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LEVINE

# SERMON *on* *the* MOUNT

A BEGINNER'S GUIDE to the KINGDOM of HEAVEN





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## Chapter 1

# THE BEATITUDES

### Preparing for Discipleship

Jesus ascends a mountain and sits down. He does not sit down, contrary to the claims of numerous Christian interpreters, because rabbis taught while seated. Rabbis taught on any occasion and from any position they could. He sits because he's about to talk for three chapters; his disciples then come and sit near him.

Matthew 5:1 tells us that the Sermon is not delivered to outsiders; it's delivered to four disciples, insiders who have already left their homes and their families in order to follow this Galilean charismatic healer and teacher. We know from Matthew 10 that there are (at least) twelve disciples, but to this point, we've only seen him call four: Peter and Andrew, James and John. Since Matthew does not name the disciples who join Jesus on the mountain, any of us can find ourselves among those sitting close and listening.

But if we count ourselves among the disciples, our task is not simply to absorb. We are human beings, not sponges. We know from both Jewish and pagan sources that disciples are active learners: they ask questions, they seek clarification, they raise objections, they seek to take their teacher's comments to the next level. Were my students only to parrot what I said, without developing their own views, then I would have failed as a teacher. Our job, as listeners, is to study the Sermon, ask our own questions, and then,

in community, seek our own answers. In churches, the congregation ideally listens to the sermon, but in few congregations is there a “talk back,” let alone a challenge. In my synagogue, on a rare occasion, a member of the congregation will actually challenge the rabbi, not from a position of disrespect. Rather, the concern is full understanding, full support for an argument, clarity. That is active listening.

As a teacher, I can imagine Jesus thinking as he begins the Sermon what I think as I begin a class: *Please, folks, pay attention; don't screw this up. If you don't understand something, ask. My reputation is on the line.*

Sometimes teachers don't know the impact they have had on students. As I was putting my notes together for this chapter, I found myself as a guest speaker at a tall-steeple (that is, traditionally large and influential) Methodist church where a former PhD student of mine was head pastor. Driving from the airport to the hotel, she said to me, “You know, for a while I really hated you.” Her eyes were on the road; mine were fixed on her. Not knowing what to say, I figured I'd let her talk. Then she said, as she still concentrated on the road, “You pushed me.” Then she smiled.

It was true. Her “good” was already “great”: she could preach the roof off the church; she could find nuances in the text that escaped the most brilliant of exegetes. But I had the impression she could do so much more, so I showed her how. Along with the A on the paper, there was also a swath of red markings with my questions: What about this? Have you considered that? How might the nuance of the Greek change the reading? Did you read the latest article on your topic? I take my pedagogical cue from Jesus: he's working already with disciples who have climbed the mountain. Now he wants them to take the next steps. Your “good” could always be better. You may be the salt of the earth, you may be the light of the world, but your salt could be saltier and your light could be brighter. Follow him into the Sermon, down the mountain, and out into the world, and step into the kingdom of heaven.

## The Beatitudes

On the simple level, to go up the mountain is to risk one's balance: our ears might pop; we might get dizzy; we might trip. Or we might hear something we cannot handle. Making the climb is the first step, and it is already a commitment. Staying on the summit and realizing we could do even more requires more courage, and letting that experience transform us, transfigure us, is scarier still. But the effort is worthwhile. The vista is gorgeous. And we become cities set on a hill—but we're not there yet.

We disciples are not the only ones listening. Jesus sees the crowds, and he likely knows they will be listening in. The message is explicitly for his disciples, but they are not the only ones welcome to receive it. The crowd needs to hear the message as well, lest they misunderstand Jesus. They have been following him for a chapter, since as Matthew tells us, his fame had spread throughout Syria (4:24). But they are following him not because of his teachings but because of his health care: the crowds are coming with the afflicted, the possessed, the disabled, and they are seeking a cure. For the Gospel writers, Jesus gives sight to the blind and the ability to walk to those who cannot, but his primary role is not that of mobile medical center. His primary role is not that of miracle worker or exorcist. Not all, then or now, receive healing of the body. To the contrary, by speaking to those who are in mourning, as we shall see, Jesus recognizes that frailty of the human form.

Jesus's import is not that he works miracles. Others do miracles: Elijah and Elisha from the Scriptures of Israel, the Rabbis Honi the Circle-Drawer and Haninah ben Dosa from postbiblical Jewish texts, even Peter and Paul, according to the Book of Acts. More important than his miracles are, for the Gospels, Jesus's death and resurrection and his teachings. A healing is very good news for the individual so blessed, but even the able bodied can find ourselves in the Beatitudes, for we may all find ourselves mourning or meek, poor in spirit, or peacemakers.

Jesus begins with a series of nine statements traditionally called beatitudes, from the Latin term for "blessed." Luke's parallel

has only four of these beatitudes, each balanced by a woe. Thus for Luke, “Blessed are you who are poor” (Luke 6:20) is matched by “woe to you who are rich” (Luke 6:24). No woes, at least not yet, in Matthew’s version. The Sermon starts with what is entirely good news. In a few cases where Matthew and Luke give different versions of the same beatitude, we’ll discuss the implications of the changes. Our concern is not that one got it right and one wrong or that Matthew and Luke are working at cross-purposes. Rather, each *evangelist* (the technical term for a Gospel author; literally, a “good-news giver”) has a particular understanding of the message of Jesus.

The Beatitudes have a cultural familiarity, even to people who have not heard them read in churches: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3), “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (5:5), and so on. They are so familiar that some Christian theologians see them as Jesus’s own autobiography: he is poor in spirit; he mourns (for example, over Jerusalem); he hungers and thirsts for righteousness. We can read the Beatitudes as Jesus’s summary of his autobiography; I think we need to do more. The disciples did not initially understand Jesus to be talking about himself; they understood him to be talking about the human condition. Jesus does not need to bless himself, but people who are lost and least, mourning and meek, need to be assured that they are blessed. Theology and ethics need not be mutually exclusive.

Problems arise when we do not consider what *blessed* connotes, who the poor in spirit are, or what *meek* would have meant to Matthew’s first audience. Here’s how we’ll proceed: we’ll talk about what a beatitude is supposed to do, and then we’ll look closely at several of the beatitudes to see what they would have sounded like to the Jewish ears that first heard them, to hear their echoes of Israel’s Scriptures, and to realize how they still speak necessary messages to the twenty-first century. Our concern, as always, is not to strip out Christian theology but to enhance it by providing the

historical context of Jesus and his followers. Fully to understand Jesus requires some understanding of what his words would have meant to the people who first heard them.

## What Is a Beatitude?

Simply put, a beatitude is a blessing. The Greek term translated in most English Bibles as “blessed” is *makarioi*; hence, sometimes the beatitudes are called *makarisms*. (In an Introduction to the New Testament course at Vanderbilt a few years ago, one student told me she remembered the term because it reminded her of macaroons, also a blessing.) Preparing the Latin translation of the New Testament in the late fourth century, St. Jerome translated the Greek with *beati*, which has the connotation not only of “blessed” but also of “happy” and even “rich.”

Jesus’s native language was neither Latin nor Greek but Aramaic and, possibly, some Hebrew. It is not clear what the original word would have been. One possibility is the Hebrew *baruch*, which means “blessed.” That is the term that begins most Jewish prayers to this day: “Blessed are you, Lord our God.” We can see a similar formulation to the Beatitudes in ecologically friendly Jeremiah 17:7-8,

Blessed are those who trust in the LORD,  
whose trust is the LORD.  
They shall be like a tree planted by water,  
sending out its roots by the stream.  
It shall not fear when heat comes,  
and its leaves shall stay green;  
in the year of drought it is not anxious,  
and it does not cease to bear fruit.

Perhaps more familiar is Psalm 118:26, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the LORD” (quoted in regard to Jesus in Matthew 21:9, 23:39; Mark 11:9; Luke 13:35).

Another possibility is that behind the Greek is the Hebrew word



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*ashrei*, which means “happy,” “fortunate,” or “worthy of praise.” This expression appears in Isaiah 30:18,

Therefore the LORD waits to be gracious to you;  
therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you.  
For the LORD is a God of justice;  
Happy [*ashrei*] are all those who wait for him.

The New Revised Standard Version actually translates that last line not as “happy are” but as “blessed are.” Neatly, the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible) for Isaiah 30:18 reads for the Hebrew *ashrei* the Greek *makarioi*, the same term used in the Beatitudes.

We might also think of Psalm 84, which has resonances with the Sermon on the Mount. The first four verses of the Psalm read:

How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O LORD of hosts!  
My soul longs, indeed it faints  
for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God.

Even the sparrow finds a home,  
and the swallow a nest for herself,  
where she may lay her young,  
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,  
my King and my God.

Happy [Hebrew: *ashrei*; Greek: *makarioi*] are those who live  
in your house,  
ever singing your praise. Selah

Jews traditionally recite three times a day a prayer called the Ashrei, from its first word. The prayer begins, “Happy [*ashrei*] are those who live in your house, ever singing your praise, Selah!” The prayer is mostly Psalm 145, but the opening line comes from Psalm 84:4—in modern musical terms, we’d call this ancient prayer a

mash-up. By the way, I looked up the term *ashrei* on the internet to be sure of getting a coherent transliteration (that is, putting the Hebrew letters into English), but I think I must have misspelled the term because the first hit I got was to the American Society of Heating, Refrigerating, and Air-Conditioning Engineers, abbreviated ASHRAE. They're blessed too.

We read the Beatitudes as indicating “Blessed are,” “Happy are,” “Fortunate are,” “Praiseworthy are.” I’ve also heard the translation “Congratulations,” which sounded to me like the exclamation “Mazel tov” (Hebrew for “good luck” with the connotation of the Australian “Good on you”). I’m staying with the traditional “blessed” because it has a sense of divine involvement and because I find it offensive to say to someone who is in mourning, “You should be happy,” or, “Congratulations.”

When we hear that we are blessed, we should hear as well a sense of responsibility. A blessing given, a talent bestowed, if unappreciated and unused, is wasted.

### **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”**

Luke’s alternative (6:20) reads, “Blessed are you who are poor, / for yours is the kingdom of God.” Still popular in New Testament studies is the thesis that the authors we call Matthew and Luke had access both to Mark’s Gospel, which does not contain the Beatitudes, and to a second hypothetical source, labeled Q from the German word *Quelle* meaning “source.” Thought to be the origin of material shared by Luke and Matthew but absent from Mark—material such as the Beatitudes and the Our Father—Q remained a staple of New Testament studies until relatively recently. Having completed a commentary on the Gospel of Luke with my friend, the evangelical scholar Ben Witherington III, I became increasingly doubtful of the existence of Q; it strikes me as just as likely, if not more likely, that Luke had access to Matthew’s Gospel.<sup>1</sup>

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It is possible that Luke, familiar with Matthew's reading, wanted to put a focus on the economically poor or, since most people in antiquity were poor, those whom we today would identify as destitute. Luke then adds the corresponding "Woe to you who are rich, / for you have received your consolation" (v. 24).

Matthew will have much to say about the rich who allow the poor to starve, go naked, or languish in prison. But here, in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew keeps the focus on those who require blessing. The woes can wait since comfort should come before condemnation.

Despite the popular view that "poor in spirit" means "weak in faith," that is not what Matthew's phrase means. Nor does it mean simply not being conceited or prideful. "Poor in spirit" is in part a synonym for the people who have enough humility that they do not operate from a sense of pride: the poor in spirit are those who recognize that they are both the beneficiaries of the help of others and part of a system in which they are to pay it forward and help those whom they can. Poor in spirit are those who do *not* sit around saying, "Look at what I've accomplished," or worse, feel resentful because they have not received what they consider sufficient honor. They know they did the right thing; they know God knows, and that's sufficient recognition indeed.

My friend Mike Glenn, a Baptist minister in Brentwood, Tennessee, speaks of the poor in spirit as those who recognize the gap between what we have and what we *should* have. We may have a bank account, but we may not have compassion, generosity, or love. We may have a watertight home, health care, and a car that works, but we may also have neighbors who struggle with paying the rent, putting food on the table, or getting to work. The poor in spirit are those who see what many don't, and they are blessed because they have this vision and because the vision compels them to act. "Mind the gap," says Mike. Spot on.

In talking with friends about the Beatitudes (I'm blessed that my friends put up with me when I want to talk about what a bibli-

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cal passage means), one asked whether “poor in spirit” could be a coded term for people who have mental health issues. The beatitude is not speaking directly about someone with bipolar disorder or schizophrenia or the various chemical imbalances that create an erroneous reality. But for those who are suffering from such disorders, the Sermon has good news because it demands that the disciples of Jesus pay attention, provide care, and provide love.

The Hebrew word *ani* means “poor” but has the connotation of “those who recognize their dependence on God.” Isaiah 66:2 speaks to this idea:

All these things my hand has made,  
and so all these things are mine,  
says the LORD.  
But this is the one to whom I will look,  
to the humble [*ani*] and contrite in spirit,  
who trembles at my word.

According to the Dead Sea Scroll IQM (also called the War Scroll), the phrase “poor in spirit” is juxtaposed to the “righteous of God,” to those who orient themselves to others and to God and not toward their self-centered concerns.

Thus, “poor in spirit” crosses economic lines. To be poor is not necessarily to be righteous, and if we hold this equation, we wind up romanticizing poverty rather than working to alleviate it. Nor for the Gospels is being rich synonymous with being venal or evil; rather, having surplus comes with the mandate to help others. Matthew mentions several well-off characters, such as the magi with their high-end Christmas gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Only Matthew’s Gospel explicitly identifies Joseph of Arimathea as a “rich man.” At the beginning of the mission discourse, Matthew’s Jesus tells his disciples, “Take no gold, or silver, or copper in your belts” (10:9). There would have been no need to forbid gold and silver if the disciples didn’t have any to take.

My friend, the Baptist author Tony Campolo, got it right. In

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February 2008, he told a gathering of fellow Baptists: “There is nothing wrong with making a million dollars. I wish you all would make a million dollars. There is nothing wrong with making it, but there is something wrong with keeping it,” he said. “My Bible tells me in 1 John 3:17, ‘If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need but shuts off his compassion from him—how can God’s love reside in him?’”<sup>2</sup>

If we think of the “poor in spirit” as those who recognize their dependence on others and others’ dependence on them, then we can already see how they are blessed. For a modern analogy, the poor in spirit are those who are aware of their own privileges and, because they are aware, work to help others who do not have the same benefits. We who have had the privilege of attending schools with up-to-date materials and motivated teachers might help others who lack such resources. We who have benefited because of the social status of our families, our appearance, contacts, networking, and luck are blessed when we recognize that, no matter our own drive, we did not achieve everything on our own.

Another way we recognize that these individuals are blessed is to acknowledge that Jesus is talking directly to his disciples. *They* are the ones who will not only pray to their Father in heaven (the Our Father is part of the Sermon on the Mount) but also see themselves on earth as part of a family, defined by doing God’s will and so engaging in mutual support. Thinking about the disciples, we might pair the Sermon on the Mount with Matthew 12:46-50, where Jesus points to his disciples and says, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

I think what Jesus is doing in the Sermon on the Mount is beginning the creation of a new movement with disciples, but not a movement in the way we think of political parties. I think what he’s doing is setting up a new family or a new community. How do you live in this group? What would it look like to live in this new family where people actually did what the Sermon on the Mount thinks



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