

The Beatitudes

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I.

Though many a contemporary preacher will confess to having preached a different version of much the same sermon in different contexts, it seems unlikely that Matthew recorded one version of Jesus' most famous sermon, The Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 5-7 and that Luke recorded another version of that sermon, The Sermon on the Plain, in Luke 6:20-7:49.

More likely both the gospel writers found the basic material for their versions of the sermon in the elusive document we call "Q" only because "Q" is the first letter in the German word for "source," *quelle*. No one has ever seen "Q." New Testament scholars have posited the early existence of such a source as the best explanation for the fact that Matthew and Luke have so much material in common with each other that they did not borrow from their visible common source, Mark. It further seems likely that the Sermon as found in "Q" was a compilation of a number of Jesus' sayings over the course of his ministry, with some editorial tweaking, rather than the written record of a single sermon.

If so we begin our sketch of the Beatitudes by noticing that both Matthew and Luke pick up a cue from "Q" in the way they structure the great sermon. Both of our gospel writers begin the sermon with a claim about the blessedness of the godly, and both of our gospel writers end the sermon with a parable about the distinction between sturdy and flimsy buildings, and by extension between sturdy and flimsy discipleship. My strong suspicion is that the model for this structure is Psalm 1, which in the Greek Old Testament begins with the very same word that Matthew and Luke use to begin their accounts of the sermon. *Blessed*—the Greek is *makarios*. The psalm pronounces blessing on the faithful with these words: "Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the impious" (my translation). The NRSV translation of the psalm uses the word *happy* and for good and understandable reasons shifts the reference from the masculine "man"—*aner* to an ungendered plural. "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked." It is a spiritual mystery or a typical result of committee work that the same translation translates exactly the same word *makarios* as "blessed" in Matthew 5:13 and Luke 6:20. We shall say more on this below.

Both Matthew and Luke end the sermon with a parable about sturdy buildings; the Psalm continues its discussion of blessedness and ends with a parable about sturdy trees.

(The godly) are like trees
Planted by streams of water,
Which yield their fruit in its season
And their leaves do not wither....

The wicked are not so,
But are like chaff that the wind blows away" (Psalm 1:1-4).

Compare Matthew:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be as a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against the house, and it fell—and great was its fall. (Matt 5:24-27)

If we are right that the Sermon on the Mount draws on a kind of elaborate interpretation of Psalm 1, then the blessings with which the sermon begins and the parable with which it ends are the framework for the verses between. The Sermon as a whole is a depiction of what it means for followers of Jesus to walk in the paths of the godly. It is not just the first thirteen verses but the whole Sermon that shows us the shape of blessedness, and the sturdy house on the strong rock at the end of the Sermon is an imaginative portrait of that blessing.¹

II.

We have already noticed that the NRSV translates the same word, *makarios*, as “happy” when translating Psalm 1:1 and as “blessed” when translating Matthew 5:3. The Good News Bible in an admirable attempt to make the translation accessible for twentieth century young people also begins the Beatitude “Happy are the Poor in Spirit.”

Happy seems too thin a word for what Jesus claims in Matthew. There are surely richer understandings of happiness than the admonition “don’t worry, be happy” would suggest, but it is hard to escape the connection of happiness with a kind of blithe concentration on the psychic wellbeing of the self. Furthermore happiness is usually contrasted with deprivation or suffering, while it is clear from the final beatitude that “blessedness” does not prevent suffering and may even demand it: “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all manner of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt 5:11-12). For Matthew the cost of blessedness is very much like the cost of discipleship.

Of course being “blessed” has its own problems in a time of explicit and implicit prosperity gospel. It is too easy to count every material gain as “blessing” and to count our blessings by counting our treasures. “God Bless America,” a song of unexceptionable loyalty, too easily gets used as the badge of exclusivism: God bless America, especially.

In the Psalm, in Matthew and in Luke, blessedness has an inescapably theological component. We are not so much blessed by God as we are blessed in God. The faithful are not taken up into the life of discipleship and then as a splendid reward handed blessedness as well. The discipleship is the blessedness; the following is the receiving.

III.

Perhaps the most salutary reminder for those of us who preach is that the Be-

attitudes are descriptive and not prescriptive. Jesus knows perfectly well how to use the imperative, and Matthew knows perfectly well how to record commands. The Beatitudes do not begin with an exhortation to shape up nor end with a dire warning. They begin with blessing and they end with rejoicing.

Of course in part this is a wise rhetorical strategy. In 1 Corinthians 13, Paul could have given the Corinthians a series of little love commandments: hold no grudges, be patient! Instead he describes love so winsomely that the Corinthians and readers ever since are entranced by the picture and won over by the possibility of love so rich, so broad, so high.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus shows his hearers what the kingdom looks like. Of course when the description works, it also inspires. No one hearing these blessings aright will easily or carelessly ignore them. Nonetheless part of the power of the Beatitudes is not in what they enjoin but in what they show. Jesus speaks to the disciples in the presence of the crowds. For Matthew this means that his words are addressed to believers and to seekers alike.

The good news of the Kingdom is not just that some ideal world should look like this; the good news of the Kingdom is that the real world does look like this already. For those who have eyes to see, there are disciples everywhere, and for those who long for purpose, there are opportunities for discipleship aplenty.

The communion of saints surrounds us. And when we preach these texts, we will want to preach that communion. In my own ministry, I have very often turned to the Beatitudes for funeral services when I want not so much to commend the one we mourn as to rejoice in the God who was both the giver and the recipient of that believer's gracious life. In the lectionary of many of our communities, we read the Beatitudes on All Saints Day as a source of rejoicing. Look around! See the poor in spirit. See the pure in heart. See the peacemakers. And sometimes, especially as preacher to people, we can say "Look at yourselves" and sneak a little of Luke's second person rhetoric into Matthew's sermon: "Blessed are you."

When we preach the Beatitudes, we would most often do well to bracket Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Mother Theresa and Martin Luther King for a while. In churches I have served, Ann Anderson organized hunger walks and Noel Gordon was poor in spirit because he did not know how rich he was and Dorothy Pete was pure in heart just because that is how God made her and sustained her through the long years of her life. Name those blessings, those blessed.

IV.

Whether or not Matthew and Luke are both using "Q," it is clear from a quick comparison that they apparently interpret Jesus' words rather differently. Here is the first beatitude in the two versions:

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

Luke: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.
(6:20)

And here is the fourth:

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

Luke: "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." (Luke 6:21)

Whenever I have preached or taught these two versions of the Beatitudes, I have suggested that Matthew's reading of Jesus' blessing is more "spiritual" than Luke's. Luke is concerned with the actual poor, the actually hungry—Matthew is concerned with those who are poor in spirit or who hunger and thirst after righteousness.

If we simply take the Beatitudes in isolation from the rest of the two gospels, the distinction makes a kind of rough sense, though in the first century as now, "spiritual" is an especially slippery category. Those of us who live among the wealthier people in a wealthy nation know that it is not all that easy to be rich in possessions and poor in spirit.

However, if we look at Matthew as a whole, these Beatitudes function in a quite different way than in a kind of internal, spiritual dimension. (See Matthew 25:31-46.) Here in the very last words of his ministry, Jesus spells out the shape of discipleship. Who is the blessed person? What kind of person lives within the blessed life of God?

The end of Matthew's gospel is thus not only the end of the last discourse; it is the conclusion to the promises granted in the first discourse: "Then the King will say, come you *blessed* of my father." To put it too simply in Luke's gospel, the poor are blessed; in Matthew's Gospel the poor in spirit are called to be blessings in order that they may enter into the fullness of blessing, too.

If anyone were to say, "Lord, Lord, I have a humble spirit and a pure heart," there is no doubting what the King will ask: "When my brothers or sisters were hungry did you feed them, naked did you clothe them, visit them in prison?" If so, then you are blessed indeed. To say it in another way, we might be able to read the Beatitudes as being concerned primarily with our interior lives, our personal piety. Matthew will not let us do that. The blessed not only have peace; they make peace.

"Not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, will enter into the Kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven."
(Matt. 7:21)

"Blessed (*makarios*) is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives." (Matt. 24:46)

When I was a graduate student, form criticism ran the danger of making us love pericopes more than we loved the Gospels, and when I was a preacher, the lectionary threatened to limit my attention to a single paragraph. When we read the Beatitudes in the light of Matthew's whole gospel, we discover that discipleship is not a matter of the heart only, and whatever else the gospel may be, it is always also social gospel.

V.

When I am pastorally sensitive, I find it very hard to preach eschatology, and when I am biblically attentive, I find it impossible to avoid it altogether. Of our four gospels, Mark and Matthew write most evidently under the threat and promise of apocalyptic consummation. Christ has taught; Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ

will come again. Soon.

It is a standard claim of those who study Paul's letters that Paul believed in an Age of blessedness that was already but not yet. Already people had received the Spirit, but except for Jesus, the dead were not yet raised, that last enemy was not yet defeated, and God was not yet all in all. However in the meantime, we live with the first fruits of the glory that is to come: of all those fruits faith, hope, and love will abide. Now enigmatically; then face to face.

Matthew is also an evangelist of the already and the not yet. Jesus establishes the church on the rock which is Peter, and the gates of Hades will not prevail, a preliminary eschatological victory. When the Christians gather to pronounce judgment on one another, Christ is already present among them, a preliminary eschatological community.

For Matthew the Kingdom of Heaven is not so much there and not altogether here; the Kingdom of Heaven is then and not altogether now. The Beatitudes themselves declare the inescapable bond between then and now, heaven and earth. The shift between present and future tense is persistent but not consistent; heaven touches earth, and the future shapes the present.

Look at how two different Beatitudes portray time:

"Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, for theirs *is* the Kingdom of Heaven."
(Matt 5:13)

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

Notice that in each case God gives both blessedness and gift. For those who are pure in spirit, whole hearted, single mindedly set on God—that single mindedness is blessedness. And of course, as the whole Gospel shows, when the Kingdom comes in its fullness, they will be among its citizens. But they already have a green card, an appointment for the naturalization ceremony, a free pass to the patriotic parties.

For those who mourn, it is easier to see the nature of the future gift; they *will be* comforted. There is honesty here as everyone knows who has given or received the premature words of comfort. In the midst of mourning, we can think comfort one day but not yet, comfort partially but not entirely. But here the surprise is that the present has its blessing, too. There is blessing not only in the promise but in the fact. Puzzling that through is the work of a lifetime, but notice quickly that we could not mourn if we did not love and that the depth of the loss marks the splendor of the gift.

As you read through the Beatitudes or preach them, notice the elusive way in which present and future come together; they are inextricably linked but not always in the same way. Heaven (which is about the future) touches earth (which is the home of the present). Earth hallows heaven. The present claims the future, through a glass, darkly.

Now we come to the difficult part for faithful but sensitive interpretation. For Matthew as for Mark and Paul, it was quite clear that this Kingdom of Heaven was neither in a distant place nor in a distant future. When Jesus tells the disciples and Matthew tells the first generation of Christians, "Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour" (Matt 24:44), he thinks in terms of hours not of millennia. In 1 Thessalonians we learn that the Thessalonian Christians were quite surprised that some of their number had died before Jesus' return, and Paul

seems a bit surprised as well. If Matthew wrote his gospel about 85 A.D., he knew that the wait had been longer than his community had expected, but he did not talk about long range planning or set up endowments for the community.

Furthermore, it is not only the case that for Matthew (and I think for Jesus) the Kingdom was coming soon; it was also the case that the Kingdom was coming to earth. Heaven, remember, was not a place. It was a reign, a sovereignty; it pressed in from the future, not from the skies.

Thus this beatitude: “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (Matt 5:5). If we were to rewrite the saying according to much contemporary Christian understanding, we would say, “Blessed are the meek, for they will go to heaven.” But we have seen that that apparently is not how Matthew understood the Kingdom of Heaven. In the famous passage in Matthew, Jesus says that at the climactic hour, “two will be in the field, one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together, and one will be taken and one will be left.” It is quite clear from the context that those who are taken are like those who were swept away by the flood in the days of Noah and that those who remain, like Noah and his family, will be saved. The Son of Man comes to earth: “Keep awake, therefore for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming” (Matt. 24:40-42).

It is a difficult pastoral and theological task to talk honestly about Christian faith in the end of times. The Beatitudes promise great recompense for the blessed, but how do we understand those promises? Some Christian preachers find it very difficult to talk with any conviction about the end of times and find ways to lay claim of God’s promises as part of the present life. So the future and present tenses of the Beatitudes are fused into one promise, a rich and graceful promise, but as Paul would say, for this life only.²

Many Christian preachers interpret eschatology, and thus interpret the promise of the Beatitudes, through an understanding of Christian hope that I think is at least hinted in John’s Gospel and that is very popular among Christians of our own time. We do not think of Christ coming again or of earth transformed, but we trust in God’s promise for each believer at the time of his or her death. Then in popular parlance, the believer goes to heaven—to be in the presence of God. At its most concrete, this turns Matthew’s promise of heaven as a divine reign that is and is to come into a divine place that has always been and will always be.

The third option is probably the most elusive. Those who preach from this perspective want to maintain the strong sense of the future as God’s future and a strong hope for consummation as not only an afterlife for believers but as a new heaven and a new earth. People who preach from this perspective are wary of timetables, which obviously have invariably failed, and of very concrete claims about what that future new heaven and new earth will look like. As one of those preachers, I cling fast to Paul who says that at the end, God will be all in all, and also that at the end, nothing will separate us from the love of Christ. (See 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 8.)

VI.

Finally, for Matthew the significance of the Beatitudes derives above all from the one who pronounces them. The Sermon on the Mount presents Jesus as the new Moses, who is more than Moses, who fulfills Torah but also interprets and expands it. At the end of the sermon, Matthew makes clear that what is at stake in these verses is

Jesus' own authority: "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught as one having authority, and not as their scribes" (Matt. 7:28). At the end of the Gospel, Jesus affirms both his authority and his continued presence among believers. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me....And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matt. 28:18-20).

What counts for Matthew is not just the content of the blessings but the source of the blessings. It is Jesus who pronounced those blessings on the mountain; it is the Risen Lord who authoritatively continues to bless by his instruction and by his presence. For Matthew, Jesus is God's great indicative. He is the embodiment of what he enjoins. He not only guides us toward blessedness; he is blessedness incarnate. For Matthew blessedness is not simply happiness but is the description of the believer in ongoing relationship to God. For Matthew, Jesus makes that connection possible; for Matthew, Jesus is that connection.

For Matthew, those who are blessed reach out in blessing; the poor in spirit serve those who are simply poor—feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the prisoner. In Matthew, Jesus is the one who is blessed and the one who blesses. At the end of history, it is he who will affirm God's blessing on those who have served the least of his brothers and sisters. For Matthew, blessing is both a present gift and future hope. In Matthew, Jesus is both the presence of God (Immanuel) and the future of God's benediction—The Son of Man. He is himself God's "already" and God's "not yet."

When we read these blessings, when we read the whole of the sermon which they introduce, when we read the whole of the Gospel that frames the sermon, we discover Matthew's most central claim: these are not only The Beatitudes; these are Christ's Beatitudes.

Notes

1 It strikes me that the "blessing" and the "rock" come together again in Matthew 16:17–18, and Peter, for all his failings, becomes a paradigm or at least a promise of blessed sturdiness. Of course this assumes that Matthew's gospel is woven cleverly enough for this kind of cross reference. I think that's a fair assumption.

2 In many ways Rudolf Bultmann's theological project was not so much to separate the New Testament from mythology as it was to separate the New Testament from apocalyptic eschatology. If not for him, at least for many who have been influenced by him, talk about personal or communal consummation beyond history is not persuasive and perhaps not even comprehensible.