

THE WAY OF JESUS IN THE BEATITUDES: MATT. 5:1-11

‘What if what you do to survive kills the things you love, fear’s a powerful thing...’

(Devils & Dust, Bruce Springsteen)

The Maze

The ‘perennial popularity’ of the Sermon on the Mount, both within and beyond the Church, has ensured its subjection (particularly that of the beatitudes contained within it) to unparalleled variations of interpretation.¹ One can lose their way in unresolved questions: To whom was Jesus primarily speaking, the disciples or the crowds? Are His proclamations a radical break from tradition, or do they reveal the heart of the Torah? Is Jesus proclaiming entry requirements for the Kingdom, or describing the true nature of one already in it? Is this a blueprint for humanity, or is He just addressing ‘mature Christians’?

The Guide

As a guide through this maze I have in front of me a painting I made by ‘mistake’ a few years ago (see Appendix 1). It is of a woman, looking down and full of sorrow. For me, she manifests the first three beatitudes: she knows she is poor in spirit, mourns that state, and, therefore, can not help but be meek. The remaining five then tumble in to place on the back of these: she knows she is empty, so she longs to be filled with that which truly satisfies, and it is this fullness, in turn, which empowers her to live a generous, merciful life, pure of heart, making peace and able to rejoice (or at least to know herself ‘blessed’) in persecution.² Keeping the first three in mind at all times, she does not have recourse to self-congratulation for her behaviour, making these three ‘attitudinal’ beatitudes, for me, foundational (if only it were that easy!). It

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *“The Most Often Abused Verses in the Sermon on the Mount: and How to Treat them Right.”* Southwestern Journal of Theology 46, No.3, (2004): 1-17, p.2.

² Most commentators (John Chrysostom, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Charles Price and John Stott to name four) agree that the ordering of the Beatitudes is significant.

is, however, the making of this image that interests me most. I covered a page in black paint and then, with swift swipes of a small sponge, removed the paint until an image emerged. As Springsteen says, we cover our selves in layers of protection in order to be 'safe': we need to be strong, rich, 'happy', satisfied, assertive and respected: in essence self-sufficient. Yet, ironically, this self-sufficiency obscures, even destroys, the thing we value most: love. Jesus's beatitudes are like eight confident swipes with a sponge full of paint stripper: agony. However, as we see the image emerge, we develop a hunger for more: more of the Real. He says 'whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it,' (Matt 16:25) and it is in line with this consistent message of Jesus's teaching that The Beatitudes must be read.

The Structure

In 'Devils & Dust' Springsteen is referring to the 2003 invasion of Iraq and man, self-defeatingly, choosing violence to protect himself, which would point to the seventh beatitude: we are to be 'peacemakers' (Matt 5:9). I am using it, however, as an indication of 'fear' being the opposite of each of the eight beatitudes (I am assuming that verse 11 is a repetition of verse 10, rather than a ninth beatitude). Having voiced my 'heart' response above (which could be understood as the text's word, or 'kerygma', to *me, now*), I will go on to look at the meaning of 'makarios', the word Matthew chooses to start each proclamation. I then will take an historical and canonical look at the passage. Such an approach, I believe, reveals that Jesus is primarily, as N.T Wright points out, 'challenging Israel to *be* Israel'.³ Augustine believed that The Beatitudes could only be understood retrospectively, through 'the prism of the church's faith'.⁴ I am in agreement with the 'critical realists', however, that 'careful attention' to the literary, canonical and historical context can successfully un-veil, or at least 'approximate' the meaning of this text.⁵ It quickly becomes evident that such an approach provides resonant responses to the 'maze' of questions at the start of this essay (which I will return to in conclusion). I will suggest that such an approach voices a distinct message to humanity at large, through the ages, all the richer for its initial, apparent, exclusivity.

³ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (London: SPCK, 1996), 288.

⁴ Robert L. Wilken, "Augustine," in *The Sermon on the Mount Through the Ages* (ed. J. P. Greenman, T. Larsen, and S. R. Spencer; Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 43-58, p.46.

⁵ Blomberg, "Sermon on the Mount," 3.

The Word

'Makarios' (μακάριος) is the word used at the start of each of the beatitudes and appears in total 50 times through the New Testament. It is almost exclusively translated 'blessed', but has the meaning of 'happy' or 'to be envied',⁶ as opposed to 'eulogia' (εὐλογία), which is the more formalized priestly blessing. 'Makarios' is a longer form of the poetical 'makar', the root of which is 'mak', meaning 'to extend or become long', which gives 'makarios' the sense of God's extended benefits or grace.⁷ It is often connected with the word 'pistis' (πίστις), meaning 'faith' (for example Rom 4: 5-7) and both have a sense of *positioning* about them: man positioning himself to receive God's grace and eternal benefits.⁸ 'Makarios' appears 39 times in the Septuagint and often refers to happiness in a worldly sense: the promise of worldly goods and a long life resulting from right living. Outside of the Bible, it appears at various points in ancient Greek literature, including that of Plato and Aristotle, and invariably refers to the state of gods who have achieved happiness, or the dead, who have reached the world of the gods.⁹ Those reading the Bible with a classical education would read 'makarios' as almost interchangeable with Aristotle's concept of 'eudemonia', which is best translated as 'human flourishing'. Aristotle believed that 'we achieve happiness as a sort of free bonus to our ethical fulfillment',¹⁰ which sounds similar to the use of 'makarios' in the Septuagint.¹¹

The Mountain

Chrysostom asked of The Beatitudes, 'From where does Jesus begin?'¹² which I think is an ideal starting point. He begins by, like Moses, walking up a mountain.

⁶ Strong's Concordance: 3107, accessed through <<http://biblesuite.com/greek/3107.htm>>

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ G. Kittel (ed), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006).

¹⁰ Jules Evans, *Philosophy for Life: And Other Dangerous Situations*, (London: Rider Books, 2012), 213

¹¹ For example Psalm 1, which starts 'Blessed (makarios) is the man...' who conforms to various behaviors for, we are told at the end of verse 3, 'whatever he does shall prosper'.

¹² John Chrysostom, quoted in Margaret M. Mitchell "John Chrysostom", in J. P. Greenman et al., eds, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 26.

¹² Blomberg, "Sermon on the Mount," 3.

Familiar: In Exodus 24, God tells Moses to ‘Come up’ to Him on the mountain, bringing ‘Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel’ (Ex 24:1). The ‘people’ must, however, stay at the bottom of the mountain. In verse 11, Moses and the Elders see God and survive, after which Moses and Joshua separate themselves from the group, going further up the mountain to spend time with God, creating three tiers of people: Moses, Joshua and God at the top, the Elders half way up the mountain, and the people at the bottom (who are not allowed so much as to step one foot on the mountain).

Radically New: In Matthew 5, every one goes up the mountain, and there are only two tiers: the disciples, who go to Him once He is seated, and the ‘multitudes’ (Matt 5:1) who, presumably, are right behind the disciples, pressing in to hear. No external divisions are needed. There is no mention of the people being ‘sprinkled’ as they are in Exodus 24. If this parallel with Exodus is valid, then Jesus is dramatically positioning Himself as God, with the disciples as Moses and Joshua, with direct access to Him, and the ‘multitudes’ as the seventy Elders who are able to see God and not perish. We have all had an upgrade! In Exodus 24, the Israelites witness the ‘glory of the Lord’ as a ‘consuming fire on top of the mountain’ (Ex 24:17). In Matthew 5, the Israelites, and any others with them, see the man, Jesus. And yet, with the eyes of their *heart*, they will all be seeing different things. Just as is the case today, some will see the Lord, others a great prophet, others a madman, and others a blasphemer. This dramatic positioning brings to the forefront His later question to His disciples, ‘Who do you say I am?’ (Matt 16:15)¹³; but He poses it (through both his actions and his eight beatific proclamations) to *everyone* present and, through the text, to us, making The Beatitudes ‘not only ethical but messianic’.¹⁴ The focus has shifted from the external to the internal. Holiness, or, perhaps better, clean-ness (the ‘people’ in Exodus were ‘unclean’ so they would die if they saw God) has become a matter of the heart, rather than external effort, and access to God a possibility, more, an invitation, for *all*. And yet the majority of Jesus’s beatitudes require *action*, not just a clean heart; is He just creating a new set of laws through which to enter the Kingdom?

¹³ Blomberg, “*Sermon on the Mount*,” 17.

¹⁴ D. A. Carson quoted in Blomberg, “*Sermon on the Mount*,” 16

The Form

Neither Jesus nor Matthew (nor Luke for that matter, whose beatitudes I am aware of but not commenting on here) invented the form of the beatitude. It appears throughout Hebrew scripture¹⁵ and can be found in other Jewish literature. The use of Hebraic poetic parallelisms would also have been familiar to many in the crowd and would have indicated that these words were important to remember.¹⁶ The Hebrew beatitudes start with the word 'ashrei' (אשרי), translated 'makarios' in the Septuagint.¹⁷ Importantly, there are nuances to 'ashrei' that are missing from 'makarios' and, I believe, these nuances give us key insight to understanding Jesus's beatitudes. The verbal root of 'ashrei' is אשר, meaning to 'go straight'. Words stemming from this root contain a sense of movement, or advancement, involving journeying or taking a step.¹⁸ When the Hebrew prophets gave instruction on Godly behavior it was never in the form of 'lofty concepts'¹⁹ but, rather, involved specific steps towards a goal. McMahon points out that, for Israel, each of these steps was in the context of God's 'shepherding grace'; the steps were towards His Kingdom, where they would be blessed, but blessing was also experienced in each step taken; it was both means *and* end.²⁰ In light of this, Jesus's beatitudes are indeed commands, or rather invitations, to act (to choose to conform your behavior to what He tells us is real), but in the context of *alongside-ness*; we choose to walk towards Him (which always involves dying to self) surrounded by His presence, grace, and energizing Spirit. As His followers we do have a 'yoke', but it is meant to be 'easy' (Matt 11:30).²¹ In line with this, Bonhoeffer states that 'only the call and promise, for the sake of which they are ready to suffer poverty and renunciation, can justify the beatitudes'.²²

The Kingdom

¹⁵ For example 'Blessed are you, O land, when...' (Ecc 10:17), 'Happy are you, O Israel...' (Deut 33:29) and "Blessed is he whose..." (Ps 32:1).

¹⁶ Hebrew New Testament Studies, "The beatitudes unlocked by Hebrew parallelism, Matthew 5:3-10." <<http://www.biblicalhebrew.com/nt/beatitudes.htm>>.

¹⁷ 'Eulogia' was used to describe the more formalized, priestly 'barakh' (ברך).

¹⁸ Darrin M. McMahon, *Happiness: A History* (New York: Grove Press, 2006), 77

¹⁹ *ibid.*

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Blomberg, "Sermon on the Mount", 7.

²² Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (London: SCM Press, 2001), 60.

The imaginations of Jesus's audience in Matthew 5 would have been steeped in the 'call and promise' of the Kingdom, and 'it was in to this context of prolonged and lavish expectation that Jesus of Nazareth stepped'.²³ As such, the *means* to the Kingdom described in Jesus's beatitudes may have felt radically new and alarming (though each was already present in scripture), but the end to which they pointed would have been extremely familiar. Each one highlights a Kingdom promise: being consoled, inheriting the earth, being satisfied, being forgiven and taking their place as God's rightful children. In the first and last beatitudes He specifically mentions that 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 5: 3 and 10). By Kingdom, it would have been assumed Jesus meant physical and political power. Jesus, however, says that God's Kingdom belongs to the poor, or powerless. Israel was willing to fight for political consolation, but Jesus says consolation comes to those that mourn. They were prepared to 'inherit the earth' (Matt 5) through force, but Jesus says the earth belongs to the meek. And so he continues, taking the familiar promise, and turning it upside-down, or rather right-side-up.²⁴ According to N.T. Wright, The Beatitudes are neither a 'guide map to heaven' nor a manual on 'how to be good' but, rather, are a challenge to Israel to *be Israel*;²⁵ the *real* Israel who was called and anointed through the patriarchs as a light to the world, rather than the Israel she had become.²⁶

The Church

Jesus may have been primarily addressing those Israelites that had already chosen to follow Him: His disciples. So affecting was the love they encountered on meeting Jesus they immediately left their livelihoods to follow Him. If The Beatitudes were an appeal for Israel to re-discover its 'true vocation as the eschatological people of Yahweh' through the '*praxis* He was marking out for them',²⁷ Jesus could point to the lives of His disciples as a visible manifestation of that vocation. Would that it were the same today. Bonhoeffer longed for a 'theology of the Church' to be equivalent to a 'theology of God'.²⁸ The Way that Jesus calls us to, however, involves death: destroying self-sufficiency, choosing dependency, dying to ourselves. Unless in a

²³ McMahan, *Happiness*, 82

²⁴ N.T. Wright, "Jesus", 288.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ McMahan, *Happiness*, 94

²⁷ N.T. Wright, "Jesus", 289

²⁸ Bonhoeffer, "Discipleship"

state of persecution, the Church rarely calls us to die. In this failure, it, or we, have 'taken away the key of knowledge'; we have not entered in ourselves, and therefore 'those who were entering in' we hinder (Luk 11:52). The call to be 'the salt of the earth' (Matt 5:13) follows directly on from the Beatitudes. To become salty again, the Church must follow the way of The Beatitudes: acknowledge its poverty, mourn it's state, from such a position of humility long to be filled, and then behave as the remaining beatitudes dictate: eight agonizing swipes in exchange for making us Real. As Bonhoeffer says, such a call is 'costly because it costs a man his life, and it is grace because it gives a man the only true life'.²⁹

The World

The efficacy of The Beatitudes is inseparable from their implicit Messianic claim: without Me these are impossible. Speaking to Israel on the mountain, with a 'holographic' eye to the rest of us that, through history, would hear His words, Jesus both points the Way to the promise, and claims that He *is* the promise. Essentially He points at Himself, and His intention, in line with Isaiah 55, is to make us thirsty for that which truly satisfies: Him. Returning to the questions at the start of this essay, I believe that Jesus was not just speaking to His disciples, the crowds, or the Church through history but, rather, was capturing the attention of humanity at large. He was sharing with us the praxis *and* the person, which, together, are the Way to become real: fully human; 'all are called to what in the reality of God they are already'.³⁰ He was proclaiming the true nature of the Kingdom which breaks in every time we choose the Way. He was preaching a break with tradition but, in the case of both Israel and the Church, a tradition which itself had and has broken from its origins. The tradition of self-sufficiency is not propelling man to a glorious future. Reality evades our grasp the more we strive for it. Repentance is our key, which, in the Hebrew (T'shuvah) contains a sense of *return*. Jesus breaks from tradition by returning to the origin.³¹ He awakens Israel to the heart of the Torah. The Beatitudes are not just the heart of the Sermon on the Mount; they are the heart of God. Ontologically, The Beatitudes *are* Jesus.

²⁹ *ibid*, 5

³⁰ *ibid*, 60

³¹ I have found Leo Strauss's ideas about progress and return helpful in understanding the message of the Beatitudes.

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Appendix 1



'Makarios', oil on polished paper, 2010