

A Storytelling Commentary on Matthew 5:1-12

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

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

"Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

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

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

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

"Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

"Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

"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 before you.

I suggest that you learn the beatitudes in pairs. The first pair is "poor in spirit" and "mourn." You can think of this as located in the center of your chest.

The second pair is being "meek" and "hunger and thirst." You can think of this as being in your gut or abdomen, which is the place of humility and of hunger and thirsting.

The third pair is "merciful" and the "pure in heart." This is located in the heart, the place of mercy and of purity of heart.

The fourth pair is "peacemaker" and being "persecuted." They can be told with a sign of blessing. They definitely go together and can be located in your hands.

Finally, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account." This is the only beatitude where there is a link between the two sentences: "persecute." Notice that the beatitudes build to the blessing of those who actually make peace and suffer the consequences non-violently.

These are pronouncements or declarations of blessing. You can think of it as performative discourse. It's like what the pastor does at a wedding: "By the authority vested in me by the church and the state, I declare that you are husband and wife." The beatitudes are a pronouncement of blessing. The blessing is what you are doing in these words. You are blessing those who are poor, meek, and so on. The audience is the people in the congregation whom you are addressing as Jesus. So in telling this as an embodiment of Jesus you are blessing those who are there.

The basic structure of thought in this series of blessings is a paradox or even a contradiction: "Happy are those who are sad," or "Blessed are those who are persecuted and have their backs up against the wall." In actuality, they are not blessed; they are persecuted. But Jesus declares this as blessedness in light of what is going to happen in the future, in light of the reversal of values that will take place in the kingdom of God.

This is about the audacity of trust in God; to use President Obama's phrase, "the audacity of hope." It is the power of hope that looks at the present through the eyes of the future. When Jesus looks at the present through the eyes of the future, what he recognizes is the value and goodness of those who have these characteristics. It stands against conventional wisdom that happy are the rich, happy are those who exercise power over others, happy are those who are proud, not meek, happy are those who have no hunger or thirst for anything, and who are confident of their own righteousness.

The most striking contradiction is to the ancient/modern virtue of heroism in battle: blessed are the warriors, blessed are the victorious in war. With Jesus, the blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God. When you look at the present from the point of view of the future, blessing is for those who suffer for the sake of righteousness, goodness and peace. Therefore, focus on those values and on seeing those characteristics in the people to whom you are telling the story. Do these blessings for them so that they experience receiving them. That's the invitation of the beatitudes.