

Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5.3-12)



Introduction

The blessings evident in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew closely resemble the blessings promised in the Sermon on the Plain found in Luke 6:20-23. Luke's version is called 'Sermon on the Plain' because our Lord spends a whole night in prayer on a mountain and starts teaching his disciples when he comes down. But there are also significant differences between the two sermons that cannot be ignored. These differences show that those who wrote the Gospels did not hesitate to re-read the tradition they received.

Let us look at the differences between the two sermons:

- (i) The Sermon on the Mount has ten pronouncements of blessings but Luke's only has four. Luke also adds four pronouncements of curses.
- (ii) In Matthew the first nine are in 3rd person plural as if drawing the attention of the disciples to look outside to those who are blessed even if they perhaps do not belong to the group of disciples, before they can also become inheritors of "Blessing" along with those who are ahead and outside. In Luke, both the blessings and the curses are addressed directly to the disciples.
- (iii) Most significantly, in the place of 'Blessed are you poor' found in Luke, we find 'Blessed are the Poor in Spirit' in Matthew. We may be tempted to ask questions such as, 'Did Jesus preach two different sermons?' or 'If there was only one source in the oral tradition, was it Matthew or Luke who was faithful to tradition? Or perhaps they both made some changes here and there?'

However, we shall not bother ourselves with finding answers to such questions. In this study I shall undertake to interpret the text in such a way as to get at what reflects the mind of our Lord. The Sermon on the Mount is often interpreted to be a set of ethical rules. No doubt, Christian life does involve ethical rigor. However, the Sermon on the Mount is itself about the mission mandate being set out at the very beginning of the Ministry of Jesus i.e. making a statement of God's agenda and God's plan of action to fulfill that agenda.

What is involved in this way of re-reading? First and foremost it needs a careful analysis of the text, tracing its First Testament connections and then noticing that it has two sections: one in third person plural followed by the second person address to the disciples. It also involves correct understanding of the meaning of spirit. Finally it involves a perception of the Gospel of God's Just Reign over the whole world and not just the Gospel of personal salvation. Let us start on the task.

We begin by looking at the attributes that make people worthy of God's blessing and we notice that none of the first four beatitudes have anything to do with attribute, virtue or commendable behaviour. We look at them one by one.

The poor in spirit

There is a common belief the words "poor in spirit" refer to the virtue of humility. Compare the text with the verse from Luke 6:20 - 'Blessed are you poor'. So did Mathew do some editing here? Why did he refer to the poor in spirit and not just to the poor? Did he think that our Lord would not have wished to exclude all the rich? He had rich friends like Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, Simon the Pharisee, and probably many others. So did he change the text to a more inclusive one? Was he saying that rich or poor, only the humble would be blessed?. To answer this question, we look to the book of Isaiah; because first two beatitudes have an unmistakable echo of Isaiah 61:3:

*“ to grant to **those who mourn** in Zion – to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of **a faint spirit** that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord that he may be glorified”*

Please note that this verse refers to those who mourn as those with a faint spirit. What is done in the Sermon on the Mount is that 'a faint spirit' is made a general category applicable to those who mourn and to many others whose spirit is made faint, crushed, or drained away. The Spirit is God's gift to every member of humankind (Isaiah 42:5) and it means that God has given life (breath) and human dignity (spirit, referring to all that is distinctively human) to every human person. Just as life can forcefully be taken away by murder, human dignity is often destroyed by various forms of oppression, stigmatization and marginalization resulting in an impoverishment of spirit. All those who mourn, those who are meek, those who are hungering and thirsting for justice, those suffering from poverty, exploitation, oppression, social stigma (due to gender, caste, low status in society) are referred to as 'Poor in Spirit'.

Those rendered poor in spirit by the oppressive forces of the world are the ones who are destined to share in God's reign i.e. they become God's partners in executing the reign of God.

Those who mourn

This reference is not to mourning when someone dies due to illness or old age in our homes. In Isaiah it refers to those in exile mourning the deaths of their loved ones who got killed by the Babylonian captors. In Matthew it refers to the many Galileans who were killed by the Romans in the uprising that resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem, and also saw many Galilean youth ruthlessly killed. Those who mourn their death will be comforted and of course as those whose spirit was killed they too become eligible to share in God's reign.

The meek

They are not those people who have cultivated meekness as an attribute understood in the modern use of the word. To understand how the word 'meekness' is used in the bible, one must refer to psalms, e.g. Ps 37:5-11. It refers to the people who are powerless to resist the arrogance of the wicked who forcibly take away their land and possession. The best illustration of a meek person is Naboth who could not keep his family property (I Kings chapter 21). Of course they are advised not to fret and fume in impotent rage but to wait patiently for the Lord's vindication. Meekness is not a simple virtue but the meek are those who had been victims of injustice who will enjoy God's blessing when God would vindicate and restore them to their rightful ownership of land. Beyond getting their possession back they also as part of the Collective of the Poor in Spirit become co-rulers in God's Reign. "They will possess the earth (land)" therefore is a pun with two meanings at once.

Those who hunger and thirst for justice

This phrase refers to a collective of all those who are longing for justice. It does not refer to those who are infused with a moral desire to be good and just. Rather, it refers to all those who have been denied justice one-way or the other and are waiting with eager longing for the day of vindication. The promise is that their hunger will be satisfied. They will see God's vindication. To be found in situations where justice is denied with vehemence also diminishes and drains the spirit, and so they too belong to the collective of the Poor in spirit and are assured a share in God's just reign.

The merciful

If one accepts as correct, the understanding that the first four beatitudes do not refer to ethical excellence, but to the ways in which many people are impoverished in their spirit...then it would be easy to understand that the next four beatitudes also in third person plural must be seen with reference to the first four. This means that the reference to the merciful should be understood as referring to those people who have developed concern for the poor in spirit and

have become God's partners in bringing comfort to the war ravaged mourners, to those who get dispossessed and to bring joy and succor to them.

God is perfect in mercy. God gives without sparing anything for God's own self. God forgives everyone. So God's partners who see eye to eye with God and disapprove of the ways in which people are impoverished in spirit also should give and forgive wholeheartedly.

The pure in heart

We said that the merciful are those who wholeheartedly put themselves at the service of God in bringing succor to the oppressed. This beatitude repeats the same message and indicates that in addition to receiving mercy they will have a vision of God. Purity in heart has little to do with ethical purity i.e. it does not refer to those whose inner intentions as much as outward actions are clean. Rather, it refers to a total commitment without any selfish motives. Many seek to do good in order to get recognition for their charitable disposition or to get favor from God. But those who are pure in heart have a total preoccupation with God's agenda without any ulterior motive. Such people have a vision of the True God who is full of mercy and who has consuming passion for justice and is determined to root out injustice. God's mercy should never be divorced from God's passion for justice. For otherwise injustice will be covered under a cloak of pity.

The peacemakers

Commitment to justice when tempered with mercy inevitably leads people to bring peace. This peace making starts with challenging the oppressors and the wicked to repent and exhorting the hurt victims to forgive. This is indeed the work of Christ the Son of God. Therefore peacemakers are brothers and sisters of Christ. Thus they are called Children of God.

Those who suffer for justice

Establishing peace with justice, which requires advocacy on the side of the oppressed and challenge to the oppressors will inevitably lead to suffering. This suffering brings them on par with the collective of the poor in spirit and so they also become partners with God in God's Reign. This means that it is not possible for someone to be merely merciful without being pure in heart, without being involved in peacemaking and without suffering together with Christ in the execution of God's Just Reign.

After clearly setting out that the Poor in Spirit (that is those who are ravaged by wars, who are dispossessed and all those who suffer various forms of injustice) and all those who are in total solidarity with them are the real partners of God, Jesus started speaking to the disciples. He assumes that they would want to

be counted among God's partners and would suffer with them. This would bring them to ridicule, they will have to face slander, scandal and persecution like the prophets of old. But they are to rejoice that they suffer because of Christ.

The Sermon on the Mount requires our readiness to see with the eyes of Jesus that there are many who are not believers but who have been accepted as partners of God in making real God's purposes on earth. For Jesus asked us to pray for the coming of God's Kingdom and qualified it with another petition that God's will may be done on earth as it is in Heaven. This is further reinforced when we see the deliberate use of third person plural in the first nine beatitudes before reporting our Lord's special instruction to the disciples. See below.

- The significance of the use of the third person plural:

Our Lord often rebuked his disciples for their lack of understanding and weak faith, but he commended many who came to him seeking healing for their faith. Jesus also told the story of the Samaritan traveler to challenge a Jewish religious leader. So our Lord must have wanted the disciples to understand that there are people who were blessed in the eyes of God who may not belong to those who had come to believe in God through Jesus in a confessional manner. In Matthew's gospel we have the words of our Lord, which warn everyone that mere confession of him as Lord will not see them through. Also in the parable of the last judgment in chapter 25 is peculiar to Matthew. In this parable those who are deemed as the Sheep worthy of eternal life express surprise at the commendation they received. For they did not do any humanitarian act with the intention of gaining merit in God's sight, or to win heaven. Please notice, therefore that the first nine beatitudes in the third person do not make any reference to piety or faith. No religious conviction or religious practice of those deemed as blessed is made mention of. This is so .not even of the one that leads to a vision of God. Therefore the Sermon on the Mount and particularly the beatitudes should be understood as setting forth God's Agenda and of drawing attention to all those who comprise the world wide partnership God enjoys in carrying out that agenda transcending all faith particularities