

The Beatitudes

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Seeing the crowds, he went onto the mountain. And when he was seated his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, This is what he taught them:

How blessed are the poor in spirit:
the kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

Blessed are the gentle:
they shall have the earth as inheritance.

Blessed are those who mourn:
they shall be comforted.

Blessed are those who hunger and
thirst for uprightness:
they shall have their fill.

Blessed are the merciful:
they shall have mercy shown them.

Blessed are the pure in heart:
they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers:
*they shall be recognized as children of
God.*

Blessed are those who are
persecuted in the cause of
uprightness:
the kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

Matthew 5:1-10

***B**lessed are the poor in
spirit:
the kingdom of Heaven is
theirs.*

Luke's account of the Sermon the Plain also contains beatitudes. In Luke's account Jesus says, "How

blessed are you who are poor: the kingdom of God is yours." Luke's account deals with the state of actual poverty. It is addressed to those who are poor and tells them that they are blessed and that in the end, they and not the rich will be in Heaven with God. It is a typical message to those who have little, especially in a culture in which possession of this world's goods was taken as a sign of God's blessing. I think Luke's account is meant to say to those who the world counts as marginal that they too are blessed. In fact, they are more blessed than those who are rich. The story of Lazarus makes this same point.

Matthew's beatitude, however, says "poor in spirit" and thus applies to everyone, for everyone can be poor in spirit. It is possible to be rich and be poor in spirit, and it is possible to be poor but not be poor in spirit.

I believe this is similar to Eric Fromm's insight about the fundamental orientations from which we each must choose: to have or to be. A fundamental having orientation means that our attitude towards the things of this world is one of ownership, control, consumption, accumulation. This applies equally to things and to ideas, the regard of others, nature, beauty, holiness. If we seek to own and control these things and qualities, we are acting out of a having orientation. Whether we have them or not is irrelevant. I may not have many insightful, intelligent ideas but if I desire them,

envy those who have them, and fixate on gaining them, then I am acting out of a having orientation.

I may not be rich and wealthy but if I use more of God's creation than I need for my life, then I am acting out of a having orientation. Perhaps the worse case is someone who has a great deal and hoards it, accumulates it, keeps track of it, and imputes his value and that of others in relationship to how much he and others have. A person who buys land so that he may have a beautiful view which is thus denied to others and when that land is not necessary to his life is acting out of a having orientation. Counting anything obsessively is an indication that one is not "poor in spirit."

A being orientation, on the other hand, is one of joyful co-existence with God's creation. Creation is used appropriately to sustain life and to create beauty and joy. It is seen as a vital in its own right not just as it is useful to humans.

Being poor in spirit requires me to be attentive to all areas of my and to always assess the sufficiency of the resources which I use for my life. That determination of sufficiency must also take into account the objective poverty in the world around me and the extent to which my personal consumption patterns and that of my society contribute to the objective poverty which exists. How can my expenditures and consumption enhance a being orientation rather than a having orientation. Are there specific actions I can take which would reflect this beatitude in my daily life? Surely there are. The movement for

voluntary simplicity is consistent with this beatitude.

I need to remember that with God there is only now. The kingdom is then for me but always right now for God. The realities of the kingdom for those who are objectively poor must be worked for in the here and now. "Getting your pie in the by and by" is not reflective of this beatitude.

Questions for consideration:

- **Is my consumption based on a standard of reasonable sufficiency?**
- **Do I make expenditures that support individuals and companies that reflect a respectful attitude toward life and the earth?**
- **Do I regularly assess my possessions to see which ones are contributing to the life of my true self and which ones seem more related to my false self of illusions and delusions?**
- **Whenever possible, do I use rather than own? Libraries, renting, and borrowing are good examples.**
- **Do I contribute a reasonable amount to individuals and organizations that help the objectively poor? This requires discipline and information so that contributions have real impact on the daily lives of people in both the short and long term.**

***Blessed are the gentle:
they shall have the earth
as inheritance.***

Christ was gentle, patient, warm, personal, sensitive, and responsive. The essence of gentleness is a profound acceptance of your self as

valuable and thus a respect for the autonomy and freedom of all life. It is difficult to be gentle with someone else if I perceive them as having an impact on who I am or how others or myself perceive me. If the locus of my self-image is outside myself, I will have a difficult time being gentle, patient, warm, sensitive, and respectful of others.

I may have a facade of gentleness but use it to manipulate others into doing what I want them to do. This most often shows up as a passive-aggressive approach to people and reality. These are ego filled people who see the world through the glasses of narcissism. Every one and every thing exists in relationship to them. Nothing and no one has an independent existence. Thus they need to control everything and everyone if they are to survive.

We are to see people and things as God sees them, as Christ sees them. Every person and every thing is an expression, a reflection of God's life in concrete form. Human persons have a fundamental freedom that God respects even to their detriment. If we view other people in this way and keep a firm hold on our son ship with the Father, we can be gentle with everyone. It is only when we begin to see others as a reflection of our own self that we can begin to manipulate them, to control them. It has now become a matter of our life and death. Thus the key to gentleness is staying firmly in the loving embrace of the Father.

Perhaps the biggest challenge with this beatitude is honesty. There are times when we have to deliver bad news and difficult messages to

others. Somehow we must do this in a way which reflects gentleness rather than hardness and roughness. No matter how the other person may take the news, we must do it in a way that reflects our own sense of gentleness. Being gentle does not mean being dishonest with another. Distorting reality so that it is less harsh may seem gentle in the short run but Christ was always honest and straightforward and gentle. The key is to keep a firm hold on our son ship and thus a firm hold on our true self so that our ego does not become invested in people and things external to our self.

Questions for consideration:

- **Do I deliver difficult news with both honesty and gentleness?**
- **Do I use gentleness as a way of manipulating other people? Do I present the stance that I am so good and so gentle that other people must do what I want? This is not gentleness.**
- **Do I treat everyone with gentleness or only those who are powerful and than I am or only those with whom I interact in a more public setting? What about those who are less powerful than I: poor, sick, young, old, women, gay, lesbian, prisoners, criminals, enemies, employees at all levels, students, emotionally ill, developmentally disabled, less educated, less intelligent? Do I act one way in public and another in private?**

Blessed are all those who mourn: they shall be comforted.

To mourn is to grieve the loss of a person, typically a loved one or someone significant. Mourning suggests visible, public signs of grief and sorrow. In primitive cultures, a wife mourns the death of her husband in highly visible and emotional ways. At times she inflicts bodily wounds to cause her own blood to flow. She might cut her hair or otherwise disfigure herself as an indication of the depths of her grief and her despair that her life will ever again be as it was.

The Blessed Virgin mourned the loss of Jesus. She more than any other knew the meaning of his death and yet she also felt the loss, the powerlessness, the anguish of a parent who must watch her child publicly condemned, humiliated, and murdered. She must listen to the voices of those calling for his death, mocking him, and going along with the prevailing view. She knew that none of it was true, that Jesus is a person of deep spirituality, love, and compassion. She mourned; she mourns now.

No matter the cause or circumstance of death, the loss of a loved one is never justified, understandable, acceptable. It always pulls us into the despair of asking why when there is no answer. We all face this cause of mourning. Most especially, we face it with the death of parents, those who gave us life, who went before us on the path of life. We never really grow up until we face life without the sheltering image of our mother and father.

The beatitude calls us to mourn, to express fully and deeply our sense of loss and aloneness. We can do

this because we have faith that God will comfort us, not just make us feel better but strengthen us with faith, hope, and charity so that we feel fully the pain of loss, enfold it within his love and make it part of our life. Unless that happens, it remains death: death of our loved one and death of a part of our soul. We are to encourage and support those who have suffered loss to mourn that loss knowing that the Father will in fact comfort them.

In the spirit of the Matthean beatitudes, we should also be aware of the suffering and dying of all humans and of God's creation. The death of a rain forest, the starvation of children, the "disappearance" of political enemies, cynical terrorism in the name of God, persecution of those who are different, these are all events which we ought to mourn, not out of a morbid fixation on what is negative and depressing but as part of a realistic appraisal of how things really are. Our hope and faith is that God will comfort us in that mourning. But if we do not mourn these events, who will know that they have happened? Our mourning calls attention to the evil and loss in the world. This is especially important in a culture that denies death and uses consumption to insulate itself from the human and ecological tragedies throughout our world.

Questions for consideration:

- **Do I reach beyond my immediate experience of life to become aware of and mournful of the losses and death throughout God's creation? How do I mourn those losses in a way that**

helps my fellow citizens focus on those losses?

■ **Do I fully grieve my own personal losses, especially of parents and those with whom I was emotionally intimate? Can I trust in the comfort of the God enough to fully and deeply experience the loss and despair?**

■ **Do I comfort those who have experienced the loss of those close to them? My comforting of them--both empathy and encouragement--is the way in which the comfort of God is made manifest to them. Do I let my own personal discomfort keep me from expressing the love and support of God to those in whose lives I am present?**

*Blessed are those who
hunger and thirst for
uprightness:
they shall have their fill.*

First, we should note that Luke's beatitude about hunger deals with actual, physical hunger: "Blessed are you who are hungry now: you shall have your fill." As with the first beatitude, Matthew has added words, "and thirst for uprightness," that spiritualizes the concept and makes it applicable to all believers, not just those who are physically hungry. With Matthew, being physically hungry is not grounds for blessedness unless you also hunger and thirst for uprightness.

In older translations, the word "justice" was often used. To our contemporary ears, these words--justice, righteousness, uprightness--seem to connote behavior that is in

accord with a set of laws or commands. We are tempted to think that uprightness means living according to the commands of God. According to the sources I consulted, that would be a misreading of the text.

Uprightness appears throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. It is fundamentally a relational term that should be understood in light of the saving relationship between God and his people. In the Hebrew scriptures, God established a covenant between himself and the Jewish people. As part of this agreement, he was to save them and they were to obey his laws. Since the people did not keep their part of the covenant, the agreement was broken. The Law contained the demands of God as part of this covenant agreement. Once the agreement was broken, the Law could no longer save. Based on this, uprightness means fulfilling the relational responsibilities of the covenant.

God established a new covenant in Christ. The covenantal responsibilities for humans under this new covenant were three. First, we must recognize our sins and seek forgiveness from God, i.e., we must repent. Second, we are to recognize that we are saved by the mercy and grace of God not by our own acts, i.e., we must have faith. Third, we are to enter into the covenantal community of fellowship, i.e., we must love our neighbor as ourselves. As St. Paul often points out, it is not that we have a set of rules of love that we must follow but rather that the new life of Christ which comes from repentance and faith will naturally express itself as an

unselfish love of our neighbor. If we fulfill our covenantal responsibilities, God grants us salvation.

Thus in the New Testament, those who hunger and thirst after uprightness are those who repent of their sins, have faith in God's saving power, and love their neighbor as themselves. Neighbor here should be understood as all human beings as in the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Those who do these things will have their hunger and thirst satisfied by God, i.e., they will enter the kingdom.

Questions for consideration:

- **Do I acknowledge my sinfulness, in a healthy way? Am I aware of the basic dynamics in my personality and my humanity out of which sinful acts arise? Do I regularly acknowledge these acts and their impact on others in some ritual way? Do I ask God to forgive me for my sins?**
- **Do I rely on God's grace for salvation or do I think that I can earn my way into the Kingdom? Do I rely on God's grace or my idols of rectitude, being good, being productive, being successful?**
- **Do I love my enemies? Do I bless those who curse me? Can I see Christ in those who hate me and would do me harm? Can I forgive those who have hurt me through their sinful acts?**

*Blessed are the merciful:
they shall have mercy
shown them.*

We tend to think of mercy as opposed to justice. When someone is apprehended for breaking a law or exposed for breaking a rule, whoever is in power can treat them according to justice or mercy. If the first, one metes out the agreed upon punishment in a way that ensures that the punishment fits the crime. If the second, one gives a punishment that is less than justice would demand, perhaps no punishment at all.

This is very familiar to us but this is not the mercy Christ spoke of in the beatitudes. When blind and sick people called out to Christ to "have mercy on them," they were not asking him to give out a lesser punishment than they were due.

The Christian concept of mercy grows out of the Hebrew concept of the God's mercy. That concept has two components: God's feelings of kindness and sympathy for his people and God's actions to provide them relief from the difficulties in which they find themselves. In fact, God communicated his mercy almost always through acts rather than words of concern.

In the New Testament Greek, the word translated as merciful is from the Greek verb meaning to render aid and assistance. There is the component of the internal feeling of sympathy but there is also the essential notion of actions to aid and assist those who are in difficulty.

Thus those who are merciful are those who go to the aid of others in difficulty. Jesus says that God will come to the aid of those people,

which is to say that they will enter the Kingdom.

Questions for consideration:

- **Do I assist those in need in my community?**
- **Am I aware of those who are in need or difficulty in my community, especially those outside my face to face community?**
- **Do I use my influence and talents to work for changes in social, political, and economic systems that create difficulties for people, especially for those who do not have the power to speak or act effectively for themselves?**
- **Can I accept mercy when it is shown me by others?**
- **Do I assist individuals within my face to face community? Often this means interacting with those who seem out of place, withdrawn, depressed, and lonely.**

*Blessed are the pure in heart:
they shall see God.*

We often interpret this beatitude in terms of sexual morality but a much deeper concept is involved. The phrase "pure in heart" comes from the Hebrew concept of clean and unclean. According to the sources I consulted, unclean means to be contaminated with some impurity. A clean object or person is not contaminated with any impurity but is itself in an unadulterated form. Thus cleanness is understood as a negative state--the absence of contamination--while uncleanness is

seen as an active, malignant state. Thus in the Hebrew practice, anything or person that was contaminated or unclean could not be a part of the life or ritual of the people of God. Various purification rites existed to cleanse an unclean person or thing.

In the Christian writings, particularly of Paul, ritual uncleanness is not seen as part of the belief of Christians. The only uncleanness that matters is that of the heart and the contamination of the heart comes from sin. The heart was understood as the seat of what we would call the self. It was the source of consciousness, feelings, thought, personality: the sum total of what a person was. Thus for the heart to be unclean or impure meant that the person him or herself was contaminated by sin.

In Hebrew belief, one could not enter the temple, enter into the presence of God, in an unclean state. One could not see the face of God. While purification rituals solved that problem for the Hebrew, repentance and God's mercy solved it for the Christian. A person who is pure of heart is one who has no sin, who has repented of his sins and begged for God's forgiveness that is always given. Such a person can enter the temple, can see God's face, and can enter into the Kingdom.

In a similar sense, one who is pure in heart deals with the reality of his or her own nature and the nature of God and is not distracted by the unreality and illusions of idols. The pure in heart see the true reality of things and people because they

have no "hidden agenda;" they simply are.

Questions for consideration:

- **Do I deal with reality rather than illusions and delusions?**
- **Do I confront my sinfulness honestly and objectively and ask God's forgiveness?**
- **Do I regularly receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation to cleanse my consciousness of the impurities of sin and the illusions from which sin arises?**
- **Do I listen to others fully and completely without distracting myself by thinking up my response to them?**
- **Do I fully attend to the people and actions that engage me without being distracted by how people perceive what I am doing and saying?**

Blessed are the peacemakers: they shall be recognized as children of God.

In the Hebrew scripture, peace was the concept of wholeness and right relations between groups. Thus a peacemaker is one who reconciles those who are at odds or in conflict. A peacemaker is not just someone who spreads good will but one who becomes actively involved with those in conflict to reduce and eliminate that conflict.

[Thomas Merton](#) has helped me understand the dynamic of conflict and violence. It begins with the

perception of another person or group of persons as being different from me, not just other than me. The more one sees another person or group as different, the more likely we are to see them as posing some threat to our group or us. The longer we see them as posing a threat, the more likely we are to see them as an enemy. Once we identify someone as an enemy, we can justify taking action against them that in turn supports either physical or psychological violence.

A peacemaker is one who works to defeat that dynamic whether in its early or late stages. The work of a peacemaker is based on his or her understanding that there is a fundamental, irreducible unity among all people and all things. That unity is based on God and the incarnation of his son, Jesus. A peacemaker stresses what we share in common rather than the differences that set us apart. Yet, at the same time, he recognizes and validates the different cultures and traditions of people, not to separate but to do honor to the diversity of God's creation and to the imaginative power of humans. Forcing someone to "be like me" when they are not is a form of violence based on the dynamic of difference. A peacemaker will be able to recognize the differences and still lay hold of the more powerful and more fundamental unity.

Questions for consideration:

- **Do I look for common ground between people in a way that realistically recognizes their**

differences?

- Do I speak my discernment of unity and my evaluation of violence no matter how subtle?
- Do I evidence an empathetic understanding of the life circumstances of others?
- Am I open to the differences among people in a way that also recognizes and emphasizes the underlying unity among people?
- Do I focus on the issues that separate rather than the process of blaming?

Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of uprightness: the kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

To persecute people is to oppress them with ill treatment in order to get them to recant their beliefs and/or to dissuade others from joining them in their beliefs. Contemporary American Christians are unlikely to face physical harm or death for their beliefs. It is more likely that they will be ignored, ridiculed, and excluded by their peer group or society for their beliefs.

As used here, uprightness is the entire redemptive relationship with God through Christ: repentance, faith, and charity toward neighbor. Those who follow Christ and live in this upright or righteous manner will face persecution from the world. As Christ told his followers, we are in the world but not of the world. The world cannot tolerate those who act and speak in a manner that goes against its principles and

assumptions. A Christian must inevitably act and speak in such a way. Just as Christ was seen as a threat to the prevailing power and authority structure of his world, today's Christian will be seen in the same way.

Questions for consideration:

- Do I forthrightly live a Christian life?
- Do I hesitate to talk about my faith when appropriate and relevant?
- Do I make my spiritual motives apparent or do I settle for just and right actions?
- Do I try to serve two masters, to live in the world and try to be of the world and of the kingdom?