

20260621 Struggling up the Ladder of Divine Ascent – Dr Myk Habets

Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, expresses the Beatitudes in Matthew 5 like this:

When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said:

'You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

'You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

'You're blessed when you're content with just who you are – no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

'You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.

'You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'care-full', you find yourselves cared for.

'You're blessed when you get your inside world – your mind and heart – put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

'You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family.

'You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom.

'Not only that – count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable.

'You can be glad when that happens – give a cheer, even! – for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.'

I love his turn of phrase in the last part of this text – and all heaven applauds.

The Beatitudes, those enigmatic yet strangely powerful words which introduce the Sermon on the Mount, call out to us from across the distance of space-time with a crystalline clarity neither marred nor silenced by that time and space.

In eight simple sayings Jesus puts forth a ladder from earth to heaven, 'a ladder of divine ascent' as the Eastern Orthodox express it, and says, in effect, follow me!

I think we identify these 8 beatitudes with 8 rungs of the ladder of divine ascent.

Not 8 works which get us into heaven –

but 8 virtues which those on the way to heaven exhibit.

8 aspects to a Christian's life which, when we experience them, result in the applause of heaven.

Climbing this ladder is not always easy, nor is it possible in our own strength. But, unless one climb the ladder Christ has provided, earth and heaven will never meet and you will never hear the applause of heaven ringing in your ears or reverberating through your soul.

As we struggle up this ladder of divine ascent we shall hear the applause of heaven! God smiling. Gabriel and Michael high fiveing. And the saints dancing for joy. For you. For me. For us. We shall hear the applause of heaven!

Blessed here means to share in the life of God, the ultimate joy. There is no higher gift. The blessings here extended to us are those of participation in the communion of the life of God, sharing in God's immortality and being blessed with qualities that seem humanly impossible.

Today we won't work through each rung of the ladder of divine ascent in any detail. Rather, for each beatitude I will point out the question it asks of us and the value it presents. I first learnt these questions and values from Rowland Foreman and I still find them useful.

1. Blessed are the Meagre, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Like climbing any ladder we have to take each rung at a time. To skip rungs is to risk falling off. And so the beatitudes have a progressive nature to them. The first two beatitudes, blessed are the meagre and the mourners go together. They are the first steps in struggling up the ladder of divine ascent for they develop the core of our character.

This first asks us to have a certain virtue – that of poverty of spirit and so the Question this forces us to ask ourselves everyday is this: Will I depend on God today? And the Value this represents: Brokenness. Brokenness before God. 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

The promise of the kingdom of Heaven is simply the promise of participation in God's life! So the first core conviction is the value of poverty of spirit.

2. Blessed are the Mourners, for they will be comforted.

This is no gentle, sentimental, twilight sadness, in which one can languish and luxuriate; it is a sorrow which is poignant, piercing, and intense. This beatitude carries with it a question: Will I mourn over sin today? And it has a value attached: Sensitivity to evil.

An immediate consequence of poverty of spirit is becoming sensitive to the pain and losses of people around me, not only those whom I happen to know and care for, but also people I don't know and don't want to know.

But why is mourning a blessing? How can it be a blessing?

Mourning creates transparency in people. It tells them that we are in pain and we have experienced some type of loss. It opens us up for others to know. As one priest put it, 'what we grieve over and mourn for reveals who we are. If we mourn our lack of money, it betrays our values. If we mourn child poverty, it exposes our heart.'

And so these first two beatitudes form the core of our character then thus they are the first rungs of the ladder of divine ascent. The next four rungs of the ladder examine what it means to be the blessed Humble, Hungry, Humane, and Honest.

3. Blessed are the Meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Meekness has a God-ward and a human-ward orientation.

Firstly, it is the person who gives God the perfect trust, obedience, and submission.

It is the Job's of the world, "Though he slay me yet will I trust in him," "The Lord giveth and he taketh away."

It is the attitude of Jesus "Not as I will but as you will."

And secondly, it has a humanward orientation, it is a Beatitude which in effect says, "Blessed is the one who is always angry at the right time and who is never angry at the wrong time."

The Question this beatitude asks of us is this: Will I be gentle with fellow sinners today?

The value this develops is: Tenderness.

The meek Christian is the one who has stood before God's judgment and abdicated all their supposed 'rights.' In gratitude of God's grace they have learnt to submit to the Lord, and in expectation of future grace they have learnt to trust in the Lord, and be gentle with fellow sinners.

4. Blessed are they who Hunger and Thirst for Righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Jesus Christ doesn't say 'Blessed are those who hope for righteousness,' or 'Blessed are those who campaign for righteousness,' but 'Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness' – that is, people who want what is right as urgently as a person in the desert wants a glass of water or a child in a refugee camp cries desperately for a crust of bread.

The question this Beatitude asks us is this: Do I have an attitude for holiness? Do I, each day, strive to be holy, long to be moral, desire to live right with God and neighbour?

The value associated with it is this: A holy dissatisfaction with where I am.

Blessed are those who hold their earthly possessions with open palms. Blessed are those, who, if everything they own were taken from them, would be at most, inconvenienced, because their true wealth is elsewhere. Blessed are those who are totally dependant upon Jesus for their joy.

5. Blessed are the Merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.

One of the problems with trying to live a righteous life is that self-righteousness is always just a breath away. How easy to catalogue the sins I haven't committed, to recite the sins of others, to fill pages with my own good deeds.

This Beatitude reminds us that righteousness comes from God alone, for he is the truly Merciful one and demands that as an antidote to self-righteousness, we be merciful to others.

This Beatitude has a question for us: Am I actively involved in giving compassion?

The value this Beatitude teaches is this: Outgoing love and kindness.

The merciful are blessed because they are testimonies to a greater goodness. Forgiving others allows us to see God has forgiven us. The dynamic of giving grace is the key to understanding grace, for it is when we forgive others that we begin to feel what God feels.

6. Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God.

What is a pure heart? It is: A heart free of passiveness, a heart capable of mourning, a heart that thirsts for what is right, a merciful heart, a loving heart, an undivided heart.

The Beatitudes here all fold into one another. The true believer has an undivided heart that is gentle, dissatisfied with their own holiness, showing outgoing love and kindness, and now exhibiting integrity.

Integrity – that is the value this beatitude demands. The question it asks is this: Am I sincere, transparent?

The promise associated with this beatitude is that the pure in heart shall see God. To see God is to be with God. To be with God is to be accepted, holy, intimate, - one with God. Here again we see a now common theme – the beatitude saint, the Christian struggling up the ladder of divine descent, is promised the ultimate reward – life with God – life IN God! And so we approach the upper rungs of the ladder of divine ascent with the 7th and 8th beatitudes.

7. Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Only a person who has taken all the steps that purify the heart can help rebuild bridges, pull down walls of division, and assist us in recovering a small degree of our lost communion with God and with one another.

From Scripture we learn that peace is not a principle, theory, concept, political ideology, or social ideal but is Christ himself.

And so as with the other beatitudes this one also has a question and a value for us:

The Question: Am I involved in mending broken relationships?

The Value: Reconciliation, Mediation

While we are told to be peace makers we must realise by now that this beatitude, like the rest, is impossible for us to actually attain on our own. If Christ is peace then only he can make peace. And I think that is what this beatitude is saying. We are to be the bridge between Christ and the world. And so, being a peacemaker does not mean that we make peace in our own strength. Rather, it means that we are in the service of peace, for

peace is God's gift.

Peacemaking – its not just for Mother Teresa, Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, or super-pastor. It is the calling of all who would follow Christ. For they will be called children of God. Once again the staggering, even scandalous promise – these people are God's people – part of his family. Christ then gives the final beatitude.

8. Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The final beatitude is the longest. In Hebrew thought – to repeat something is to give it emphasis.

The final question and value of the beatitudes is this:

The Question: Am I prepared for the consequences of this radical lifestyle?

The Value: Suffering, the cross.

Following Christ is not the choice to make for anyone whose goal in life is security. And so we reach the top of the ladder of divine ascent. But something has happened along the way. Did you perceive it? Have you caught on to the fact yet?

The analogy of a ladder into heaven is good, but it quickly gives way to other analogies which bring out some of the complexity and real-world nature of Christian discipleship. You see we find that we never really climb a rung of the ladder and leave it behind for evermore. In fact, it is truer to life that we find ourselves ascending and descending the ladder on a daily basis as we work, sin, repent, and live and move and have our being in this fallen world – but nonetheless in Christ. More like an escalator!

And so the image of a ladder of divine ascent gives way to another image. Once more our Eastern friends come to our aid when they speak of Christian spirituality as a kind of journey, a form of metamorphosis – a process of change and growth and transformation into the creature we have been designed to become – like Christ.

In her hauntingly beautiful work *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Annie Dillard tells the following story. At school I saw a searing sight. It turned me to books; it turned me to jelly; it turned me much later, I suppose, into an early version of a runaway, a scapegrace. It was only a freshly hatched Polyphemus moth crippled because its mason jar was too small.

The mason jar sat on the teacher's desk; the big moth emerged inside it. The moth had clawed a hole in its hot cocoon and crawled out, as if agonizingly, over the course of an hour, one leg at a time; we children watched around the desk, transfixed. After it emerged, the wet, mashed thing turned around walking on the green jar's bottom, then painstakingly climbed the twig with which the jar was furnished.

There, at the twig's top, the moth shook its sodden clumps of wings. When it spread those wings those beautiful wings – blood would fill their veins, and the birth fluids on the wing's frail sheets would harden to make them tough as sails. But the moth could not spread its wide wings at all; the jar was too small. The wings could not fill, so they hardened while they were still crumpled from the cocoon. A smaller moth could have spread its wings to their utmost in that mason jar, but the Polyphemus moth was big. Its gold furred body was almost as big as a mouse. Its brown, yellow, pink, and blue wings would have extended six inches from tip to tip, if there had been no mason jar. It would have been as big as a wren.

The teacher let the deformed creature go. We all left the classroom and paraded outside behind the teacher with pomp and circumstance. She bounced the moth from its jar and set it on the school's asphalt driveway. The moth set out walking. It could only heave the golden wrinkly clumps where its wings should have been; it could only crawl down the school on its six frail legs. The moth crawled down the driveway toward the rest of Shadyside, an area of fine houses, expensive apartments, and fashionable shops. It crawled down the driveway because its shrivelled wings were glued shut. It crawled down the driveway toward Shadyside, one of several sections of town where people like me were expected to settle after college, renting an apartment until they married one of the boys and bought a house. I watched it go.

I knew that this particular moth, the big walking moth, could not travel more than a few yards before a bird or cat began to eat it, or a car ran over it. Nevertheless, it was crawling with what seemed wonderful vigour, as if, I thought at the time, it was still excited from being born. I watched it go till the bell rang and I had to go in. I have told this story before, and may yet tell it again, to lay the moth's ghost, for I still see it crawl down the broad black driveway, and I still see its golden wing clumps heave.

The Polyphemus moth is a parable of the way many live their lives today.

Created to be transformed, to claw our way out of our cocoons of self, consumerism, pride, preoccupation, and sin – to spread our grand wings and become the remarkable creatures we are designed to be – so many lack the energy or drive to struggle out of the cocoon. Others create mason jars of sin to hem themselves in thinking this is the route to security and joy. And so they walk down the hot asphalt of life to a slow but certain death. The death of the ordinary. The death of the consumerist. The death of the secularist. The death of the preoccupied. The death of one too lazy to struggle for life – Christ life, eternal life, the divine life!

God in Christ has provided a release from the mason jar at just the right time and says – here – here is the path to follow, the ladder to climb, the way in which you can fly and soar and realise your divine potential.

Jesus would go on to say in Matthew 11:28: "Come to me all who are weary and burdened, and I shall give you rest." Here is the route to achieving the applause of heaven!