

Bless You, Later (The Beatitudes, Part One)

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Achoo! [Audible “Bless you” response] What do you *mean* by that?

We use the word “bless” often enough, not only when someone sneezes but also when we feel “blessed” by a church service, or when we ask for God’s “blessing” on our food, family, church, or nation. And yet, the word “blessed” is very difficult to define. We use it to offer vague well wishes; in our prayers, “God bless so-and-so” means “God, bestow some good on them.” As far as saying “bless you” immediately after someone sneezes, you may have heard the medieval belief that it kept demons from flying up your nose when you inhaled again. Interesting that, despite laughing at such superstition, we still say it, as if our magical incantation could stop germs any better than it once stopped demons.

The passage just read, Matthew 5:1-12, is known as the Beatitudes, where Jesus applies the word “blessed”—in Latin, *beatitudo*—to certain kinds or conditions of people. I want to understand, not only because I want to qualify as “blessed,” but also because the passage seems important. In our Bibles, this series of *blessings* is the first thing Jesus says, in the first sermon he gives, in the first Gospel. If Jesus is announcing his agenda, the essence of his message, I should pay attention—maybe even look at the Beatitudes in detail. How much detail? The French scholar Jacques DuPont wrote a three-volume, 1100-page scholarly treatise just on the eight Beatitudes. I’ll be a bit more concise, but I will take the unusual step of offering a two-part sermon, this week and next, on just this little passage. This week I’ll focus on blessing and reward, and next week I’ll describe the kinds and conditions of people that Jesus names, with the help of some Christmas-oriented visual aids. I’m the guy who once stood up here with a live chicken, so you must come next week to see what I spent five dollars on, at a garage sale, for your enlightenment.

This morning, however, no props; it’s just me up here, and my task is simpler—but stranger. It is to persuade you that the Beatitudes probably don’t apply to you, or they make you uncomfortable, or both. That, of course, makes *me* uncomfortable, because I want you to like me

and declare *me* “blessed” when you pass me on the way out the door. But pandering is never in the spirit of Jesus, whereas provoking often is—provided that I include myself in the provocation. I believe that my task is always to convey, to the best of my ability, Jesus’ words on their own terms, respecting their original context, and to let the chips fall where they may—even if they fall heavily on your toes and mine.

In defining more closely that important word “blessed,” I begin with the observation that Jesus almost certainly spoke to the crowds in Aramaic, the dominant language of the Near East at that time. In Aramaic, the expression “blessed are you” contains the word “good” and means simply “good for you,” or in religious terms, “God’s on your side.” In other words, “blessed” is a category, not an emotion, so it is a mistake to identify the word with “happy,” as a few translations and interpreters do, including some rosy sermonizers who refer to these as the “be-happy attitudes.” This is cute, but it’s nonsense, most obviously if you apply it to the second beatitude and declare, “happy are those who mourn.” No they aren’t.

But if the “blessed” are the category of the God-favored, we aren’t told *how* they are favored until the end of each Beatitude, when the word “blessed” is paired with a particular promise. The awkward thing about the promise is that what these God-favored people have coming to them is coming later—perhaps not even in this life. It seems that being blessed does me about as much good *now* as hearing “gesundheit” after I sneeze.

That’s no fun. We want our goodies now. But Jesus evidently shared with his contemporaries what is called an *apocalyptic* perspective. That is, he believed that God was soon going to break into history and, in a reversal of appearances and expectations, reward those who were humble and powerless. Jesus referred to this outcome as the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven, which today we might call “the ideal world.”

But clearly, this kingdom didn’t appear in Jesus’ lifetime, or in the lifetimes of his followers, or any time since. Was Jesus just plain wrong, at least about the timing of these coming events? Or was his meaning misconstrued, and words put in his mouth? Given the dullness of his followers evident in the Gospel accounts, we shouldn’t be surprised if Jesus tried to persuade them that the kingdom was for the afterlife, or even an ideal to work toward, and they just didn’t get it.

I want to be cautious, however, with speculation about a “hidden meaning” of Jesus distorted by his followers, which is often simply a convenient excuse to impose our modern ideas on him. Whatever Jesus meant about the location and timing of the kingdom, there is enough repetition of terms and themes in the Gospels to be confident that, like virtually all of his contemporaries, he believed in an afterlife, and he believed that we should perform charitable or loving acts. If you dwell on either one of these beliefs to the neglect of the other, you end up with “pie in the sky” religion, on the one hand, or “make your own pie” religion, on the other. These alternatives, of course, correspond neatly to modern Evangelicalism, with its focus on salvation and eternal life; and liberal Protestantism, with its focus on social change. The groups don’t need to be mutually exclusive—they both find at least some support in Jesus’ teaching—but each tends to dwell on their favorite passages, or selected phrases within them, while neglecting large portions of the Bible that don’t support their agenda. To make use of the Beatitudes, Evangelicals spiritualize the qualities and conditions of people listed here, and Liberal Protestants politicize them. What if, instead, we *personalize* them?

We squirm, that’s what. Because, while the Beatitudes promise wonderful rewards for people who embody certain qualities or circumstances, if we’re honest, we don’t quite see ourselves in these qualities or circumstances—and we may also find that we’re not all that interested in what these “blessed” people are promised. What an awkward realization at the beginning of Jesus’ first sermon, to find *him* so out of touch with *us*.

What do I mean by these people being unlike us? I’ll just point the finger at me, and you decide if you can relate. I don’t have to define precisely the terms “poor in spirit, meek, pure in heart,” etcetera, to get a general sense that these qualities and conditions are almost the opposite of *my* qualities and conditions. *My* Beatitudes go something like this: Blessed are the intimidating, for they will get their way. Blessed are those who don’t mourn because life is pretty comfortable, and they aim to keep it that way. Blessed are those with prestige, for everyone will listen to them. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for recognition, for others will praise them. Blessed are those who keep score, for they will always win, or at least tie. Blessed are the cynical, because they can’t be hurt. Blessed are those who stir things up, because they will

always be in the mix. Blessed are those who keep their faith to themselves, for they will be safe from embarrassment.

You'll notice that in my Beatitudes, the rewards all come in the present, or the near future, in this life. I have it good. Why long for an afterlife? Why not simply extend this life as long as possible? Hope doesn't need wings if you're always on safe ground.

But for most people, in most places, at most times in history, life has not been so pleasant. Most human lives have been short, plagued by the elements, poor hygiene, accidents, and inadequate shelter; subject to sexual, ethnic, and class violence; threatened by predatory microbes, insects, animals, and, especially, people—criminals, invaders, and corrupt or tyrannical rulers. “Life is hard, then you die” is a quip for me, but a succinct summary of existence for most people in most places at most times.

The contrast between my life and the majority human experience struck me when I studied the early history of this church for the bicentennial book and learned, for example, that original subscriber John Stevens and his wife Mary, who, two hundred years ago, sat in the second row, in front of where I usually sit, lost six of their ten children as infants; Henry and Asenath Nutt, who sat in the front row, outlived eleven of their thirteen children; Joseph and Elizabeth Wing, who sat in the sixth row, lost seven of their nine. And these are just a few of the tragedies. These people sat in these very pews, helpless and humbled by their circumstances, in perpetual mourning, yet they sang about one day gathering at the river, they sang “I'll fly away,” they sang “ours the cross, the grave, the skies”—and they meant every word.

Were they dreaming, or are we? Has the suffering majority invented an afterlife to console themselves; or has the safe, short-sighted minority dismissed the afterlife because this life is enough for us? Maybe what we thought was the perspective of enlightened knowledge is really the perspective of privileged self-interest. Maybe the misery of the mass of humanity matters to God after all, and Jesus wasn't just blowing smoke. Well, we'll all know when we die—or we won't know anything—but it bears consideration right now how unlike Jesus' audience we are in terms of circumstances and hopes, and therefore how ironic it is that we would dare describe our pampered existence by saying how “blessed” we are. Not according to Jesus.

Ah, but it's almost Christmas, and I'd rather not think about apocalyptic Jesus, I'd rather think about sweet little baby Jesus in the manger. The problem is, while the Beatitudes kick off Jesus' preaching, the message really begins with the Christmas story, when Mary goes all apocalyptic on us, responding to the Annunciation by proclaiming that God is about to turn everything topsy-turvy, scattering the proud, filling the hungry, and choosing a socially outcast woman as the bearer, literally and figurately, of the ultimate promise. Mary sings, "God . . . has looked with favor on his lowly servant . . . and all generations will call me *blessed*." It's the sweet little baby Jesus who grows up to proclaim, beginning with the Beatitudes, the same upside-down kingdom, a future blessing for those whose lives now are not at all blessed. It's that simple, and that difficult. You weren't thinking in these terms when you sang a Christmas carol as the hymn of preparation, but let me remind you of the Beatitude that you sang less than fifteen minutes ago. Verses three and four of "It Came Upon A Midnight Clear" promise that "you, beneath life's crushing load . . . look for glad and golden hours to come . . . the age of gold, when peace shall over all the earth its . . . splendors fling." Thus, even the message of Christmas looks far forward beyond the manger scene to a peace that can only prevail, ultimately, not now, not here, but in God's kingdom. The more uncomfortable I am with *that*, the more likely that I am all too comfortable [waves broadly] with *this*.

Where does that leave us? Not in the lurch. There's a message of grace here, but to find it, we must bypass the shortcuts. By looking honestly at what Jesus promises and who receives it, we avoid making him a manikin that we dress up as an evangelist to suit our piety or a social reformer to suit our politics. We also avoid reducing Jesus' provocative list of qualities and conditions to a shallow "be happy attitude."

Instead, we are invited by the Beatitudes to look into God's heart, to see God's longing to fortify the flailing, to comfort, to show mercy, to remember the forgotten, the seeming failures. This is not for us to spiritualize; it is not for us to politicize. It is for us to *personalize*: simply to love a God who loves like this. And as we do, we find the promise of the Kingdom reaching back from the future into *our own* hearts, now. As it finds a home there, where might it lead us? If we can so faithfully say "bless you" when someone sneezes, can we also make it a reflex, a habit of the heart, to love a bit more as God loves, to *be* a blessing here and now? God knows what

kingdom awaits us if we do—what comfort, what satisfaction, what mercy. And *that's* certainly nothing to sneeze at.