

Margaret Aymer. *Confessing the Beatitudes*. (2011 *Horizons* Presbyterian Women),

**Matt. 5: 3; Luke 6:20, 24**

**Matt. 5:4; Luke 6:21b, 25b**

**Matt. 5:5; Psalm 37**

**Matt. 5:6; Luke 6: 21a, 25a; Psalm 107: 1-9)**

**Matt. 5:7; Luke 10: 25-37**

**Matt. 5: 8; Psalm 24; 51: 1-12**

**Matt. 5:9; James 2:15-16**

**Matt. 5:10; 13:20-21; Romans 8:31-39**

**Matt. 5:11-12; 23:29-36; Luke 6:22-23**

*In Matthew 5:1-12*, Jesus teaches nine beatitudes – the list we know so well as “the Beatitudes” –as the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. In *Luke 6:20-26*, Jesus teaches four beatitudes similar to the list in *Matthew*, and four accompanying woes, to a crowd gathered around him on a plain; this teaching is sometimes called the Sermon on the Plain. In this study, we will be reading the beatitudes of *Matthew* and *Luke* together, because the four in *Luke* parallel four of the beatitudes in *Matthew*, and help us to understand them better.<sup>1</sup>

The cultural and historical context [of the Beatitudes] is Roman occupied Palestine. Roman Empire was one of the greatest civilizations of all time. However, the Roman Empire also had a brutal side, a side that did not hesitate to crucify those whom it wanted to silence. The Gospel writers and even Jesus, experienced this cruel side of the Roman Empire. The Beatitudes reflect experience of Rome’s cruelty. But the Beatitudes *also* reflect the good news of God’s response to Rome – a response that is both just and grace-filled.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Aymer. *Confessing the Beatitudes*. (2011 *Horizons* Presbyterian Women), 4.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Aymer. *Confessing the Beatitudes*. (2011 *Horizons* Presbyterian Women), 4.

**Matt. 5: 3; Luke 6:20, 24**

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:3; Luke 6:20); But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation (Luke 6:24).*

In the first century culture, honor is more important than gold, and public shame is one of the worst things that could happen to anyone. This is the culture of the New Testament writers. In the Beatitudes (Matt. 5; Luke 6), Jesus teaches his followers about honor, and in doing so, he uses the Greek word *makarios* which was translated as “blessed” –by God. However, in the original Greek, the word means something more like “blessed by the community” or “honored/honorable.” Today’s young people might translate *makarios* as “awesome” – “how awesome are the poor!” Jesus’ teaching turns his culture’s understanding of honor on its head, for Jesus names as honored those whom his culture calls shameful; and he names as shameful those whom his society would have honored.<sup>3</sup>

When Jesus says “the poor,” whom does he mean? Greek, the language of the New Testament, has many words for “poor.” One word refers to the working poor –those who are struggling but who are managing to survive from day to day (Matt. 15:8-9; 20: 1-17). However, in this first beatitude in Luke, Jesus is speaking about another group of the poor –those he calls the *ptochoi*, or the “destitute.” The destitute were the beggars of Jesus’ day. These people could not work for their daily bread. Perhaps physical disabilities prevented them from working; maybe they were too young or too old to work. Widows with no living sons or male relatives also were left destitute, having no man to provide for their needs. These destitute would have relied upon the mercy of their community for daily bread. In Jesus day, such destitution would have been seen as a

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<sup>3</sup> Margaret Aymer. *Confessing the Beatitudes*. (2011 *Horizons* Presbyterian Women), 7.

consequence of God's displeasure because of some sin that person had committed. Those who were destitute were shameful, pitiable, despised.<sup>4</sup>

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is preaching this beatitude to a crowd of people gathered on a plain—a crowd that has come to be healed of diseases and unclean spirits (Luke 6:18). This crowd would have been largely comprised of people who were destitute. They would have had nothing to do all day except following a wandering preacher and healer. Jesus directed his very first beatitude toward them, saying “*honored [Blessed] are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*” (Luke 6:20a). Jesus goes on to proclaim that “the dominion [Kingdom] of God is yours (Luke 6:20b). This language was deeply political because an empire already held dominion over first-century Palestine—the Roman Empire. However, Jesus pronounces to this crowd of destitute that, in heaven's dominion, *they* are the owners, the ones with power and status and honor. Jesus here, is fulfilling the words of his sermon in Luke, “The Spirit of the Sovereign is upon me, because God has anointed me to preach good news to the *ptochoi*, the destitute” (Luke 4:18).<sup>5</sup>

Now, let us turn to the more-familiar first beatitude in *Matthew*. It is slightly different from the one found in *Luke*. In Matthew, Jesus, speaking privately to his disciples on a mountain (Matt. 5:1-2), honors [blesses] those whose *spirits* are destitute (5:3). While he continues to identify this group as the *ptochoi* (destitute), Jesus reveals that not only are they unable to provide for themselves economically, their inner resources also have run out. They have lost all hope. To his disciples on the mountain, Jesus teaches that these hopeless women and men are greatly honored [blessed]. Jesus is saying these [destitute] are the citizens of heaven.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Aymer. *Confessing the Beatitudes*. (2011 *Horizons* Presbyterian Women), 8.

<sup>5</sup> Margaret Aymer. *Confessing the Beatitudes*. (2011 *Horizons* Presbyterian Women), 8.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Aymer. *Confessing the Beatitudes*. (2011 *Horizons* Presbyterian Women), 9.

Jesus' first reproach in Luke 6:24 in context: One of the major differences between the beatitudes in *Matthew* and *Luke* is that each of the four beatitudes is paired with a reproach in the gospel of *Luke* beginning with "Woe to you." "Shame on you who are affluent, for you are receiving your comfort" (Luke 6:24).

The Greek word for "affluent" is *plousioi*. The affluent people in Jesus' day were the exact opposite of the destitute. Because they were so wealthy, they did not have to work. They spent their days ruling the community as rich patrons, providing benefits as they wished to those beneath them, and enjoying everyone's high esteem. No one in that time or culture would have considered the rich shameful, but Jesus did. Perhaps this was because Jesus knew the answer to the question: Why are there rich people? In Jesus' day, no one was supposed to be significantly richer than anyone else. Every family had inherited land, and that land was to be passed on from father to son. However, when the Romans and their client-kings, the Herodians, came to power, they started to tax the working poor heavily. Poor farmers faced a series of taxes, tributes and temple offerings, as well as the need to pay rent and repay debts. Further, the affluent set the market prices for produce, and the amount of taxation. When the poor could not pay, they often had to forfeit their lands to the affluent, thus making the affluent even richer and placing the poor even closer to destitution. The money from these taxes did not go into a common coffer, but rather severed to make affluent richer still. It was a very difficult existence. One of the ways the Roman Empire kept its power was to create allies of smaller, weaker kings called client-kings. These client kings ruled on behalf of Rome and paid tributes in the form of money and goods to Rome. Herod the Great (Matt. 2), and his three sons Herod Philip, Herod Antipas, and Herod Archelaus, were client-kings of Rome.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret Aymer. *Confessing the Beatitudes*. (2011 *Horizons* Presbyterian Women), 9.

Jesus knew that the affluent became rich by pushing the working poor toward destitution. As a result, Jesus' reproach implicitly includes an accusation: "Would you be affluent if you did not exploit the poor? Shame on you, affluent people, for you already are receiving your comfort, even while your sisters and brothers have become destitute."<sup>8</sup>

**Matt. 5:4; Luke 6:21b, 25b**

*Blessed [honored] are those who mourn, for they will be comforted (Matt. 5:4); blessed [honored] are you who weep now, for you will laugh (Luke 6:21b). Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep (Luke 6:25b).*

In Matthew [second Beatitudes] Jesus says, "Greatly honored [blessed] are the *penthountes*, the mourners." In that culture, mourners publically grieved on behalf of the community, with loud wailing and crying. For this beatitude in Luke, Jesus uses a synonym. He says, 'Greatly honored [blessed] are you *klaiontes*, you weepers.'" "Weeper" was not a specialized term, like "mourner." It refers more generally to those who were actively crying, for whatever reason. Weepers are not part of a formal group [as Matthew's mourners]. There may not have been much practical difference between these people. After all, "mourner" and "weeper" occur together often in the Bible as synonyms. Still, to the group gathered on the plain, Jesus does not present a group of community mourners as honorable. He lifts up a more general group: "all of you weepers."<sup>9</sup>

In the Gospels, weepers and mourners grieve for two general reasons. First, mourners and weepers grieve death (Mark 5:38-39; Luke 8:51-52; 7:12-13; 11:35). Second, mourners and weepers grieve personal shame. Remember that the unnamed woman of Luke 7:37-38 weeps on Jesus' feet? She carries with her so much personal shame that she is known, on sight, as a sinner. This would

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<sup>8</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 15.

certainly cause a woman of her day to grieve publicly. Similarly, consider Peter's reaction in Luke 22:61-62 when he realizes that he has denied knowing Jesus. He has been dishonored, publicly, as a coward and a liar. He is shamed not only before the servant, but before Jesus himself. Peter would grieve publicly, weeping bitterly. In Jesus' time, as in ours, shame and death and grief were common. However, the economic, political, and social realities caused by Roman control of the Mediterranean basin often worsened the grief of the people, and increased the likelihood that some of them –particularly the poor and destitute –would experience grief too soon and too often. Like other human, preventable causes, Roman occupation made illness and death much more prevalent in Jesus' time. Roman policies of exporting the food of Palestine to the city of Rome led to an impoverished diet and widespread malnutrition for those remaining in Palestine –malnutrition that would worsen illness and increase the likelihood death.<sup>10</sup> As today, so also in Jesus' day, physical and mental disability and disease could be linked to malnutrition. Indeed, so closely linked was the Roman empire with the illness of people of Palestine that one of the demons Jesus casts out is called Legion – the name of the Roman military unit (Mark 5:9; Luke 8:30). The Roman occupation made one kind of death much worse: death by execution. The Roman Empire crucified people. The Roman Empire's client-kings, like Herod and his family, slaughtered and beheaded all perceived enemies, whether babies in Bethlehem (Matt. 2: 16-18) or prophets named John (Matt. 4:1-12; Mark 6:14-29; Luke 9:9). The Roman Empire's army laid siege to Jerusalem, destroyed its temple, and crucified its people. When it came to war and execution as causes of death, the Roman Empire made matters worse. Rome's policies –economic, social, and political – may have pushed people to the point of desperation and shame [and made people mourn and weep. Jesus calls those who grieve publicly honorable.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*. 17.

Every beatitude listed in Luke has a parallel rebuke. In this case, the rebuke is “shame on you *ge ontes* (ge-LOHN-tes), you who laugh now!” We find in the scriptures that the most common meaning of this work is “to laugh at,” or “to scorn.” One way to read this rebuke is “Shame on you who make fun of those who mourn!” In this meaning, Jesus is telling the poor on the plain, “You who are weeping will one day mock those who now mock you.” He is promising them a direct reversal of fortune. There is a second possible interpretation, for laughter can also refer to joy and mirth at goodness of life. In this interpretation, those who laugh are not mocking the weepers and mourners. Rather, they are unaware of them, rejoicing in their own good fortune. This is the position in which the affluent man finds himself in *Luke 16:19-31*. He is enjoying his life while Lazarus, a poor beggar, lies at his gate. This is, by far, the more dangerous reading, for it challenges all of us who live a life of joy and laughter unaffected by the sufferings of others. We who live lives of unconcerned joy may have the most to lose in the coming of God’s reign.<sup>12</sup>

**Matt. 5:5; Psalm 37**

*[honor] Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5);*

In the third beatitude of *Matthew*, Jesus calls us to honor a group whose description traditionally has been translated as “meek.” The Greek word, here is *praeis* (pre-ACE), which might also be translated as “humbled.” The Bible describes three different kinds of people with this unusual word [the humbled]. The group most commonly described as “humbled” in the Bible are those who are oppressed or downtrodden. These people are the targets of injustice, of unfair practices toward the poor. Some of them might be the destitute of the first beatitude, or the weepers and mourners of the second beatitude. A second group described as “humbled” would have been those who were opposite of proud or

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<sup>12</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*. 18.

mighty. This group which includes both Moses and Jesus, may not consist of people who are poor; however, unlike *plousioi* (affluent), they do not live in ways that unjust, oppressive, or coercive. <sup>13</sup>Upon hearing this usage, Jesus' disciples might have recalled the promise in Zechariah 9:9 that the king would come to Jerusalem humbled and sitting on a colt. The third and most unusual use of the word *humble* is for those who are guided by God and seek refuge in God. Here the status of the humble in society is less important than their dependence on God. While all three of these groups of people help us to understand this beatitude, the first group –the oppressed –seems to be at the heart of it. <sup>14</sup>

Psalm 37 and the Third Beatitude: Jesus is quoting a verse from *Psalm 37*, almost verbatim. The concern of *Psalm 37* is “the wicked.” As biblical scholar Warren Carter notes, “The wicked are violent against the poor and needy (Ps. 37: 14, 32), borrow but do not pay back (Ps. 37:21), and oppress them (Ps. 37: 35).” Further, they “plot against” (37:12) those who are just. It is not hard to make the connection between those “wicked ones,” the rich of the first rebuke in Luke, and the laughers of the second rebuke in *Luke*. They are all the same people: those who, through injustice and derision, oppress and shame the poor. By contrast, “the humbled” are those who face oppression of the wicked. They could name exactly what the wicked do to them. Yet, in this psalm, they do not have the power to stop the oppression they face daily and systematically. The Psalmist, although he acknowledges all the wicked things, suggested the humble to wait for the intervention of the God of heaven and they shall inherit the earth (37:11; Matt. 5:5). When we consider the Psalm that Jesus is quoting, the meaning of the word *humbled* comes into clearer focus. <sup>15</sup>

The humbled and the Roman Empire: When Jesus' disciples heard *Psalm 37*, it would not have been hard for them to make the connection between the

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<sup>13</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 23.

<sup>14</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*. 24.

<sup>15</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*. 24,



wicked in the psalm and the system of oppression that the Roman Empire brought with it to Palestine. Certainly, the empire controlled Palestine with a bent bow and drawn sword, as the psalmist describes (37: 14). As the author of the epistle of James would note, it was the rich who brought the poor to court, suing them for all that they had (37:16; see James 4). In short, Rome, and those who ruled on Rome's behalf, were towering oppressors, keeping the poor of Palestine moving toward destitution and in a state of mourning and weeping (Ps. 37:35).<sup>16</sup>

The humbled shall "inherit the land." Inheritance was more than a source of economic stability. It was an identity marker for a family. Losing the family lands was a kin to losing a part of one's identity, one's place in society. One of the systems that Rome had brought to Palestine directly attacked the system of inherited land that kept the poor from becoming destitute. Because of heavy taxes that Rome and its allies levied, the peasant farmers who had inherited the land became so indebted that they were obligated to sell their lands, and sometimes even themselves, into the hands of the affluent. The affluent would buy these lands, creating large farms called *latifundia*. They would then hire or enslave the increasingly impoverished farmers to work on their ancestral lands, not as owners but as landless laborers or as slaves. Jesus regularly protests against this system of accumulation, this system that allows the wicked—the affluent who rule by the sword and impoverish the humbled folk—to inherit the land. He excoriates the wealthy landowners in *Luke 12:6-21*, who stores up all of his wealth, but cannot enjoy it because that very night he will die. He commands the rich young man in *Mark 10: 17-25* to sell all that he has and give to the poor. And it is Jesus who reminds us of the story of rich man who had abundance but could not lift a finger to help the beggar Lazarus at his door (*Luke 16:19-31*). In Jesus day, one became wealthy in unjust ways. In this third beatitude, Jesus reminds his disciples not to honor the wicked who appear to be

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<sup>16</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*.25.

towering in abundance, but to honor the humbled, who may be oppressed but who know to rely on God. For, he reminds them, despite all evidence to the contrary, it is these humbled ones, not the wicked, who ultimately will inherit the land.<sup>17</sup>

**Matt. 5:6; Luke 6: 21a, 25a; Psalm 107: 1-9)**

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled (Matt. 5:6; Luke 6:21a). Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry (Luke 6: 25a).*

We begin with the one in Luke. Jesus is sitting on a plain in front of people, many of whom may be among the poorest of society, the destitute. To this crowd, Jesus declares: “You who are *peinontes*, you who are famished [hungry] are greatly honored [blessed]. Here Jesus speaks of the chronic, deep-seated, life-threatening hunger that the poorest of the poor know on a daily basis. When this word occurs in the Bible, it often describes those who are fasting for extended periods of time, like Jesus in the wilderness (Luke 4:2), or those experiencing famine, like the Egyptians under Joseph’s rule (Gen. 41:55). To be famished [hungry] is to understand viscerally the need for and the blessing of daily bread.<sup>18</sup>

Under Roman imperial rule, the famished were everywhere. As the city of Rome grew, it demanded more and more crops from its colonies. The result was that those under Roman rule had access to less and less nourishment. Famines were very common, even in the Roman provinces in northern Africa, the breadbasket of Rome. What nutritious food there was went to feed the affluent of Rome’s colonies, those who ruled on behalf of Rome. The poor, those who follow a wandering preacher on the plains of Palestine, would have known

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<sup>17</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*. 25.

<sup>18</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*. 31.

nothing but daily, persistent hunger. These are the famished whom Jesus calls honorable [blessed]. In Jesus' culture, to be a "real man" meant to be able to feed oneself and one's family. To not be able to do so, particularly if one was a man, was a mark of shame. Beggars, thus, were less than human because they could not care for themselves. The affluent would have ignored beggars like Bartimaeus in Mark 10: 46-52, or the man at the Beautiful Gate of the temple in Acts 3: 1-10. Certainly, it would have astonished them to consider the famished as honored [blessed].<sup>19</sup>

The beatitude Jesus teaches his disciples on the mountain (Matt. 5:6) is somewhat different. In Matthew, Jesus declares, "Greatly honored [blessed] are those who are famished and parched for *dikaiosyne*," for justice. Our English translation of the Bible all used the word *righteousness* here. There is a distinction between righteousness and justice. Righteousness was seen as more of an individual state of morality or holiness. Justice was something imposed on us from the outside. [Originally] the Greek *dikaiosyne* meant "justice," and this certainly was its primary meaning during Jesus' day. "Justice," here, should not be confused with "judgment." Rather, justice is a state of right relationship with God and neighbor. In Leviticus 19:9-10, 15, it means dealing as fairly with the poor as with the rich. In Deuteronomy 24: 17-22, it means treating widows, orphans, and foreigners exactly as you would treat the married, those with parents and citizens.<sup>20</sup>

In *Matthew*, Jesus charges his disciples to honor those who are famished and parched for justice, for the kind of right relationship between people and God that were the original vision of God. These are the people who, even if they were not mourning or destitute or humbled, yearned as if they were famished and parched, for right relationship among all people. While they themselves might have had no power to bring about this vision of right relationship, they

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<sup>19</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*.32.

<sup>20</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*.32.

knew it to be God's heart, and they longed for the day it would be brought about.<sup>21</sup>

### **Fed or stuffed? The rebuke in Luke:**

Both in *Luke* and in *Matthew*, Jesus makes the same promise to those who are famished, either for food or for justice: "They shall be *chortazo*." This verb, which means "to feed," derives from a word that means "pasture" or "grass." One way to translate this is "they shall be filled" or "they shall be satisfied." Jesus' use of *chortazo*, both in *Matthew* and *Luke*, hearkens to the promise that God will shepherd God's people, leading them, as the beloved Psalm 23 says, to green pastures beside still waters. Those who are famished, or famished and parched for justice, will receive a response from a loving, life-giving God who provides for their needs as a shepherd provides pasture for flocks of sheep.<sup>22</sup>

Jesus intentionally uses two different words for "full." In the rebuke, Jesus uses the word *empimplemi*, a word that might be translated "sated" or "stuffed." Jesus heaps shame on those who fill their bellies while others around them are famished. Jesus' distinction between the one being fed by a just God and the one whose belly is stuffed in the face of hunger is the same distinction that he has made throughout these four beatitudes – a distinction between the affluent and the destitute.<sup>23</sup>

Claudio Carvalhaes, at the 2009 Big Tent event of the PC(USA), pointed out in his sermon: "We make up four percent of the world population and eat up forty-nine percent of its resources."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 33.

<sup>24</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 35.

**Matt. 5:7; Luke 10: 25-37**

*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy (Matt. 5:7);*

*Matthew 5:7*, the fifth beatitude, describes a different group of people—a group who is less oppressed but just as much the concern of the God of heaven and earth. The first characteristic of the people of the second verse is that they show mercy. How do we define “mercy?” During Jesus’ time, mercy would have carried at least two different meanings, depending on whether your background was Jewish or Gentile.<sup>25</sup> Christians who came from Jewish backgrounds, like Jesus’ disciples, and Paul, would have connected the Greek word for mercy, *eleos*, with the “covenant loyalty” or “steadfast love” of God for God’s people. Christians of Jewish background would have heard Jesus saying something like this: “Greatly honored are those who show steadfast love, or covenant loyalty, for the same will be shown to them.” Christians who came from Gentile background would have heard this beatitude very differently. Since they would have grown up with Roman philosophy, they would have connected *eleos* to the Latin word that meant “pity” or “clemency” for one who deserves to be punished. For these Christians who were not on the mountain with Jesus, but who would become the leaders of the early church, this beatitude sounded more like this: “Greatly honored are those who show pity or clemency, for the same will be shown to them.” In the multicultural mix of the early church, these definitions combined together, creating something that preserved a little of each culture. “Mercy” was to take pity, and show both clemency and favor to those in need in a way that demonstrated an ongoing covenant loyalty for faithfulness to them. In this broad definition, mercy consists of three components: emotion, action and dedication. One who shows mercy feels emotion when faced with pain of another, takes action on behalf of that person, and demonstrate ongoing

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<sup>25</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 39.

dedication to that person beyond the initial crisis. No one shows mercy better than God of Israel. God's mercy is marked by compassion, clemency, and faithfulness to God's people. In *Isaiah*, we hear the voice of God say, "With everlasting love (*eleos*), I will have compassion on you" (Is. 54:8); and in *Hosea*, we hear the promise of God: "I will have pity (*eleos*) on the house of Judah and I will save them by the Lord their God" (Hos. 1:7). If this is how God shows mercy what might it mean for a person to show mercy? What does a merciful person look like? Luke gives us an example of such a person in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25-37).<sup>26</sup>

The consequence of mercy: If you allow yourself to feel compassion for another, to act on behalf of another, to dedicate yourself and your resources to another, they could take advantage of you. And yet, Jesus instructs his disciples that they merciful are not naïve; they are honorable.<sup>27</sup> Jesus said, those who are willing to be moved with compassion for their sisters and brothers will find that God looks with compassion upon them. Jesus teaches that those who are merciful will experience the compassion, intervention, and dedication of the God of mercy.<sup>28</sup>

#### **Matt. 5: 8; Psalm 24; 51: 1-12**

*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God (Matt. 5:8).*

In this sixth beatitude from the mountain, Jesus is more concerned about the condition of more ancient, biblical understanding of heart: the heart as the seat of important decisions, of thought. Jesus teaches "Greatly honored are the *katharos*, the pure in heart" (Matt. 5:8). This Greek word would have evoked something clean, unmixed, unpolluted, or genuine. Consider the heart Jesus

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<sup>26</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 40.

<sup>27</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 41.

<sup>28</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 42.

describes in *Matthew 15:18-19*, the heart that emits uncleanness. If we could cut open this heart, metaphorically, Jesus says we would find “evil intentions, murder, adultery, prostitution of others, theft, the bearing of false witness, and slander” (15:19). <sup>29</sup>Evil intentions lead to evil actions. Murder, adultery, prostitution of others, theft, the bearing of false witness, and slander all are hurtful (or even lethal) actions taken on someone else. Impure heart, it seems, is dangerous not simply because of the thoughts it carries, but because of the actions that those thoughts can produce: actions that might harm the community through the death of a person (murder), the destruction of a family (adultery), or the shaming and impoverishment of a neighbor (prostitution), theft, false witness, and slander). As Jesus notes, it is not the external but the internal – the heart –that makes such a person unclean.<sup>30</sup>

Anyone might have an unclean heart, even a religious leader. In fact, Jesus charges that the religious leaders of his day are hypocrites. Their hearts are full of greed, self-indulgence, hypocrisy, and lawlessness. These “heart conditions” are dangerous, particularly to their communities, even if they come from religious leaders. Those who are pure in heart are the opposite of those with unclean hearts. They have good and noble intentions that manifest themselves in good or noble actions, perhaps actions of mercy. They preserve lives and families, rather than destroying them for personal gain and pleasure. They protect and defend others, rather than attacking and destroying them. They speak the truth. Even to their own detriment, they do not slander or bear false witness. Those with pure hearts are generous, selfless, law-abiding, and forthright. “Pure in heart” does not describe what one does; it describes who someone *is*. One does not “do” clean; one *is* clean.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 47.

<sup>30</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 48.

<sup>31</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 48.

Consider the pure in heart in *Psalm 24*. The psalmist says that the pure in heart also have clean hands. They do not lift up their souls to what is false; and they do not swear deceitfully (*Ps. 24:4*). Clean hands and uplifted souls are acts of worship, for the psalmist's community. One of the main definitions of *katharos* is "genuine." One who is pure in heart [genuine] claims to love God and neighbor *and* thinks and acts in ways that demonstrate her belief.<sup>32</sup>

The promise to the pure in heart is that they shall "see God." There are two ways to understand this promise. First, it is an eschatological promise –one that will happen when this age ends and God's just reign begins. Those with integrity of faith and action will see God, which is good news. A second way to read this promise –one steeped in the history of God's revelation to God's people. Consider the revelation of God to Jacob in *Genesis 32:22-32* at Peniel. Those who see God, Jacob warns us, are changed forever. The prophet Isaiah demonstrates in *Isaiah 6* that the pure in heart bear witness to God's justice and mercy in the community. Mary Magdalene could testify to seeing the living God, in the face the resurrected Christ (*John 20: 11-18*).<sup>33</sup>

#### **Matt. 5: 9; James 2:15-16**

*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God (Matt. 5:9):  
If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them,  
'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill', and yet you do not supply their  
bodily needs, what is the good of that? (James 2:15-16).*

In this seventh beatitude, Jesus teaches that this second kind of person also is a peacemaker –a person who makes peace. What is peace? Who is a peacemaker? Peace is more than a quiet home. *Pease, shalom* in Hebrew, is an

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<sup>32</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 48.

<sup>33</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 49.



all encompassing word that you can find all over the Bible. For Jews like Jesus, “Peace” would have been the traditional greeting, just like “Aloha” is the traditional greetings in Hawaii. But “Peace” in Jesus’ time was more than “Hello” or “Goodbye.” When someone greeted you with “Peace,” they were voicing their hope for your wholeness and your welfare in all of your life – spiritual, physical, emotional, economic, even political. <sup>34</sup>

Although a wish for peace was a common greeting, some early church leaders like James felt that the wish for *shalom* was sometimes inadequate. In his epistle, James teaches, “If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘God in peace (*shalom*); keep warm and eat your fill,’ and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? (James 2:15-16). James understand that true *shalom*, true well-being requires more of the Christian community than merely the wish of peace. It requires taking steps to make sure that your sisters and brothers have *shalom* –the ability to be well, to be whole. Perhaps this is why Jesus does not honor the “peace wishers,” but the peacemakers. <sup>35</sup> Peacemakers do more than simply speak the words. Peacemakers find ways to make *shalom* a reality. <sup>35</sup>

In Isaiah, God is the one who makes *shalom* as well as woe (Is. 45:7). In Jeremiah, God brings Israel “abundance of prosperity (*shalom*) and security” (Jer. 33:6). In turn Jesus Christ makes peace in his flesh (Eph. 2:15) between Christians of Jewish and Gentile backgrounds, building us all together into one church. Peacemakers, then, like God, have at least two tasks: to break down hostilities and to ensure that their neighbors are well and whole. <sup>36</sup>

Peacemakers shall be called *children of God*: By proclaiming this, we raise those who work for *shalom* above celebrities and politicians, business people

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<sup>34</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 55.

<sup>35</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 56.

<sup>36</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 56.

and church leaders. We honor the peacemakers because Jesus Christ, himself the Son of God, has proclaimed that these peacemakers are his own siblings.<sup>37</sup>

The Pax Romana: Rome had a different understanding of peace during the time of Jesus. The emperor and his empire claimed to be the bearers of peace, the famous *pax Romana*, or “peace of Rome.” Originally attributed to Augustus, Rome’s first emperor, the *pax Romana* could have been called, “the victory of Rome,” for Roman “peace” started with the conquest and colonization of the lands on all coasts of the Mediterranean, and extended well inland. Roman “peace” was maintained by civic religion, by relationships with local rulers who depended on Rome, and by the strength of Rome’s military.<sup>38</sup>

The religion of the empire of Rome, often was the first line of defense in Rome’s “peace.” The second line of defense for the Roman “peace” was the group of local officials who relied on Rome for their power. In Jesus’ day these local officials included all the Herods as well as the leadership of the temple in Jerusalem. Thus they seek to kill Jesus –whose ministry seems to be causing upheaval –because “everyone will believe in him and the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation” (John 11:48). As John reports, the high priest concludes that “it is better for you to have one man die for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed” (John 11:50).<sup>39</sup>

Rome would lay siege upon and destroy a city. The people that the Romans did not crucify by the thousands were enslaved or scattered. Thus, peace was restored –for the Romans –peace at a great price to others. Only three decades after the fall of Jerusalem, the birth of a Palestinian Jew, and not the emperor, brought “peace on earth and goodwill” (Luke 2:14). Imagine the courage of the little Christian community in which the author of John resided, when that

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<sup>37</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 57.

<sup>38</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 57.

<sup>39</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 57.

community read aloud Jesus' proclamation, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives .." (John 14:27). Imagine the courage of the little Christian community in which the author of Matthew resided, when that community read aloud the words of Jesus: "Greatly honored are those who make shalom" (Matt. 5:9) <sup>40</sup>

**Matt. 5:10; 13:20-21; Romans 8:31-39**

*Honored [Blessed] are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:10): As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; <sup>21</sup>yet such a person has no root, but endures only for a while, and when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, that person immediately falls away (Matt. 13: 20-21).*

This eighth beatitude seems to say, "Blessed are those who have faced the consequences of discipleship," for persecution may well be a consequence of Christian discipleship. Persecution in Jesus' day, and in the very earliest church, was far more subtle. Christians faced persecution in the family, in the local community, and in the cities ruled by clients of Rome. <sup>41</sup>

Christians might have two options: to act as though Jesus had never taught the beatitudes, or to follow her faith into ways of justice, and risk the wrath of the father of the family [if he was not a Christian]. Some Christians would choose justice, knowing that the choice might very well get them persecuted, or worse, killed. The family was not the only place of danger for the Christian. In the local community or the city. Christ-believers who stood with the voiceless and the powerless could find themselves marginalized economically or socially,

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<sup>40</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 58.

<sup>41</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 63.

ostracized for hanging around the wrong sort of people and showing them undue respect. If they dare to challenge city leaders, they could face imprisonment, exile or execution. In a world that valued one's honor, not only such treatment be dangerous personally, it could place one's entire family in a permanent state of dishonor, a fate as bad as death. Persecution was such a real threat that it became the basis for people leaving the early Christian community. In addition, some of the early church would have read persecution as a sign of God's displeasure. If God were pleased, then bad things would not be happening to good people.<sup>42</sup>

In Matthew, the Beatitudes are the very beginning of Jesus' teaching. The disciples must have puzzled over what kind of person would honor the poor and oppressed, act with mercy and integrity toward them, and willingly face persecution for the sake of justice. Yet, as the Gospel continues, the reader understands what the disciples may have missed: that the ultimate example of one persecuted for the sake of justice is Jesus, himself.<sup>43</sup>

Jesus feeds destitute people, both Jewish and Gentiles, in the wilderness (Matt. 14:14-21; 15:32-38). Jesus weeps with Mary and Martha at the tomb of Lazarus, and raises the dead child of the widow of Nain (John 11:35; Luke 7:11-15). Jesus blesses the most powerless of his society –the little children (Matt. 19:13-15). He associates with tax-collectors and prostitutes (Matt. 21: 31-32). Jesus tells the stories of injustice toward the beggar Lazarus at the gate of the rich man and the honorable widow who gives her last two copper coins to the temple (Luke 16:19-31; Mark 12:41-44). Jesus is merciful to his disciples when they break Sabbath in their hunger (Matt. 12:1-8). Jesus' integrity clarifies for him, and his audience, what is due Caesar, what is due God, and the difference between these two powers of his day (Matt. 22:16-22). Jesus, in his first Nazarene sermon, proclaims that he has come to work for the *shalom* of God's

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<sup>42</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 64.

<sup>43</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 64.

people (Luke 4:18-21). Jesus' life, thus, was the epitome of the teachings he gave his disciples from the mountain in *Matthew*.<sup>44</sup>

Therefore, Jesus, the worker of justice, is the one persecuted for the sake of justice. Although we later followers understand Jesus' death as redemptive, in his days, Jesus' death was the ultimate persecution. His betrayal, trial, and crucifixion were intended to stop the one who, through his actions, was raising up a following that looked suspiciously like an insurrectionist mob. The intent of his crucifixion was to shame him and them, to silence him and them.<sup>45</sup>

In his persecution for the sake of justice, Jesus became powerless, like the destitute and the mourners. Jesus' body became a human billboard, not unlike the hanging bodies of black men in the South, left on trees by lynch mobs as a warning to those who would challenge the power of the empire. Naked, helpless, exposed to the world, the crucified one was debased, and the honor of his family, destroyed. Paul writes in Philippians (2:7-8) that Christ Jesus takes "the form of slave."<sup>46</sup>

Jesus' eighth beatitude would have reminded the disciples that although these heroes [the persecuted] had been shamed in their day, heaven had vindicated them. Indeed, the dominion of heaven consists of people such as this: people who put their lives on the line for what is right, despite the cost.<sup>47</sup>

**Matt. 5:11-12; 23:29-36; Luke 6:22-23**

*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*

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<sup>44</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 65.

<sup>45</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 65.

<sup>46</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 65.

<sup>47</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 66.

*before you (Matt. 5:11-12). The eye is the lamp of the body. So, if your eye is healthy, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light in you is darkness, how great is the darkness! (Luke 6:22-23).*

In this final teaching, Jesus shifts to a far more pointed and personal, “Greatly honored are *you when ...*” “You” shifts the focus of the Beatitudes to the lives of disciples. Here, Jesus is moving the teaching from the abstract to personal. This is no longer about “those who” act in ways that concern heaven. On the mountain, Jesus is now directing his teaching at the lives of his disciples.<sup>48</sup> He speaks directly to the future life of discipleship that the mountain audience will face. It is a life facing revulsion, persecution, and false slander for Jesus’ sake. Such a life is unpalatable, ignoble, dishonorable. Jesus says, “Greatly honored are you *when* you are dishonored by the world on my account.” It seems, contrary to our American expectation of Christian respectability, that a life of discipleship is a life of dishonor. He is saying that if the disciples follow Jesus, they will face what he has faced.<sup>49</sup>

Shame on you who have good reputation: This beatitude on the plain comes with a reproach, “Shame on you whenever all people speak well of you.”<sup>50</sup> Jesus’ reproach contradicts his culture and even some of the scriptures that he would have known. Proverb 22:1, for example, teaches, “A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches.” If discipleship means choosing to honor the destitute, weeping, humbled, and famished over the rich, happy, powerful, and full, a group of every powerful people will likely be displeased. If discipleship means choosing to honor, even to emulate, those who exhibit mercy, integrity, peacemaking, and willingness to face the consequences, rather than those who exhibit cruelty, duplicity [deception], warmongering [aggression], and insistence

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<sup>48</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 71.

<sup>49</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 72.

<sup>50</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 72.

upon a good name at all costs, another group of very powerful will be displeased. For those who live this way consistently, the “when” of persecution should be expected and accepted as one the costs of discipleship. By contrast, those who choose their reputation over the needs of the first group, or over the faults of the second, *they* are the focus of Jesus’ rebuke. Shame on you if your good name is more important than heaven’s dominion. <sup>51</sup>

Rejoice and be glad: Jesus does not end [his beatitude] with a warning to be on guard against persecutions. Instead, Jesus’ final instruction in the Beatitude is “Rejoice!” To the disciples on the mountain, Jesus teaches, “Be overjoyed!” To the crowd on the plain, Jesus teaches, in good Pentecostal fashion, “Leap about!” The command is to jubilation –an outlandish [unusual], outsized jubilation. Jesus’ commands his hearers to rejoice not *because* of persecution, but *despite* persecution. It would, indeed, be unrealistic to expect the disciples to rejoice because they are facing shame, ridicule, persecution, or worse. However, Jesus *does* expect the disciples to rejoice because they know the source of their hope. In God’s justice, those who face persecution on behalf of the good news of Jesus Christ are no less the concern of heaven than those who are oppressed. The source of joy is the trust that God is faithful, and that, if we are faithful despite the hardships and discipleship will bring, God will also be faithful to us. This is the promise that even if we are sent into a world that will not hear, and might even attack, nevertheless we are doing the work of God and will in no way lose our heavenly reward. <sup>52</sup>

The promise is not that the rewards of the disciples will be waiting for them in some unforeseen future. The promise is that, even in the midst of persecution, the Triune God of our Christian confession is concerned with, and is, in ways seen and unseen, standing with Christ’s faithful disciples. Since God is with us, even now, we can dare to take the step of discipleship, even in the face of

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<sup>51</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 73.

<sup>52</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 73.

persecution. For truly, if we live as disciples, in life, in death, and in life after death, we belong to God.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Aymer. *Beatitudes*, 74.