

A Scholarly Stroll Through the Sermon on the Mount

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Session One – Blessed

A Fresh Voice in Galilee

From the Jerusalem Gazette (Society Section)

The see-and-be-seen crowd was nowhere to be found on a Galilean hillside last night, though there were plenty of eyes there who could have seen them. Villagers and country people came out from all directions for a variety of reasons. The speaker, a certain Jesus bar Joseph of Nazareth, has developed a reputation as a wonder-worker, so some came expecting that he would heal them or their loved ones of disease. Others were curiosity seekers, following the crowd. “Not sure where this guy’s going with this,” said one Eleazar of Sepphoris, “but everyone else is here, so I’m here.” Still others sought inspiration amid a stale season at the synagogue. Around the edges, the revolutionary sorts found Jesus’s words uninspiring: “Doesn’t this chap know that the meek are the problem!” they carped, as they trudged off to seek inspiration elsewhere. The upstart carpenter’s son could become a story, so this reporter will keep an eye peeled.

How Shall We Read?

Matthew 5.1-16 is one of the most beloved passages in all of scripture. “Blessed are the poor in spirit...the meek...those who mourn...” etc. The Beatitudes have captured the hearts of faithful people for two millennia: beautiful words that Jesus speaks to his Galilean audience and that God continues to speak to us.

But how should we read them? When Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” is that our cue to:

- a. Endeavor to become poorer in spirit? (Ethical Reading)
- b. Realize that God blesses people who are already poor in spirit and give thanks? (Prophetic Reading)
- c. Realize that we can’t live up to the high demands, so thank God for grace and forgiveness? (Luther’s Reading)
- d. Honor the saints of the church who have been poor in spirit? (Ecclesiastical Reading)
- e. Realize that God’s final apocalypse will change the order of the world and bring a Beatitudes world into play? (Eschatological Reading)
- f. All of the above?

And how should we imagine these blessings? The Greek word MAKARIOS means “blessed” or “happy.” But happiness and mourning don’t usually travel hand in hand. “MAKARIOS” was often reserved for the well-to-do and powerful, but Jesus was

speaking to a crowd that was anything but that: Galilean peasants under the thumb of a Jewish hierarchy that was under the thumb of a Roman Imperial machine. “Blessed”? Happy? Really?! Jesus says, “Yes!” But how? And how can Jesus think you and I are blessed when we are poor in spirit/are meek/mourn?

Finally, did Jesus speak this sermon in one fell swoop? Or is this a collection of things he spoke over time, brought together to epitomize his teaching?

All of these exegetical and hermeneutical questions matter, but they can hinder us if we get too exacting about them, requiring a solid and secure answer before we allow Jesus’s amazing words to become powerful for us. As you read the famous Beatitudes section of the Sermon on the Mount ask these questions:

1. What does Jesus reveal to us through these words about the character of God?
2. What do we learn about what God desires of his disciples/us?
3. What would a person/church that is formed by these words look like? And how do we become those persons/that church?

Enjoy this first marvelous section of Jesus’ Sermon!

Who Is Blessed?!?

The Greek word MAKARIOS is the one we translate “blessed” in the Beatitudes. MAKARIOS means blessed, or happy. The evolution of the way ancient Greek-speakers used this word helps us understand what Jesus means with the Beatitudes.

The word MAKARIOS described...

Stage One – The state of the gods, who need not work and are beyond the ravages of time.

Stage Two – The condition of the dead, who have ceased suffering those same ravages, experiencing nothing.

Stage Three – The experience of the elite, who have the power or money to buffer themselves against the difficulties of life.

Do you see a trend? MAKARIOS mostly described people who had it easy, for whom life was good. The sign of cosmic blessing was ease. Those who weren’t doing well, the cosmos had forgotten – the gods had forgotten.

Now do you see how strongly Jesus disagreed with normal usage of MAKARIOS. He bends the word to cover people others never would have called “blessed.” In the Beatitudes, Jesus told ancient peasants that God was with them in their struggle. But the message was not limited to them. God is with us in our struggle, too -- while we mourn or are poor in spirit or are being persecuted. That is the revelation: Jesus shows us a God who stays with us always, even when he seems absent. Blessed are we!

Appreciative Words

“I guess you can do anything you want with the Beatitudes. Some have ignored them, some have admired them and walked away, some have used them as a yardstick to measure their own blessedness, and some have used them to declare revolution. The simplest thing to do with them, perhaps, is to let them stand you on your head so that you cannot see the world again in the same way but rather the way God sees it—turned upside down by the only one who really knows which way is up.”

Barbara Brown Taylor, “Blessed Are the Upside Down,” *Gospel Medicine*, p. 149.

“If anyone says that the best life of all is to sail the sea, and then adds that I must not sail upon a sea where shipwrecks are a common occurrence and there are often sudden storms that sweep the helmsman in an adverse direction, I conclude that this man, although he lauds navigation, really forbids me to launch my ship.”

Seneca, *Essays and Letters*.

Squeezing All the Juice

Each time we read scripture, we are offered a new opportunity to participate in the life of God. But how would we know what our part is? How would we know what to do?

One way to make sure this time through the remarkable Sermon on the Mount hasn't been in vane is to keep track of your perceptions: What part of this session most drew you to Jesus? What part most confused you? What questions do you have coming away from the Beatitudes?

Our Reading Schedule

Here's how we will proceed for our eight weeks:

05JAN26	Blessed	Matthew 5.1-16
12JAN26	Deepening Torah	Matthew 5.17-30
19JAN26	Chasing Perfection	Matthew 5.31-48
26JAN26	Building Integrity	Matthew 6.1-18
02FEB26	Non-Anxious Presents	Matthew 6.19-34
09FEB26	The Gold Standard	Matthew 7.1-11
16FEB26	Discerning the Voices	Matthew 7.12-23
23FEB26	Solid Ground	Matthew 7.24-29

I'll send supplemental articles, etc. week to week, for those who wish to go longer. My first hope for you is that you'll read the Matthew text well before anything else.

Enjoy!