

Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount (Mt5)

How blessed are the poor in spirit
theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are the gentle:
they shall have the earth as inheritance.

Blessed are those who mourn:
they shall be comforted.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness:
they shall have their fill.

Blessed are the merciful:
they shall have mercy shown them.

Blessed are the pure in heart:
they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers:
they shall be known as children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted in the cause of righteousness:
theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people abuse you and persecute you and speak all kinds of calumny against you falsely on my account:
rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven; this is how they persecuted the prophets before you.

Luke has a series of Beatitudes, which are followed by a corresponding series of woes or curses (Luke 6:20ff):

Fixing his eyes on his disciples he said:

How blessed are you who are poor:
the kingdom of heaven is yours.

Blessed are you who are hungry now:
you shall have your fill.

Blessed are you who are weeping now:
you shall laugh.

Blessed are you when people hate you, drive you out, abuse you, denounce your name as criminal, on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice when that day comes, and dance for joy: look, your reward will be great in heaven. This was the way their ancestors treated the prophets.

But alas for you who are rich:
you are having your consolation now.

Alas for you have plenty now:
you shall go hungry.

Alas for you who are laughing now:
you shall mourn and weep.

Alas for you when everyone speaks well of you! This was the way their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Compare Jesus' choice of a text for his first sermon in Nazareth, where he had been brought up (Lk 4): he makes a specific search for Isaiah 61, which says:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me, to *preach good news to the poor*, to soothe *the broken-hearted*, to proclaim liberty to

captives, release to those in prison, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord, and a day of vengeance from our God: to *comfort all who mourn*, to give them, for ashes, a garland: for mourning-clothes, the oil of gladness: for despondency, festal robes....*I exult for joy in the Lord*, for he has clothed me in garments of salvation, has wrapped me in a cloak of saving justice, like a bridegroom wearing his garland, like a bride adorned in her jewels. For as the earth sends up its shoots, and as a garden makes seeds sprout, so the Lord makes saving justice and praise spring up in the sight of the nations.

Because Jesus used this text to refer to himself ("This text is being fulfilled here and now, even as you listen" - Luke 4:21) it is clear that he saw himself as the herald of the beatitudes, the anointed one (*christos, messiah*) who would turn the future tense of the Beatitudes (*will be satisfied, will inherit*) into present reality (*even as you listen*).

Are the Beatitudes of Matthew's Gospel imperatives to ethical behaviour (*be a peacemaker, be pure in heart, etc*)? Or are they consolatory promises about the future world?

The only imperative is that we should rejoice and be glad. Persecution (a source of blessedness, is not an ethical choice, but a piece of suffering. Further, the Sermon on the Mount (of which the Beatitudes forms the first paragraph) will spell out much ethical teaching. But the Beatitudes gives us blessing before demand, greeting before confrontation, grace before imperative.

Poor in spirit - certainly economic poverty is included, as it is the prime meaning of the word for "poor". But also implied is the state of those who are in special need of the help of God, most particularly his oppressed and humiliated people. These are also the people to whom Isaiah was speaking in the passage above. They await that eschatological reversal, when the previously oppressed achieve dominion, and their oppressors are punished. The same context should be supplied even for Luke's beatitudes: the rich, in his gospel, have no idea of their need for God (the rich man who built bigger barns, Dives and Lazarus), where the poor depend upon him.

The gentle - a word used for Moses, and also of Jesus himself, whose life gives the context for understanding this Beatitude. Again, the gentle will triumph over the cruel.

Those who mourn - the People of God mourn because of the triumph of evil and the suffering of the righteous. God has not yet acted to right their situation.

Hunger for righteousness - above all, for the triumph of God's justice; and the hunger is not passive desire, but active seeking; righteousness is not given as a present, but chosen. Equally the pure in heart are not given purity, but seek it: similarly the gentle.

Pure in heart - means willing one thing alone - to do what will please God.