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The Character of the Blessed Community of the Kingdom – the Beatitudes

It is very difficult to avoid the conclusion that the kingdom of God is the central theme of the sermon. The Beatitudes are a sort of prologue describing the characteristics of kingdom people with the first and final Beatitude eliciting the promise that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven”.¹

The main block of the sermon is introduced by the section on Jesus' relationship to the Law and the Prophets that ends with the statement that a righteousness that surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law is needed for entrance into the kingdom of heaven.² In the section on prayer we are instructed to pray for the coming of the kingdom and in the section on our attitude towards material things to seek God's kingdom and righteousness before anything else.³

Then in the concluding section Jesus says that entrance into the kingdom is conditional on doing the will of the Father, which is explained as putting the words of the Sermon on the Mount into practice.⁴ This final reference is conclusive proof that the Sermon on the Mount was meant to be an ethic by which kingdom people are expected to live in their everyday lives.

It may be stating the obvious but we need to be reminded that kingdom language is political language. What is in view in the Sermon on the Mount is a method of government that is characteristic of the “realm” of God.

It is also interesting that the best known statement of the ethics of the kingdom that Jesus came to establish begins with a declaration of blessing just as the establishment of the old covenant with Abraham was also steeped in “blessing”.⁵ Blessedness is promised to those that have a number of inward dispositions that are worked out in specific actions.

Before turning to the individual beatitudes, it is important to emphasise that the various dispositions and actions that lead to blessedness do not describe different individuals but the rounded character of kingdom people.

The poor in spirit

The Beatitudes begin by declaring the blessedness of the poor in spirit. It is now popular to argue against spiritualising this reference to the poor. The Beatitudes that are found in Luke where Jesus simply says “Blessed are you who are poor” are referred to as evidence. But it is clear that Jesus is making a different point in Luke's account.⁶

¹ Mt 5:3b cf. 10b. When referring to the kingdom Matthew sometimes say ‘kingdom’ simply as in 4:23. More often than not he has ‘kingdom of heaven’, as he does here, which reflects the contemporary reluctance to use the divine name. On some occasions he has ‘kingdom of God’ as in Mt 12:28. The 3 ways of referring to the kingdom are synonymous.

² Mt 5:17-20. Vs. 20 forms an *inclusio* with 7:12 to form the main body of the sermon.

³ Mt 6:10, 33.

⁴ Mt 7:21, 24.

⁵ Gen 12: 2-3

⁶ Lk 6:20. The relationship between Matthew's ‘Sermon in the Hills’ and Luke's ‘Sermon on a Level Place’ is complex. It is not impossible that both evangelists record material from the same occasion on which the sermon was delivered. There is also the possibility that as a very busy itinerant preacher Jesus used the same material on

In Luke, Jesus is directly addressing his disciples in the second person in a very relevant way because they had chosen the path of voluntary poverty in forsaking their means of earning a living when they followed him. There Jesus is saying that those who have responded to his call to forsake all to follow him are truly blessed.

Here in Matthew, Jesus is making a more general point about the attitude of the truly blessed. They are those who see that they are impoverished within and that they need God to lift them up. They are the opposite of proud. This is certainly a way of understanding the meaning of poverty that had become common in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms.

This more “spiritual” understanding of poverty is also more consistent with the Old Testament because it never views poverty as a blessing in and of itself but as an evil result of sin. It so happens that the majority of people that have confessed their inward poverty before God throughout the ages have not been the wealthy and powerful ones of the world but the poor.⁷

But it is also the case that not all the physically poor are poor in spirit. To be poor in spirit is to be in a spiritual state that transcends literal poverty and wealth but that has an impact on both.

The poor are raised up in their spirit, which more often than not marks the beginning of a journey away from literal poverty; the rich when they become poor in spirit are humbled and begin to move in the direction of divesting themselves of their wealth for the benefit of the poor.

The key point that needs to be made is that both the poor and the wealthy need to become poor in spirit and that their doing so is a crucial step in the direction of literally blessing the poor.

Those who mourn

A common perspective in commentators who live in rich countries is that they are not people who are sad because of bereavement but the repentant. They are people sorrowing because of their own sin and the sin of others that is causing such a lot of pain and grief in the world.⁸

Leon Morris comments: “Perhaps we should bear in mind that typically the worldly take a light-hearted attitude to the serious issues of life, a fact that is very evident in our modern pleasure-loving generation ... Because they do not grieve over what is wrong in themselves, they do not repent; and because they do not grieve over the wrong they share with others in the communities in which they live, they take few steps to set things right. Because they are

different occasions and that Matthew’s and Luke’s material comes from memory of the use of similar material on different occasions.

⁷ Hagner commenting on this phrase says that ‘the subject of the first beatitude refers to the frame of mind characteristic of the literally poor. Thus, by the added “in spirit,” Matthew or the tradition before him has not “spiritualized” the Lukan (and probably original) form of the beatitude... He too means the literally poor, but he focuses on their psychological condition or frame of mind. The poor are almost always poor in spirit; the poor in spirit are almost always the poor... In Israel, especially in the post-exilic period, poverty and piety often went together, the poor... having no other recourse than their hope in God. The poor were driven to complete reliance upon God, and the righteous poor were thought especially to be the objects of God’s special concern (cf. Pss 9:18; 33[34]:18; 40:18; Isa 57:15; Jas 2:5).’ That king David thought of himself among the righteous poor suggests that Hagner’s position is not entirely water tight – see Ps 40:17 cf. 70:5. Hagner, Donald A., *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 33a: Matthew 1-13*, (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher) 1998

⁸ See Psalm 119:136; Ezekiel 9:4; Luke 19:41-42; Philippians 3:18

not moved by the plight of the poor and the suffering, they make no move to help the world's unfortunates.”⁹

I am very conscious that I am in danger of only representing the perspective of the oppressor here. In the quotation from Leon Morris, the focus is entirely on the repentance of those that have the means to do something about the sin of poverty.

But what about the mourning of those that are poor and that are always going to be in the majority in the kingdom of God if my understanding of poverty of spirit is correct? What does it mean for them to mourn?

Even the poor need to repent of their rebellion against God but the sorrow that they feel because of their poverty is different to the sorrow that rich people feel because of the poverty of the poor. The poor mourn their condition while looking to God for justice with the assurance of the long revelatory tradition that he will vindicate their cause.

Mary gives powerful expression to this Old Testament hope as an integral aspect of the rule of the Messiah when she became assured that she was to be his mother:

He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.¹⁰

Other beatitudes and subsequent passages in the Sermon on the Mount will show how this sorrow that the poor feel should be expressed.

The meek

To be meek is to be self-effacing. Here again the perspective of the poor and powerful differs. This is not to deny that there is self promotion among the poor. The sin of self aggrandisement is universal. Neither can we deny the reality of self loathing among the rich and powerful. The full psychiatric clinics of the West witness to the contrary.

But there is a very real sense in which many of the poor do not have to become invisible because they already are. This is probably true particularly of a great many [poor] women in the world. For such people to be meek is to come to the conviction that they matter to God even if they are treated as non-entities by their husbands and their male-dominated society. They look to God to lift them up and trust in his willingness and ability to do so.

Though coming from a very different starting point the privileged and powerful likewise become meek when they depend on God to make a difference. Moses even though he had spent 40 years in exile before God called him to his great task had a very privileged upbringing. His education and grooming for the exercise of power contributed to making him one of the greatest leaders in history. Yet he is described as the meekest man on earth.¹¹

Meekness is the opposite of self-assertion but does not preclude strong assertion of the truth and justice of God. Moses was very strong on what God wanted. His will was subjected to God's will. He was also an unwilling leader. He did not push himself forward but almost had to be forced into prominence by God. For those that are privileged and that have access to

⁹ *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Leicester: IVP, 1992, p. 97. Cf. John R. W. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978, p. 41: 'It is not the sorrow of bereavement to which Christ refers, but the sorrow of repentance.'

¹⁰ These verses are full of OT allusions, e.g. 1 Sam 2:5-8; Job 5:11; 12:18ff; Ps 34:17-18; 73; 107:9; 113:7-8; 146:6-9; Jer 5:26ff; 17:11; 31:10.

¹¹ Num 12:3 - 'humble' is used in the NIV.

power this is one of the most important lessons to learn when engaging in a struggle to overcome poverty. The crucial factor is not gaining control of power but dependency on God. Those who seek power in order to help the poor end up being corrupted by any power they may acquire.

Those who seek to bless the poor in dependence on the power of God really succeed. This is not an excuse for refusing to confront injustice but a challenge to do so in God's strength as the only way to make a significant difference. "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit," says the Lord.¹²

Poverty of spirit, mourning and meekness describe the humble person. Poverty of spirit drives us to God, mourning drives us to God with the evils of the world, meekness is the attitude which makes it possible to do something about it in God's strength.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness

Righteousness (*dikaïosunē*) is a key concept in the Sermon on the Mount and is closely linked with the concept of the kingdom.¹³ It is a term that encompasses the whole process of establishing the kingdom of Jesus the Messiah. This wider purpose is also confirmed in Greek by the fact that there is only one term for the English "righteousness" and "justice".

There is certainly nothing in the context of Matthew 5:6 to suggest that righteousness in the sense of the imputed righteousness of Jesus is the exclusive meaning of *dikaïosunē* here. In fact those commentators who believe that the reference to the poor in vs. 3 should be taken literally argue that it must mean "justice" in this instance.

The truth is probably more subtle and reflects the Hebrew roots of the New Testament. Hebrew does distinguish between being just/righteous (*sedeqa*) and executing justice/righteousness (*mishpat*) although the two terms are treated as synonyms in Hebrew parallelisms.¹⁴

What this suggests is that it is possible to conceptually distinguish between being righteous and doing justice, but that the two concepts are essentially inseparable so that it is impossible to be righteous without doing justice and vice versa.

So, to hunger and thirst for righteousness is to long for the comprehensive blessing that the kingdom of God will bring. It is to long for people to be made righteous through the blood of Christ and that justice will be done for the poor. One cannot be more important than the other because they are both kingdom priorities because the kingdom means the reign of righteousness/justice.

The new heaven and earth is "the home of righteousness/justice" and it is ridiculous even to suggest that those that have been transplanted into it from the kingdom of darkness through the sacrifice of Christ should act other than justly as they wait its consummation.¹⁵ We love justice now because we will love it for ever.

¹² Zech 6:4

¹³ See Mt 5:10, 20; 6:33. We have also seen that it is central to the concept of the rule of God in the Old Testament.

¹⁴ Ps 36:6; 72:1-4.

¹⁵ 2 Pet 3:13.

The merciful

There is a clear echo of the Septuagint of Proverbs 14:21 here that reads: "blessed is the one who has mercy on the poor". In Jewish society, by the time of Jesus, giving to the poor had become the most exalted way of showing mercy.

This can be seen in Matthew 6:2 where the words that are translated "give to the needy" originally meant "to do an act of mercy" but had "by the inter-testamental period... become a technical expression for almsgiving."¹⁶ There is no need to limit showing mercy to showing mercy to the poor but it is good to remember that poverty provides the best context for sharing - for being merciful.

The pure in heart

The heart in the Bible is not the seat of the emotions but the centre of what we are as human beings. It controls the way we think and the way we act as well as the way we feel. Poverty of spirit creates the possibility of cleansing at the centre of our personality because it recognises that there is much cleansing to do within.

Jesus came to call those who knew that they were sinners so that the recognition of the need for inward cleansing became an absolute prerequisite for benefiting from his grace. Faith in Jesus' offer of forgiveness cleanses the heart and creates the possibility that good things will flow from within. Here again we are dealing with the very essence of the new covenant. If there is purity in the heart then God is at the centre and his life can flow out to others.

We cannot be blessed or a blessing unless we give attention to our heart relationship to God. This does not mean immediate perfection but it does mean that we can be channels of God's blessing to others and that we can begin to be single-minded in our pursuit of God and the good of our neighbours. If we do this we are assured that we will see God not in a way that will prove fatal but as the ultimate experience of bliss.

The peacemakers

Peace is a very comprehensive concept in the Old Testament. It is the opposite of everything that the world has become as a result of sin. By the time of the Flood the world was full of violence and, sadly, that is still a valid description of the world today.

It takes very little imagination to picture the impact of such senseless violence on the quality of people's lives. As a conflict within a state the civil war in the DRC, which is estimated to have claimed more than 3 million lives, is now typical of most conflicts in the world.

At the beginning of 2006 the United Nations High Commission for Refugees [UNHCR] estimated that such conflict had caused the internal displacement of 23.7 million people in 52 countries.

The combined suffering of people fleeing their homes in terror while everything they had was looted and destroyed is unimaginable, but this is the reality of conflict and violence. Peace in the sense of the cessation of conflict would be a precious gift in these situations.

But peace in the Old Testament is not simply a lack of violence, conflict and war. It is what happens when people live their life in the way that God had always intended that they should. Fundamental to this is restoration of our broken relationship with our creator. This is

¹⁶ Hagner, Donald A., *Word Biblical Commentary, Volume 33a: Matthew 1-13*, (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, Publisher) 1998.

pictured prophetically in Isaiah who sees the beautiful feet of the herald coming over the mountains to proclaim peace because the Lord has redeemed his people.¹⁷

John the Baptist proclaimed the dramatic return of the Lord himself to his people so that he could reveal his glory to all mankind because the sin of his people had been paid for.¹⁸ This is the kingdom that has come, is coming and will come in Jesus the Messiah bringing glory to God and peace on earth.¹⁹ Real peace is peace with God, peace between people and peace with the rest of creation.²⁰

The world in which we live is full of conflict that is the cause of an immense amount of poverty. Nations, tribes and families fight each other. Quarrels abound in every community. In the midst of this, the followers of Jesus are called to be actively making peace between people as well as between people and God through the good news of the gospel.

Peace and poverty cannot coexist. We are to actively and deliberately bring conflict to an end by reconciling enemies and in the process create one of the essential conditions for people to flourish in every sense.²¹ It is peacemakers in this comprehensive sense that are known as the children of God.

Those persecuted because of righteousness

This Beatitude is somewhat unexpected. From the human perspective kingdom people do not seem to be people that the powerful of this world need to fear.

Paul reminds the congregation of Christians in Corinth that “not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth”²² and this could probably be said about most Christian congregations since.

Yet the history of the church is drenched in the blood of martyrs and there were more Christian martyrs in the 20th century than the previous 19 centuries added together.

So, what is it that the powers that be find so threatening about Christians? Very simply it is kingdom people’s concern for righteousness/justice that Jesus says is synonymous with their love for him. “Blessed are you,” he says, “when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.”²³

The powers of this world will find us threatening in the same way as they found Jesus threatening. The teachers of the law and Pharisees were threatened by Jesus because he challenged their preoccupation with their own goodness that led to a lack of compassion for ordinary people struggling in their sins, sorrows and sufferings.

The high priest’s family that controlled the lucrative temple cult in Jerusalem were threatened by his reminder that the cult was not meant to benefit them personally but the ordinary people and even gentiles.

¹⁷ Is 52:7-10.

¹⁸ Is 40:1-5.

¹⁹ Lk 2:14.

²⁰ See Is 65:17ff for a wonderful poetic picture of this peace in the new heavens and earth that God promises to create for his people.

²¹ Cf. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, op. cit. page 101: ‘There is a quality of peaceableness, a disinclination to engage in disputes, that is admirable, but Jesus is talking about more than that. He refers not to peace-keepers but to peace-makers, people who end hostilities and bring the quarrelsome together.’

²² 1 Cor 1:26

²³ Mt 5:11.

Herod was threatened because he felt that Jesus, like John the Baptist, would condemn his immoral lifestyle. Pilate, the colonial governor, was persuaded to believe that Jesus was a threat to the power of the divine Caesar in Palestine.

In other words, the righteousness/justice that Jesus embodied was a threat to the religious, economic, moral and governing powers of his world! They thought that they had put an end to the threat when they nailed him to the cross, but he rose from the grave and his threatening Spirit lives on in the hearts and lives of his kingdom people.

Every thing that we are and do should speak of his peaceable kingdom that by its nature undermines injustice and oppression in the world. But we should expect to be persecuted and rejoice when it happens because our reward in heaven will be great.²⁴

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²⁴ Mt 5:12