Introduction to the Beatitudes
Tony Hopkins

In the New Testament, "the Beatitudes" as a phrase generally refers to the sayings of Jesus which begin the Sermon on the Mount in Mt (5:3-11) and the Sermon on the Plain in Lk (6:20-23). In the Latin version of the Bible, the Vulgate, each of these sayings begins with the word *beatus*, which gives us the English word "beatitude." (The Greek word which begins each statement is *makarios*, so the sayings are sometimes called "makarisms.") Most English translations render the word as "blessed." The Good News Bible, which often looks for less technical terms in its translation, begins each beatitude with "happy." While we certainly see the connection between God's blessings and human happiness, the more traditional translation is probably better, precisely because it has a more spiritual connotation. When Jesus says, "Blessed are those who . . . ," the implications seems to be, "God's blessing rests upon those who . . . ," or "God's favor rests upon those who . . . ."

The beatitudes of Jesus, like many of his teachings and sayings, rest upon the foundation of the Hebrew scriptures, or Old Testament. There are more than forty beatitudes in the Old Testament; more than half of these are in the Psalms, and they are also prominent in the Wisdom Literature (Job, Ecclesiastes, and especially Proverbs). Not surprisingly, these blessings are connected to reverencing God; living righteously; doing justice; and showing mercy, especially to the poor and marginalized.

Because the Old Testament does not have a doctrine of afterlife, its beatitudes typically reflect the Reward and Retribution theology which is so common in the Old Testament. This view assumes that those who are obedient and faithful can expect God's blessings *in this life*, and those who are disobedient and unfaithful can expect God's chastisement *in this life*. Like the New Testament in general, the beatitudes of Jesus portray God's blessings as *eternal*. This life may well bring hardship for the faithful, but in the end, the faithful will know the fullness of God's blessings—blessings which transcend life and death in this world. Indeed, perhaps the first thing that strikes us about Jesus' beatitudes is the use of adjectives like poor, hungry, lowly, meek, mournful, and persecuted. In short, the beatitudes refer to people whom we do not typically think of blessed, fortunate, or happy. But this reversal is at the heart of the kingdom which Jesus inaugurates: the goal of life is not wealth or comfort or power; rather, it is (1) to live in a relationship with our Creator which (2) allows us to fulfill God's purpose for our lives. The collective realization of this purpose is what Jesus calls the *kingdom of God*, and it is recognizable when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

The last few sentences of the previous paragraph reflect the theology of the beatitudes in both Mt and Lk. In the both Gospels, the beatitudes suggest that life is theocentric: it focuses on God, who is both the source of life and the one who gives life meaning and purpose and joy. The beatitudes in both Gospels also have a common *form*: each speaks of some quality of the faithful and then turns to the anticipated blessing. In both Gospels, then, we understand that the more we are faithful to God's will for our lives, the more fully we can experience the blessings which God wants us to have.

Having been clear, however, about what the two sets of beatitudes have in common, we may also note that each is nuanced in a way that fits the portrait of Jesus in that particular Gospel. By way of summary, Lk's beatitudes tend to be more tangible, or physical, while Mt's tend to be more spiritual or abstract. Mt speaks of the poor in spirit; Lk speaks of the poor. Mt speaks of those who hunger for righteousness while Lk speaks of those who hunger for daily food. The tangibility, or immediacy, of Lk's beatitudes is reinforced by the use of the second person: instead of "blessed are those who . . .," we read, "blessed are *you* who . . . ."

The Beatitudes in Luke

While every Gospel presents the same Jesus, each Gospel writer has aspects of Jesus' life and ministry with which he particularly resonates; and therefore which he gives special emphasis in

his Gospel. In Lk, Jesus is the *one who shares God's love with the marginalized*. The world may favor the rich and powerful, but God's heart holds a special place for those on the fringes. In Jesus' world, these included the poor, the lowly (in terms of socioeconomic status), women, Gentiles, and sinners. As I like to say: in the Gospel of Luke, everybody who's a nobody is somebody to Jesus!

Not surprisingly, then, Lk's beatitudes focus on the hungry, the poor, and those who weep. This last group gathers up everyone whom life has beaten down—through need, through pain, through loneliness, through struggle—and brought to tears. To these, Jesus declares, God's favor will one day bring what they lack. The hungry will be filled, those who weep will know laughter and joy, and the poor will know their true place as those who belong to the kingdom. Strikingly, the opposite of poverty is not wealth but participation in the reign of God! Jesus also offers hope to those who are hated, excluded, or defamed "on account of the Son of Man." Those who suffer for their faith, Jesus declares, will know great blessings, including their heavenly reward.

Unlike Mt, Lk's beatitudes are balanced by a corresponding set of "woes." The word which begins each of these statements (*ouai*) may be translated "alas," suggesting distress or peril. The more common translation, "woe," recalls the places in the Old Testament where prophet's word of woe connoted divine disfavor or judgment (as it does here). The woes perfectly balance the beatitudes. Those who are full now will be hungry; those who laugh now will weep; and those who are rich have already received their consolation. Taken together, the beatitudes and woes represent a favorite Lukan theme, *the reversal of fortunes*. The woe to the rich is fulfilled in the parable of the rich fool (found only in Lk, 12:13-21). A man who spent his life solely focused on his wealth—so that he can eat, drink, and be merry (while clearly ignoring the needs of others)—abruptly learns that his life and over and his wealth will now be left to those will fritter it away. Similarly, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (also found only in Lk, 16:19-31) fulfills both the beatitudes and the woes. The rich man is consigned to Hades while the Lazarus finds comfort and rest in the bosom of Father Abraham. The reversal of fortunes does not always take place in the afterlife, however; sometimes it happens in this life. In another story found only in Lk (19:1-10), Zacchaeus is graced by an unexpected visit from Jesus, and everything about his life changes. He repays those whom he has cheated; he gives generously to those whose needs he had ignored; and he, a Gentile tax collector, is declared by Jesus himself to be a "child of Abraham"! Once thrice-excluded from God's covenant (a Gentile, a tax collector, a thief), Zacchaeus finds himself swept up in the unbounding grace of God.

The Beatitudes in Matthew

As noted earlier, Mt presents the same Jesus that we find in Lk; but like Lk, Mt finds particular meaning in certain aspects of Jesus' life and ministry, and these aspects are highlighted in Mt's portrait of Jesus. In Mt, Jesus is the *one who teaches, models, and fulfills the new standard of righteousness*. By way of summary, the new standard involves

- not only actions but also intent—don't commit murder, but also don't hold hate in your heart; don't commit adultery, but also don't hold lust in your heart;
- forgiveness rather than revenge—love your enemies and pray for those who abuse you;
- mercy rather than sacrifice—righteousness is grounded in God's mercy rather than our good works.

This new standard of righteousness is the central ethic of the kingdom, which is another way to describe who Jesus is in Mt: *he is the teacher of kingdom life*. Mt most frequently uses the phrase "the kingdom of heaven," but he also uses "the kingdom of God," "the Father's kingdom," and simply "the kingdom"—indeed, there are 48 references to the kingdom in Mt's Gospel, more than any other Gospel. (By the way, the four phrases are essentially interchangeable: saying "the kingdom of heaven" is not really different than saying "the kingdom of God," because the kingdom is a reality in which God's will is done completely,

whether in heaven or on earth.) We should also note that the "kingdom of God" can also be translated "the reign, or rule, or God." In some way, it is a better translation because we tend to think of a kingdom as a *place* (geography). In the teaching of Jesus, the kingdom is a *state of being*. God's reign is breaking in on our lives, and our role is to submit to and obey the will of the King.

Mt's beatitudes, then, reflect both the qualities of kingdom life and the blessings which come with them. Of the eight beatitudes which have the more traditional form—a characteristic of those who participate in God's reign and corresponding blessing—the first and last blessing is "the kingdom of heaven." In some instances, the blessing corresponds to the characteristic: those who offer mercy to others will themselves receive mercy. What a lovely reality: by opening our hearts and hands to offer mercy to others, we are able to more fully receive the mercy of God! (Correspondingly, if we close our hearts and hands so as to withhold mercy to others, we are less able to fully receive God's mercy).

The characteristics found in Mt's beatitudes are both interconnected and nuanced. The phrase "poor in spirit" is an idiom for humility (just as "high in spirit" was an idiom for haughty). Humility is related to meekness, yet they are not exactly the same. In both cases, the quality can be defined by our relationship with God. When we understand that God is God (and we are not), we are rightly humble. Meekness, on the other hand, is grounded in knowing that God is our advocate, that God is on our side. While in modernity we say "as meek as a lamb" or "as meek as a mouse," in the first century, they said "as meek as a lion." What a difference! The lion is the most powerful animal in jungle, and everyone knows it; therefore the lion doesn't have to make a show of its power. In the same way, when we know that the God of creation is our advocate, we don't have to brandish power to impress others; we can trust quietly in the power of God.

Unique to Mt are the qualities of being "pure in heart"—again, it's not just how we act but the motives of our hearts that matter—and being "peacemakers." Like the other qualities, these reflect (and require) trust in the sovereignty of God. When we know that God is on our side—and in the end will make all things right—we don't have to abuse others (a characteristic of an impure heart, in terms of sexuality or violence, for instance) and we don't have to wage war. The corresponding blessings are also unique to Mt: to "see God" and to be "children of God." In the Old Testament, there is the notion that no one can see God and live. When Moses receives the Ten Commandments, he is hidden in the cleft of the rock lest he be destroyed (Ex 33:22). But Jesus declares that if we are pure in heart, if we have singleness of devotion to God, one day we will see God; not only we will not be destroyed, but we will at last understand our true identity and purpose. Similarly, the Old Testament (for good reason) puts great emphasis on the holiness of God. The word "holy" literally means "other"—the emphasis is on how different God is from humanity. But especially in Mt, Jesus teaches us to think of God, to pray to God, and to love God *as a Father*. Few things in Mt (or the entire New Testament) are more remarkable than this: not only does Jesus say that God is *his* Father, but he also says that God is *our* Father, too. Especially in Mt, Jesus reminds us that God has chosen to love us as daughters and sons!

A final thought:
Seemingly the more well-known version of Jesus' beatitudes is found in Mt 5. Why has this version received more acclaim in Christian tradition? Surely part of the reason is that the Sermon of the Mount is rightly regarded as a keystone of Jesus' life and ministry. But could it also be that we prefer spiritual aspirations to tangible ministry? In a way, it's easier to care for the poor in spirit than it is to care for the poor, and it's easier to feed those who hunger for righteousness than it is to feed the hungry. The one requires us to share encouragement and hope; the other requires us garner financial resources and give practical help. Words of encouragement and hope are a gift, to be sure, but many Christians and churches are much more generous with our words than our money.