

Description more than Prescription – A Meditation on the Gospel of the Beatitudes from the 4th Sunday of the Year

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The Gospel passage on Beatitudes is one of the most familiar of Scripture. Yet, though familiar, these Beatitudes remain difficult to understand. This is because they are very paradoxical. The word paradox refers to a statement that goes against the common understanding or intuition. We do not usually call the poor blessed, but rather the well off. We do not usually call those who mourn blessed or happy, rather we call joy and laughter blessed. And so forth. So the Lord is presenting us with paradox and we may struggle to grasp the truth of what he says.

It helps to explore the notion of Beatitude for a moment and then apply it to each beatitude.

1. To begin it is critical to understand that beatitude is not something we do, but something we receive. The beatitudes declare an objective reality as the result of a divine act. The indicative mood should be taken seriously, and not transformed into an imperative of exhortation, as though Jesus were saying, start being poor or meek, then God will bless you. Rather, he is saying that when the transformative power of the cross brings about in us a greater meekness, poverty of spirit and so forth we will experience that we are being blessed. Beatitude is a work of God and results when we yield to his saving work in us. We are blessed when we accept and yield to the work that God alone can do. With this understanding we can see the beatitudes not as a prescription of what we must do per se, but as a description of what a human being is like who is being transformed by Jesus Christ.
2. The Greek word is *makarios* and translates the Hebrew *ashere*. The Hebrew word is really more of an expression than just a word. It is an exclamation which might well be translated *O the blessedness of...* In this sense the Hebrew *ashere* emphasizes that something is being described more than prescribed.
3. In ancient Greek times, *makarios* (blessed) referred especially to the happiness of the gods. They had achieved a state of happiness and contentment in life that was beyond all cares, labors, and even death. They lived in some other world away from the cares and problems and worries of ordinary people. In taking up this term to translate the Hebrew *ashere*, the New Testament teaches on the stability of beatitude, if it is from God. It is, to a large degree a stable, deep and serene beatitude not sharply affected by the vicissitudes of this world. Since the world does not give it, the world cannot take it away. There is an old saying, *Happiness is an inside job*. Too many people seek to locate their happiness in a world that is unstable and fickle. But the Lord wants to confer on us an

inner beatitude that is deeply rooted, stable, and not easily swept away by worldly conditions. This helps explain the paradox of some of the beatitudes. Thus, one is still blessed even when poor, mourning, and persecuted. Even more, they are confirmed in their blessedness by such realities, since these things are reminders that we are not at home in this world and that God and His kingdom are our preoccupation and the source of our true beatitude.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, the kingdom of God is theirs – Who are the poor in spirit? They are those who, by God’s grace, shun anything that would deprive them of the joy of being totally dependent on God. Now, all of us are dependent on God, we just don’t know it. The poor in spirit are those who delight in the experience of dependence on God. Those in the flesh strongly resist any such sense of dependence or lack of control. As such they acquire wealth, power, and resources to create the illusion that they are in control. But they are not and ultimately their whole system will fail. It is a recipe for frustration and unhappiness.

Further, control is like an addictive drug. The more we get, the more we need to feel less anxious. Our modern age illustrates this. Consider for example modern medicine through which we can control things we never could before. Fine, so now all our fears are gone right? Hmm... we have never lived so long and healthy, and yet, we have never been so anxious about our health. Worried doctors, health care professionals and pharmaceutical companies, goaded and aided by the fear mongering media warn us of one threat after another. Worried as never before our medicine cabinets fill with prescriptions and OTC meds. And still we worry. Control is an illusion and an addiction all its own. Medicine is fine, but control is still an illusion and, in the end, it seems we can never have enough of it to feel “safe.”

But how blessed are those who delight to depend on God! Who realize that every beat of their heart is His gift, that everything they have is from God and belongs to God. They not only realize this, but delight in it. They are blessed because they are free of countless fears that flow from the illusion of control.

Now Matthew adds “in spirit” because it is evident that not all who are materially poor are thereby freed of the obsession with wealth, power and the need to control. To be poor is not merely a measure of what is in my wallet, but rather, what is in my heart.

However, to be sure, wealth is a very grave danger to inheriting the kingdom. And those who have it are far less likely to experience with delight their dependence on God. Rather, they will fear it. Let’s be clear, most of the saints were broke and the Son of Man, Jesus, had nowhere to lay his head. And it makes sense that he did not for he thus had nothing to lose in terms of this world. Wealth on the other hand brings with it many fears and the strong tendency to compromise our faith. The wealthy have too much to lose and thus are filled with fears and an increasing obsession with control. This is a curse and an illusion, for the truth is the whole thing is sinking fast and no amount of temporary control is going to change that. This world is not the Kingdom, but heaven is. And how blessed are those who delight to know and experience their utter poverty and dependence on God for, quite literally, everything. They already have the Kingdom by faith and that Kingdom is growing for them. The kingdom of this world however is passing away.

Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted – Who are those who mourn? They are those who, delighting in the Kingdom of heaven, see the awful state of most of God’s people. They see that so many do not know God, or why they were made. They see others locked in sin and darkness, often willfully. They see still others who are victims of the sins of injustice and oppression. And they mourn, and they moan, and they pray. Indeed, this beatitude is the basis of intercessory prayer and deepening love for sinners. Because I mourn I pray for the world.

Distinction – Note then the object of this beatitude is rooted in the Kingdom of God and its values, not the passing values of this world. If my Porsche is scratched, or if the stock market is down and I mourn, that’s not a beatitude.

But oh how blessed are those who mourn over what really matters and who pray. God will console them, strengthen them and encourage them. To mourn in this way is to be blessed. It is a grief that “hurts so good” for we know that it brings abundant blessings for the world as it intensifies our prayer and our own commitment to God and his Kingdom.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth – Anger is a very difficult passion. It can sorely vex us but is also a necessary zeal for what is right. Aristotle spoke of meekness (*praotes*) as the proper balance between too much anger and not enough anger. For sometimes we merely vent our anger to excess. But at other times we fail to be angry enough, and evil and injustice go unaddressed and un-resisted. But oh how blessed are those who, by God’s grace have authority over their anger. They do not unnecessarily or excessively vent their anger. But they also have the necessary zeal and courage to stand up for what is right and express righteous indignation at sin and injustice.

The meek have authority over their anger and other passions and thus will inherit the earth. How? Because self control conserves resources and uses them appropriately. But unrestricted passions dissipate resources and squander the gifts of God.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied. – Many fight God and ridicule the values of God’s kingdom. Chastity, forgiveness, and mercy are especially ridiculed today. Many hunger for anything but God, you name it: wealth, power, popularity, the latest fad, anything but God. But Oh how blessed are those who hunger and thirst for the righteousness and justice of God and the values of his Kingdom. God will satisfy them with the joy of living under his law and they will rejoice to see the wisdom of His ways. They hunger for God’s word and devour it when they find it. They rejoice to see God put sin to death in them and bring about virtue. They are excited and satisfied at what God is doing in their life. They are blessed indeed.

Blessed are the Merciful for they shall obtain mercy – We live in a world that often prizes revenge and the destruction of one’s enemies. But we ought to be very careful about this for Scripture teaches that the measure that we measure to others will be measured back to us (Matt 7:2). We are also taught that if we do not forgive, we will not be forgiven (Matt 6:15) and that merciless is the judgment on the one who has shown no mercy (James 2:12). It’s just simply misguided and a bad idea to go around condemning others and throwing the book at everyone. But how blessed are those, who by God’s grace, have experienced God’s mercy and are

equipped to share that mercy with others. They are able to leave most vengeance to God and, though they correct the sinner, they do not need to avenge themselves. According to God's promise they, by showing mercy, will also experience mercy from God. They are blessed indeed.

Blessed are the Pure of Heart for they shall see God – The Greek here is really better translated as “single hearted.” It is so easy for us to be torn asunder by many contrary drives and wishes. The Book of James says that the double minded mind is unstable in all his ways! (James 1:8). But Oh how blessed are those who can say with St. Paul: *this one thing I do...I press on to the prize marked out for me in Christ Jesus* (Phil 3:13), or to say with the psalmist: *There is only one thing I ask of the Lord: to dwell in the courts of the Lord and behold his face!*(Psalm 27:4). Oh how blessed to be single-hearted, to be centered on one thing, to have but one purpose, to be undivided and uncompromised. Oh how blessed!

Blessed are the Peacemakers for they shall be called the sons of God – Everyone loves peace, but only some are actually working for it. And true peace can only be based on the truth. Hence being a peacemaker is more than being a nice guy and overlooking stuff. True peacemakers announce the kingdom and bring souls to Christ. True peacemakers strive for righteousness and justice and announce its demands. How blessed are those whom God inspires with a dedication to such work. They are indeed sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake for theirs is the Kingdom of God. In life we are going to suffer. It might as well be for something decent and noble. How blessed are those who, because they have loved God and his kingdom, are hated by this world. At least they share a common lot with Jesus. And they are blessed because they know that only false prophets are loved by all (Lk 6:26). There is a paradoxical serenity that comes from this sort of persecution for it is a sign that we are no longer of this world and that it has lost its hold on us and thus hates us (Jn15:19). Having forsaken this world and been hated by it, they are blessed because the Kingdom of God is theirs in abundance.

One of my mentors has been Fr. Francis Martin a great Scripture scholar, teacher at the Dominican House of Studies and many other places and author of many books and articles. He has also had a great ministry to priests over the years through the giving of retreats. Here are some reflections of his on today's Gospel.