

WHOM DOES GOD APPROVE? THE CONTEXT, STRUCTURE, PURPOSE, AND EXEGESIS OF MATTHEW'S BEATITUDES

DAVID L. TURNER
Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary
Grand Rapids, MI 49505

Introduction

Whom does God approve? I suspect that Jesus' answer to this question goes against the flow of American evangelical "pop theology." For instance, in certain evangelical circles it seems to be assumed that widespread popularity is tantamount to divine approval. But the Sermon on the Mount (hereafter SoM) indicates otherwise, teaching that those whom God approves may be a persecuted minority (5:10-12; 7:13-14). In other evangelical contexts one gathers that attention to human rules and traditions insures God's blessing, but Jesus' denunciation of pharisaic externalism applies equally well to evangelical legalism (5:20). Elsewhere the focus is on material possessions as proof of divine endorsement, but Jesus strictly prohibits that sort of priority in values (6:19-21, 33). Another current teaching sees divine approval in extraordinary displays of power, but Jesus' chilling words about what might eventuate on judgment day refutes this notion (7:22-23). And there are those today whose emphasis on spiritual knowledge implies that God must inevitably congratulate those who have memorized the most Bible verses. But knowledge alone is a foundation of sand if it does not lead to ethical obedience (7:26-27).

No--being popular, keeping the rules, having possessions, doing miracles, and acquiring knowledge are not necessarily marks of God's approval. According to Jesus, God approves those who turn to Him when they hear the message of His rule (Matt 3:2; 4:17; 10:7; 13:19; 24:14). Their turning is marked by the character traits summarized by Jesus in

the beatitudes, Matthew 5:3-12. These character traits are gracious gifts which result from God's approval (cf. Matt 11:25-27; 13:11; 16:17), not requirements for performance which merits God's approval. However, those who have repented should cultivate these characteristics (cf. Matt 11:28-29; 13:23; 16:24). Each beatitude contains a pronouncement concerning who is blessed backed up by a promise concerning why they are blessed. The qualities which God does approve are explained in two sets of four, describing relating to God and relating to other people respectively (cf. Matt 22:37-40). He approves those who relate to Him by, admitting their spiritual poverty and mourning over their sin, humbly seeking spiritual fulness (5:3-6). He approves those who relate to others mercifully and purely as peacemakers, even though they may be persecuted for their righteous behavior (5:7-10).

Such is the argument of this study in brief. It is developed by addressing the context, structure, purpose, and exegesis of the beatitudes. But before these main issues can be developed three preliminary matters--the complexity, historicity, and familiarity of the beatitudes--call for brief comments. .

An immense amount of scholarly material has been written on the SoM in general and on the beatitudes in particular. Harrington does not exaggerate when he says, "The history of the sermon's interpretation is a miniature history of Christianity."¹ Kissinger's bibliography of materials on the SoM published by 1975 ran to nearly 150 pages, and over thirty pages of this bibliography are devoted to the beatitudes.² A computerized data base I recently consulted listed 90

¹ D. J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Sacra Pagina vol. 1 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991) 76.

² W. S. Kissinger, *The Sermon on the Mount: A History of Interpretation and Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow/ATLA, 1975) 128-275. Among more notable studies of the beatitudes are I. W. Batdorf, *Interpreting the Beatitudes* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966); M. Black, "The Beatitudes," *ExpTim* 129(1953) 125-26; J. W. Bowman, "Travelling the Christian Way: The Beatitudes," *RevExp* 54 (1957) 377-92; G. W. Buchanan, "Matthaean Beatitudes and Traditional Promises," in *New Synoptic Studies*, ed. W. R. Farmer (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1983) 161-84; C. H. Dodd, "The Beatitudes: A Form-critical Study," in *More New Testament Studies* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 1-10; J. Dupont, *Les Beatitudes*, 2d ed., 3 vols. (Paris: Gabalda, 1969, 1973); D. Flusser, "Some Notes on the Beatitudes," *Immanuel* 8 (1978) 37-47; V. C. Grounds, "Mountain Manifesto," *BSac* 128 (1971) 135-41; R. A. Guelich, "The Matthaean Beatitudes: 'Entrance-Requirements' or Eschatological Blessings?" *JBL* 95 (1976) 415-34; G. L. Lawlor, *The Beatitudes are for Today* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974); N. J. McEleney, "The Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount/Plain," *CBQ* 43 (1981) 1-13; B. M. Newman, "Some Translational Notes on the Beatitudes," *BT* 26 (1975) 106-20; and C. M. Tuckett, "The Beatitudes: A Source-Critical Study," *NovT* 25 (1983) 192-207. Tuckett's study is followed by a response by M. D. Goulder, 208-16.

additional studies of the beatitudes published since 1975. The profundity of the beatitudes and the plethora of discussions means that this study can only introduce the complex issues at hand.

One of these complex matters is historicity. The SoM does not appear as such in Mark and appears only partially in Luke (6:17-7:1). Luke 6:20-24 contains four beatitudes which more or less parallel some of Matthew's nine beatitudes, with the notable exception that Luke's version is second person and Matthew's version is third person (except for 5:11).³ Several theories exist to explain this aspect of the synoptic problem. Many believe that Matthew has created the SoM from traditions, documentary sources, and his own ingenuity, so that the SoM should not be attributed to the historical Jesus.⁴ Evangelicals have properly rejected this dehistoricizing approach⁵ and have generally opted for one of the two following viewpoints. One is that Matthew has created the structure of the SoM by collating various teachings of the historical Jesus which were originally uttered in various contexts.⁶ The other is that Matthew accurately records the "gist" (*ipsissima vox*) of a historical sermon which Jesus actually uttered on a mountain, so that the structure of the SoM is dominical, not redactional.⁷ The latter view will be assumed in the present study. The tradition history of the beatitudes is generally viewed today from the perspective that Matthew has redacted Luke or the traditions used by Luke. Whatever the merit of this approach, the present study will take a literary critical slant, focusing on Matthew's narrative as a whole and the beatitudes as a part of it.

But another matter is more serious than complexity and even historicity. It is the familiarity of the beatitudes:

The most dangerous passages of the Bible are the familiar ones, because we do not really listen to them. The sharp stone of God's word,

³ The first beatitudes in both Matthew and Luke (Matt 5:3/Luke 6:20) are parallel passages. Luke's second beatitude parallels Matthew's fourth (Matt 5:6/Luke 6:21a). Luke's third beatitude (6:21b) has no direct parallel in Matthew, though Luke's οἱ κλαίοντες . . . γελάσετε is similar to Matthew's second beatitude (5:4) which has οἱ πενθοῦντες . . . παρακληθήσονται. Luke's fourth and final beatitude is parallel to Matthew's ninth (Matt 5:11-12/Luke 6:22-23). Luke's four woes (6:24-26) which follow the four beatitudes have no parallel in Matthew 5, though the woes present antithetical situations to some of the beatitudes.

⁴ E.g. F. W. Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (New York: Harper, 1981) 125.

⁵ See in particular C. Blomberg, *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1987) especially 138-46.

⁶ E.g. R A Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982) 33-36, 112-18.

⁷ E.g. D. A Carson, "Matthew," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 8.122-26.

smoothed down by the river of time, no longer cuts. Instead of being challenged by hard thought or hard choices, we lean back and savor pretty words. . . spiritual bonbons.⁸

When reflecting on the beatitudes, one runs the risk of missing the impact of their radical message because of their commonplace occurrence and pretty packaging. In this manner dominical beatitudes can become hackneyed cliches. Shaking the beatitudinal kaleidoscope⁹ yet one more time in this study must lead beyond mere visual and intellectual gratification to a realignment of our fundamental values with those of Jesus.¹⁰

Context

After his unique story of Jesus' infancy (1-2), Matthew develops the body of his gospel as five blocks of Narrative/Discourse material (3-7, 8-10, 11-13, 14-18, 19-25) and concludes with Jesus' death, resurrection, and mission mandate (26-28).¹¹ The narratives focus on Jesus' works, the discourses on his words. The five sections of Jesus' works and words are divided by the key phrase *καὶ ἐγένετο ὅτε ἐτέλεσεν ὁ Ἰησοῦς* . . . ("and it came about when Jesus had finished. . ."; 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19:1; 26:1). The discourse which has been called the SoM since the time of Augustine (Matt 5-7) should be seen as the representative ethical teaching of Jesus. It unpacks the summary statement of 4:23 which presents a words/works complex. Thus 4:23 and the similar summary in 9:35 provide an inclusio, which envelops or Jesus' ministry of teaching (5-7) and doing miracles (8-9). Both the words and the works demonstrate the authority of the Kingdom of Heaven (7:28-29; 8:8-9; 9:6-8).

The SoM is summarized and displayed in Chart One as follows.

⁸ J. P. Meier, "Matthew 5:3-12," *Int* 44 (1990) 281-85.

⁹ This phrase is suggested by McEleney, "The Beatitudes," 13.

¹⁰ For challenging expositions built on careful exegesis see F. D. Bruner, *The Christbook* (Waco: Word, 1987) 133-59; D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978) 16-29; D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 32-148; and J. R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture* (Downers Grove, IL.; InterVarsity, 1978) 30-56.

¹¹ This approach to Matthew is often connected with B. W. Bacon, *Studies in Matthew* (London: Constable, 1930). It is favored by many today, including Carson, "Matthew," 50-57 and J. P. Meier, *Matthew* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1980). For a rival approach, see J. D. Kingsbury, *Matthew: Structure, Christology, Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 1-39; and D. R. Bauer, *The Structure of Matthew's Gospel* JSNTSS 31 (Sheffield: Almond, 1988) 73-108.

Chart One:
Display and Summary of the SoM

Introductory narrative framework (5:1-2): Jesus is prompted to teach by the crowds and his disciples gather around him to hear his teaching.

Introduction to the sermon: Beatitudes (5:3-16); The beatitudes describe the divinely approved lifestyle of those who have repented at the arrival of the rule of God in Jesus' words and works.

Body (5:17-7:12): Jesus announces (5:17-20) and then explains, his / and his disciples' relationship to the law with six contrasts (5:21-48). / Then he turns to hypocritical versus genuine religious practice (6:1-18), / materialism and anxiety (6:19-34), and relating to people (7:1-12).

The reference to the law (7:12) provides another enveloping *inclusio* which completes the theme of obeying the law and prophets which began in 5:17.

Conclusion (7:13-27): Here three contrasts challenge the listeners to make the correct response to the teaching. They are to take the narrow way (13-14), to avoid fruitless false prophets (15-23), and to build their lives on the words they have heard (24-27). Are their lives marked by the traits of the beatitudes? Do they view the law and the prophets as Jesus does?

Concluding narrative framework (7:28-29): The crowds are amazed at Jesus' authoritative teaching.

Literary Structure

Each of the beatitudes is composed of a statement of who is blessed ("blessed are the poor in spirit. . .") followed by a statement of why the person is blessed ("for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"). First the character of the blessed person is highlighted, and then the promise of God to that person is explained. Altogether there are nine beatitudes (5:3-12), the ninth (5:11-12) being an expansion of the eighth. The first eight beatitudes may be divided into two groups of four, with the first group emphasizing the disciple's vertical relationship to God, the second emphasizing the disciple's horizontal relationship to

people.¹² The beatitudes may be displayed chiastically and summarized as follows:

Chart Two
Display and Summary of the Beatitudes .

- 5:3 Poor in spirit blessed because theirs is the kingdom of heaven
 5:4 Mourners blessed because they will be comforted
 5:5 Meek blessed because they will inherit the earth
 5:6 Hungry blessed because they will be filled
 5:7 Merciful blessed because they will be mercied
 5:8 Pure blessed because they will see God
 5:9 Peacemakers blessed because they will be called sons of God
 5:10 Persecuted blessed because theirs is the kingdom of heaven¹³

This chiastic layout of the beatitudes is indicated by several factors. First there is the enveloping present tense *inclusio* αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν in 5:3, 10. The similar future divine passives παρακληθήσονται and κληθήσονται occur in 5:4, 9. A future active verb with direct object occurs in 5:5 (αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσιν τὴν γῆν), answered by the future middle verb with direct object in 5:8 (αὐτοὶ τὸν θεὸν ὄψονται). In the center of the chiasm, 5:6-7 both utilize future divine passives (αὐτοὶ χορτασθήσονται . . . αὐτοὶ ἐλεηθήσονται). It may also be noted that the both halves of the chiasmus conclude with the concept of righteousness (5:6, 10), and that there is alliteration with the letter π in Matthew's description of the blessed in the first half (πτωχοὶ . . . πενθοῦντες . . . πραεῖς . . . πεινῶντες; 5:3-6). Thus the enveloping idea of the blessedness of presently possessing of the kingdom (5:3, 10) is developed primarily by stressing what God's gracious initiative will do for disciples (future divine passives; 5:4, 6, 7, 9), and secondarily by mentioning what disciples will do in response to that initiative (future active and middle; 5:5, 8).

¹² Another approach, alluding to Matthew's penchant for triads, posits three sets of three beatitudes. For this see W. D. Davies and D. C. Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC (Edinburgh: Clark, 1988) 1.429-31.

¹³ The inverted parallelism or chiasm shown here is adapted from McEleney, "The Beatitudes," 12.

The Greek text of Matthew 5:3-12 may be laid out similarly. In Chart Three the chiasmic structure and the supporting ὅτι clauses are prominent. Also the elaboration of the eighth beatitude (5:10) by 5:11-12 is clarified.

Chart Three
Display of Matthew 5:3-12

- 3 Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι,
ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.
- 4 μακάριοι οἱ πενθοῦντες,
ὅτι αὐτοὶ παρακληθήσονται.
- 5 μακάριοι οἱ πραεῖς,
ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσιν τὴν γην.
- 6 μακάριοι οἱ πεινῶντες καὶ διψῶντες τὴν δικαιοσύνην,
ὅτι αὐτοὶ χορτασθήσονται
- 7 μακάριοι οἱ ἐλεήμονες,
ὅτι αὐτοὶ ἐλεηθήσονται.
- 8 μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ,
ὅτι αὐτοὶ τὸν θεὸν ὄψονται.
- 9 μακρῖοι οἱ εἰρηνοποιοί,
ὅτι αὐτοὶ υἱοὶ θεοῦ κληθήσονται.
- 10 μακάριοι οἱ δεδιωγμένοι ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης,
ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν.
- 11 μακάριοί ἐστε
ὅταν ὀνειδίσωσιν ὑμᾶς
καὶ διώξωσιν
καὶ εἴπωσιν πᾶν πονηρὸν καθ' ὑμῶν [ψευδόμενοι]
ἕνεκεν ἐμοῦ.
- 12 χαίrete καὶ ἀγαλλιᾶσθε,
ὅτι ὁ μισθὸς ὑμῶν πολὺς ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς·
οὕτως γὰρ ἐδίωξαν τοὺς προφήτας τοὺς πρὸ
ὑμῶν.

Theological Purpose

The theological purpose of the beatitudes cannot be understood apart from the theological purpose of the SoM as a whole, and there are many divergent approaches to this.¹⁴ Albert Schweitzer's *konsequente Eschatologie* approach saw the SoM as an interim ethic designed only for what Jesus mistakenly believed would be the brief time before the inbreaking of the apocalyptic judgment. Needless to say, evangelicals find little common ground with a view which posits a mistaken Jesus. Lutheranism tends to take the SoM as a teaching of the high standards of the law which is intended to drive the audience to the gospel. Traditional dispensationalism similarly tends to view the SoM as law, not grace, but postpones its primary applicability to the future millennium. But many dispensationalists today are not disposed to the traditional approach.¹⁵ Classic liberal theology took the SoM as a bulwark of the “social gospel” of human kindness and progress and in the process drastically overestimated human ability to live by the SoM apart from divine grace. The anabaptist tradition somewhat simplistically absolutizes the SoM as the standard of ethics for all times and places. Though the above views contain elements of truth, it seems much better to view the SoM in general and the beatitudes in particular as an ethic for disciples who live between the two advents of Jesus the Messiah. The disciples' character traits are the result of the saving rule of God inaugurated through the kingdom message preached at Jesus' first advent. The disciples long for the full manifestation of that saving rule in the future (cf. 6:10).

The theological purpose of the SoM in general and of the beatitudes in particular centers in the kingdom of heaven. The phrase ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν occurs in 5:3, 10, 19, 20; 7:21. The word kingdom also occurs in 6:10, 13 (text?), 33.¹⁶ At least three major theological issues surround the kingdom of heaven. The first of these is the relationship of Matthew's characteristic term “kingdom of heaven” to the kingdom of God. Though some have attempted to make a distinction here,¹⁷ none is warranted. This is clear from a comparison of the king-

¹⁴ H. K. McArthur lists 12 views in *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (New York: Harper, 1960). Cf. Kissinger's discussion of the history of interpretation in *The SoM*, 1-125.

¹⁵ Cf. J. A. Martin, “Dispensational Approaches to the Sermon on the Mount,” in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. S. D. Toussaint and C. H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody, 1985) 35-48.

¹⁶ Carson is certainly correct in “Matthew,” 127, that it is not how many times kingdom” occurs but where it occurs that matters.

¹⁷ Traditional dispensationalists have often done this. E.g., J. F. Walvoord, *Matthew: Thy Kingdom Come* (Chicago: Moody, 1974) 30. M. Pamment attempts to prove a

dom of heaven in Matthew with the kingdom of God in parallel passages in the synoptic gospels (e.g. Matt 5:3; Luke 6:20). Apparently Matthew uses the term as a metonymy of God's dwelling place for God's name, due to the sensitivity of his audience.¹⁸

Another question concerns whether the kingdom is God's present rule and/or God's future realm. Here the answer is certainly conjunctive rather than disjunctive. To handle all the data adequately¹⁹ one cannot resort to simplistic theories which identify the kingdom either with the future millennium or with the present church. Both traditional dispensational theology and traditional covenant theology need to nuance their respective positions along the lines suggested by George Ladd and others.²⁰

A third question about the kingdom of heaven is its relationship to the church. Traditional dispensationalism's tendency has been to separate the two and traditional covenant theology's to equate them. Neither of these positions will do in view of the data in Matthew, especially 16:18-19. Again Ladd's articulation is a beneficial place to begin discussion of a more nuanced position.²¹

Now the question of how all of this impacts the interpretation of the beatitudes must be considered. The first and eighth beatitudes contain the same enveloping promise, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν ("theirs is the kingdom of heaven). Just how significant is the fact that the verb is present tense? Scholars as diverse as Beasley-Murray and Toussaint attempt to minimize any emphasis on the presence of the kingdom here. Beasley-Murray argues from the future orientation of the context²² and Toussaint views the present tense as futuristic or proleptic.²³

distinction for other reasons in "The Kingdom of God According to the First Gospel," *NTS* 27 (1980-81) 211-32.

¹⁸ Perhaps this is based on such OT passages as 1 Kgs 8:12, 23, 27, 30, 32, 34, 36, 39, 43, 45, 49; Dan 2:28, 37, 44; 4:26, 35, 37; 5:23; 6:27; 7:2, 13, 27. Cf. Matt 6:9, 10, 20; 7:11; 21:25; Mark 11:30; Luke 15:18, 21.

¹⁹ The presence of the kingdom is emphasized in texts like Matt 3:2, 4:17; 5:3, 10; 6:33; 12:28, 16:19; 23:13 and its future in texts like 13:41; 25:34.

²⁰ G. E. Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 122-48.

²¹ Ladd, *Presence*, 262-77. Ladd argues that the church is not the kingdom, the kingdom creates the church, the church witnesses to the kingdom as its instrument and custodian.

²² G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids/Exeter: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1986) 162. In dialogue with C. L. Blomberg recently, Beasley-Murray reaffirmed this position. See his study "The Kingdom of God in The Teaching of Jesus," *JETS* 35 (1992) 19-30. This is followed by Blomberg's response (31-36, see especially 34) and Beasley-Murray's comments on the response (37-38).

²³ S. D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1980) 96-97; and "The Kingdom and Matthew's Gospel," in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed. S. D. Toussaint and C. H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody, 1986) 25.

However, one wonders why a futuristic present would be used since the context is already dominated by the future tenses. More than this, the whole thrust of the beatitudes is upon the present blessedness of the disciples, and this blessedness is rather hollow if their actual experience of this blessings is postponed until millennial times. Therefore it is better to take the present tense as a simple statement of the disciples' present experience of the kingdom. Granted, their present experience of the kingdom is partial, but it is genuine. Granted, the disciples' hope is primarily in the future eschaton, but they have already experienced its saving power.²⁴ God has already begun His eschatological work of blessing those who acknowledge their spiritual bankruptcy and hunger for spiritual fulness. In the eschaton they will be filled full.

In all this it becomes clear that the beatitudes are primarily the eschatological blessings of the kingdom, not requirements for entrance into the kingdom.²⁵ One should not view the beatitudes as God's challenge for disciples to perform up to a certain standard in order to earn His approval. That would lead either to hopeless despair or to self-congratulation and spiritual pride, qualities which are antithetical to the character traits which are blessed. Instead one must view these character traits as visible fruit of the work of God through the dynamic of the good news of God's saving rule. Beatitudes are not imperatives, though they implicitly call upon those blessed by God's gracious initiative to cultivate the character traits which have become theirs by God's grace. This is not unlike the more explicit "be what you are" pattern often noted in Pauline ethical teaching (e.g., Eph 4:20-5:2; Col 3:1-4). With this theological perspective in mind, it is now time to examine the individual beatitudes.

Exegetical Comments

Foundational to the exegesis of the beatitudes is the meaning of μακάριος, "blessed." The word "beatitudes" is related to the Latin *beatus*, "happy." Sometimes the beatitudes are called "macarisms," based on μακάριος. In the LXX μακάριος; often translates אֲשֶׁר־אֵין, an emphatic exclamation meaning "oh the happinesses of " Beatitudes have their background in both wisdom and apocalyptic literature and are found regularly in the Bible (e.g., Ps 1:1; 32:1; Prov 3:13; Dan 12:12; Rom

²⁴ This position is favored by Carson, "Matthew," 132; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:446; Guelich, *Sermon*, 76; Ladd, *Presence*, 206-7; and H. N. Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, trans H. de Jongste (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962) 78.

²⁵ This is the thesis of R A Guelich, "The Matthean Beatitudes: 'Entrance-Requirements' or Eschatological Blessings?" *JBL* 95 (1976) 415-34.

14:22; Rev 1:3).²⁶ To be blessed is to receive God's approval, favor, endorsement, congratulations. "Blessed" should not be understood merely in the sense of "happy," since happiness is a vague idea often with a shallow, emotional ring to it. No doubt divine blessing produces deep joy and genuine happiness in its human recipients, but the focus is on the originator of the blessing. God initiates blessing by graciously condescending to save His people. His people respond to His initiative by blessing Him in thanks and praise for that grace and by living obediently.

As noted in the discussion of literary structure, the beatitudes are best viewed as two sets of four (5:3-6; 5:7-10), plus an expansion of the final one (5:11-12). Evidently 5:13-16 is meant to show that those who manifest the character traits of the beatitudes will impact their world as salt and light. The first set (1.1-4 below) seems to describe those qualities which assure one of approval in relating to God (awareness of spiritual poverty, mourning over sin, humility, desire for deeper experience of righteousness). The second set (2.1-4 below) describes the qualities which assure one of divine approval in relating to people (extending mercy, internal integrity, making peace, and enduring persecution).

1.1 "Blessed are the poor in spirit,"²⁷ for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:3). God's approval does not come to those who boast of their spiritual riches. Rather his endorsement is for those who admit their poverty. In the Old Testament there is repeated reference to the עֲנָוִים people whose economic distress left them with nothing to rely upon except God (Lev 19:9-15, 32-33; Deut 15:4, 7, 11; Ps 37:10-17; Prov 16:18-19; Isa 66:1-2; Jer 22:15-17; Amos 2:6-8). Their distress was due to such problems as death in the family, physical handicap, advancing age, military defeat, social injustice, or alien status. This seems to be the OT background of Jesus' words, but spiritual poverty should be acknowledged by everyone, not just those who have adverse circumstances. Material prosperity should not deaden one's sensitivity to spiritual poverty. Those who realize that they have nothing spiritually are the only ones who really have anything.

1.2 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted" (5:4). Here Jesus indicates that those who mourn receive God's approval. People mourn over such things as disasters, injustice, unbelief, and persecution. But here the context indicates mourning over one's

²⁶ For helpful overviews of the nature of beatitudes see Allison and Davies, *Matthew*, 1.431-42; Guelich, *SoM*, 63-66.

²⁷ The distinction between Luke's simple οἱ πτωχοὶ (6:20) and Matthew's οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι has been exaggerated. See Carson, "Matthew," 136-37; Guelich, *SoM*, 75; and G. T. Meadors, "The 'Poor' in the Beatitudes of Matthew and Luke," *GTJ* 6 (1985) 305-14.

own sinfulness, whether in thoughts or actions, omissions or commissions. So this beatitude fits with the testimony of such great saints as Isaiah (Isaiah 6) and Job (Job 42). At first this may sound like some sort of cruel, sadistic joke, appealing only to masochistic types. It is as if Jesus is saying that those who are unhappy are happy. But in reality Jesus is exposing the error of superficial, self-centered living. Genuine realism, not false optimism, is true bliss for the follower of Jesus, for it will lead to ultimate comfort.

1.3 "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth" (5:5). "Meekness is not weakness," so goes the cliché. But true meekness is an unassuming humility which places total dependence upon God and renounces self effort to achieve one's wants and needs. It is this kind of person who will inherit the earth (see also 19:28-29; 25:34). Once again Jesus goes against the grain of human pride and modern culture by asserting that the meek, not the yuppies, the militarists, the financial tycoons, or the holier-than-thou types, will inherit the earth.

1.4 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (5:6). God approves those who long for right relationship with him, not those who mistakenly think they have already achieved it. Righteousness here should not be viewed in the Pauline sense (Rom 5:1-2, etc.) of legal innocence before God based on faith in Jesus' vicarious sacrifice. Rather the emphasis is on ethical rightness, the upright lifestyle (see also 1:19; 3:15; 5:10, 20, 45; 6:1, 33).²⁸ Those who realize their lack in this area rather than those who boast of their attainments will receive what they long for. We should think here not only of personal righteousness but also of social righteousness.

2.1 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (5:7). God's approval comes to those who relate to others with pity plus action. While grace pardons the guilty, mercy relieves the miserable. Matthew repeatedly stresses that the theme of mercy is important for the disciple of Jesus (6:2; 9:27, 36; 15:22; 17:15; 20:30). In contrast, mercy is not present where isolationism (9:13), legalism (12:7), and trivialism (23:23) are the rules of life (cf. Hos 6:6; Mic 6:8). Those who have experienced God's mercy will show it to others (cf. Matt 18:21-35), and thus demonstrate their destiny as those who will yet receive mercy at the last day.

2.2 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (5:8). Purity of heart involves integrity, transparency, and freedom from corruption. It is crucial to note that the purity which God approves is heart purity. The Pharisees were models of an external, rule-oriented

²⁸ cr. B. Przybylski, *Righteousness in Matthew and His World of Thought* (Cambridge: University Press, 1980). Cf. Guelich, *SoM*, 84-87.

purity which Jesus utterly rejected and condemned. His disciples 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 (see Matt 5:28; 6:21; 9:4; 11:29; 12:34; 13:15, 19; 15:8,18,19; 18:35; 22:37; 23:26). Only such people may expect to see God.

2.3 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (5:9). God in Christ is the ultimate peacemaker (cf. Rom 5:1; Eph 2:14-15; Col 1:20). Those who will be called His children already bear a filial likeness or family resemblance to their heavenly Father (see 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.

2.4 "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (5:10). With the second mention of the phrase "theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (see 5:3), the beatitudes have come full circle. The chief marks of those who already live under God's rule are humility toward God and mercy toward people. One might expect such humble, merciful people to be valued highly by their fellow human beings, but such is not the case. Jesus preeminently displayed these characteristics, and he was viciously persecuted to the point of death (23:31-32). He warns his disciples that they will receive similar treatment (10:16-42; 24:9-14).

3.1 Now Jesus explains that the disciples described in 5:3-10 will have a definite influence upon this world. This should put to rest any notion that discipleship is merely a private matter between a person and God. First, in 5:11-12 Jesus expands his beatitude on persecution (5:10) by pointing out that insults and slander may occur because of His disciples' connection with Himself. When this occurs, the disciples are in good company with the prophets and may expect a great reward. Thus the disciples' influence on the world may be unappreciated.

3.2 Second, in 5:13-16 Jesus uses two vivid pictures to speak of His disciples' influence. They are salt (5:13) and light (5:14-16). As salt they will purify and preserve their society if only they retain their saltiness. As light their good deeds will result in praise going to their Father if only they display that light prominently for all to see.

Conclusion

The character traits of kingdom rule are chiefly humility toward God and mercy toward people. By God's grace these traits are present in principle in the lives of His people. Yet God's people must cultivate

these traits so that they are present in fact. In a world which values pride over humility and aggression over mercy, Jesus' disciples are, in the words of Stott, Christian counter-culture. As Jesus' disciples cultivate the counter-cultural qualities of the beatitudes, they have not only the teachings of their Lord but also his life to consider. It has been suggested by Waltke that Jesus the Messiah is in reality the blessed man of Psalm 1.²⁹ In the encomium of Hebrews 11-12 the author of Hebrews viewed Jesus as the ultimate example of the life of faith.³⁰ Peter likewise did not hesitate to speak of Jesus as the disciple's example (1 Pet 2:21).

Similarly, in Matthew Jesus is the one whose life models kingdom values in relating to God and people. Matthew 5:3-12 has several echoes of Isa 61:1-9, a text which extolls the work of the Messiah under the power of the Spirit (cf. Matt 11:5; Luke 4:18). He identified with those who were poor in spirit (e.g., Matt 9:9-12). He mourned over Israel's needs (Matt 9:36; 14:14; 23:37). He lived as the epitome of meekness (Matt 11:29). He fulfilled the righteousness of the OT (Matt 3:15; 5:17). His relationships to people were similarly exemplary as he demonstrated mercy (Matt 9:36; 14:14), integrity (Matt 27:59-60), and reconciliation (Matt 4:23-24; 8:16-17). In spite of all Jesus' righteousness, he was persecuted to the point of execution (Matt 9:34; 10:25; 12:14). In all this he lived as well as taught the values of the kingdom, the beatitudes. Thus his disciples do not merely ascribe to an abstract theory of values, they walk in the steps of one who practiced those values and said take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matt 11:29). Meier puts it like this:

In the end, then, the beatitudes are the autobiography of Jesus, a perfect self-portrait by the Master. Jesus the meek teacher of wisdom and meek king of the universe, Jesus crucified and risen, is the only fully happy man who ever lived. We disciples slowly learn his path to happiness as we walk his way of wisdom, his way of the cross. Happy are those who discover on the way, like a treasure hidden in a field, the Christology hidden in the beatitudes.³¹

²⁹ B. K. Waltke, "A Canonical Process Approach to the Psalms," in *Tradition and Testament: Essays in Honor of Charles Lee Feinberg*, ed. J. S. and P. D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody, 1981) 3-18.

³⁰ M. R. Miller, "What is the Literary Form of Hebrews 11" *JETS* 29 (1986) 411-17.

³¹ Meier, *Matthew 5:3-12*, 285.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

The Criswell College;
4010 Gaston Ave. Dallas, TX 75246
www.criswell.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu