“Mission as Blessing”
An Exegetical and Missiological Examination of Beatitudes in Matthew

A. Synopsis:

Is Matt. 5: 1 – 12, the Beatitudes, a missionary text? More often than not Matt. 5: 1 – 12 is construed in Christological, ecclesiological and ethical terms. The most quoted missionary text from Matthew is the great commission text, Matt 28: 18 – 20 and also the apostolic discourse to the twelve apostles, Matt 10: 5 – 42. By examining Matt 5: 1 – 12, this essay will explore Beatitudes’ missiological idiom and its implications for mission today.

B. Introduction:

Matthew 5: 1 – 12, the Beatitudes, is one of the most popular passages in the whole bible. It belongs to the section of the Sermon of the Mount (Matt 4:23 – 8:1) which is the first, the longest (uninterrupted), and the most carefully structured speech in Matthew’s gospel.¹

Most often the Beatitudes have been read mainly with the Sermon on the Mount as virtues, imperatives and ethical codes. However, the Beatitude has a distinctive function in the sermon of the mount; it serves as its introduction and foundation. Its language is not legal but performative and indicative, characterizing the eschatological community and declaring the basis for its life to be in God’s gracious act.² They are gospel, not law, the kerygmatic basis of the didactic core of the sermon.³


² Ibid., 172
³ Ibid., 177
A beatitude (Latin) or makarism (Greek) is a statement in the indicative mood beginning with a form of the adjective *makarios* (μακάριος) declaring certain people to be in a privileged, fortunate circumstances.\(^4\) The beatitudes declare an objective reality as a result of a divine act, not subjective feelings and thus should be translated with the objective “blessed” instead of the subjective “happy”. The opposite of “blessed” is not “unhappy” but “cursed” (cf. Matt 25: 31 – 46; Luke 6: 24 – 26)\(^5\) "In the case of Jesus the decisive accent is not upon human effort, but upon the fact that the salvation of God is here."\(^6\)

They do not directly lay down demands for conversion, but declare the *notae ecclesiae*, the “marks of the church”.\(^7\) There is however, an ethical dimension to the beatitudes. The community that hears itself pronounced blessed by its Lord does not remain passive, but acts in accord with the coming kingdom.\(^8\)

Understood as a prophetic pronouncement, the truth claim of the beatitude is not independently true, but dependent on the speaker who is more than a prophet; he is the Son of God and Lord of the church, already seen from the post-Easter perspective.\(^9\) Thus, the Sermon on the Mount should not be divorced from its larger literary context especially from the person of its speaker, as though it contains an ethic that can be separated from Christology.\(^10\) Matthew intends to portray Jesus as the Messiah in word and as the Messiah in deed. Both belong together: word and deed.\(^11\)

The ten pronouncements are not statements about general human virtues—most appear exactly the opposite to common wisdom. Like all else in Matthew, they are oriented to

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\(^4\) Ibid., 176
\(^5\) Eugene M. Boring, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 177
\(^7\) Eugene M. Boring, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 177
\(^8\) Ibid.
\(^9\) Ibid.
life together in the community of discipleship, not to individualistic ethics. On the other hand, the beatitudes demonstrate a deep and profound understanding of the human condition—its deepest needs, aspirations, search and meaning. The Beatitudes are not about what we should do but about what we should be; it is about thinking, willing, and feeling, that is, about a new way of being spiritual.

C. Commentary:

1. Setting (Matt 5:1 – 2):

   1 “When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying ...”

The multitudes who followed Jesus were healed by Jesus without meeting any requirements or making an act of confession. However, the Sermon on the Mount begins only when he went up to the mountain and generates a space between himself and the multitudes who were crowding around him. In addition, the Sermon does not commence until his disciples cross the space that Jesus opens up to listen to his teaching. An essential departure and arrival is required—from worldly categories to spiritual milieu—to experience the blessedness of God.

Going up the mountain in 5:1 is part of Matthew’s Christological Moses typology. This is to show how Jesus’ authoritative teaching from the mount relates to the Torah given on Sinai.

Jesus was sitting when he proclaimed the Beatitudes. Rabbi sits when giving instruction according to the rules of the great Torah schools. Jesus as rabbi is mentioned fourteen times in the gospel.

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12 Eugene M. Boring, The New Interpreter’s Bible, 178
16 Eugene M. Boring, The New Interpreter’s Bible, 175.
2. The Beatitudes (Matt 5: 3 – 12):

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

The expression “poor in spirit” is only found in Matthew. It implies the bestowal of the blessing of God not to the poor in the literal sense but poor “in spirit”. In this sense, the poor and rich alike can be “poor in spirit” as this expression cut across social, economic and political categories.

For centuries, this expression “in spirit” has generated lots of controversy and debate. This expression ought not to be too quickly considered a “spiritualization” on Matthew’s part as though he were not interested in the literally poor (cf. Matt 11: 5; 25: 31 – 46) but as a critical comment intended to forestall a misunderstanding of the simple adjective “poor”.  

It is important to realize that the Beatitude does not regard the condition of poverty as a blessing. On the contrary, even though the condition of poverty is not blessed, person living in such conditions can be blessed. But in the same way wealth is not a blessing, in fact an obstacle to entering God’s kingdom (cf. Matt 19: 22 – 24).

The expression “poor in spirit” is the basic human condition which implies the attitude of humility; human beings are (whatever their socioeconomic situation) beggars before God (poor in Greek ρτωχός ptōchos denotes beggar) and accordingly abandons human ambition. This virtue is opposed to hubris, arrogance, self indulgence and overextension of the natural limits of the human predicament. In Judaism the expression appears to be

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18 Ibid.
20 Eugene M. Boring, *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, 178
22 Ibid., 114.
23 Ibid.
connected with the so-called anawim/piety. “they would try to conduct themselves humbly and unostentatiously, relying firmly on God’s mercy and grace.”

The quality that grants blessedness for the “poor in spirit” is the “kingdom of the heavens” an altogether eschatological concept. Sermon on the Mount prefers the expression “the kingdom of the heavens” instead of “the kingdom of God” preferred by the Sermon on the Plain. This language seems to suggest that the realm of God is not limited to one place or time. It is beyond earth and sky; it is nevertheless present everywhere in creation. It is to come in the future, but it is also a reality in the present.

Jesus is the exemplar of the “poor in spirit” (cf. Matt 11:29).

4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”

If poverty characterizes the human condition in general, then grief is the expected human response. One of the characteristics of the true people of God is that they lament the present condition of God’s people and God’s program in the world. The blessedness is not the causes of “mourning”, e.g., death, destruction, hunger, etc., but the act of “mourning” which connotes solidarity especially with the suffering and resistance against structures that breed innocent suffering.

This beatitude is based on Isa 61: 1 – 11, the community laments the desolation of the holy city. This is the community that does not resign itself to the present condition of the world as final but laments the fact that God’s kingdom has not yet come and that God’s will is not yet done (6: 10). This response was regarded as proper for the righteous, in stark contrast to the frivolous and cynical, who do not care.

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26 Ibid., 117.
27 Ibid., 118.
28 Ibid., 118 -119.
29 Ibid., 119.
30 Ibid., 120.
31 Eugene M. Boring, The New Interpreter’s Bible, 179
32 Ibid.
33 Hans Dieter Betz, The Sermon on the Mount, 121.
The quality that bestows blessedness in vs 4b is akin to Rev. 21:4, where it says that God will wipe away every tear from their eyes: “neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away.”

5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

Psalm 37:9, 11 is here reformulated as a beatitude of Jesus. This beatitude contains two of the most important concepts of Hellenistic ethics, that of meekness and that of who is entitled to possess the earth.

“Meek”, “gentle” is a key Matthean word that characterizes the reversal of this worldly ideas of kingship (11:29; 12: 18 – 21; 21: 5), meekness is here a synonym for “poor in spirit”. Those who are aware of their identity as the oppressed people of God in the world, those who have renounced the violent methods of this-worldly power are the “meek”. “Meek” is not subservience and passivity, on the other hand, it is the inner grace which emboldens stark subversion amidst oppression and injustice. The opposite of meekness were brutality and untamed anger.

Meekness is the general characteristic of the sage, the righteous person, and the ruler, with Moses and others serving as paradigms. James 3:13 makes meekness part of the description of the Christian sage. "There are only two individuals in the entire scriptural tradition who are called meek: the first is Moses and the second is Christ."

The blessing in 5:5b is an eschatological promise. One must also see this promise in relation to the long tradition of promising dominion over the world to the righteous. This

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36 Eugene M. Boring, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 179
37 Ibid.
notion implies that the earth is the mission field. Matthew’s reading would be similar to Matt. 28: 18 – 20 and his entire interpretation of God’s promise to Abraham.41

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

“Righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη dikaiosunē) is a key Matthean concept which retains both its primary meaning of actively doing the will of God (as in 6: 1 – 18).42 While the Sermon on the Plain focuses on physical hunger, the Sermon on the Mount points to another, equally painful kind of hunger and thirst: the hunger and thirst for righteousness.43 It is not that physical hunger and thirst is a blessing but the inner capacity endowed by God to uphold, to seek, to fulfil God’s will and vision amidst deceit and distortion of God’s design in the world.

“Hunger” and “thirst” implies persistence, never ceasing to seek God’s righteousness. In the Greek text, the participles suggest continuous action, not only occurring now, but also stretching out into the future. Thus, verse six could be rendered, “Blessed are those who keep on hungering and thirsting for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.”44

The eschatological assurance given in 6b as a quality of blessedness is the image of abundance and fulfillment.

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."

Matthew uses the word for “mercy” (ἐλεήμων eleēmōn), to concrete acts of mercy rather than merely a merciful attitude.45 God is the source and model of mercy who likewise require mercy from us before rituals and laws: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Matt 9:13 and 12: 7).

Compassion and mercy are gifts which bestows the proper attitudes to various human predicaments. Mercy is recommended as an ethical response to violence and enmity (Matt

41 Hans Dieter Betz, The Sermon on the Mount, 128.
42 Hans Dieter Betz, The Sermon on the Mount, 129.
43 Ibid.
45 Eugene M. Boring, The New Interpreter’s Bible, 179.
5:38 – 42, 43 – 48). The duty of almsgiving is affirmed and underscored (Matt 6:2-4), and forgiveness is singled out as a very important aspect of prayer (Matt 6: 12, 14 – 15; also 5:45, 48: 7:10 – 11).46

The future passive indicates that at the last judgment God will show mercy toward those who have done deeds of mercy during their life on earth. No matter how many deeds of mercy they may have done, those who appear before God’s throne will need mercy. The concept of mercy is therefore connected with the practice of forgiveness (6:12, 14 – 15).47

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

Psalm 24: 3 – 4 has been cast in the form of a beatitude and presented as a saying of Jesus. “Purity of heart” is not merely the avoidance of “impure thoughts” (e.g., sexual fantasies), but refers to the single-minded devotion to God appropriate to a monotheistic faith.48 Thus, purity does not in any way suggest ethereal flight from the sinfulness and harsh realities of the world. On the contrary, “pure in heart” is God’s bestowed strength and grace of genuine interiority in spite of the exterior corrupt environment. All throughout the Sermon on the Mount, there is a constant emphasis on the internal disposition of the person as over against the external world, on the invisible versus ostentation, and on honest simplicity versus hypocrisy.49

The eschatological promise in vs 8b is traditionally connected with purity of heart.50

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

The seventh beatitude has always been controversial because of its political implications. In Judaism not only peace but also peacemaking was a long established virtue. The concept of shalom was fundamental to the Old testament and Israelite religion. Its

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46 Hans Dieter Betz, The Sermon on the Mount, 133.
47 Hans Dieter Betz, The Sermon on the Mount, 134.
48 Eugene M. Boring, The New Interpreter’s Bible, 179.
50 Ibid.
dimensions are cosmic and involved the order of the universe as intended by the creator. God’s *shalom* is not the superficial absence of conflict but peace based on justice and accepting and living with the differences of one another (cf. Isa 11: 6).

This presupposed that God is the principal peacemaker and that he rules accordingly in his kingdom (see Matt 5: 44 – 45, 48; 6: 12, 14 – 15; 7:10 – 11). Consequently, all human peacemaking is done in imitation of God.  

The Sermon on the Mount recognizes war, persecution, and injustice as part of the evil world. Precisely because there is war, strife, dissension, and hostility, peacemaking is a demand that comes with justice and the kingdom of God.

The promise in vs 9b takes up a traditional theme of Jewish eschatology. The promise was first made by God to Israel, as the Old Testament testifies, and it remained a continuous part of the Jewish religious hope.  

10 “*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*”  

Again the blessing is not in the persecution itself but in God’s endowed capacity to the disciples to uphold righteousness despite great suffering which will obtain for them the experience of the “kingdom of heaven” now and in the future.

The persecution of the prophets is a prominent theme in the Old Testament, whereas the sufferings of the righteous are a recurring motif in the Psalms. The prototype of it all is Job, though innocent suffered greatly but held onto God’s righteousness despite his friends and wife prodding’s.

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51 Ibid., 139.
53 Ibid., 140.
54 Ibid., 141.
55 Ibid., 144.
If humility is the most elementary of the virtues, persecution for the sake of righteousness is the highest. Thus, the *condicio humana* comprises not only situations of deprivation and misery but also those demonstrating human dignity and strength.\(^{56}\)

The second line 10b repeats the second line of vs 3b.

11 "*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.*"

The composition of the ninth beatitude from the preceding ones is characteristically different from the preceding ones in other ways. The conditional clause in vs 11 describes actual situations of persecution for the sake of righteousness.

For the first time in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is identified as speaker and the fact is also stated that an identifiable group of persons have responded positively to his teachings and are willing to bear the consequences – this are the disciples for whom the Sermon on the Mount was written. For them Jesus figures as their authoritative master and teacher.\(^{57}\)

The blessing is again not on the pain and shame on account of Jesus name but on Jesus strength, confidence and peace bequeathed upon the disciples who doesn’t wilt in the face of persecution.

The definitive break between Judaism and Christianity, the exclusion of Christians from synagogue .. are not implied in the language of vs. 11. The situations depicted in this beatitude reflect what appears to be earlier situations of harassment and persecution within Judaism.\(^{58}\)

12 “*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*”

\(^{56}\) Ibid., 146.  
\(^{57}\) Ibid., 147.  
\(^{58}\) Ibid., 149.
The tenth and last beatitude has an altogether different form. It begins by issuing a double call for joy. This double call appeals to the hearers or readers for what amounts to a liturgical response much like “hallelujah” or similar exclamations.\textsuperscript{59}

Gladness and jubilation are called for at the present time, not only in the eschatological future. Amidst the many worldly adversaries, the disciples will experience God’s gift of joy not as fleeting emotional joy but lasting and profound joy.

The change introduced by vs 12a is that it calls for a response by the hearers or readers to the messages they have received in vss 3 – 11, the final one addressing them directly (vs 11). The faithful disciples can justifiably be joyful even now, because they can be sure that their reward is awaiting them in heaven and that God himself as the guarantor of justice is guarding the treasure.\textsuperscript{60}

D. Implications of the Beatitudes to Mission Today:

Our brief exegetical examination centred on the view that Beatitudes are God’s giftedness rather than human virtues and ethical standards. What is the significance of this to mission today?

Mission is often perceived as missionaries’ doing God’s work: church planting, proselytization, evangelization, programs such as liturgical renewal, education, formation, social services; strategies such as inculturation, community building, alliance building; methods and techniques like multimedia, group dynamics, religio-cultural. Under close scrutiny, however, many of these activities carry our own human agenda and baggage, e.g., issues of power, economic and cultural superiority, prejudices and insecurities, internal squabbles, etc. Mission then becomes a burden upon the people instead of God’s medium of joy, hope, peace of God’s reign—proclamations of the Beatitudes.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 151
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 152.
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In this situation, the significance of the Beatitudes is to see mission as an awareness of God’s “blessedness”. This means that we need to recognize first of all that mission is not ours but God’s. This was highlighted in the paradigm of mission as missio dei (mission of God) as contrasted with missio ecclesiae (mission of the church). This is summed up in the words of David Bosch: “Mission is thereby seen as a movement from God to the world; the church is viewed as an instrument for that mission. There is church because there is mission, not vice versa.”61 The ultimate goal of mission is not the church but the reign of God. As Pope John Paul II states: "the Church is effectively and concretely at the service of the kingdom."62

The starting point then of mission is the experience of “blessedness” by the people in their concrete situation of “joys and the hopes, grief and anxieties.” Through the mission the people experience Christianity as blessing and gospel before doctrines, obligation and institution. At the same time the mission recognizes the seed of this good news, of this blessedness already in their human condition, in their culture. Indeed the famous maxim is valid here: “God was here before our arrival!”

This experience of God’s blessedness entails the fusion of horizons between basic human attitude, values, mentality and God’s attitude, values, mentality is essential. This fusion gives way to a new life and new world which proclaims the integration of the divine and the human. In the end they discover who they really are, their true identity and the being of what they want to be—created in the image and likeness of God.

The Christian life then is the experience of the good news about Jesus and entering into the blessedness of God which brings a new mindset, change of heart and new life and belongingness to a new community directed towards the coming of the Kingdom of God.

“Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with

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62 Redemptoris Missio (1990), n. 20.
an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”63 This person is Jesus who in word and deed proclaimed the beatitudes.

This experience of God’s blessedness allows them to see beyond their world despite all its sufferings, hardships, hopelessness, injustice, violence, enslavements and to journey towards the reign of God. The reign of God as future event already began in the resurrection of Jesus is their overriding source of hope.64

E. Conclusion:

The Beatitudes, although a fundamental part of the Sermon of the Mount, are not imperatives and code of ethics but primarily declarations of the blessedness of God of which the imperatives in the Sermon are based. The meaning of blessings in the Beatitudes is not the physical pain, suffering and hunger but God’s endowed grace of poverty, mourning, purity of heart, meekness, peacemaking, etc., for the future coming of the kingdom yet already here and now. In so doing, the Beatitudes challenge mission today to make the blessedness from God as its starting point.

Bibliography:


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