

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the famous *Beatitudes* of Jesus' *Sermon on the Mount*, the first eight verses contain short sayings beginning with "blessed are (blank)...for they (blank)..." These sayings declare who is to enter the kingdom which is coming. God will then reverse the positions and judgments which men have made for themselves in this world, and the last will be first, and the first last. Thus, it is those who are *least* like kings and rulers --- the *least* prosperous --- who are the blessed in a striking contrast between present appearances and future reality.

Jesus is not simply suggesting timeless truths about *the way the world actually is*. *Anybody knows* that this is *not* a description of reality. No. This is "an upside-down world, or perhaps a right-side-up world," and Jesus is announcing that the work is actually underway to accomplish it, that the work to achieve this is beginning *now* in his own lifetime and that of those he is addressing. Something is starting to happen. God is at work in the world once again in a new way.

Another way of putting it would be to say that rather than wisdom instruction, a longstanding Jewish tradition, Jesus is here offering a type of "apocalyptic consolation." The apocalyptic element is expressed in the reversal of fate offered in the passage. For example, Jesus says that "the meek will inherit the earth." They are consoled in the reversal expressed in the sentence. This is not the consequence of an individual's activity but rather of divine intervention at some point in the future. So, this is not a "didactic discourse." Instead, it points to "virtues that must be practiced by Jesus' disciples." But, again, this is to take place in the future. It is not a description of reality; anyone hearing it could not assume that the words concerned the present circumstance. These blessings are announcements of "good news" about what God is accomplishing in his world.

Jesus says, "follow me," because in Jesus Christ, God is doing a new thing. The good news is "part of the invitation, the summons, part of his way of saying that God is at work in a fresh way and that *this is what it looks like*." From this point on, "all the controls people thought they knew about are going to work the other way round." If people assume that good news concerns success, wealth, long life, victory in battle, "Jesus is offering wonderful news for the humble, the poor, the mourners, the peacemakers." If it is expressed through the word "Blessed" in English, it would be more accurate to call each of these sayings "wonderful news." God is acting through Jesus "to turn the world upside down, to turn Israel upside down, to pour out lavish 'blessings' on all who now turn to him and accept the new thing he is doing." The point is to announce God's "new covenant."

So, *when*, one might ask, do the promises inherent in the covenant come true? Christians often answer that the promises come true *in heaven, after death*. And indeed several verses here seem to say that there will be a great reward in heaven for those who suffer persecution for Jesus' sake. But it is a misunderstanding of the meaning of "heaven" to limit one's understanding to this level. "Heaven is God's space, where full reality exists, close by our ordinary (earthly) reality and interlocking with it. One day heaven and earth will be joined together forever, and the true state of affairs, at present out of sight, will be unveiled. We see this in the saying that the meek will inherit the earth which could not happen "in a disembodied (existence in) heaven after death."

Sometimes it is helpful to re-phrase in order to capture more accurately what Jesus appears to be doing through his teaching moments. Here, we could say that the Beatitudes are "a series of illustrations, or 'for examples,' or 'case studies' of life in God's empire, visions of identity and way of life that result from encountering God's present and future reign." Each of the Gospels was composed for a particular audience. In the case of Matthew, we are certainly dealing with a minority group, a "marginal community of disciples of Jesus" at least a half-century after the events depicted in the New Testament accounts of the life of Jesus.

The words of Jesus could have been expected to strengthen that community's identity "as a small community in a dominant culture" that did not "share that culture's fundamental convictions." This is because the community would have been reminded in this teaching "that the interactions with God, with one another, and with the surrounding society" were "important aspects of their existence which embrace(d) 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."

The term "blessedness" in English does not fully convey the fact that the beatitudes "concern not just emotions (as in the misleading "happy are" expression), not just personal qualities, but primarily God's favor for certain human actions and situations." In an honor-shame society, a good translation might be "how honorable..." or "how full of honor..." and the like would be appropriate. Also, the counter to "beatitude" are "woes" or reproaches such as in the formula "woe to the scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites...." which should be translated: "how shameless you are...."

In Matthew's gospel, the author presents Jesus as the new Moses for the people of Israel. That is, he is portrayed as being very similar to Moses in his role within the Jewish tradition. For example, just as Moses goes up to a mountain to receive the Law, Jesus goes up a mountain to give a new Law in the Beatitudes as part of a larger Sermon on the Mount. The same is true of contrasts which the author uses for the same purpose. Here, by comparison with Moses' series of prohibitions in the Ten

Commandments (“thou shalt not....”), Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount with “messages of comfort, what was called in antiquity a *consolatio* (as mentioned earlier), an address to those afflicted, neglected, or persecuted.” (“happy – or blessed -- the poor, happy the sad, happy those who hunger and thirst to see the right prevail”). “And these are all paradoxes. They turn expectations and normal values upside down.” Although this overall message is found throughout the four gospels, here there is a “concentration of the ethical topsy-turvydom of Jesus’ Revelation” in which the author takes the paradoxes one at a time, lending emphasis not found elsewhere in the New Testament.

Whereas the Greek says “*the poor in spirit*,” Jesus is saying that the mere physical condition of poverty is *not* the blessed state. He refers, rather, to those who accept poverty in their own mind as a state that does not make them envious or the rich or rebellious against providence.” The expression “happy or blessed the sad” refers not to mere physical affliction or loss...but a spiritual state, “a grieving for spiritual reasons.” Happy or blessed are the meek (or those who yield) refers not to those unable to be assertive but rather to “those who could be aggressive but who refuse to be.” In one sense, “as a teacher of nonviolence, Jesus goes beyond Tolstoy, Gandhi, Thoreau, and Dr. King” (“but I tell you, *oppose not* one wronging you. Rather, when one punches your right cheek, offer him the other” and “but I tell you, you will love those opposed to you, and pray for those who persecute you”).

“Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?...These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.”

Almighty God, give us grace to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living, that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared for those who truly love you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Sources

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