the

absence of God. Instead, begin with the assumption that black is a positive color—the color of the nighttime hours, a color that allows other colors to shine, a color that brings definition and visibility to light, as well as to other colors.

Knowing that the artist began with a black background, bring all your imaginative powers to bear on why she chose that course, and how that black background defines and shapes visual interpretations of the Beatitudes. Take the following steps to guide you through your imagining:

- Look at the poster so you can take in all nine of the images at once, as well as one at a time. Look at them as if they formed a collage. What do you see as you look for the artist's black background in each image? On which images does the black background stand out? On which images does it fade into something else?
- In which images does black seem to be most prominent? How does it enhance those images for you?
- In which images does the black background go almost unnoticed? Had the artist not told us she began in this way, would you have noticed that the image began with a black background? Invite your knowing to inform your meditative reflections throughout your exploration of these images.

MEDITATING ON THE ART, IMAGE BY IMAGE

Within the guidelines for reflection and meditation below, there is no presupposition that they should be used before or after reading each lesson, unless a question so specifies. You can discern the usefulness of each guided meditation. If you want to partner these reflections with a group lesson, you might end your session by looking ahead at the image for the next lesson as a way to imagine where the author will take you. Or you might end a lesson by reflecting together on what the artist has captured of your new understanding of the beatitude for that particular lesson. If you use them to enhance your personal exploration of the beatitudes, do what works best for you, perhaps experimenting with the timing of your meditation as you move through the study. No matter how these guidelines initially seem useful, let them be catalysts for additional exploration. Allow the art to lead you into deeper reflection on, and response to, the beatitudes. The art is, after all, a vehicle, not the destination. The destination is more careful attention to the call of Christ to live faithfully with all God's children, honoring those whom Christ honors.

Now turn to page 6 of *Confessing the Beatitudes* (page 8, in the large-print) and give your full attention to the art for Lesson One. In each lesson, the artist offers a description of what she intends to convey. In Lesson One, you will find that description on page 8 (10, in the large-print). I always notice more if I use my own eyes before reading an artist's description. Often one's own insights into a piece of art are as personally valuable, sometimes even more so, than the artist's interpretation. We have the benefit of both!

Lesson One: Greatly Honored Are the Poor!

Consider the image.

- What do you see that indicates that this person is poor?
- In what ways might shining a spotlight on those who are poor be demeaning for them? In what ways might shining a spotlight on them help bring their situation to light in useful ways?
- In what ways are you drawn into the scene? What might you want to do as a result?
- The artist, Ann Kim, says, “The person cries out to God, knowing that God is there” (page 8/10 in the large-print). What might indicate God’s presence in the picture? What might indicate to you as the viewer that this person knows God is there? Are we always aware of God’s presence? What indications do we have of God’s presence in dire situations?
- Ann Kim says, “This person may be empty-handed, poor and lonely, but, under the light of God’s special attention, all is well” (page 8/10). Is a belief in and recognition of God’s presence in dire situations enough for you? For those who are poor? What might God’s “special attention” look like to those who are poor? Are we called to embody God’s “special attention”? If so, how? If not, how do you imagine God’s “special attention” being conveyed to those who are poor?
- Johnny Cash, a well-known country and western singer, was commonly referred to as "The Man in Black," because he wore black when he performed. His song “Man in Black” presents that choice as a show of solidarity with the outcasts of society: “I wear the black for the poor and the beaten down, livin' in the hopeless, hungry side of town.

I wear it for the prisoner who has long paid for his crime, but is there because he's a victim of the times.”¹ What might the black frame and black background on Lesson One’s image convey to someone such as the person described in Johnny Cash’s song?

- Although those who are poor are in the spotlight in this image, God has not abandoned the rest of us. If a spotlight were to shine on us and our actions, would we be found awake and paying attention? What would the spotlight show of your response to those who are poor? Your church’s response? How might you shine a spotlight on yourself or your church so that a faithful response to those who are poor might be inspired in your local community?

Lesson Two: Greatly Honored Are the Mourners!

Consider the image.

- Examine the details—running drops on the background; a white dress/robe and blue shoulder sash; pink feet; the connection made between the two figures; their sitting/kneeling positions. What do you see in this picture about honor for those who mourn?
- If the mourner is the figure on the right, who might the figure on the left be? Imagine a number of possibilities.

- Do you imagine that wordless honor, or spoken honor, is offered here? If wordless, what might the silence convey? If spoken, what words might convey honor to the one who mourns?
- “The mourner does not feel the presence of God, and her faith seems to have melted away” (page 16; 24 in large-print). Look at the figure on the right. How does the artist convey this? What might a melted-away faith feel like in a time of mourning? Have you ever felt it or known someone who has expressed it? How might you express it, or how have you heard it expressed?
- “Though the mourner is in deep despair, Jesus is there, mourning alongside her.” How does the artist convey Jesus’ presence and honor? Don’t miss the long arm of Jesus that reaches all the way around the mourner’s back! Where might you want the long arm of Jesus to reach in your life?
- The artist intends for the tears dripping down in the darkness to be those of the mourner. But I can imagine them being Jesus’ tears. Recall or read the story in *John 11:1–44* of the death of Jesus’ dear friend Lazarus. Even though Jesus knows that he will raise Lazarus, Jesus weeps. If we imagine the dripping tears in the image are the tears of Jesus, for whom might Jesus be weeping?
- Look at the very top of the picture. I wonder whether behind the darkness there is a veritable wall of tears for the weeping of many. Which tears might you see in the near future, and how might you prepare to honor those who will shed them?

Lesson Three: Greatly Honored Are the Humbled!

Consider the image.

- On the nondescript blue-gray background, it’s easy to focus all your attention on the figure sitting on the ground, head bowed, back slumped, arms hanging to the sides. Surely the jolt of energy the electric cord represents is exactly what the doctor ordered! What does “humbled” mean to you? In your opinion, what circumstances or acts of others, or of society, truly humble a person?
- If you have ever felt truly humbled, how would you describe that feeling?
- What might serve as a shot of energy for the truly humbled person? Think about what a person might provide for those who are humbled. What might a church provide? What might an encounter with the living Christ provide?
- Ann Kim reflects, “With head and arm slightly lifted in praise, he waits to be reenergized and empowered by God” (page 24; 36, in the large-print). When I first read this explanation, I thought, “Really?!” But after looking a bit harder, I began to see it—an attempt to lift an arm that has hung heavy in defeat, a small gesture of defiance as the head that dropped to the chest in despair lifts in the slight hope that all is not yet lost. What weight has caused you at times to feel oppressed and downtrodden? As you look around your community, who are the oppressed and downtrodden? Recall how they look.
- Ann Kim tells us that this slight stirring and lifting signify “the man glorif[ying] God, even as he waits” (page 24). Such a description is reminiscent of author Margaret Aymer’s third explanation

of the word “humbled”—“those who are guided by God and seek refuge in God” (page 24; 36, in large-print). This barely discernable rejuvenation because of trust is empowering for all who see it! What hope might it offer another who is humbled? For what might the humbled actually be hoping? (What might it look like to be “reenergized and empowered by God”?)

- If presented with the opportunity to be “reenergized and empowered by God,” what might a metaphorical plug offer you? Pray for that gift from God’s storehouse for the humbled.

Lesson Four: Greatly Honored Are Those Who Are Famished and Parched for Justice!

Consider the image.

- For what does the open, “famished and parched for justice” mouth reach? Imagine and make a list of the possibilities, both literal and metaphorical.
- The coiled spring represents a very long journey before the nourishment—whatever it is—will reach the body that awaits it! What are some of the things that get in the way of justice reaching those who long for and deserve it?
- Look for the “drop of water,” “eyes set on heaven,” “burning heat,” and the gesture for “more water” (all aspects of the art, as identified by Ann Kim on page 32; 48, in the large-print). Who are the “famished and parched for justice” in your community? What gestures are they making toward your church that might have gone unnoticed?
- What life-giving water does your church have to offer? Imagine the image that might follow this one, if the stuffed who are called to account by Jesus were to respond by serving up justice.
- The black is back. Who resides in the outer reaches, if the burning heat only engulfs those in the center? Whose cries for justice go completely unmet because their voices are never heard?

Lesson Five: Greatly Honored Are Those Who Show Mercy!

Consider the image.

- What gestures and postures in this picture reflect what you would describe as great acts of mercy?
- Pay attention to the extreme contrasts and contours of color. What meanings might you attribute to the red, the black vertical line, and the various shades and positions of blue?
- The artist intends to depict “a huddled woman who is in desperate need of help” (page 40; 60, in the large-print). Recall from this month’s news the world’s desperate need. What one situation or place might your action or stewardship, however small, reach?
- “The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath. It is twice blest:
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes.”²

With what great acts of mercy have you been blessed? Have you blessed others? How has blessing others blessed you in return?

Lesson Six: Greatly Honored Are the Pure in Heart!

Consider the image.

- Try to identify the “stuff” that lies scattered about the figure. What do these things symbolize?
- Has this person thrown himself down in delight at his accomplishments as represented around him? Has he fallen under their weight? Is he dismayed at how much they have come to mean to him? Imagine a scenario for this person and these things.
- “Those who are pure in heart . . . have good and noble intentions that manifest themselves in good or noble actions, perhaps actions of mercy, . . .” (page 48; 73, in the large-print). What might this “stuff” symbolize to someone who wants to “[S]trive first for the kingdom of God and [God’s] righteousness” (*Mt. 6:33*)?
- Artist Ann Kim offers us a man who “finally realizes that nothing is worthy of pursuit or possession without God” (page 48/72). Would you agree? What possessions have you felt compelled to shed, or might you feel compelled to shed, because of realizing what the man in this image has realized?

Lesson Seven: Greatly Honored Are the Peacemakers!

Consider the image.

- What might at first look like a happy dance is instead the enactment of an attempt at reconciliation. Once again, colors and symbolism play an important role in Ann Kim’s interpretation. Knowing this, who might the peacemaker be in this image? What might the backdrop of the “vermillion sun” against the black sky represent (page 56; 84, in the large-print)? Play with the images before reading the artist’s description (page 56/84).
- The artist helps us see that the central figure is actively working for peace, engaging in the dual act of drawing two people toward one another, and also drawing both of them toward God. Just one of those acts can be a challenge! “Peacemakers find ways to make *shalom* [Hebrew: ‘peace’] a reality” (page 56; 85, in the large-print). Where might this radical description of peacemaking need to be enacted in your community? In the world?
- Artist Ann Kim doesn’t mention the bright yellow shoes of the peacemaker, but I can’t help but think of the light a peacemaker brings to situations of conflict, and the light that a new way of relating sheds on all of the participants. What challenges are present when one attempts to get two clashing parties to come together? What additional challenges are inserted into the process when one attempts to do so in the light of God’s word?

- Imagine yourself on either side of the central figure. What position are you holding, or what action are you taking, and who is on the other side of the central figure? What ground must you both cover in order to move closer to one another and to God?
- Who has served effectively as a peacemaker for you? For whom have you served as peacemaker, or for whom might you be an effective reconciler? Why do you think the act of bringing conflicting parties toward God is a part of the peacemaking process that matters in a practical way for Christians?

Lesson Eight: Greatly Honored Are Those Who Have Been Persecuted for the Sake of Justice!

Consider the image.

- Look for signs of strength in the person who stands for justice in this image. What signs do you see?
- The artist indicates that the weather symbolizes the forces against this individual. Look at the figure's stance, his clothes, the sky. What might they symbolize in any person's stand for justice?
- Artist Ann Kim claims, ". . . he is rooted firmly to God and to his faith" (page 64; 96, in the large-print). Clearly he knows what he needs to do to continue his resistance. How do you root yourself in God?
- Is this only a picture of sheer determination, or do you also see signs of hope? If yes, what are they?
- Jesus says, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (*Jn. 15:13*). For what would you be willing to face persecution, and why is it so important to you?
- Jesus also said, "If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you If they persecuted me they will persecute you; . . ." (*Jn. 15:18, 20b*). Where do you see real persecution in the North American context? In other contexts?
- Imagine yourself standing up for others despite personal danger. How might you depict your stance and the forces that align against you?

Lesson Nine: Greatly Honored Are You Who Put Your Honor on the Line for Christ's Sake!

Consider the image.

- With this image, a traditional interpretation using the symbolism of black clothes and bright yellow and white garments, of foreground and background figures, of larger-than-life and clothed-in-shadow—all will help you interpret artist Ann Kim's interpretation of one who puts her life on the line for Christ's sake. Imagine a scenario in which one woman steps out on behalf of others, unafraid, or at least undaunted, in her stand for her faith.
- Recall women you have known for whom following Jesus was more important than social status, ridicule, and the dishonor of the world.

- Recall a time you were willing to take a stand for Christ’s sake and/or a time when, in hindsight, you wish you had.
- Ann Kim mentions that taking a stand might make one “subject to . . . the unknown” (page 72; 108, in the large-print). What is more risky for you: the social judgment you might face for publicly taking a stand or the risk of not knowing how others might respond to you if you do not take that stand? Follow the gaze of the woman who steps out on her own. We have no way of knowing what lies ahead of her, but quite possibly, neither does she.
- In recent memory, has your church taken a risky stand on a social or political issue? On something that happened in your community? On a theological issue? If so, what were the responses and the consequences?
- Place yourself in the red boots of the woman who puts her honor on the line for Christ’s sake. What are two or three things that you are willing to take a stand on, despite the possibilities of social judgment and the unknown?

Notes

1. Johnny Cash, Patrick Carr, *Cash: The Autobiography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 63.
2. William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, scene 1.