

The Title of this sermon is: Recovering Compassion

- Setting the Historical and Theological Backdrop
- What is meant by blessed is the poor in spirit?
- What is meant by the kingdom of heavens?
- History of Interpretation

Setting the Historical and Theological Backdrop

Deu 18:15-18 The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken; 16 According to all that thou desiredst of the LORD thy God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. 17 And the LORD said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. 18 I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.

- God promises a line of prophets who will speak to Israel on his behalf
- Moses refers himself **a prophet**, the instrument of communicating God's word to Israel
- Nations listen to magicians, etc.; Israel is to **listen** to God's prophet not pagan means of revelation and guidance.
- Now God refers to Moses a prophet and promises a future prophet like him for Israel.
- In the 1st century a.d., Jews expected a final prophet, NT writers identified as Jesus

While Jesus is the rightful heir to the throne of David, the object of this promise in Deu

- Is that of a new Moses, who by calling 12 apostles renews the 12 tribes of Israel as the combined people of God, Jew and Gentile, the Gospel call universal
- Today there is a lot of talk and action with regards to group identity
- The Jews waiting for the Messiah rejected Jesus due to misapplying group identity

They rested on the fact that they were entrusted with the oracles of God

- They were chosen a peculiar people to witness to what a covenant relationship is like
- Were charged to share this good news along the way as they traveled to the nations
- But instead, they perverted their religion into a system of boasting
- That merely being entrusted with the oracles of God and His Law was sufficient

They rested on their ethnicity for salvation

- that Abraham sits at the gate of hell to ensure no Jew passes through
- They had no need for Jesus' Kingdom or for eternal life, they lusted for political power
- On Palm Sunday, they cried out Hosanna Son of David
- But when they learned Jesus was not going to fulfill their worldly lusts, but just a few days later, they cried out Crucify Him

Those who have mingled Xtianity with politics are doing the same thing

- Jesus Kingdom is not of this world, but is a movement that convert one heart at a time
- Yet does have this-world implications with regards to serving our fellow man that demands detachment from worldly lust of the eyes, of the flesh, and pride of life

Jesus just as during His earthly ministry commands all men to repent

- In his day, repent of the perverted religion of the scribes and Pharisees
- To belief in the triune God revealed more fully by Jesus as the Incarnate Son

Matthew 5:1 And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: 2 And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying,

- And when he was set: Jesus takes His rightful seat on the cathedra of the mountain in contrast to the rabbis he refers to later, who sit in the cathedra or chair of Moses who teachings must be obeyed due to office, even though their lives contradict it
- Jesus is the new Moses the teacher of Israel and for all humans for all times
- Everyone who hears and accepts Jesus' word can become a disciple

Verses 3-12 are known as the Beatitudes, a term derived from the Latin *beatitudo*

- Corresponding to *makarismos* in Greek, *macarism* in English
- Originates from the Greek adjective *makarios* meaning blessed or happy
- A Beatitude consists of two-lines, a declarative statement followed by an explanation
- It is a literary form found in other cultures as well, especially Egyptian writings and in Greek religion found in the ancient *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*

The Sermon on the Mount and Sermon of the Plain

- Are not drawn from mystery Greek cults, but developed out of Jewish thought
- The OT and post biblical literature contain a large number of beatitudes in a wide variety of forms and functions, difficult to determine primary characteristics

Comparing all these OT and post-biblical materials leads to the following conclusions:

- The original function (Sitz im Leben) is ritual
- Their nature is that of declarative statements
- The future orientation is eschatological as well as this-worldly
- They are connected with ethics and morality

With regards to the Beatitudes contained in the Sermon of the Mount

- Their Sitz im Leben meaning original function is didactic, meaning teaching
- If the function is ritualistic, it is secondary, reminders of teachings heard before
- Most are given in the 3rd pers. Pl. indicating didactic, 2nd pers. Pl. indicating ritual
- Yet the evidence shows that both forms are didactic
- while the 3rd pers is never without an ethical appeal

The Declarations state an understood truth

- What might be understood as a theological dogma applied to eschatological judgement
- If in the context as the last judgment, God, as the supreme judge pronounces the verdict making concrete what has been stated as a principle
- The Beatitudes represent anticipated eschatological verdicts

In the context of Jewish wisdom texts

- The Beatitudes declare that one blessed deserves this state of being because of the wisdom displayed before God and humanity
- This wisdom is based on divine justice revealed in the Torah
- The faithful disciple is called the prudent one

Jesus is understood to be the speaker and authority behind the beatitudes

- Yet they are not merely pronounced on his authority as if arbitrarily invented by him
- But the authoritative teacher who formulated them derived from revealed divine justice
- Every competent Jewish teacher should have been familiar with these principles
- Jesus is merely correcting the perversions of the leaders back to God's revealed justice
- The final authority of the Beatitudes is God's justice, a fundamental concept in SM

While the Beatitudes have a primary eschatological meaning regarding the afterlife

- There is close relationship to morality and ethics that reveal a new way of life
- The beatitude affects moral behavior and demands ethical awareness

What is meant by blessed is the poor in spirit? To our text:

Matthew 5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

- This is the 1st and leading beatitude
- The first part is the beatitude proper, formulated in the 3rd pers. Pl.,
- The 2nd part is a "hoti" clause, for, that, because that, stating the reason for the 1st part
- As a component, this clause has its place in last judgment
- *theirs is the kingdom of heaven*, a verdict is anticipated

1st beatitude regarding Poverty & riches has been of the utmost interest since NT times

- There has been tomes written in response dealing with it, citing 4th C. father Ambrose
- *This beatitude is not only first in order, but also the one that in some way generates all other virtues*
- This beatitude sums up in a succinct form what has been contemplated by religious and philosophical thinkers for centuries

However, more than summing up of what has been known before, it contains new insights that have kept minds and pens busy since it was first pronounced

- It is composed formally of two lines, the first of the macarism proper:

Blessed are the poor in spirit (Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι)

- The discovery and study of Qumran texts, aka Dead Sea Scrolls, ancient Jewish texts found in the Judean desert in mid 20th C has provided an explanation & new questions

Does πτωχός (poor) refer to economic poverty, or is it a spiritual metaphor signifying the mentally depressed, fainthearted, or conscious of the general state of deprivation?

- Does it refer to voluntary poverty or an expression of somatic or psychic deprivation, or a form of piety?

The meaning of “poor” must be determined contextually

- Primarily was it intended in the economic or figurative sense?
- This ambiguity may have resulted in the later predominance of the terms “lowly, humble-minded” and so on, suggesting the figurative

Obviously, the expression plainly makes a statement about poverty and wealth

- A topic much debated in antiquity
- Also obvious is the positive valuation given to poverty
- The teachings of Jesus present a counter-culture reversal motif
- Drawn from Jewish thinking that should already be known by competent scholars

The SM, however, differs from the SP in one important point

- The SM does not, as does the SP juxtapose the rich and the poor as social types
- Instead, “poor in spirit” in the SM intends to qualify a statement regarding poverty
- Based on comparable expressions, the addition of “in spirit” is a critical comment intended to mitigate against a simplistic understanding of the simple adj. “Poor”
- The phrase as a whole critically and apologetically interprets what Jesus meant - and did not mean! -when he called the poor blessed

This debate is concerned not only with the message of Jesus, but also

- For the implications of Isa 61:1, essential for understand the blessedness of the poor

Isaiah 61:1 The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound;

- If the historical Jesus called the poor blessed, did he do so in order to liberate the economically poor from their miserable conditions?
- Did he address a specific group, such as the so-called people of the Land
- Did he call for voluntary submission to this social or economic condition?
- Did he simply try to console those living in a state of depravity?
- Or did he have a more comprehensive message?

These questions are answered by the expression “poor in spirit”

- But this expression itself has become a question
- The term “the poor” has always referred to persons living in social and economic misery
- It is important to realize that the SM does not regard poverty itself as a blessing
- The condition itself is not a blessing, those living in such conditions can be blessed

The message is that becoming aware of this condition is essential for one's understanding of life in general; the starting point of an ethic

- For this reason, we can conclude that the characterization of the beatitude as "spiritualization" and as a softening of Jesus' original radicalism is misleading
- Another misunderstanding would be to conclude that the virtue of patience in the face of unchangeable circumstances of poverty is recommended as favored by some church fathers, who held a high estimation of asceticism.

The expression "poor in spirit" points to an intellectual insight into the human condition

- The corresponding attitude to this insight is the virtue of humility, praised in antiquity
- This virtue is opposed to hubris, arrogance, self-indulgence, and continued practise of extending or expanding this human predicament

The way of life set forth by the SM is based on the insight of the human condition that accepts poverty in the wider sense of the term, a mark of piety and wisdom

- Especially in Jewish wisdom, but also in strands of Greek philosophy
- The Qumran texts attest equivalent notions of piety by Jews who regarded themselves as poor creatures in the eyes of God as well as fellow humanity
- Conducting themselves with humility and relying firmly on God's mercy and grace

In Greek thought, poverty as the basic human condition was seen primarily in terms of human mortality and finitude.

- The Delphic maxim, "Know yourself" was taken to mean "Know that you are mortal"

Philosophically, the positive valuation of poverty understood as self-knowledge became associated with the Socratic and Cynic schools

- A more general understanding persisted until much later, indicated by this epigram
- Attributed to Claudius Ptolemaeus (circa AD 85-160)

I know that I am mortal, a creature of a day; but when I search into the multitudinous revolving spirals of the stars my feet no longer rest on the earth, but, standing by Zeus himself, I take my fill of ambrosia, the food of the gods.

According to Plato, when Socrates says he lives in abundant poverty he has more in mind than economic hardship, rather his entire way of life, he has chosen is one of poverty. The reason for this choice: the growing suspicion among philosophers that wealth is not to be trusted, and the theological conviction that the gods who are in need of nothing live in happiness and freedom

- Choosing a life of poverty was the proper way to imitate the gods.

Socrates ideal was not total self-impoverishment, but rather the elimination of needs

- Which cloud the realization of the beauty within, found in the immortal soul dwelling in the human body

The interpretation of “in the spirit” seems to agree with Socrates dictum Plato’s Apol 38a

- “The unexamined life is not worth living for the human being”
- As one may see from the SM as a whole, self-examination is an imperative for faithful disciples of Jesus

The main difference between Plato and the SM is that in the SM, blessedness is not found in the immortal soul dwelling in the human body

- in fact, an intentional polemic against such an idea occurs in Mt 6:22-23

Matthew 6:22 The light of the body is the eye: if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. 23 But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is that darkness!

- When the light that is in thee, or the light within can be assumed to be total darkness
- Rather the quality that grants blessedness is not introspection
- Instead it is the Kingdom of Heavens, an altogether eschatological concept
- Which segues into the second line of the beatitude

What is meant by the kingdom of heavens?

As we have mentioned, the 1st line in a beatitude is declarative, the 2nd explanatory

- The line also anticipates an eschatological verdict, *for theirs in the Kingdom of Heavens*

What does the SM mean by the Kingdom of Heavens?

- The SM prefers the expression Kingdom of Heavens over the Kingdom of God
- With the exception of the Lord's prayer starting in 6:12
- The SM uses the expression kingdom of heavens referring to the dwelling place of God
- By contrast, the singular “heaven” is used in passages that contrast earth and sky
- God’s realm is spoken of in the plural, distinguished from the sky as part of the cosmos

By comparison, the rest of Matthew is less concerned with the terminology

- Using the traditional kingdom of heavens, but also uses kingdom of God occasionally
- The language suggests that the realm of God is not limited to one place or time
- God is not confined by the cosmos, yet is present everywhere in creation
- Not in a pantheistic notion, but present by way of providence, divine concurrency

It is to come in the future, but has a present reality

- Plural heavens expresses a worldview involving multiple heavens
- God’s eschatological verdict can be known even now, and if so can be pronounced now
- God’s realm is where his justice prevails

So then how can the poor in spirit be blessed in the already?

- The answer is that justice, God’s justice requires it.
- Does not mean the condition of poverty is just, but those who are faithful recognize and accept it with humility, such submission deserves merit
- God who represents and guarantees justice will reward such faithfulness

History of Interpretation

There are 3 basic types of interpretation that complement one another

1. **One emphasizes the *word of grace* in the Beatitudes based on the 1st 4 beatitudes**
 - The blessed are in a particular situation: They are poor, sad, meek, and empty and in need of righteousness.
 - Grace is spiritualized, esp. In Protestant interpretations: empty before God
 - The beatitudes contrast those who are righteous in themselves and those who are righteous only by grace
2. **The 2nd interprets the Beatitudes as ethical exhortation**
 - Favored by ancient and medieval churches and most modern Catholics
 - The Beatitudes are all about virtues understood as a royal stairway from repentance to perfection, their sequence irreversible.
 - The 1st 3 deal with severing earthly ties, the next 3 deal with relations with others, the last 2 deal with one's final acceptance by God
3. **The 3rd interprets the Beatitudes as regulations for community life that comes from grace, to hunger and thirst for grace, then learn how to deal with other people**

Interpretation: Jesus

- For Jesus, the unconditional assurance of salvation to people who are in a hopeless situation is decisive and have a paradoxical nature
- They are not to be interpreted in terms of wisdom deed-result connection because human behavior is not in the foreground
- Nor is the promise to those who are blessed in any way the consequence of behavior

The background is the apocalyptic hope for a total reversal of conditions

- The poor in spirit represent the socially oppressed who suffer from the powers of injustice & are harassed by those who only consider their own advantage and influence.
- They are at the same time those who remain faithful to God and expect their salvation from his kingdom alone.
- They do not answer evil with evil, nor oppose injustice with injustice
- In the midst of the ungodliness and worldmindedness of others, they form the true people of God, comforted by the promise of the coming salvation of the Lord.

Jesus' beatitudes differ from apocalyptic future hopes through his message of the

Kingdom of God: the promised glorious future is already dawning in his activity.

- A part of the salvation promised to the poor, the hungry, and those who mourn is already a reality of Jesus' acceptance of the dispossessed, in his common meals with them, and in the joy over God's love experienced in the present.
- Jesus' beatitudes are not empty promises of something that will happen in the future
- There is an already but not yet tension, Kingdom is present but not fully consummated

We are people of faith look far beyond scholarship that treats these texts similar to any other ancient literature

- Jesus, as the Incarnate Son reveals to us not just self-awareness but a glimpse into the mind of God, contrasting the values of the world with the values of God

That the ultimate meaning of blessedness promise a new vision of the world

- sharing in Jesus' resurrection life as part of a new creation.
- When man begins to live and see from God's perspective, the promises are not merely postponed to the future, but hearts are changed to serve our fellow man

The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand

- Rather there is an already, but not yet, present, but not yet consummated
- We enjoy a foretaste of heaven now, an earnest of the spirit as a down payment for what awaits us, while Jesus brings joy now in the midst of affliction

The Beatitudes should convict Xtians to free themselves from all the political strife, return to the first works, love God, honor God's law, love our fellow man, and love our enemies

- The second great commandment is to *love our neighbor as ourselves*
- This commandment assumes that we love ourselves and this is key
- Xtians need to stop trying to control others and start to take care of themselves

Self-love is a prerequisite to loving others

- love for self flows from our love for God, as does our love for our fellow man.

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