

The Beatitudes

John Stott, The Message of the Sermon on the Mount

c. The blessings promised

Each quality is commended, inasmuch as each person who exhibits it is pronounced 'blessed'. The Greek word *makarios* can and does mean 'happy'. So JBP translates the opening words of each beatitude, 'How happy are ...!' And several commentators have explained them as Jesus' prescription for human happiness. The most ingenious attempt I know was made by Ernest M. Ligon of the Department of Psychology, Union College, Schenectady, New York, in his book *The psychology of Christian personality*. Acknowledging his debt to Harry Emerson Fosdick, he sets out to interpret the Sermon on the Mount 'from the point of view of mental health' (p. vii). 'The most significant mistake that men have made in interpreting these verses of Jesus (*sc.* the beatitudes)', he writes, 'is the failure to note the first word in each of them, *happy*.' In his view they 'constitute Jesus' theory of happiness'.³ They are not so much ethical duties as 'a series of eight fundamental emotional attitudes. If a man reacts to his environment in the spirit of them, his life will be a happy one,' for he will have discovered the basic 'formula for mental health'.⁵ In particular, according to Dr Ligon, the Sermon emphasizes the 'forces' of faith and love, 'experimental faith' and 'fatherly love'. These two principles are indispensable for the development of 'strong and healthy personalities'. Not only may the chaos of fear be overcome by faith and destructive anger by love, but also 'the inferiority complex and its many byproducts' by the Golden Rule.⁷

There is no need to dismiss this interpretation as entirely fallacious. For nobody knows better than our Creator how we may become truly human beings. He made us. He knows how we work best. It is through obeying his own moral laws that we find and fulfil ourselves. And all Christians can testify from experience that there is a close connection between holiness and happiness.

Nevertheless, it is seriously misleading to render *makarios* 'happy'. For happiness is a subjective state, whereas Jesus is making an objective judgment about these people. He is declaring not what they may feel like ('happy'), but what God thinks of them and what on that account they are: they are 'blessed'.

What is this blessing? The second half of each beatitude elucidates it. They possess the kingdom of heaven and they inherit the earth. The mourners are comforted and the hungry are satisfied. They receive mercy, they see God, they are called the sons of God. Their heavenly reward is great. And all these blessings belong together. Just as the eight qualities describe every Christian (at least in the ideal), so the eight blessings are given to every Christian. True, the particular blessing promised in each case is appropriate to the particular quality mentioned. At the same time it is surely not possible to inherit the kingdom of heaven without inheriting the earth, to be comforted without being satisfied or to see God without receiving his mercy and being called his children. The eight qualities together constitute the responsibilities, and the eight blessings the privileges, of being a citizen of God's kingdom. This is what the enjoyment of God's rule means.

Are these blessings present or future? Personally, I think the only possible answer is 'both'. Some commentators, however, have insisted that they are future, and have emphasized the 'eschatological' nature of the beatitudes. Certainly the second part of the last beatitude promises the persecuted a great reward in heaven, and this must be future (11). Certainly too it is only in

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the first and eighth beatitudes that the blessing is expressed in the present tense, 'theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (3, 10); and even then this verb was probably not there when Jesus spoke in Aramaic. The other six beatitudes contain a verb in the simple future tense ('they shall'). Nevertheless, it is plain from the rest of Jesus' teaching that the kingdom of God is a present reality which we can 'receive', 'inherit' or 'enter' now. Similarly, we can obtain mercy and comfort now, can become God's children now, and in this life can have our hunger satisfied and our thirst quenched. Jesus promised all these blessings to his followers in the here and now. The promise that we 'shall see God' may sound like a reference to the final 'beatific vision', and no doubt includes it. But we already begin to see God in this life both in the person of his Christ² and with spiritual vision. We even begin to 'inherit the earth' in this life since if we are Christ's all things are already ours, 'whether ... the world or life or death or the present or the future'.⁴

So then the promises of Jesus in the beatitudes have both a present and a future fulfilment. We enjoy the firstfruits now; the full harvest is yet to come. And, as Professor Tasker rightly points out, 'The future tense ... emphasizes their certainty and not merely their futurity. The mourners will *indeed* be comforted, etc.'

This brings us to a further question about the 'blessings' Jesus promised. It is a problem we cannot avoid. Do not the beatitudes teach a doctrine of salvation by human merit and good works, which is incompatible with the gospel? Does not Jesus state clearly, for example, that the merciful will obtain mercy and the pure in heart will see God? And does not this imply that it is by showing mercy that we win mercy and by becoming pure in heart that we attain the vision of God?

Some interpreters have boldly argued this very thesis. They have tried to represent the Sermon on the Mount as nothing but a thinly Christianized form of the Old Testament law and of the ethics of Judaism. Here is Jesus the Rabbi, Jesus the lawgiver, they say, issuing commandments, expecting obedience and promising salvation to those who respond. Probably the most forthright exponent of this view has been Hans Windisch in his *The meaning of the Sermon on the Mount* (1929). He puts his emphasis on 'historical exegesis' and rejects what he calls 'Paulinizing exegesis', by which he means trying to interpret the Sermon in a way which harmonizes with Paul's gospel of grace. In his view this cannot be done: 'From the standpoint of Paul, Luther and Calvin the soteriology of the Sermon on the Mount is irredeemably heretical.' In other words, it preaches the law not the gospel, and offers righteousness by works not by faith. So 'there is a gulf here between Jesus and Paul that no art of theological exegesis can bridge'.³ H. Windisch goes even further. He speculates that Paul's emphasis on free salvation had led many to regard good works as superfluous, and that Matthew deliberately composed the Sermon on the Mount as a kind of anti-Pauline tract!⁴

It is this same fear that the promises of the Sermon on the Mount depend for their fulfilment on human merit that led J. N. Darby to relegate them to the future 'kingdom age'. His dispensationalism was popularized by the Scofield Reference Bible (1909) which, commenting on 5:2, calls the Sermon 'pure law', although conceding that its principles have 'a beautiful moral application to the Christian'.

But both the speculations of H. Windisch and the fears of the dispensationalists are groundless. Indeed, the very first beatitude proclaims salvation by grace not works, for it pledges the kingdom of God to 'the poor in spirit', that is, to people who are so spiritually poverty-stricken

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that they have nothing in the way of merit to offer. The reader can guess with what hot indignation Luther repudiated the suggestion made by some in his day that the Sermon on the Mount teaches salvation by merit! He added to his exposition a long ten-page Postscript in order to counter this monstrous idea. In it he castigated 'those silly false preachers' who 'have drawn the conclusion that we enter the kingdom of heaven and are saved by our own works and actions'. This 'abomination of the sophists' so turns the gospel upside down, he declares, that it 'amounts to throwing the roof to the ground, upsetting the foundation, building salvation on mere water, hurling Christ from his throne completely and putting our works in his place'.²

How, then, can we explain the expressions which Jesus used in the beatitudes, indeed his whole emphasis in the Sermon on righteousness? The correct answer seems to be that the Sermon on the Mount as a kind of 'new law', like the old law, has two divine purposes, both of which Luther himself clearly understood. First, it shows the non-Christian that he cannot please God by himself (because he cannot obey the law) and so directs him to Christ to be justified. Secondly, it shows the Christian who has been to Christ for justification how to live so as to please God. More simply, as both the Reformers and the Puritans used to summarize it, the law sends us to Christ to be justified, and Christ sends us back to the law to be sanctified.

There can be no doubt that the Sermon on the Mount has on many people the first effect just noted. As they read it, it drives them to despair. They see in it an unattainable ideal. How can they develop this heart-righteousness, turn the other cheek, love their enemies? It is impossible. Exactly! In this sense, the Sermon is 'Mosissimus Moses' (Luther's expression); 'It is Moses quadrupled, Moses multiplied to the highest degree', because it is a law of inward righteousness which no child of Adam can possibly obey. It can therefore only condemn us and make the forgiveness of Christ indispensable. May we not say that this was a part of the Sermon's purpose? It is true that Jesus does not explicitly say so, unless it be in the first beatitude as already mentioned. But the implication is there throughout the new law just as much as it is in the old.

Luther is even more clear about the second purpose of the Sermon: 'Christ is saying nothing in this Sermon about how we become Christians, but only about the works and fruit that no one can do unless he already is a Christian and in a state of grace.'² The whole Sermon in fact presupposes an acceptance of the gospel (as Chrysostom and Augustine had understood), an experience of conversion and new birth, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. It describes the kind of people reborn Christians are (or should be). So the beatitudes set forth the blessings which God bestows (not as a reward for merit but as a gift of grace) upon those in whom he is working such a character.

Professor Jeremias, who refers to the first explanation ('the theory of the impossible ideal') as 'Lutheran orthodoxy'³ and does not mention that Luther himself also gave this second explanation, suggests that the Sermon was used as 'an early Christian catechism' and therefore presupposes that the hearers were Christians already: 'It was preceded by the proclamation of the Gospel; and it was preceded by conversion, by being overpowered by the Good News.'⁴ Thus the Sermon 'is spoken to men who have already received forgiveness, who have found the pearl of great price, who have been invited to the wedding, who through their faith in Jesus belong to the new creation, to the new world of God'. In this sense, then, 'the Sermon on the Mount is not Law, but Gospel'. To make the difference between the two clear, he continues, one should avoid

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terms like 'Christian morality' and speak instead of 'lived faith', for 'then it is clearly stated that the gift of God precedes his demands'.⁶

Professor A. M. Hunter helpfully sets this matter in the context of the whole New Testament: 'The New Testament makes it clear that the early Church's message always ... had two aspects— one theological, the other ethical: (i) the Gospel which the apostles preached; and (ii) the Commandment, growing out of the Gospel, which they taught to those who accepted the Gospel. The Gospel was a declaration of what God, in his grace, had done for men through Christ; the Commandment was a statement of what God required from men who had become the objects of his gracious action.' The apostle Paul commonly divided his letters in this way, with first a doctrinal, then a practical section. 'But in this', A. M. Hunter continues, 'Paul was only doing what his Lord had done before him. Jesus not only proclaimed that the kingdom of God had come with himself and his work; he also set before his disciples the moral ideal of that kingdom ... It is the ideal adumbrated in the Sermon on the Mount.'

To sum up these three introductory points relating to the beatitudes, we may say that the people described are the generality of Christian disciples, at least in the ideal; that the qualities commended are spiritual qualities; and that the blessing promised (as an unearned free gift) is the gloriously comprehensive blessing of God's rule, tasted now and consummated later, including the inheritance of both earth and heaven, comfort, satisfaction and mercy, the vision and the sonship of God.

We are ready now to look at the beatitudes in detail. Various classifications have been attempted. They are certainly not a random catalogue but, in Chrysostom's words, 'a sort of golden chain'.³ Perhaps the simplest division is to see the first four as describing the Christian's relation to God, and the second four his relations and duties to his fellow men.

1. The poor in spirit (3)

It has already been mentioned that the Old Testament supplies the necessary background against which to interpret this beatitude. At first to be 'poor' meant to be in literal, material need. But gradually, because the needy had no refuge but God, 'poverty' came to have spiritual overtones and to be identified with humble dependence on God. Thus the psalmist designated himself 'this poor man' who cried out to God in his need, 'and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles'.⁵ The 'poor man' in the Old Testament is one who is both afflicted and unable to save himself, and who therefore looks to God for salvation, while recognizing that he has no claim upon him. This kind of spiritual poverty is specially commended in Isaiah. It is 'the poor and needy', who 'seek water and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst', for whom God promises to 'open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys', and to 'make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water'. The 'poor' are also described as people with 'a contrite and humble spirit'; to them God looks and with them (though he is 'the high and lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy') he is pleased to dwell.² It is to such that the Lord's anointed would proclaim good tidings of salvation, a prophecy which Jesus consciously fulfilled in the Nazareth synagogue: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.' Further, the rich tended to compromise

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with surrounding heathenism; it was the poor who remained faithful to God. So wealth and worldliness, poverty and godliness went together.

Thus, to be 'poor in spirit' is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty, indeed our spiritual bankruptcy, before God. For we are sinners, under the holy wrath of God, and deserving nothing but the judgment of God. We have nothing to offer, nothing to plead, nothing with which to buy the favour of heaven.

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to thee for dress;
Helpless, look to thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

This is the language of the poor in spirit. We do not belong anywhere except alongside the publican in Jesus' parable, crying out with downcast eyes, 'God, be merciful to me a sinner!' As Calvin wrote: 'He only who is reduced to nothing in himself, and relies on the mercy of God, is *poor in spirit*.'

To such, and only to such, the kingdom of God is given. For God's rule which brings salvation is a gift as absolutely free as it is utterly undeserved. It has to be received with the dependent humility of a little child. Thus, right at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contradicted all human judgments and all nationalistic expectations of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is given to the poor, not the rich; the feeble, not the mighty; to little children humble enough to accept it, not to soldiers who boast that they can obtain it by their own prowess. In our Lord's own day it was not the Pharisees who entered the kingdom, who thought they were rich, so rich in merit that they thanked God for their attainments; nor the Zealots who dreamed of establishing the kingdom by blood and sword; but publicans and prostitutes, the rejects of human society, who knew they were so poor they could offer nothing and achieve nothing. All they could do was to cry to God for mercy; and he heard their cry.

Perhaps the best later example of the same truth is the nominal church of Laodicea to whom John was directed to send a letter from the glorified Christ. He quoted their complacent words, and added his own assessment of them: 'You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.' This visible church, for all its Christian profession, was not truly Christian at all. Self-satisfied and superficial, it was composed (according to Jesus) of blind and naked beggars. But the tragedy was they would not admit it. They were rich, not poor, in spirit.

Still today the indispensable condition of receiving the kingdom of God is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty. God still sends the rich away empty. As C. H. Spurgeon expressed it, 'The way to rise in the kingdom is to sink in ourselves.'

2. Those who mourn (4)

One might almost translate this second beatitude 'Happy are the unhappy' in order to draw attention to the startling paradox it contains. What kind of sorrow can it be which brings the joy

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of Christ's blessing to those who feel it? It is plain from the context that those here promised comfort are not primarily those who mourn the loss of a loved one, but those who mourn the loss of their innocence, their righteousness, their self-respect. It is not the sorrow of bereavement to which Christ refers, but the sorrow of repentance.

This is the second stage of spiritual blessing. It is one thing to be spiritually poor and acknowledge it; it is another to grieve and to mourn over it. Or, in more theological language, confession is one thing, contrition is another.

We need, then, to observe that the Christian life, according to Jesus, is not all joy and laughter. Some Christians seem to imagine that, especially if they are filled with the Spirit, they must wear a perpetual grin on their face and be continuously boisterous and bubbly. How unbiblical can one become? No. In Luke's version of the Sermon Jesus added to this beatitude a solemn woe: 'Woe to you that laugh now.' The truth is that there are such things as Christian tears, and too few of us ever weep them.

Jesus wept over the sins of others, over their bitter consequences in judgment and death, and over the impenitent city which would not receive him. We too should weep more over the evil in the world, as did the godly men of biblical times. 'My eyes shed streams of tears,' the psalmist could say to God, 'because men do not keep thy law.' Ezekiel heard God's faithful people described as those 'who sigh and groan over all the abominations that are committed in (Jerusalem)'.³ And Paul wrote of the false teachers troubling the churches of his day: 'Many, of whom I ... now tell you even with tears, live as enemies of the cross of Christ.'

It is not only the sins of others, however, which should cause us tears; for we have our own sins to weep over as well. Have they never caused us any grief? Was Cranmer exaggerating when in his 1662 Holy Communion service he put into the lips of church people the words, 'We acknowledge *and bewail* our manifold sins and wickedness'? Was Ezra mistaken to pray and make confession, 'weeping and casting himself down before the house of God'? Was Paul wrong to groan, 'Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?', and to write to the sinful church of Corinth: 'Ought you not rather to mourn?'⁶ I think not. I fear that we evangelical Christians, by making much of grace, sometimes thereby make light of sin. There is not enough sorrow for sin among us. We should experience more 'godly grief' of Christian penitence, like that sensitive and Christ-like eighteenth-century missionary to the American Indians David Brainerd, who wrote in his journal on 18 October 1740: 'In my morning devotions my soul was exceedingly melted, and bitterly mourned over my exceeding sinfulness and vileness.' Tears like this are the holy water which God is said to store in his bottle.

Such mourners, who bewail their own sinfulness, will be comforted by the only comfort which can relieve their distress, namely the free forgiveness of God. 'The greatest of all comfort is the absolution pronounced upon every contrite mourning sinner.' 'Consolation' according to the Old Testament prophets was to be one of the offices of the Messiah. He was to be 'the Comforter' who would 'bind up the brokenhearted'.⁴ That is why godly men like Simeon were said to be looking and longing 'for the consolation of Israel'. And Christ does pour oil into our wounds and speak peace to our sore, scarred consciences. Yet still we mourn over the havoc of suffering and death which sin spreads throughout the world. For only in the final state of glory will Christ's comfort be complete, for only then will sin be no more and 'God will wipe away every tear from their eyes'.⁶

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3. The meek (5)

The Greek adjective *praüs* means 'gentle', 'humble', 'considerate', 'courteous', and therefore exercising the self-control without which these qualities would be impossible. Although we rightly recoil from the image of our Lord as 'gentle Jesus, meek and mild', because it conjures up a picture of him as weak and effeminate, yet he described himself as 'gentle (*praüs*) and lowly in heart' and Paul referred to his 'meekness and gentleness'. So, linguistically speaking, the NEB is quite correct to refer in this beatitude to 'those of a gentle spirit'. But what sort of gentleness is it, on account of which those who have it are pronounced blessed?

It seems important to note that in the beatitudes 'the meek' come between those who mourn over sin and those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. The particular form of meekness which Christ requires in his disciples will surely have something to do with this sequence. I believe Dr Lloyd-Jones is right to emphasize that this meekness denotes a humble and gentle attitude to others which is determined by a true estimate of ourselves. He points out that it is comparatively easy to be honest with ourselves before God and acknowledge ourselves to be sinners in his sight. He goes on: 'But how much more difficult it is to allow *other people* to say things like that about me! I instinctively resent it. We all of us prefer to condemn ourselves than to allow somebody else to condemn us.'

For example, if I may apply this principle to everyday ecclesiastical practice: I myself am quite happy to recite the General Confession in church and call myself a 'miserable sinner'. It causes me no great problem. I can take it in my stride. But let somebody else come up to me after church and call me a miserable sinner, and I want to punch him on the nose! In other words, I am not prepared to allow other people to think or speak of me what I have just acknowledged before God that I am. There is a basic hypocrisy here; there always is when meekness is absent.

Dr Lloyd-Jones sums it up admirably: 'Meekness is essentially a true view of oneself, expressing itself in attitude and conduct with respect to others ... The man who is truly meek is the one who is truly amazed that God and man can think of him as well as they do and treat him as well as they do.'² This makes him gentle, humble, sensitive, patient in all his dealings with others.

These 'meek' people, Jesus added, 'shall inherit the earth'. One would have expected the opposite. One would think that 'meek' people get nowhere because everybody ignores them or else rides roughshod over them and tramples them underfoot. It is the tough, the overbearing who succeed in the struggle for existence; weaklings go to the wall. Even the children of Israel had to fight for their inheritance, although the Lord their God gave them the promised land. But the condition on which we enter our spiritual inheritance in Christ is not might but meekness, for, as we have already seen, everything is ours if we are Christ's.

Such was the confidence of holy and humble men of God in Old Testament days when the wicked seemed to triumph. It was never expressed more aptly than in Psalm 37, which Jesus seems to have been quoting in the beatitudes: 'Fret not yourself because of the wicked ... The meek shall possess the land ... Those blessed by the Lord shall possess the land ... Wait for the Lord, and keep to his way, and he will exalt you to possess the land; you will look on the destruction of the wicked.' The same principle operates today. The godless may boast and throw their weight about, yet real possession eludes their grasp. The meek, on the other hand, although

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they may be deprived and disenfranchised by men, yet because they know what it is to live and reign with Christ, can enjoy and even 'possess' the earth, which belongs to Christ. Then on the day of 'the regeneration' there will be 'new heavens and a new earth' for them to inherit.³ Thus the way of Christ is different from the way of the world, and every Christian even if he is like Paul in 'having nothing' can yet describe himself as 'possessing everything'. As Rudolf Stier put it, 'Self-renunciation is the way to world-dominion.'

4. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (6)

Already in the Virgin Mary's song, the Magnificat, the spiritually poor and the spiritually hungry have been associated, and both have been declared blessed. For God 'has filled the *hungry* with good things, and the *rich* he has sent empty away'. This general principle is here particularized. The hungry and thirsty whom God satisfies are those who 'hunger and thirst for righteousness'. Such spiritual hunger is a characteristic of all God's people, whose supreme ambition is not material but spiritual. Christians are not like pagans, engrossed in the pursuit of possessions; what they have set themselves to 'seek first' is God's kingdom and righteousness.⁷

Righteousness in the Bible has at least three aspects: legal, moral and social.

Legal righteousness is justification, a right relationship with God. The Jews 'pursued righteousness', Paul wrote later, but failed to attain it because they pursued it in the wrong way. They sought 'to establish their own' righteousness and 'did not submit to God's righteousness', which is Christ himself. Some commentators have seen such a reference here, but this is scarcely possible since Jesus is addressing those who already belong to him.

Moral righteousness is that righteousness of character and conduct which pleases God. Jesus goes on after the beatitudes to contrast this Christian righteousness with pharisaic righteousness (20). The latter was an external conformity to rules; the former is an inner righteousness of heart, mind and motive. For this we should hunger and thirst.

It would be a mistake to suppose, however, that the biblical word 'righteousness' means only a right relationship with God on the one hand and a moral righteousness of character and conduct on the other. For biblical righteousness is more than a private and personal affair; it includes social righteousness as well. And social righteousness, as we learn from the law and the prophets, is concerned with seeking man's liberation from oppression, together with the promotion of civil rights, justice in the law courts, integrity in business dealings and honour in home and family affairs. Thus Christians are committed to hunger for righteousness in the whole human community as something pleasing to a righteous God.

Luther expressed this concept with his customary vigour: 'The command to you is not to crawl into a corner or into the desert, but to run out, if that is where you have been, and to offer your hands and your feet and your whole body, and to wager everything you have and can do.' What is required, he goes on, is 'a hunger and thirst for righteousness that can never be curbed or stopped or sated, one that looks for nothing and cares for nothing except the accomplishment and maintenance of the right, despising everything that hinders this end. If you cannot make the world completely pious, then do what you can.'²

There is perhaps no greater secret of progress in Christian living than a healthy, hearty spiritual appetite. Again and again Scripture addresses its promises to the hungry. God 'satisfies

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him who is thirsty, and the hungry he fills with good things'. If we are conscious of slow growth, is the reason that we have a jaded appetite? It is not enough to mourn over past sin; we must also hunger for future righteousness.

Yet in this life our hunger will never be fully satisfied, nor our thirst fully quenched. True, we receive the satisfaction which the beatitude promises. But our hunger is satisfied only to break out again. Even the promise of Jesus that whoever drinks of the water he gives 'will never thirst' is fulfilled only if we keep drinking. Beware of those who claim to have attained, and who look to past experience rather than to future development! Like all the qualities included in the beatitudes, hunger and thirst are perpetual characteristics of the disciples of Jesus, as perpetual as poverty of spirit, meekness and mourning. Not till we reach heaven will we 'hunger no more, neither thirst any more', for only then will Christ our Shepherd lead us 'to springs of living water'.³

More than this, God has promised a day of judgment, in which right will triumph and wrong be overthrown, and after which there will be 'new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells'. For this final vindication of the right we also long, and we shall not be disappointed.

Looking back, we can see that the first four beatitudes reveal a spiritual progression of relentless logic. Each step leads to the next and presupposes the one that has gone before. To begin with, we are to be 'poor in spirit', acknowledging our complete and utter spiritual bankruptcy before God. Next we are to 'mourn' over the cause of it, our sins, yes, and our sin too—the corruption of our fallen nature, and the reign of sin and death in the world. Thirdly, we are to be 'meek', humble and gentle towards others, allowing our spiritual poverty (admitted and bewailed) to condition our behaviour to them as well as to God. And fourthly we are to 'hunger and thirst for righteousness'. For what is the use of confessing and lamenting our sin, of acknowledging the truth about ourselves to both God and men, if we leave it there? Confession of sin must lead to hunger for righteousness.

In the second half of the beatitudes (the last four) we seem to turn even more from our attitude to God to our attitude to our fellow human beings. Certainly the 'merciful' show mercy to men, and 'peacemakers' seek to reconcile men to each other, and those who are 'persecuted' are persecuted by men. It seems likely therefore that the sincerity denoted by being 'pure in heart' also concerns our attitude and relation to our fellow human beings.

5. The merciful (7)

'Mercy' is compassion for people in need. Richard Lenski helpfully distinguishes it from 'grace': 'The noun *eleos* (mercy) ... always deals with what we see of pain, misery and distress, these results of sin; and *charis* (grace) always deals with the sin and guilt itself. The one extends relief, the other pardon; the one cures, heals, helps, the other cleanses and reinstates.'

Jesus does not specify the categories of people he has in mind to whom his disciples are to show mercy. He gives no indication whether he is thinking primarily of those overcome by disaster, like the traveller from Jerusalem to Jericho whom robbers assaulted and to whom the good Samaritan 'showed mercy', or of the hungry, the sick and the outcast on whom he himself regularly took pity, or of those who wrong us so that justice cries out for punishment but mercy

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for forgiveness. There was no need for Jesus to elaborate. Our God is a merciful God and shows mercy continuously; the citizens of his kingdom must show mercy too.

Of course the world (at least when it is true to its own nature) is unmerciful, as indeed also the church in its worldliness has often been. The world prefers to insulate itself against the pains and calamities of men. It finds revenge delicious, and forgiveness, by comparison, tame. But those who show mercy find it. 'How blest are those who show mercy; mercy shall be shown to them' (NEB). The same truth is echoed in the next chapter: 'If you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father also will forgive you.'² This is not because we can merit mercy by mercy or forgiveness by forgiveness, but because we cannot receive the mercy and forgiveness of God unless we repent, and we cannot claim to have repented of *our* sins if we are unmerciful towards the sins of *others*. Nothing moves us to forgive like the wondering knowledge that we have ourselves been forgiven. Nothing proves more clearly that we have been forgiven than our own readiness to forgive. To forgive and to be forgiven, to show mercy and to receive mercy: these belong indissolubly together, as Jesus illustrated in his parable of the unmerciful servant. Or, interpreted in the context of the beatitudes, it is 'the meek' who are also 'the merciful'. For to be meek is to acknowledge to others that *we* are sinners; to be merciful is to have compassion on others, for *they* are sinners too.

6. The pure in heart (8)

It is immediately obvious that the words 'in heart' indicate the kind of purity to which Jesus is alluding, as the words 'in spirit' indicated the kind of poverty he meant. The 'poor in spirit' are the spiritually poor as distinct from those whose poverty is only material. From whom, then, are 'the pure in heart' being distinguished?

The popular interpretation is to regard purity of heart as an expression for inward purity, for the quality of those who have been cleansed from moral—as opposed to ceremonial—defilement. And there is good biblical precedent for this, especially in the Psalms. It was recognized that no-one could ascend the Lord's hill or stand in his holy place unless he had 'clean hands and a pure heart'. So David, conscious that his Lord desired 'truth in the inward being', could pray, 'Teach me wisdom in my secret heart,' and, 'Create in me a clean heart, O God.' Jesus took up this theme in his controversy with the Pharisees and complained about their obsession with external, ceremonial purity. 'You Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the dish, but inside you are full of extortion and wickedness.' They were 'like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness'.³

Luther gave this distinction between inward and outward purity a characteristically earthy turn. For he contrasted purity of heart not only with ceremonial defilement, but also with actual physical dirt. 'Christ ... wants to have the heart pure, though outwardly the person may be a drudge in the kitchen, black, sooty, and grimy, doing all sorts of dirty work.' Again, 'Though a common labourer, a shoemaker or a blacksmith may be dirty and sooty or may smell because he is covered with dirt and pitch, ... and though he stinks outwardly, inwardly he is pure incense before God' because he ponders the word of God in his heart and obeys it.²

This emphasis on the inward and moral, whether contrasted with the outward and ceremonial or the outward and physical, is certainly consistent with the whole Sermon on the

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Mount which requires heart-righteousness rather than mere rule-righteousness. Nevertheless, in the context of the other beatitudes, 'purity of heart' seems to refer in some sense to our relationships. Professor Tasker defines the pure in heart as 'the single-minded, who are free from the tyranny of a divided self'.³ In this case the pure heart is the single heart and prepares the way for the 'single eye' which Jesus mentions in the next chapter.

More precisely, the primary reference is to sincerity. Already in the verses of Psalm 24 quoted above, the person with 'clean hands and a pure heart' is one 'who does not lift up his soul to what is false (*sc.* an idol), and does not swear deceitfully' (4). That is, in his relations with both God and man he is free from falsehood. So the pure in heart are 'the utterly sincere' (JBP). Their whole life, public and private, is transparent before God and men. Their very heart—including their thoughts and motives—is pure, unmixed with anything devious, ulterior or base. Hypocrisy and deceit are abhorrent to them; they are without guile.

Yet how few of us live one life and live it in the open! We are tempted to wear a different mask and play a different role according to each occasion. This is not reality but play-acting, which is the essence of hypocrisy. Some people weave round themselves such a tissue of lies that they can no longer tell which part of them is real and which is make-believe. Alone among men Jesus Christ was absolutely pure in heart, being entirely guileless.

Only the pure in heart will see God, see him now with the eye of faith and see his glory in the hereafter, for only the utterly sincere can bear the dazzling vision in whose light the darkness of deceit must vanish and by whose fire all shams are burned up.

7. The peacemakers (9)

The sequence of thought from purity of heart to peacemaking is natural, because one of the most frequent causes of conflict is intrigue, while openness and sincerity are essential to all true reconciliation.

Every Christian, according to this beatitude, is meant to be a peacemaker both in the community and in the church. True, Jesus was to say later that he had 'not come to bring peace, but a sword', for he had come 'to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law', so that a man's enemies would be 'those of his own household'. And what he meant by this was that conflict would be the inevitable result of his coming, even in one's own family, and that, if we are to be worthy of him, we must love him best and put him first, above even our nearest and dearest relatives.² It is clear beyond question throughout the teaching of Jesus and his apostles, however, that we should never ourselves seek conflict or be responsible for it. On the contrary, we are called to peace, we are actively to 'pursue' peace, we are to 'strive for peace with all men', and so far as it depends on us, we are to 'live peaceably with all'.

Now peacemaking is a divine work. For peace means reconciliation, and God is the author of peace and of reconciliation. Indeed, the very same verb which is used in this beatitude of us is applied by the apostle Paul to what God has done through Christ. Through Christ God was pleased 'to reconcile to himself all things, ... *making peace* by the blood of his cross'. And Christ's purpose was to 'create in himself one new man in place of the two (*sc.* Jew and Gentile), so *making peace*'. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the particular blessing which attaches to peacemakers is

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that 'they shall be called sons of God'. For they are seeking to do what their Father has done, loving people with his love, as Jesus is soon to make explicit.⁵ It is the devil who is a troublemaker; it is God who loves reconciliation and who now through his children, as formerly through his only begotten Son, is bent on making peace.

This will remind us that the words 'peace' and 'appeasement' are not synonyms. For the peace of God is not peace at any price. He made peace with us at immense cost, even at the price of the life-blood of his only Son. We too—though in our lesser ways—will find peacemaking a costly enterprise. Dietrich Bonhoeffer has made us familiar with the concept of 'cheap grace';¹ there is such a thing as 'cheap peace' also. To proclaim 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace, is the work of the false prophet, not the Christian witness. Many examples could be given of peace through pain. When we are ourselves involved in a quarrel, there will be either the pain of apologizing to the person we have injured or the pain of rebuking the person who has injured us. Sometimes there is the nagging pain of having to refuse to forgive the guilty party until he repents. Of course a cheap peace can be bought by cheap forgiveness. But true peace and true forgiveness are costly treasures. God forgives us only when we repent. Jesus told us to do the same: 'If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him.' How can we forgive an injury when it is neither admitted nor regretted?

Or again, we may not be personally involved in a dispute, but may find ourselves struggling to reconcile to each other two people or groups who are estranged and at variance with each other. In this case there will be the pain of listening, of ridding ourselves of prejudice, of striving sympathetically to understand both the opposing points of view, and of risking misunderstanding, ingratitude or failure.

Other examples of peacemaking are the work of reunion and the work of evangelism, that is, seeking on the one hand to unite churches and on the other to bring sinners to Christ. In both these, true reconciliation can be degraded into cheap peace. The visible unity of the church is a proper Christian quest, but only if unity is not sought at the expense of doctrine. Jesus prayed for the oneness of his people. He also prayed that they might be kept from evil and in truth. We have no mandate from Christ to seek unity without purity, purity of both doctrine and conduct. If there is such a thing as 'cheap reunion', there is 'cheap evangelism' also, namely the proclamation of the gospel without the cost of discipleship, the demand for faith without repentance. These are forbidden short cuts. They turn the evangelist into a fraud. They cheapen the gospel and damage the cause of Christ.

8. Those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake (10–12)

It may seem strange that Jesus should pass from peacemaking to persecution, from the work of reconciliation to the experience of hostility. Yet however hard we may try to make peace with some people, they refuse to live at peace with us. Not all attempts at reconciliation succeed. Indeed, some take the initiative to oppose us, and in particular to 'revile' or slander us. This is not because of our foibles or idiosyncracies, but 'for righteousness' sake' (10) and 'on my account' (11), that is, because they find distasteful the righteousness for which we hunger and thirst (6), and because they have rejected the Christ we seek to follow. Persecution is simply the clash between two irreconcilable value-systems.

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How did Jesus expect his disciples to react under persecution? Verse 12: *Rejoice and be glad!* We are not to retaliate like an unbeliever, nor to sulk like a child, nor to lick our wounds in self-pity like a dog, nor just to grin and bear it like a Stoic, still less to pretend we enjoy it like a masochist. What then? We are to rejoice as a Christian should rejoice and even to 'leap for joy'. Why so? Partly because, Jesus added, *your reward is great in heaven (12a)*. We may lose everything on earth, but we shall inherit everything in heaven—not as a reward for merit, however, because 'the promise of the reward is free'. Partly because persecution is a token of genuineness, a certificate of Christian authenticity, *for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you (12b)*. If we are persecuted today, we belong to a noble succession. But the major reason why we should rejoice is because we are suffering, he said, *on my account (11)*, on account of our loyalty to him and to his standards of truth and righteousness. Certainly the apostles learnt this lesson well for, having been beaten and threatened by the Sanhedrin, 'they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonour for the name'. They knew, as we should, that 'wounds and hurts are medals of honour'.⁴

It is important to notice that this reference to persecution is a beatitude like the rest. Indeed, it has the distinction of being a double beatitude, for Jesus first stated it in the third person like the other seven (*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, 10*) and then repeated it in the direct speech of the second person (*Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you ..., 11*). Since all the beatitudes describe what every Christian disciple is intended to be, we conclude that the condition of being despised and rejected, slandered and persecuted, is as much a normal mark of Christian discipleship as being pure in heart or merciful. Every Christian is to be a peacemaker, and every Christian is to expect opposition. Those who hunger for righteousness will suffer for the righteousness they crave. Jesus said so both here and elsewhere. So did his apostles Peter and Paul. It has been so in every age. We should not be surprised if anti-Christian hostility increases, but rather be surprised if it does not. We need to remember the complementary woe which Luke records: 'Woe to you, when all men speak well of you.' Universal popularity was as much the lot of the false prophets as persecution was of the true.

Few men of this century have understood better the inevitability of suffering than Dietrich Bonhoeffer. He seems never to have wavered in his Christian antagonism to the Nazi regime, although it meant for him imprisonment, the threat of torture, danger to his own family and finally death. He was executed by the direct order of Heinrich Himmler in April 1945 in the Flossenburg concentration camp, only a few days before it was liberated. It was the fulfilment of what he had always believed and taught: 'Suffering, then, is the badge of true discipleship. The disciple is not above his master. Following Christ means *passio passiva*, suffering because we have to suffer. That is why Luther reckoned suffering among the marks of the true Church, and one of the memoranda drawn up in preparation for the Augsburg Confession similarly defines the Church as the community of those "who are persecuted and martyred for the gospel's sake" ... Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer. In fact, it is a joy and a token of his grace.'

The beatitudes paint a comprehensive portrait of a Christian disciple. We see him first alone on his knees before God, acknowledging his spiritual poverty and mourning over it. This makes him meek or gentle in all his relationships, since honesty compels him to allow others to think of

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him what before God he confesses himself to be. Yet he is far from acquiescing in his sinfulness, for he hungers and thirsts after righteousness, longing to grow in grace and in goodness.

We see him next with others, out in the human community. His relationship with God does not cause him to withdraw from society, nor is he insulated from the world's pain. On the contrary, he is in the thick of it, showing mercy to those battered by adversity and sin. He is transparently sincere in all his dealings and seeks to play a constructive role as a peacemaker. Yet he is not thanked for his efforts, but rather opposed, slandered, insulted and persecuted on account of the righteousness for which he stands and the Christ with whom he is identified.

Such is the man or woman who is 'blessed', that is, who has the approval of God and finds self-fulfilment as a human being.

Yet in all this the values and standards of Jesus are in direct conflict with the commonly accepted values and standards of the world. The world judges the rich to be blessed, not the poor, whether in the material or in the spiritual sphere; the happy-go-lucky and carefree, not those who take evil so seriously that they mourn over it; the strong and brash, not the meek and gentle; the full not the hungry; those who mind their own business, not those who meddle in other men's matters and occupy their time in do-goodery like 'showing mercy' and 'making peace'; those who attain their ends even if necessary by devious means, not the pure in heart who refuse to compromise their integrity; those who are secure and popular, and live at ease, not those who have to suffer persecution.

Probably nobody has hated the 'softness' of the Sermon on the Mount more than Friedrich Nietzsche. Although the son and the grandson of Lutheran pastors, he rejected Christianity during his student days. His book *The anti-Christ* (a title he had dared to apply to himself in his autobiographical sketch *Ecce homo*) is his most violent anti-Christian polemic and was written in 1888, the year before he went mad. In it he defines what is 'good' as 'all that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man', and what is 'bad' as 'all that proceeds from weakness'. Consequently, in answer to his own question, 'What is more harmful than any vice?', he replies, 'Active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak—Christianity.'² He sees Christianity as a religion of pity instead of a religion of power; so 'nothing in our unhealthy modernity is more unhealthy than Christian pity.' He despises 'the Christian conception of God—God as God of the sick, God as spider, God as spirit'—a conception from which 'everything strong, brave, masterful, proud' has been eliminated.⁴ 'In the entire New Testament there is only *one* solitary figure one is obliged to respect,' he affirms, and that is Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor. Jesus, by contrast, he disdains as 'God on the cross', and Christianity as 'mankind's greatest misfortune.'⁶ The cause of his venom is plain. The ideal that Jesus commended is the little child. He lent no support whatever to Nietzsche's commendation of the 'superman'. So Nietzsche repudiated the whole value-system of Jesus. 'I *condemn* Christianity,' he wrote. 'The Christian church has left nothing untouched by its depravity, it has made of every value a disvalue.' Instead (in the last words of his book) he called for a 'revaluation of all values'.⁸

But Jesus will not compromise his standards to accommodate Nietzsche, or his followers, or any of us who may unconsciously have imbibed bits and pieces of Nietzsche's power-philosophy. In the beatitudes Jesus throws out a fundamental challenge to the non-Christian world and its outlook, and requires his disciples to adopt his altogether different set of values. As Thieliicke puts it, 'Anybody who enters into fellowship with Jesus must undergo a transvaluation of values.'⁹

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This is what Bonhoeffer (who incidentally was brought up in the same Lutheran tradition as Nietzsche) termed the 'extraordinariness' of the Christian life. 'With every beatitude', he wrote, 'the gulf is widened between the disciples and the people, and their call to come forth from the people becomes increasingly manifest.' It is particularly obvious in the blessing on mourners. Jesus 'means refusing to be in tune with the world or to accommodate oneself to its standards. Such men mourn for the world, for its guilt, its fate and its fortune. While the world keeps holiday they stand aside, and while the world sings "Gather ye rose-buds while ye may", they mourn. They see that for all the jollity on board, the ship is beginning to sink. The world dreams of progress, of power and of the future, but the disciples meditate on the end, the last judgment and the coming of the kingdom. To such heights the world cannot rise. And so the disciples are strangers in the world, unwelcome guests and disturbers of the peace. No wonder the world rejects them!'

Such a reversal of human values is basic to biblical religion. The ways of the God of Scripture appear topsy-turvy to men. For God exalts the humble and abases the proud, calls the first last and the last first, ascribes greatness to the servant, sends the rich away empty-handed and declares the meek to be his heirs. The culture of the world and the counter-culture of Christ are at loggerheads with each other. In brief, Jesus congratulates those whom the world most pities, and calls the world's rejects 'blessed'.¹

¹ John R. W. Stott and John R. W. Stott, [*The Message of the Sermon on the Mount \(Matthew 5-7\): Christian Counter-Culture*](#), The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 33–56.