

Are You Flourishing?

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Scripture

Matthew 5:1-12

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon

On the surface, the Beatitudes sound so assuring and aspirational. We find these verses on plaques and refrigerator magnets, offering inspiration, offering hope. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Mt. 5:4). “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Mt. 5:9). Each of the blessing statements can stand on their own. The Beatitudes were made for Twitter; each one fits quite nicely into a tweet. They’re eminently Tweetable.

Go below a surface reading of the text, however, go into the Greek, connect the text to the rest of the Sermon of the Mount, connect the sermon to the rest of Matthew’s Gospel, and we discover that things are not that simple—or all that assuring. Well, they are comforting, but not in the way we expect. Let’s dig deeper.

Behind the English word “blessed” is the Greek word *makarios*, which is notoriously difficult to translate. *Makarios* can be translated as “blessed,” but it can also mean “blissful,” “happy,” “fortunate,” or “flourishing.” Blessing statements, *makarisms*, as they’re known, were not unique to Jesus; they were common in Second Temple Judaism and throughout Greco-Roman culture. The Greeks used the word *makarios* in their mythology to describe the life of a human being who lives like the gods, flourishing, living beyond care, beyond labor, beyond death. [1] In other words, *makarios* describes what a blessed or happy life looks like.

We have more digging to do. There’s more to know about *makarios*. Between 300-200 BC, the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek. This Greek translation was known as the Septuagint and was used widely by Hellenized Jews, that is, Jews shaped by Greek philosophy and culture. The Septuagint was considered inferior to the original Hebrew because, in part, Jewish theology and worldview do not sit easily within Greek culture. For example, the early Christian theologian Tertullian (160-220), aware of our roots in Judaism, famously asked in his

Prescription Against the Heretics, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” They are miles apart. Despite this tension, Greek ideas shaped Jewish, and later Christian thought.

For example, consider the opening verse of Psalm 1: “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread” (Ps. 1:1). “Happy” could also be translated as “blessed.” We need to know that in Hebrew, there are two words for “blessing.” There’s baraka, which is God’s act of blessing, and there’s ašrê, which describes the happiness, the blessedness of human life in relationship with God, walking in the way of God. In Psalm 1, the Hebrew is not baraka but ‘ašrê. It describes a life flourishing in relationship with God, when we walk with God. When the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek, in the Septuagint, the Greek word chosen for ‘ašrê was makarios. Why does this matter? Because the English word often used to translate makarios is “blessed,” and “blessed” is “so heavily loaded with the narrower sense of ‘divine favor’ that the sense of human flourishing is almost always lost.” [2]

The Judaism of Jesus and Matthew, heavily influenced by Greek thought, was driven by this philosophical question: what does a good life, what does a flourishing life look like? And, so, in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus takes up this question through his own makarisms or “blessing statements.” However, Jesus frames their meaning in light of his mission to proclaim the coming realm of God. In other words, Jesus wants his followers to know that when we follow him, yes, we will be blessed because we’ll discover what human flourishing looks like—however, don’t be surprised if human flourishing, according to Jesus, looks odd, bizarre, or even scandalous.

And there’s one other Greek word we need to mention, hoti, often translated “for.” “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom.” The word “for” in each statement has created the impression that blessedness will be experienced one day, in the future. It’s also easy to read or hear the Beatitudes this way: If I am poor in spirit, God will bless me, and then I will enter the kingdom—so I better be poor in spirit. If I am meek, then I will inherit the earth—so I better be meek. If I am pure in heart, then I will see God—so I better be pure in heart. If I live this way, I will be blessed. If we took a poll, I guess most of us have read the Beatitudes this way. The problem, however, is that this “if-then” approach is a “flat,” one might say even boring reading this text.

But there’s another way to translate hoti; it can also be translated as “because.” And, so, if we use “because” in place of “for,” and instead of “blessed” said “flourish, the theological meaning of the Beatitude shift, and everything changes. Listen:

Flourishing are the poor in spirit because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Flourishing are the mourners because they will be comforted.

Flourishing are the humble because they will inherit the earth.

Flourishing are the ones hungering and thirsting for righteousness because they will be satisfied.

Flourishing are the merciful because they will be given mercy.

Flourishing are the pure in heart because they will see God.

Flourishing are the peacemakers because they will be called the children of God.

Flourishing are the ones persecuted on account of righteousness because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

Flourishing are you whenever people revile and slander you and speak all kinds of evil against you on account of me.

Rejoice and be glad... [3]

When? Now! Why? Because right now, that future, God’s future, is on the way and is at work in us when we live this way because it’s at work in Jesus, and he wants us to know what human flourishing looks like.

Now, I know “flourishing” is a problematic word. Many see flourishing as achieving wealth, property, power, influence, having lots of “stuff” in a process of endless growth, and being successful, as defined by the values of our culture. It’s a word easily coopted by prosperity gospel preachers. Jesus, however, is being counter-cultural and counter-intuitive.

Jesus says we are flourishing when we are poor in spirit. When we acknowledge our spiritual poverty, confess what we lack, name what we need, knowing that we are all beggars before God, we discover what life is like within God’s realm.

We are flourishing when we mourn—that’s a tough word to hear. Those I know who are mourning the loss of loved ones don’t see themselves as flourishing. Jesus is calling us to a different kind of mourning. It’s the mourning that comes when we allow ourselves to be touched by the suffering of the world. Mourning for the present state of things, grieving over injustice, for what’s happening to children and families at the border, grieving for our communities, for families in pain. Mourning for the lives of children not allowed to flourish. Mourning for the rising violence in Baltimore City. Crying with Tyre Nichol in Memphis. Crying with Tyre Nichol’s mother and every crying mother anxious for her children. Mourning for the rich, for those who have sold their souls to wealth and possessions. Mourning for the compassionless. When we do, ironically, we will be comforted because this kind of mourning and grieving lead us toward a fuller, richer life because it calls us to action, to change, and points us toward a still more excellent way (1 Cor. 12:31)—which invites us to become more human.

We can go through the rest of the beatitudes this way, especially “Flourishing are the peacemakers because they will be called children of God.” When we advocate for peace, make peace real, suffer for the sake of mercy and justice, and hunger for righteousness, then we can say we are flourishing. And if we’re not living this way, then from Jesus’ perspective, we’re not flourishing at all—and we’re probably wasting our lives.

Jesus not only tells us what a flourishing life looks like but also shows us. Each beatitude also describes the life of Jesus. He lived a flourishing life because he was poor in spirit, and he mourned and grieved for humanity’s waywardness and ignorance and our inability to flourish; he was meek and hungered for righteousness, for justice; he was merciful and lived with a single-hearted devotion to God’s claim on his life; he was a peacemaker was persecuted because he was a servant of the Most High; he was ridiculed, mocked, and eventually killed for showing the things that make for life, for real life.

And, so, Jesus invites us to follow him into a richer, fuller, truly human life, and he enables us to live this way. When we live this way, when we follow him, we discover what a flourishing life looks like, and that this experience is at the center of God’s redeeming work in the world. [4] This is what the church offers the world.

Christianity, like Judaism, is a way of life. The Christian life must not be reduced to doctrine and ideas and beliefs, on the one hand, or reduced to moralistic “do-goodism,” on the other. To follow Christ, to claim him Lord is to follow in his way; it’s about the flourishing of life in within God’s Reign.

This is what Jesus is summoning us toward. So, let us join hands with the Lord and live into his vision, lean into grace, lean into this future. And when we do, we’ll discover what human flourishing looks like. I can guarantee you that it will be unique for each person and each

community. And I can guarantee you that it will stand in sharp contrast to a world—and, yes, sometimes even to the Church—that doesn’t understand, or is reluctant to understand, mercy or justice or peace or how to live with hearts devoted to God’s vision of wholeness. “Flourishing are the ones persecuted on account of righteousness because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Flourishing are you whenever people revile and slander you and speak all kinds of evil against you on account of me. Rejoice and be glad....”

Sure, some will consider us scandalous. So what. Who cares? When we’re flourishing, we get to be salt and light in the world, as Jesus says next in his sermon (Matthew 5:13-16). When we’re flourishing, we get to be salt and light in the world. Our lives become visible signs and heralds of God’s new world that is on the way toward us and now is. And that’s what matters most.

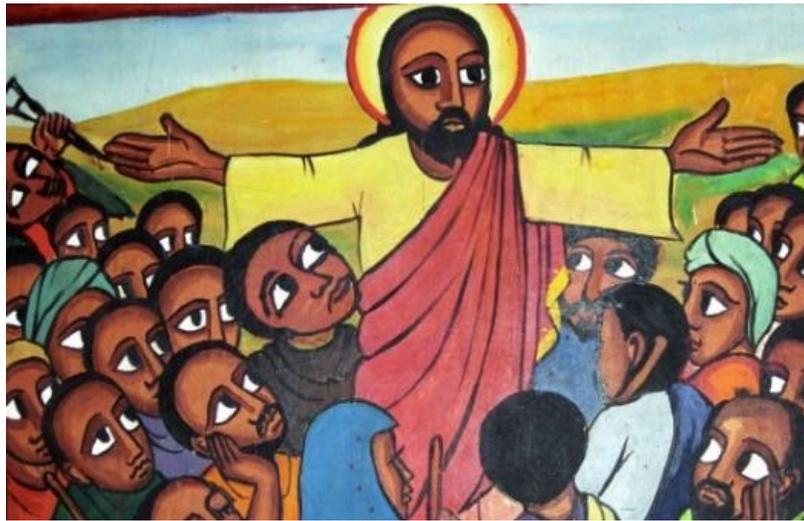


Image: “Black Jesus Preaching,” artist unknown.

Sources

[1] Throughout this sermon, I am indebted to Jonathan T. Pennington’s paradigm-shifting scholarship on Matthew 5-7. Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 46.

[2] Pennington, 50.

[3] This is Pennington’s translation of the Beatitudes.

[4] I agree with Pennington: “A close and careful reading of the Sermon of the Mount will help the church recover the profound and pervasive theme of human flourishing in God’s redeeming work in the world,” 309-310.