

Matthew 5:1-12a

¹ When he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him. ² He began to teach them, saying: ³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land. ⁶ Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied. ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God. ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰ Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you (falsely) because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.

Context

By way of preparation for the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew has established Jesus’ superiority to John the Baptist (3:1–12), recounted the divine acknowledgement of Jesus as the Son of God (3:13–17), and shown what kind of Son of God Jesus is (4:1–11). The scene has been set: the Messiah had begun to preach in Galilee as Scripture foretold (4:12–17). The Son of God, has begun to form a new messianic community via the calling of the four disciples (4:18–22). Boring (*The Gospel of Matthew*, 169) notes that “The call of the first disciples is the beginning of the messianic community: the church. Jesus’ baptism and temptation were not merely individualistic religious experiences of a ‘great man,’ but the recapitulation of the birth of Israel in the Red Sea and the wilderness testing; they lead to the formation of a new community, the Messiah’s people (1:21).” In addition to the first disciples, large crowds are being drawn to his teaching (vv.23–25). The Sermon on the Mount (5:1–7:29) will reveal Jesus as the authoritative teacher and the manner in which “*the Law and the prophets*” are fulfilled in the person of Jesus.

Introduction to the Discourse

From the 4th through the 9th Sundays of Year A the Catholic Lectionary covers most of Chapters 5–7 of the Gospel according to Matthew – popularly known as the “Sermon on the Mount.” These verses are the first, the longest and the most carefully structured discourse in the Matthew’s narrative. Roughly 27 percent of Matthew’s discourse is shared with Luke 6:20–49, a further 33 percent has parallels elsewhere in Luke, and 5 percent in Mark, while the remaining 35 percent is unique to Matthew. In Matthew it is a lengthy collection of authoritative teaching with a parallel of authoritative deeds following in Matthew 8–9.

For Whom the Message is Intended. Jesus has drawn large crowds, and because of them, has withdrawn with his disciples to a setting where he begins to instruct this intimate circle of followers on the nature of their new commitment to the kingdom of God (cf. 4:17). The focus of the discourse is not the wider proclamation of the “*good news of the kingdom of God*” (v.23), but instruction for those who have already responded to the proclamation and now need to learn what constitutes life in the kingdom. The teaching will describe them as a special group set apart, and often persecuted by people of the world. They are those who have entered into a new relationship with “*your Father in heaven*” (6:9) and are called to a radical lifestyle distinct from the norms of society.

Warren Carter (*Matthew and the Margins*) has these introductory comments about the entire sermon:

The focus of Jesus’ teaching concerns the “good news of God’s empire/reign” (4:17, 23; 5:3, 10, 19, 20; 6:10, 33; 7:21). The sermon is not, though, a comprehensive manual or rule book not a step-by-step “how to” book. Rather it offers a series of illustrations, or “for

examples,” or “case studies” of life in God’s empire, visions of the identity and way of life that result from encountering God’s present and future reign. (p.128)

For those who belong to the minority and marginal community of disciples of Jesus, the sermon continues the gospel’s formational and envisioning work. It shapes and strengthens the community’s identity and lifestyle as a small community in a dominant culture that does not share that culture’s fundamental convictions. The community is reminded that the interactions with God, with one another, and with the surrounding society are important aspects of their existence which embraces all of life, present and future. Mission to, love for, and tension with the surrounding society mark their participation in this society. Integrity or wholeness defines their relationships with one another. Prayer, accountability, and the active doing of God’s will are features of their relationship with God and experience of God’s empire. (p.129)

The Nature of the Discourse. The Beatitudes, which begin the “Sermon on the Mount” have a tendency to lead readers/hearers of the text to assume that Matthew has constructed a general ethical code which forms the core message. Craig Keener (*A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew*, 160) notes that there are more than thirty-six discrete views about the sermon’s message. He summarizes 8 of them:

1. The predominant medieval view, reserving a higher ethic for clergy, especially in monastic orders;¹
2. Martin Luther’s view that the sermon represents an impossible demand like the law;
3. the Anabaptist view, which applies the teachings literally for the civil sphere;
4. the traditional liberal social gospel position;
5. existentialist interpreters’ application of the sermon’s specific moral demands as a more general challenge to decision;
6. Schweitzer’s view that the sermon embodies an interim ethic rooted in the mistaken expectation of imminent eschatology;
7. the traditional dispensational application primarily to a future millennial kingdom; and
8. the view of an “inaugurated eschatology,” in which the sermon’s ethic remains the ideal or goal, but which will never be fully realized until the consummation of the kingdom.”

It is perhaps the first view (ethical) that is most common. Many scholars trace this popular predominance to the influence of Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy whose literal interpretation of the ethical teachings of Jesus centered on the Sermon on the Mount (*The Kingdom of God Is Within You*). But this ethical reading alone does not do justice to the whole of Matthew’s text. Jesus is describing a standard that is nothing less than wholeness/completeness, being like God (5:48). As St. Irenaeus wrote in the 2nd Century, “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.”

Jesus’ use of black-and-white categories lays down a challenge which can not simply be converted into a set of rules and regulations for life in the real world. The essence of life in the kingdom of heaven is the antitheses of a legalistic code, as 5:20 will state and 5:21-48 will repeatedly illustrate. The discourse is intended as a guide to life – but only for those who are committed to the kingdom of heaven. And, paradoxically, even they will always find that its reach exceeds their grasp.

¹ It is sometimes suggested that this first discourse reflects a tripartite division of the OT Law into moral, ceremonial, and civil law. In reality this distinction has little biblical basis and can not be traced back earlier than the medieval theologians.

An Outline of the Discourse. As you might imagine, there is no agreed upon outline of the discourse. There are three general forms which might prove helpful and seem to represent – in broad strokes – the majority of views:

R.T. France (2007, p.155) suggests:

- 5:3-16 the distinctiveness of the disciples
- 5:17-48 fulfilling the Law
- 6:1-8 piety, true and false
- 6:19-34 the priority of trust in God over material security
- 7:1-12 a collection of saying thematically connected to the discourse
- 7:13-27 four challenging contrasts
- 7:28-29 the conclusion

Eugene Boring (p.173) offers an alternative reading:

- 5:3-16 Triple Pronouncement that constitute the disciples as the eschatological community
 - the Beatitudes
 - the disciples as salt
 - the disciples as light and a city on a hill
- 5:17-7:12 Triple instructions of the Way of Life in the eschatological community
 - Part 1 – the Law
 - Part 2 – temple service
 - part 3 – deeds of loving service
- 7:13-27 Triple eschatological warnings to the community
- 7:28-29 Conclusion

Peter Ellis and C.H. Lohr, who overall see a chiasmic structure to Matthew narrative, also see, like Boring, a triplet structure, but locate the *Lord's Prayer* as the chiasmic center of the entire discourse.

The Message of the Sermon. Regardless of the structure assigned, this discourse deals with the character, duties, attitudes and dangers of the Christian disciple. It is a manifesto setting out the nature of life in the kingdom of heaven. As France writes (1989, p.112):

The Sermon thus makes no claim to present an ethic for all men; indeed much of it would make no sense as a universal code. It is concerned not with ethics in general, but with discipleship, with man in his obedience and devotion to God, not with a pattern for society. To interpret it legalistically as a set of rules is to miss the point; it represents a demand more radical than any legislator could conceive, going far beyond what human nature can meet, a demand for perfection (5:48). And central to it is the person of Jesus himself: for his sake the disciples are to be persecuted (5:11); he sets before them his own interpretation of the will of God (5:17–48: '*I say to you ...*'); their eternal destiny depends on their relation to him (7:21–23) and their response to his teaching (7:24–27). The Sermon is thus far from being just a collection of moral precepts. It presents the radical demand of Jesus the Messiah on all who respond to his preaching of God's kingdom. The Sermon on the Mount compels us, in the first place, to ask who he is who utters these words.

Commentary

The 4th Sunday (Year A) includes (a) the setting of the entire discourse and (b) the opening section, universally known as the Beatitudes. Beatitudes are found elsewhere in Matthew (11:6; 13:16; 16:17; 24:46) and more frequently in Luke. They are based on a common form of expression in the poetical books of the Old Testament (e.g. Pss. 1:1; 32:1–2; 40:4; 119:1–2; 128:1), but nowhere in the Old Testament or other Jewish literature is there so long and carefully constructed a series as here. A

beatitude (Latin) or *makarism* (Greek) is a statement in the indicative mood beginning with the adjective *makarios*, declaring certain people to be in a privileged, fortunate circumstance. It is not original to Jesus but occurs frequently in the OT as well as in non-Scriptural Jewish and pagan writings. Used here, the beatitudes reflect the Jewish use and setting: wisdom and prophecy. In the wisdom setting beatitudes declare the blessings of those in fortunate circumstances, based on observation and experience (e.g. Sir 25:7-9), and declare their present reward and happiness. In the prophetic setting beatitudes declare present and future blessings to those who are presently in dire circumstances but who will be vindicated at the coming of God's kingdom (e.g. Is 30:18, 32:20; Dan 12:12). Paraphrasing Boring (177-8), to that end:

- The beatitudes declare an objective reality as the result of a divine act (blessed) – not the subjective feeling of a person (happy). As with covenant language the opposite of “blessed” is not “unhappy,” but “cursed” (Mt 25:31-46).
- The beatitudes are not an imperative or exhortation, but rather an indicative. They declare blessedness to those committed to the future reality of the kingdom of God – even as they imply an imperative in the call to decision/commitment. They do not so much exhort conversion, but declare the marks of the church.
- There is an ethical demand in that the blessed community does not remain passive but acts in accord with the coming kingdom. This aspect is elaborated in 5:17-7:12.
- The beatitudes are written in unconditional performance language. The form is not “if you will *x* then *y*,” but they unconditionally declare that those who are *x* will be *y*. Like the prophetic word of Scripture, the beatitudes effects what it says, bringing into being what it states. They are not entrance requirements, they are declarations about insiders. They are gospel, not law.
- The beatitudes are true on the basis of the authority of the one who speaks them. In that light, the beatitudes make an implicit Christological claim.
- The beatitudes are bracketed by “*the kingdom of heaven*” and thus they are eschatological rather than historical. The “comfort” of 5:4 refers to salvation expected as the consolation of Israel. Similarly much of what the beatitudes declare are not worldly, practical realities, but elements of the eschatological hopes of Israel as declared by the prophets.
- The beatitudes do not describe nine groups of people who go to heaven, but are declarations about the blessedness of the community of disciples living in anticipation of God's reign.

The Setting

The mountain is not a specific place, but a general term, as we might say ‘into the hills’ (cf. 14:23; 15:29; 28:16, none of which specifies the exact place; see Notes). It indicates the steeply rising ground to the west of the lake of Galilee. Such ‘retreats’ to the quiet of the hills, for prayer and teaching, are a regular feature of Jesus’ ministry.

Jesus is depicted sitting (the correct posture for formal teaching: cf. 13:2; 23:2; 24:3; 26:55; Luke 4:20), with *his disciples* round him. *The crowds*, apparently here left behind, are found in 7:28–29 to have been also listening, but that can only be as a more remote audience, for passages like 5:11–16 are clearly addressed only to disciples. Perhaps a rigid distinction between disciples and crowd should not be pressed: there were varying degrees of commitment. But the primary audience is clearly the ‘insiders’.

The Cultural Fabric of the Beatitudes

One core value among Mediterranean people – that is often missed by Western readers – is that a key

cultural thread is that of honor. It is a central value that drives all behavior. Honor is a public claim to worth and a public acknowledgment by others of that claim. John Pilch describes how this concept is woven into the fabric of the Beatitudes:

The three basic honorable and esteemed behaviors offered by Jesus are being poor, mourning, and hungering. “Poor” in the Bible is never an economic designation. It rather describes someone who has temporarily lost honorable status and must seek at all costs to regain but never surpass that status.

“Poor” thus refers to a revolving class of people. The customary association of poor with widows and orphans confirms this notion of losing status. Widows and orphans did not have to retain this position forever. Widows could remarry (see the serious discussion of “real” widows in 1 Tim 5:3-16); orphans could be reabsorbed into an extended family. Those who lost status were culturally obliged to regain it.

There are, however, two distinctive elements in Jesus’ beatitudes. First, he says being poor constitutes true honor! Second, the passive voice in each beatitude (“will be comforted,” “be filled,” etc.) is a strategy used by our ancestors in the faith to avoid saying the name of God. Those who engage in social protest (mourning and fasting) will be comforted by whom? By God, of course! This grammatical usage in the Hebrew and Greek Bible is called, appropriately, the “theological or divine passive voice.”

In Jesus’ view, true honor and esteem are determined and bestowed by God, very publicly, for all to see. And the things that God considers truly honorable and worthy of praise are almost always the opposite of what human beings of any culture think.

Malina and Rohrbaugh (47) suggest: “Within an honor-shame setting, perhaps the best translation for ‘blessed is/are’ would be ‘How honorable ...,’ ‘How full of honor ...,’ ‘How honor bringing ...,’ and the like. The counter to ‘beatitudes’ are the ‘woes’ or reproaches in Matt. 23:13-35; there the formula: ‘Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites ...’ ought be translated: ‘How shameless you are....’”

The Theological Fabric of the Beatitudes

Throughout Matthew’s narrative the word *dikaïosynē* (or its adjective form, *dikaïos*) appears in key passages (e.g. 5:6). Most translations opt for “righteousness” as the translation; the New Jerusalem opts for “saving justice.” In all translations there is a basic concept of appropriateness – the way things ought to be – and right relationship. The word *dikaïosynē*, in its religious setting, means the way things ought to be between God and his people. In other words, people are righteous when they stand in right relationship to God (the medieval Latin word for this is *pietas*; I will use “piety” to convey this idea). Thus righteousness/piety implies, by extension, right relationships with everything else in one’s life: possessions (6:24), one’s neighbors (22:38-40), and even one’s enemies (5:44). When the world is the “way things ought to be” that is Matthew’s sense of the kingdom of heaven being present in the world. Righteousness (*dikaïosynē*) is the state of affairs, all affairs, when God rules. From our perspective *dikaïosynē* is faithfulness to the teachings and commandment of God as a response to the imminence of God and the kingdom.

It is in their vein that the Beatitudes declare blessedness to those committed to the future reality of the kingdom of God – even as they imply an imperative in the call to decision/commitment of a discipleship rooted in *dikaïosynē*.

The blessings of the Beatitudes are the honor and esteem that God bestows upon those who are faithful to all that He commands. Thus Matthew makes the case that this is the way the world ought to be.

Internal Structure

Altogether there are nine beatitudes in 5:3–12, the ninth (5:11–12) is really an expansion of the eighth (5:10). Some scholars opt for a structure with three sets of three, the first eight exhibit such a tightly knit parallel structure that it is more likely that we should understand them as two sets of four. This is most consistent with Hebraic poetry forms which seem to be the literary background of the Beatitudes. Still there is an internal consistency within each “stanza/verse” as seen in the form of each pronouncement:

<i>Blessed are they who...</i>	(a quality/activity in the present tense)
<i>for they will be....</i>	(a verb in the future; except vv. 3 and 10)

This form is repeated each time with minor variations. The first and last beatitude have the same ending: “*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*”

Some see an internal chiasmic structure of the poetic based on the grammar of the text:

- 5:3 Poor in spirit because theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven (present tense promise identical to 5:10)
- 5:4 Mourners because they will be comforted (future passive promise as in 5:9)
- 5:5 Meek because they will inherit the earth (future transitive verb with direct object as in 5:8)
- 5:6 Hungry because they will be filled (future passive promise as in 5:7)
- 5:7 Merciful because they will receive mercy (future passive promise as in 5:6)
- 5:8 Clean of heart because they will see God (future transitive verb with direct object as in 5:5)
- 5:9 Peacemakers because they will be called children of God (future passive promise as in 5:4)
- 5:10 Persecuted because theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven (present tense promise identical to 5:3)

However interesting, this perhaps is a bit over analyzed. It would seem a simpler model (vv. 3 and 10 in the present with the intervening verses in the future) is adequate to point to a “realized eschatology” and the “two-groups of four” is adequate to retain the underlying poetic.

Mark Allen Powell (119-38) suggests that the text can be outlined in the following way:

- A. Introduction to the Sermon on the Mount (5:1-2)
- B. The Blessed Ones (5:3-12)
 - 1. Third person blessings (“*blessed are they*”) (5:3-10)
 - a. Promises of eschatological reversals to the unfortunate (5:3-6) – first stanza
 - b. Promises of eschatological rewards to the virtuous (5:7-10) – second stanza
 - 2. Second person blessing (“*blessed are you*”) (5:11-12)

This outline is simpler and retains a central idea that the kingdom has begun to break into the world but will only be complete (fulfilled) in a future time.

The First Stanza – Promises of Reversals to the Unfortunate

Powell states: “All four of the beatitudes in the first stanza may reasonably be interpreted as promising eschatological reversals to those who are unfortunate, and some of the beatitudes in this stanza can be reasonably interpreted only in this way” (122). With this approach, these are not virtues that one should aspire to, but they are circumstances in which people find themselves.

Poor in spirit. The word *ptochoi* (poor) is used to translate Hebrew *‘ānāwīm* in the LXX, the dispossessed and abandoned ones in Israel. The phrase alludes to an Old Testament theme which underlies all the beatitudes, that of the ‘poor’ or ‘meek’ (*‘ānī* or *‘ānāw*) who occur frequently in the Psalms and elsewhere (Isa. 61:1–2, alluded to in v. 4, and Ps. 37, alluded to in v. 5), those who humbly trust God, even though their loyalty results in oppression and material disadvantage, in contrast with

the ‘wicked’ who arrogantly set themselves up against God and persecute his people. The emphasis is on piety and suffering, and on dependence on God, not on material poverty as such.

It is likely that Matthew extends the image beyond Israel to the dispossessed and abandoned people of the world in general. The *‘ānāwīm* were often noted as much for their piety as for their poverty. The general thought seems to be that they trust in God more profoundly than most because they have no hope in this world. However, Matthew’s inclusion of “*in spirit*” indicates something more than just financial poverty, but also spiritual poverty: the loss of hope.

Powell (124) notes that in Matthew’s Gospel the poor in spirit are not people who trust in God because they have no reason for hope in this world. They are people who have no reason for hope in this world, period. Boring (178) says it a little differently:

From the time of the composition of the Psalms, “The poor” had been understood as a characterization of the true people of God, those who know their lives are not in their own control and that they are dependent on God. ... What is at stake in the phrase ... is neither economics nor spirituality, but the identity of the people of God – a Matthean theme (1:21).

Being “poor in spirit” is not a characteristic one would seek, but it is a characteristic of the people of God.

Remembering the earlier point that the Beatitudes are unconditional performance language that those who are *x* will be *y*, Powell suggests that in the main clause of this beatitude

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

The Greek *hoti autōn estin hē basileia tōn ouranōn* (lit. because they are the kingdom of heaven) can also validly be translated as

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for of them is the kingdom of heaven”

It is in this translation that one sees the honor bestowed upon them by God – they are no longer the *ptochoi* but have become the kingdom themselves by placing themselves under heaven’s rule. It is in this that they possess *dikaiosynē*. This further emphasizes the idea of the formation of a messianic community.

Those who mourn. This is not necessarily the bereaved, or even the penitent. Boring (178-9) notes that at one level Matthew here taps into the deep biblical tradition that one of the characteristics of the true people of God is that they lament the present condition of God’s people and God’s program in the world (see Lamentations; the lament Psalms; etc.). In Isa 61:1-11, on which the beatitudes are based, the community laments the desolation of the holy city. Those who mourn do not resign themselves to the present condition of the world as final, but lament the fact that God’s kingdom has not yet come and that God’s will is not yet done (6:10).

At another level, those who mourn are the suffering, those whose life is, from a worldly point of view, an unhappy one, and particularly those who suffer for their loyalty to God (see on v. 3). This meaning too echoes Isaiah 61:2, which promises consolation as a part of the Messiah’s work. In God’s salvation they will find a happiness which transcends their worldly condition. Powell (135) writes: “If the poor in spirit are those who find no reason for hope in this life, then the ones who mourn are those who find no cause for joy. They are blessed because ‘they will be comforted,’ a divine passive that implies God will act, so they need mourn no more.”

The meek. Meekness as a characteristic of Jesus’ own ministry is stressed by Matthew (11:29; 12:15–21; 21:5). *The meek* echoes the same Old Testament idea as the ‘poor in spirit’. The Greek *praus* is a term also used in the LXX for the *‘ānāwīm*. It can have a positive sense of “humble” or “gentle,” but it

can also have the negative sense “humiliated.” The language here clearly alludes to Ps 37:11, where the context stresses the oppression of the poor by the wicked. It is likely that this beatitude speaks of those who have been humbled, bent over by the injustice of an oppressor. They “inherit” their blessing. It is not a reward that one earns, but a gift for which one must wait.

“Meekness” is a key Matthean word that characterizes the reversal of this-worldly ideas of kingship (11:29; 12:18-21; 21:5); “Meekness” is here a synonym for “poor in spirit” (v. 3); it is not a matter of a particular attitude one is urged to adopt, but characterizes those who are aware of their identity as the oppressed people of God in the world, those who have renounced the violent methods of this-worldly power.

In Ps 37 the concern is primarily with the land of Palestine. Jesus applies it not territorially, but in terms of the ultimate vindication of the meek. God will give them the high place they would not seize for themselves. In Matthew, the gift of “earth” or “land” (*ges*) indicates what the *praus* are lacking: “The *praus* are ones who have not been given their share of the earth. They have been denied access to the world’s resources and have not had opportunity to enjoy the creation that God intended for all people” (Powell, 126).

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. The images of “hunger” and “thirst” not only depict desire, but also deprivation – the people who do not experience justice – the people who know that God’s will is not being done on earth. Righteousness is a key Matthean concept, which retains both its primary meaning of actively doing the will of God (as in 6:1-18) and, like its Old Testament counterpart (*sedada*), the eschatological activity of God (6:33; cf. Isa 51:1, 5). Thus persons who hunger and thirst for righteousness are not those who merely long to be personally pious or idealistic dreamers or do-gooders, but, like those of 5:4, they are persons who long for the coming of God’s kingdom and the vindication of right, which will come with it, and who on the basis of this hope actively do God’s will now. This longing is no empty hope, but God will satisfy it.

Summarizing the First Stanza. In short, the first four beatitudes speak of reversal of circumstances for those who are unfortunate. Contrary to popular homiletical treatments, being poor in spirit, mourning, being meek, and hungering and thirsting for righteousness/justice are not presented here as characteristics that people should exhibit if they want to earn God’s favor. Paradoxically, these are conditions that characterize no one at all when God’s will is done.

A summary about the first four:

Theologically, then, the point of these first four beatitudes is not to offer “entrance requirements for the kingdom of heaven” but to describe the nature of God’s rule, which characterizes the kingdom of heaven The people who benefit when God rules, Jesus declares, are those who otherwise have no reason for hope or cause for joy, who have been denied their share of God’s blessings in this world and deprived of justice – in short, people for whom things have not been the way they ought to be. For such people, the coming of God’s kingdom is a blessing, because when God rules, all this will change and things will be set right. (Powell, 129-130)

The Second Stanza – Promises of Reward to the Virtuous

All the beatitudes in Matthew 5:7-10 are best interpreted as promising eschatological rewards to people who exhibit virtuous behavior. The second stanza does not, however, represent a logical departure from the thought that undergirds the first, for the virtues that are rewarded with blessings are ones exercised on behalf of the people mentioned in Stanza One. In other words the people whom Jesus declares blessed in 5:7-10 are those who help to bring to reality the blessings promised to others in 5:3-6.

The merciful. “Mercy” (*eleos*) can have quite a broad range of meanings -- which all involve concrete acts rather than just an attitude. It can mean “to forgive sins.” A related word (*eleemosyne*) refers to the giving of money to the poor (6:2, 3, 4). “Showing mercy” (*eleeo*) can mean “to heal those who are sick” (9:27; 20:30, 31) or “those possessed by demons” (15:22; 17:17). Twice in Matthew, Jesus quotes Hosea 6:6: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice.” In the first of these (9:13), he metaphorically illustrates mercy as being a physician to those who are sick (9:12). It is spoken in the context of eating with sinners and tax collectors (9:10-13). In the second instance (12:7), the context is feeding those who are hungry. As already illustrated by Joseph’s actions in the opening scene of the Gospel, Matthew does not understand “justice” and “mercy” to be alternatives (1:19; see also 20:1-16, esp. v. 4). In Matthew, Jesus is generally referring to concrete acts of mercy rather than a merciful attitude.

Powell (131-32) writes that in a basic sense, “the merciful” are healers, people who seek to put right that which has gone wrong. They favor the removal of everything that prevents life from being as God intends: poverty, ostracism, hunger, disease, demons, debt... The blessing pronounced on the merciful is that they will receive mercy. Surely this means that they themselves will be treated with mercy on the final day of judgment, but in a broader sense it may mean simply that they will see mercy prevail. They will receive mercy not only for themselves but also for those on whose behalf they have sought it. The advent of God’s kingdom is a blessing to those who value mercy, because God also values mercy and, when God rules, what God values will become reality.

The clean of heart. This beatitude is perhaps the one with a wide variety of OT allusion that can be associated with it, giving a richness to the meaning of “the clean (*katharos*) of heart.” *Katharos* is from the root word *kardia*, which here and elsewhere in scripture seems simply to represent “the true self,” what one really is, apart from pretense. Thus, to “understand with the heart” (13:15) means to understand truly; to “forgive from the heart” (18:35) means to forgive truly. In other words, “clean of heart” amounts to an internal integrity that transparently manifests itself in outward behavior. Matthew presents certain Pharisees as models of an external, rule-oriented purity that Jesus rejected and condemned because it masked inner corruption (cf. 15:1–20; 23:25–28). His disciples must possess an inner piety and purity that surpasses mere externally acceptable behavior (5:20–22, 27–28). They have experienced the power of the Kingdom, which purifies from the inside out. Thus, they must cultivate integrity in their private intellectual, emotional, and volitional lives (cf. 5:28; 6:21; 9:4; 12:34; 15:8, 18, 19; 18:35; 22:37). Powell (133) writes: “... we may surmise that the pure in heart are those who are *truly* pure as opposed to those who are only apparently so (23:25-28). Just as people may worship God with their lips when their hearts are far from God (15:8), so also may they appear *katharos* [“pure” / “clean”] to others when they are actually full of *akatharsia* (“uncleanness,” 23:28). Thus, many commentators believe the real accent in Matthew’s sixth beatitude is on integrity.”

Concerning the blessing that they will see God, Powell (134) writes: “Such a blessing is especially appropriate for the pure in heart because, as people who are truly pleasing to God, they have offered the world a vision of what is godly. Those who will see God are those in whom something of God has been seen.”

On another level, scholars such as Boring (179) see this beatitude as a recasting of Ps 24:3-4. In this vein, “clean of heart” is not merely the avoidance of “impure thoughts” (e.g., sexual fantasies), but refers to the single-minded devotion to God appropriate to a monotheistic faith. Having an “undivided heart” (Ps 86:11) is the corollary of monotheism, and requires that there be something big enough and good enough to merit one’s whole devotion, rather than the functional polytheism of parceling oneself out to a number of loyalties. Faith in the *one* God requires that one be devoted to God with *all* one’s heart (Deut 6:4-5; cf. Matt 22:37). This corresponds to the “single eye” of 6:22, the one pearl of 13:45-46, to Paul’s “this one thing I do” (Phil 3:13 NRSV) and Luke’s “one thing is needed” (Luke 10:42 NIV)—not one *more* thing. The opposite of purity of heart is a divided heart (Jas 4:8), attempting to serve two

masters (6:24), the “doubt” (*distazō*; lit. “have two minds”) of 14:33 and 28:17, and the conduct of the Pharisees (23:25).¹⁸ Put differently, it is a single-hearted passion for God. This is well said by St. Augustine (Confessions 2.1) when he wrote: “While turned from Thee, the One Good, I lost myself among a multiplicity of things.”

The one whose one passion is God and whose inward nature corresponds with his outward profession: “*Such are the people that love the LORD, that seek the face of the God of Jacob*” (Ps. 24:6). They receive the promise that they shall see God. This can only fully be realized in heaven, when ‘*we shall see him as he is*’ (1 John 3:2); then ‘*we shall be like him*’, and the longings of v. 6 will be finally satisfied. But the vision of God is already the experience of his true lovers on earth, who persevere in his service: “*persevered as if seeing the one who is invisible*” (Heb. 11:27).

The peacemakers. Those whom Jesus pronounces blessed in 5:9 are best regarded as agents of God who are actively establishing *shalom*. This correctly stresses that this beatitude is not about being a passively peaceful person but an active reconciler of people (cf. Luke 2:14; 19:38; Acts 10:36; Eph 2:14–18; Jas 3:18). Those who would be called God’s children will bear a filial likeness to their heavenly Father who treats enemies well (5:43–48). The experience of peace with God enables Jesus’ disciples to seek the cessation of their hostilities with people. While the gospel itself may offend some people and lead to hostility (10:34), Jesus’ disciples actively seek harmonious relationships with others. In this age of individual, ethnic, and national aggression, Jesus’ reminder that peacemakers, not warmongers, have God’s approval, is sorely needed. Carter (*Matthew and the Margins*, 135) starkly reminds us that in Jesus’ time – as well as our own – peace can be proposed or imposed:

Rome’s peace (*Pax Romana*) consisted of Rome’s “gift” of order, security, and prosperity, guaranteed by the emperor as commander of Rome’s military. G. Zampaglione notes that “almost all the Roman writers agreed that spreading peace ... meant subjecting other peoples to Roman dominion,” an expression of the “proud conviction” that Rome had been “vested with the mission of imposing [its] laws and way of life on the rest of the world”.

In Matthew’s Gospel, people are identified as God’s children when their conduct is similar to God’s own (5:48), in the same way that people are identified as members of Jesus’ family when they do God’s will (12:50).

Those persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Although *dikaiosynē* was discussed briefly in the fourth beatitudes, it has a different meaning in here. In the fourth beatitude, it was God’s activity to bring about a just world. Here, it is our human activity to participate in what God is doing. The virtue being promoted is not persecution, but commitment. The virtuous are not like those who “*hear the word and immediately receives it with joy; ... but ... when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, they immediately fall away*” (13:20–21).

This eighth beatitude serves as a fitting conclusion to the second stanza of four and summarizes the basic thought of the unit. Those who show mercy and those who work to establish God’s *shalom* are examples of people committed to *dikaiosynē*, and if these people are pure in heart, then their commitment will not falter in the face of persecution. In every case, the people described by these beatitudes are virtuous. They display qualities that, ideally, all people should display. In one sense, then, the thought of the second set of beatitudes is quite different from that of the first. When God’s kingdom comes and God’s will is done, no one will have to be poor in spirit, mourn, be meek, or hunger and thirst for righteousness/justice, but everyone who is ruled by God and does God’s will is merciful, pure in heart, committed to peacemaking, and willing to suffer for the sake of righteousness/justice. (Powell, 136)

Relationship of The Two Stanzas

The people described in the first stanza are those who lack *dikaiosynē*. The people described in the second stanza are those dedicated to bringing *dikaiosynē*. Thus the people in the second part provide what the people are lacking in the first part. Ironically, by seeking to provide *dikaiosynē*, the virtuous may find themselves in the position of lacking *dikaiosynē*. With Jesus as an example: he proclaimed justice to those deprived of justice, and he became one who was unjustly executed.

Whether the coming of God's kingdom is perceived as bringing reversal or reward depends only on the position that one occupies prior to its advent. God's rule sets things right. Those for whom things have not been right are blessed by the changes it brings and those who have been seeking to set things right are blessed by the accomplishment of what they have sought. (Powell, 138).

The Final Blessing

¹¹ *Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you (falsely) because of me.* ¹² *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven.*

The sudden shift to “you” must have been shocking to the disciples and other followers. Up until now in the gospel, the disciples have neither been the unfortunate in need of the eschatological reversal nor the virtuous waiting for the eschatological reward. They just followed Jesus, but sort of standing on the sidelines, watching the activities; listening to Jesus. They have been hearing about those other poor and virtuous souls and the blessings pronounced on them. Suddenly the word **you** involves the hearers. Suddenly Jesus' words aren't about those other people any more but me. Why would we be reviled and persecuted and lied about? Because you are committed to *dikaiosynē* and because of this commitment, you will end up in the position of those lacking *dikaiosynē* – being unjustly persecuted. However, we have already heard the blessings God has in store for such people. Will we believe those promises for ourselves or not? Will we believe that God will make all things right for us – whether reversal or rewards? If so, we can rejoice and be glad, knowing we have a great reward in heaven.

Notes

Matthew 5:1 the mountain: *eis to oros* can also be translated “into the hills.” This seems to describe the general topology of the countryside west and north of the Lake of Galilee where hills rise steeply from the waters. The phrase need not indicate a specific mountain. This is in contrast to the mention of a “high mountain” in Mt 4:8, 17:1 and the named mountain of 24:3.

That being said, Matthew may well have intended the reader to understand “mountain” as part of an on-going parallel with Moses (cf. 4:8; 14:23; 15:29; 17:1; 24:3; 28:16 with Exod 19–20; 34). This parallel leads some commentators to emphasize the legal nature of the beatitudes (e.g. Martin Luther). One must be mindful that Moses spoke the words of the Law given to him whereas Jesus is the source and author of the words given in the Beatitudes.

Matthew 5:3 Blessed: *makarios* (blessed) means “fortunate,” “happy,” “in a privileged situation,” or “well-off.” In a religious context the word is used to mean blessed by God. It is distinguished from another word used in NT writings, *eulogeō* and its derivatives), used primarily in the sense of praise, especially of God as in Mt 21:9; 23:39.

poor: The “*poor in spirit*” (5:3) probably alludes to the *ʿānāwīm*, the materially impoverished who recognize God as their only hope, who appear in so many prophetic and wisdom passages and especially in Isa. 61:1.

theirs is the kingdom of heaven: It is noteworthy that 5:3 and 5:10 have identical promise statements (“for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs”), and thus frame the entire section. Also the promise statements

of 5:3 and 5:10 both use the present tense, while the promise statements of the intervening verses (5:4–9) use the future tense. There is debate over the significance of the present tense in 5:3, 10. Some opt for the futuristic use of the present, and others stress the present realization of Kingdom blessing. The latter view—that a presently inaugurated Kingdom will be consummated in the future—seems preferable. The oppressed poor presently experience Kingdom blessing only partially.

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