THE BEATITUDES: CHALLENGING WORLDVIEWS

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The Beatitudes are a tough nut to crack. For instance, translating the Greek word *makarioi* as "happy" can make the Beatitudes sound all too much like bumper stickers or song titles. Images of "Happiness is a Warm Kitten" or "Happiness is Seeing Lubbock, Texas, in the Rearview Mirror" come to mind.

However, the more traditional translation of "blessed" intones a liturgical chant which may warm the soul but leave the body plodding along the same old path. We hear but we do not listen. John Meier is right:

> The sharp stone of God's Word, smoothed down by the river of time, no longer cuts. Instead of being challenged by hard thought or hard choices, we lean back and savor pretty words . . . and no one notices that Jesus the revolutionary is heaving a verbal grenade into our homiletic garden.[1]

In their original context, Jesus' words forced his hearers to examine who they were and their goals in life. In modern day parlance we might say that Jesus challenged the worldview of those who heard him.

Webster's College Dictionary defines worldview with the

[1]John P. Meier, "Matthew 5:3-12," *Interpretation*, 44 July 1990, 281.

German word *Weltanschauung* which means "a comprehensive conception or image of the universe and of humanity's relation to it." In other words our worldview shapes how we look at life.

Our worldview is made up of all of our deep-level assumptions and values, all those things that we accept as being true without really requiring proof.[2] Assumptions concerning the basic nature of the universe (Is the universe run by mechanistic laws of cause and effect or by one or more spirits?) provide a framework for answering questions about how things got the way they are and what keeps them moving. Based on these underlying assumptions, we evaluate and validate the choices that we make. "By definition, the evaluative assumptions people hold sanction and validate the basic institutions, values, and goals of a society, giving people the impression that their approach is the right one."[3]

Since many of these assumptions are held subconsciously, we are often not aware that we are imposing our way as the right way for everyone else. Once after a Korean-American church growth campaign, I overheard a visiting American pastor remark, "If we could just get these people to start and stop on time, we could have some really great meetings!" For the American the quality of the event was directly related to the amount of time consumed (time orientation), while his Korean hosts were more concerned with who was there at the beginning and what happened (event orientation).

On a deeper level our worldview affects the way we solve problems and relate to other people. Who is more important, the individual or the group? What methods are acceptable to achieve my goals? What are acceptable goals?

We immediately become aware that not everyone in our society functions from the same point of reference. Within the larger culture different sub-cultures function with worldviews that often are in conflict with the worldviews of other groups in their larger culture. It is also obvious that at many points

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[2]Charles H. Kraft in *Christianity with Power: Your Worldview and your Experience with the Supernatural*, (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1989), 181-205, has an interesting discussion of the functions and universals of worldviews.

[3]Ibid., 187.

the claims of Christ are in conflict with our own worldview. The problem is that at times we have smoothed off the edge of the sharp stone of God's word to the point that our worldview interprets God's word instead of the other way around.

The focus of the remainder of this article will be to examine the way that Jesus used the Beatitudes to challenge the worldview of groups in his day. From that perspective we can see more clearly at what points he wants to challenge our worldview today.

The literary form of beatitude has been around for a long time. Originally a Greek poetic form used to describe the blissful state of the gods, from Aristotle on the word *makarios* found its way into everyday Greek language. Generally, the term is used to describe the social stratum of the wealthy who by virtue of their riches do not have the normal cares and worries of the rest of society.[4]

In the Old Testament, beatitudes are most common in the Psalms, followed by Proverbs and Isaiah. In the Septuagint, the normal pattern is *makarios* followed by a description of the person regarded as fortunate. Often the description is expressed by a series of relative clauses. Those who are fortunate range from those who trust (Ps. 40:4; Pr. 16:20), fear (Ps. 112:1; 128:1; Pr. 28:14), and obey the Lord (Ps. 1:1; 119:2; Pr. 8:32) to those whom the Lord has chosen (Ps. 65:5) and who have received forgiveness from him (Ps. 32:1, 2). Generally, though not always, the results are described in the context of the passage. For example, the person described as fortunate in Ps. 1:1-2 is said to prosper in everything he does (v. 3).

The use of *makarios* in the Septuagint does not carry the idea of a cultic blessing which is efficacious in its pronouncement. That idea is normally expressed by the Greek word, *eulogeō*, and its derivatives. Therefore, the beatitude is an expression of the type of person who is truly fortunate, not an evocation of happiness.

In the intertestamental literature, Robert Guelich finds

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[4]*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "*Makavrio*," by Friedrich Hauck.

that the beatitude reflects two rather different usages.[5] First, the beatitudes found in the Wisdom-oriented literature parallel most of those found in the Old Testament both in form and content. They are declarative statements concerning those who are fortunate, though they may shade into paranetic exhortations as well. The statement of fact turns into "a model to be emulated or a goal to be attained."[6] The second group of beatitudes, found mostly in the apocalyptic writings, are similar in form, but their content is decidedly eschatological, describing a future vindication and reward.

Of the forty-four beatitudes in the New Testament, twenty-eight are in Matthew and Luke. Almost half of those (thirteen) are found in Matthew 5 and Luke 6. The form of the beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount differs slightly from those found in the Old Testament. The identification of the fortunate one is much shorter, often only one word, and the result is expressed by a clause introduced with the Greek word *hoti*, because. In content these Beatitudes pick up on Old Testament themes (Mt. 5:5 is almost an exact quote from Ps. 37:11.), but the emphasis has shifted.

The first beatitude is instructive; here the fortunate ones are the poor in spirit. But who are the poor in spirit? What or who is their referent in the real world? While the phrase "poor in spirit" is rare,[7] the concept of the poor is very common. The Greek word, *ptōxos*, occurs about one hundred times in the Septuagint translating six Hebrew words.[8]

In the Greek world *ptōxos* carries only a socioeconomic sense. Giving alms is not regarded as a virtue, nor is there any moral or religious glorifying of poverty. In social conflicts the poor could not even count on the gods for help.[9]

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[5]Robert Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1982), 64.

[6]Ibid., 65.

[7]The phrase occurs only here in the New Testament and not at all in the Septuagint. The Hebrew equivalent occurs once in the *War Scroll* of Qumran (1QM 14:7), but the meaning there is unclear, being translated variously as "voluntarily poor," "faint-hearted," and "humble." For citation see Guelich, 73.

[8]*TDNT*, s.v. "*Ptōxos*," by Ernst Bammel.

[9]*TDNT*, s.v. "*Ptōxos*," by Friedrich Hauck.

By contrast, the Hebrew use of the word has a much broader sense. In common with the Greek world, *ptōxos* contains a socioeconomic sense, but the word also has a religious dimension as well. Though the poor may be deserted by their friends (Pr. 14:20; 19:4) and oppressed by the rich (Pr. 28:3), the Law commands that the needs of the poor be provided for and the Psalms remind the poor that God has not forgotten them and will act in their behalf.

The *ptōxoi* are not just those who are materially poor, but includes the weak and helpless, the marginalized of society. In Ps. 41 (40):1 the Hebrew word *dal*, helpless or weak, is translated by the Greek words *ptōxon* and *penēta*, usually translated poor and needy. Also the psalmists, though probably not materially poor, call themselves *ptōxos* (see Ps. 25:16; 40:17; 69:29; 70:5; 88:15).

Matthew's poor in spirit is probably to be understood in light of this broader usage. Luke, by focusing on the woe to the rich, places more emphasis on the socioeconomic situation, though in reality his meaning is not substantially different from that of Matthew.[10] Guelich suggests the translation "desperate" since those who are being described stand before God "stripped of all self-sufficiency, self-security, and self righteousness."[11]

Two beatitudes connected with the poor in the Old Testament are indicative of the Hebrew attitude. The first, in Ps. 41 (40):1, says, "Blessed is the one who considers the plight of the poor and needy. In time of trouble the Lord will rescue him."[12] The form in Ps. 14:21 is different, but the emphasis is the same: "The one dishonoring the needy sins, but the one showing mercy to the poor is blessed." Though not in the literary form of a beatitude, the same idea is expressed by those in the gates when Job walked by: "For the ear heard and blessed (*emakarise*) me and the eye seeing me turned aside, because I saved the poor from the hand of the

[10]Guelich argues that even in Luke rich and the poor retain the dual reference to religious as well as socioeconomic conditions. See Guelich, 69-70.

[11]Ibid., 98.

[12]Unless otherwise noted all quotations from the Septuagint or the New Testament are my own translations.

powerful, and the orphan, who had no helper, I helped." (Job 29:11-12)

In each instance the focus of happiness is not on the poor themselves, but on the one who helps them. The poor are the objects of attention because through meeting their needs one can earn favor with God.

Jesus turned the emphasis upside down. Now the poor themselves are to be envied, not those who help them. The fronting of *autōn* in verses three and ten makes this reversal more emphatic. It also serves as a bridge to the reason why the poor are to be considered fortunate: "because theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The kingdom of heaven is to be understood in light of Matthew's use of the term elsewhere. The poor are not the proud owners of a piece of real estate somewhere but those who stand without pretense before God and experience the rule of God in their lives. The kingdom of heaven is God's dynamic rule expressed here and now.[13]

Unlike beatitudes in the intertestamental period where wisdom literature stressed present happiness and apocalyptic literature future happiness (see above), the tension between both the present and future dimensions of the kingdom is maintained in the Beatitudes as recorded in Matthew. Although the copulative verb was probably not present in Jesus' original Aramaic conversation and is not necessary in Greek, Matthew includes it in verses three and ten. The present tense stands in contrast to the consistent use of the future in the remaining Beatitudes. Verses three and ten form bookends reminding the reader that though the final expression of God's sovereign reign lies in the future, his rule was initiated in the person and work of Jesus.

The next two Beatitudes reinforce the utter powerlessness of the fortunate one to act in his own behalf. Those who mourn are helpless to change their situation and must wait on God for their comfort, a comfort promised to them in Is. 61:2-3. Likewise, Jesus promised good news to the poor. Though Matthew does not record Jesus' quotation of this

[13]See George Ladd's chapter on "The Kingdom of God" in *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974).

verse (cf. Lk. 4:18-19), there is an allusion to the verse in Jesus' answer to John the Baptist (Mt. 11:5). Guelich suggests that Matthew aligned his first four Beatitudes with Isaiah 61.[14] If this is the case, then both Matthew and Luke began Jesus' teaching ministry with a reference to Isaiah 61.

In Isaiah 61 the year of Jubilee is proclaimed, the restoration of original status to those who have lost what was once theirs. Luke records Jesus' proclamation that in him that process had begun. Verse five is based on Ps. 37 (36):11 where the meek are also promised the earth as an inheritance. This promise is preceded by the command to "obey (*huotagēthi*) the Lord and make petition to him."[15]

A passive response to the evil of their day characterized the Essenes. Probably originating in the aftermath of the Maccabean revolution, the Essenes followed their Teacher of Righteousness into the wilderness to set up an ideal community and wait for God to usher in his kingdom.[16] More rigorous in their legalism than the Pharisees, the Essenes would have felt right at home with the Beatitudes. They were the fortunate ones because, helpless before God, they were waiting for him to act.

However, in the exposition following the Beatitudes Jesus shattered their self-righteousness. Waiting for God to act does not mean hiding from the world. In fact salt and light hidden away to themselves are useless. The kingdom character described in the Beatitudes was to be expressed right in the midst of the wicked, sinful world from which the Essenes had fled.

The Pharisees probably originated from the same background as did the Essenes. However, rather than withdrawing from the world, they attempted to make the Torah the standard for the whole community. To accomplish, this the Pharisees sought to interpret and apply the Law to the social,

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[14]Guelich, 80.

[15]See verse seven, LXX. The RSV renders the verse, "Be still before the LORD, and wait patiently for him."

[16]For a discussion of the origin and the character of the Qumran community see Richard A. Horsley and John S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets, and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 23-29.

economic, and religious life of the people.[17] Being more socially oriented than the Essenes, the Pharisees would relate especially to the Beatitudes which encouraged a hunger and thirst after righteousness and acts of mercy.

Once again, however, Jesus challenged their worldview. In the exposition of the Beatitudes, the Law is important and righteousness is essential. In fact, righteousness is so important that the righteousness of the Pharisees was inadequate (5:20). The six examples following this startling statement make it abundantly clear that external action must be grounded in a change of heart. The Pharisees' acts of righteousness (6:1, *dikaisounēn . . . poien*) were designed for public display. True righteousness is a matter of the heart. Giving to the poor, praying, and fasting, as practiced by the Pharisees, was a reward in itself. The Pharisees really were hungering and thirsting after public adulation, not righteousness. The kingdom character expressed in the Beatitudes must be expressed from the inside out.

The scope of this article does not permit a detailed examination of each beatitude nor more than a cursory look at the way Jesus used the Beatitudes and their exposition in the Sermon on the Mount to challenge the worldviews of the people around him. However, the examples given illustrate the point that Jesus did indeed toss "verbal grenades" into "homiletic gardens."

By shifting the focus of the Beatitudes, Jesus turned everything upside down. The one to be envied is not the self-sufficient religionist who condescends to help out the helpless one. The role model for the kingdom is the helpless one himself, who stands before God acknowledging him as the only source of help.

In our world of competition, where king of the mountain is the game of children and adults alike, we need to be reminded again that there is power in helplessness. As the apostle Paul discovered, "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor. 12:10b).

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[17]Ibid., 27.

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