

## **THE PATH TO TRUE BLESSEDNESS**

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

February 16, 2025

It is called the Sermon on the Mount, or The Beatitudes; beatitudes, because the passage speaks of blessings for those who follow in the way of the kingdom of God. The phrase Sermon on the Mount comes from Matthew's gospel where this teaching was said to have been given on a mountain. Here in Luke, it is said to have taken place on a plain, or broad level place.

When the authors of Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels, they relied primarily on the text of Mark which was written before theirs. But interestingly, the sermon on the mount or plain is not found in Mark's gospel. Most scholars believe that both Matthew and Luke relied on two other sources on the sermon on the mount. One of them was the gospel of Thomas which records much of the sermon on the mount. They relied also on a document called "Q," from the first letter of the German word quelle, meaning source. This other "source" has not yet been found, but may still one day.

In the Sermon on the Mount, or plain, Jesus spoke about much more than what is obvious on the surface; financial poverty and physical hunger and grief and persecution. With Jesus' teachings, there were always other deeper levels of meaning and truth to be gleaned. In this passage he was also talking about how transformation occurs in the human soul, and the values meant to be in human society that will transform it from a normal secular community to the glory of the kingdom of God.

Let's take a look at this sermon on the level place. The passage tells us that people from all around Jerusalem and Judea and as far away as Tyre and Sidon on the Mediterranean coast made the journey to this broad plain where Jesus was waiting. A vast multitude gathered there to hear him and to be healed. At some point in all the activity that day, Jesus looked up at his disciples and spoke directly to them. Jesus was getting ready to lay out his core teaching in several brief statements. These statements would be some of the most remembered of all Jesus' sayings that would echo out among his disciples down through the centuries. But unfortunately, it was often not fully applied in Christian lives or the Jesus movement.

Here in Luke, it begins: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Matthew adds "poor in spirit." On one level, Jesus' disciples who were struggling to eek out a living may have heard these words and thought, "blessed are the poor? Man, being poor sure doesn't seem like a blessing!" But then they may have thought; "But wait, the kingdom of God isn't just for those people who are well-to-do and powerful? The kingdom of God belongs to us!? To those who are poor!" But maybe Judas Iscariot's reaction was different; Judas who was always crunching numbers and squirreling away a few coins here and there may have thought; "Blessed are the poor? What a bunch of malarkey!" But Jesus was speaking about more than economic poverty that day. This is where Matthew's reference to the "poor in spirit" comes in.

Author Cynthia Bourgeault refers to a wonderful Zen story that gets at the heart of this spiritual poverty that Jesus was talking about. Here is the story: There was a young seeker, keen on becoming the student of a certain

master, was invited to an interview at the master's house. The student rambles on about all his spiritual experience, his past teachers, his insights and skills, and his pet philosophies. The master listens silently and begins to pour a cup of tea. He pours and pours, and when the cup is overflowing, he keeps right on pouring. Eventually the student notices what's going on and interrupts his monologue to say, "Stop pouring! The cup is full." The teacher says, "Yes, and so are you. How can I possibly teach you?" The master was saying that as long as the student was full of himself there was no more room to learn anything new, to go any further in spiritual understanding. One must first become poor – empty – before they can be open to learn all that there is to understand about the kingdom of God.

Now, here's Jesus second blessing: "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled." This again refers to the last blessing. It is only after recognizing that your cup of tea is empty, that you will be hungry and open to be spiritually fed. The Message Bible states this blessing this way: "You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry. Then you're ready for the Messianic meal."

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." Matthew's gospel uses the word mourn here instead of weep. To mourn is to live between two realms; the living and the dying. Author Ken Wilber refers to this mourning as a wound of love. He says: "Real love hurts; real love makes you totally vulnerable and open; real love will take you far beyond yourself; and therefore, real love will devastate you." Cynthia Bourgeault speaks of mourning as a form of brokenness and vulnerability and emptiness. There is great value in this pain. For she says: "in this emptiness, if we can remain

open, we discover that a mysterious 'something' does indeed reach back to comfort us...To mourn is to touch directly the substance of divine compassion." Only through brokenness and emptiness will we experience God on a deeper level.

"Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven." Luke here records this phrase very differently than how it is stated in either Matthew or Thomas. In the gospel of Thomas, it is stated this way: "Blessed are you in the midst of persecution who, when they hate and pursue you even to the core of your being, cannot find 'you' anywhere." Jesus' words here speak of much more than physical persecution, but of the enemies of Christ pursuing the disciples to the very core of their being, to the heart of their identity. Jesus' disciples are blessed who, when hounded to the core of their being, find no "you" there.

In other words, there is nothing in the depths of your soul that can suffer from persecution, because "you" are no longer there, Only Christ is. Galatians states it this way "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." Jesus said it this way: "Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul." For the early Christians, there was only so much that those who hated Christians could do to them. Sure, they could bring great suffering to the body. But they couldn't touch the soul, because as Jesus said in Thomas's gospel: "there is no "you" there.

So, let me summarize some of the depth of meaning of Jesus words here in Luke's beatitudes, and how it applies to our lives:

- First, the kingdom of God belongs to the poor; to those who are not seeking the wealth found in the things of this world, but are seeking the treasures of the kingdom of God. These treasures can only be found by those who, because they recognize their cup is not already full, are continually open to being filled again and again. I have always stated this truth this way: "What do I know? Less and less the more I learn." It's a bit paradoxical. The more I learn the more I know. But the more I know, the more I realize how much I still don't know. In other words, using the Zen imagery, the more my cup is being filled, the more it is being emptied at the same time. Maybe it's because my cup is expanding? I don't know.
- Second, blessed are they who find themselves empty, because it is in that state that they will hunger for more, for more of God.
- Third, blessed are those who mourn, who experience deep loss. Because again, in that place of pain and loss and emptiness, are they open to receive the fullness of divine compassion.
- And lastly, you are blessed when you find yourselves reviled because you are living in the oppositional ways of the kingdom of God, because at the core of your being, there is no "you" there to be reviled, but only Christ.

Poverty, emptiness, hunger, mourning, and hatred. When our love resembles the fierce, passionate love of God for all creation, we will fight for equality and justice for every being on this planet. And these ways are radically different than many of the ways our society functions. Be this kind of love.