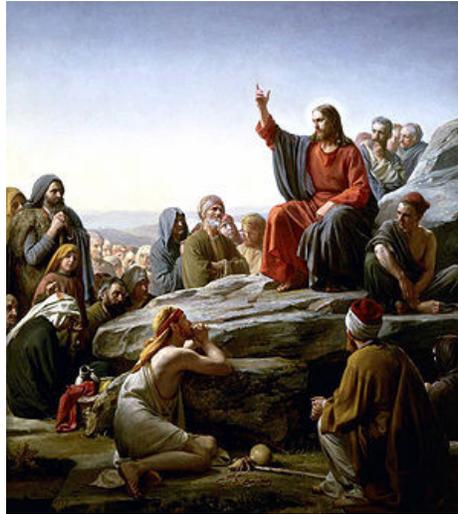


The Beatitudes

Peter Kreeft

The greatest sermon ever preached takes only about fifteen minutes to read. Even Gandhi knew of nothing in the rich Hindu tradition to equal it. All can admire it. Most fail to follow it. Matthew's longer version of the sermon, often called the Sermon on the Mount, takes three chapters (5-7). Luke has a shorter version that was probably preached on a different occasion. Both begin with the beatitudes.



“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are they who mourn,
for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,
for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful,
for they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure of heart,
for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called children of God.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 5:3-10)

The Beatitudes are the gateway to the Sermon on the Mount. They are God's answer to man's deepest need, his greatest quest. Blessedness, beatitude is what all of us are seeking. Blessedness is always our goal, whether we identify its source in pleasure, power, riches, wisdom, honour or anything else. Blessedness is the *summum bonum*, "the greatest good." Everyone seeks it, but not everyone finds it, because not everyone knows where it is. Saint Augustine says, "Seek what you seek, but it is not where you seek it." Not everyone has a road map. In the Beatitudes Jesus gives us the road map for our lives. It is a treasure map to the greatest of all treasures.

The treasure they point to is not just happiness, but blessedness. Some Bible versions translate the word *makarios* as "happy." This is a big mistake. For *happy* to the modern reader means something subjective, a state of consciousness, a feeling. If you feel happy, you are happy. It also connotes a temporary state, and something dependent on chance. *Blessedness*, on the other hand, is an objective state, not a subjective feeling. It is also a permanent state and dependent on God's grace and our choice, not on chance.

Suffering is the crucial test separating happiness from blessedness. Suffering can be part of blessedness, but not a part of happiness. Job was not happy in his sufferings but he was blessed, though he did not know it, because he was learning wisdom and coming closer to God.

Each of the Beatitudes is an outrageous paradox. Those whom worldly wisdom regards as the least blessed turn out to be the most blessed, and those the world regards as most blessed turn out to be the least. Apparent losers are winners and apparent winners are losers. "The first will be last and the last will be first" (Mt 19:30). There is a staggering contrast between appearances and reality.

The Beatitudes are part of the gospel, the good news. Because they are surprising they are news, but they are beatitudes because they are good news – to the poor, the meek, the mourners, the persecuted. But they are bad news to the complacently rich, the arrogant, the comfortable. It is not hard to see why. Jesus Christ came to establish a new kingdom, the kingdom of heaven. It threatens the sovereignty of the old kingdom, the kingdom of this world. To enter Jesus' kingdom, we must abandon our old allegiance.

We understand things best by contrast. Thus we understand supernatural virtue, the virtue of the Beatitudes, best by contrast with supernatural vice. Just as the Beatitudes summarize the blessedness of supernatural virtue, the seven deadly sins summarize the misery of supernatural vice. Unlike the Beatitudes, the seven deadly sins are not found together in Scripture, but they are warned against in the Scripture. There is a close parallel between vices and virtues.

Pride is self assertion, selfishness; *poverty of spirit* is humility, selflessness.

Avarice is greed, the centrifugal reach to grab and keep the world's goods for oneself; *mercy* is the centripetal reach to give, to share the world's goods with others, even the undeserving.

Envy resents another's happiness and good fortune; *mourning* shares another's unhappiness and bad fortune.

Wrath wills harm and destruction; *meekness* refuses to harm. *Peacemaking* seeks to prevent the wrathful from causing destruction.

Sloth refuses to exert oneself toward what is good, toward the higher things. *Hunger and thirst for righteousness* does just that.

Lust dissipates and divides the soul, desiring every attractive body; *purity of heart* centres and unifies the soul, desiring God above all things.

Gluttony consumes an inordinate amount of worldly goods; being *persecuted* is being deprived of even ordinate necessities. It is being willing to sacrifice the goods of this world "for his namesake."

The Beatitudes come from Heaven. The seven deadly sins come from Hell. The Beatitudes were preached by God incarnate, Jesus Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount as the New Commandments of the New Covenant. The deadly sins are preached by our inner fallen selves, calling us to rebel against God and all that is good, and seek the things of this world on our own terms as are ultimate goal.

In this life we must choose which road we are going to follow.

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