

Conference on World Mission and Evangelism
Moving in the Spirit: Called to Transforming Discipleship
8-13 March 2018
Arusha, Tanzania

Bible Study 2

Transforming the World, according to Jesus' Vision of the Kingdom

Matthew 5:1-16

¹*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

³*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

⁵*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

⁶*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

⁷*Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

⁸*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

⁹*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

¹⁰*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹*Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”*

¹³*“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.”*

¹⁴*“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”*

The Text in Its Context

The selected text is the first part of the Sermon on the Mount, as found in the gospel according to Matthew. Probably, Matthew is collecting various sayings of Jesus delivered in

different contexts into a compendium, and placing it at the beginning of the public ministry of Jesus (Matt. 5:1-7:29) – just as the Missionary Instructions are collected in chapter 10, the Parables of the Kingdom in chapter 13, and Instructions about the Community of God in chapter 18, and then the Sermon on Eschatology is placed toward the end of the gospel (Matt. 23:1-25:46). These discourses are clearly marked with the phrase: “When Jesus had finished saying these things...” (NIV, 7:28, 11:1, 13:53, 19:1, 26:1). The five discourses in Matthew could allude to the five books of the Torah.

This text, one of the key passages in the gospels, has three sections:

Section 1: Describes the scenic setting of the first sermon of Jesus;

Section 2: Captures the sermon of Jesus in the aphorisms that we refer to as “Beatitudes”;

Section 3: Points out the outcome of living the Beatitudes – we become salt of the earth and light of the world.

In contrast to Luke (6:17), where Jesus delivers the Beatitudes from a level ground, Matthew (5:1) places Jesus on a mountain as he delivers the first of the discourses. Given the Jewish context of the gospel according to Matthew, Jesus is portrayed as the new Moses (see Ex. 19:3-9), now wanting to form a new community of disciples: “. . . he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him” (Matt. 5:1). Moreover, Jesus delivers the discourse while seated, exhibiting authority (Matt. 7:29; also Luke 4:20) and appearing to be the new judge (see also John 8:2). However, his authority is different and his criteria for judgement are new.

What is at the core of his teaching? Jesus is proposing a new definition of righteousness: The righteousness of the members of his community is to surpass the legalistic righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20). Righteousness in the mind of Jesus is a response of an individual to the *makarios* (Greek for “blessing”) of God.

“Blessing,” or being “blessed,” is two-dimensional. On the one hand, God blesses human beings. God tells Abraham and even other patriarchs: I will bless you and your descendants (Gen. 12:2). Good harvest, children, peaceful family, wealth, happiness, wisdom are all seen to be blessings from God. On the other hand, the book of Psalms suggests also that the human being blesses God: “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.” (Ps. 103); “In the great congregation I will bless the Lord” (Ps. 26:12); “So I will bless you as long as I live” (Ps. 63:4). In the book of Daniel, we find the three young men in the blazing furnace, calling on the whole of creation to join them in blessing the Lord (Dan. 3:23-68 [*Greek addition*]). This suggests that *makarios* is the sacred space where human beings and God encounter each other. “Blessing,” in other words, is that very experience of encounter and the outcome of that experience.

“Blessing” understood as the experience of God in Jesus is the new interpretation of “righteousness.” “Blessing” is the antecedent and consequence of personal transformation. Being blessed is the source and expression of the individual transformed disciple. When individual disciples experience the blessing of God, they, as a community, become a sign of blessing in the world.

This leads us to the third part of the text (Matt. 5:29-30). This part reiterates that the fruit of the encounter is that the disciples of Jesus, as a community (It is important to note that the “you” here is plural, unlike in Matt. 5:29-30.), become salt of the earth and light of the world. “Salt” could have different layers of meaning. In the Hebrew scriptures, salt is associated with covenant (Lev. 2:3; Num. 18:19; 2 Chron. 13:5). Using this connotation, is Jesus telling us that we, his disciples, are the signs of the covenant of God in the world? Salt also is hidden in food, only perceived in taste. In line with some of the parables of the kingdom (Matt. 13:31, 33), is Jesus telling us that sometimes our virtuous life could lie hidden because it is based on the covenant with God, just as the sign of the covenant lies hidden in the circumcised man, perceived only by him?

In contrast to salt, light is visible and facilitates visibility for others. Light stands as the complementary dimension to salt. Salt lies hidden beneath the earth like the root, and light shows itself like the shoot for the world. In being light of the world, the Christian is compared to the sun – and to Jesus himself, who declared, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12). While Christian life is based on a hidden relationship with God in Jesus, it needs to be also explicitly visible before the world, so that the relationship becomes a sign of hope for the world, inviting transformation according to the values of the kingdom.

The Text in Our Context

Transformation of the world begins, first and foremost, with the individual, even though individuals are part of a community. The individual’s transformation begins with their attitude, their desires, and their priorities. Their desires and priorities are to be focused on the covenantal relationship with God. All will be well with those who are focused on the communion with God. True happiness is an outcome of our focus on the experience of God. This is the core of the Beatitudes. Let us examine each of the aphorisms.

Blessed are the poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3): What could being poor in spirit mean? In the Hebrew scriptures, widows, orphans, and strangers are considered the poor (Ex. 22:22; Lev. 19:10). They are helpless and vulnerable. They are totally dependent on God. What Jesus is saying is that all will be well with those who make themselves vulnerable in front of God. The attitude of total abandonment to God inherits the reign of God.

Blessed are those who mourn (Matt. 5:4): Does “mourning” merely mean being depressive or experiencing negative affect? Mourning could also be associated with a deep desire for the beyond. There is a promise that the “dark night of the soul,” which is marked by even a painful longing for God, will be one day satisfied.

Blessed are the meek (Matt. 5:5): Meekness could be understood as being humble before the sight of God (Ps. 37:11). It also implies being submissive to the will of God (Num. 12:3). Those who are not arrogant and who are ready to accept the will of God will inherit the earth. In the temptations of Jesus (Matt. 4:1-11), the last of the tests was the possibility to worship something other than God, with a false promise of inheriting “all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour.” Jesus, however, chooses to “Worship the Lord God, and serve him only.” In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ promise to those who will bow before God is that they will inherit all that exists. John of the Cross, a great 16th-century mystic, writes,

Mine are the heavens and mine is the earth. Mine are the nations, the just are mine, and mine the sinners. The angels are mine, and the Mother of God, and all things are mine; and God Himself is mine and for me, because Christ is mine and all for me. What do you ask, then, and seek, my soul? Yours is all of this, and all is for you. Do not engage yourself in something less, nor pay heed to the crumbs which fall from your Father’s table.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt. 5:6): What is “righteousness” – a repeated theme in Matthew? Is it obedience to law, or is it being justified by God? Jesus foresees that the righteousness of his disciples is to exceed mere pharisaic obedience to the law (Matt. 5:20). We are justified by an experience of God in Jesus (Rom. 3:24). Therefore, those who hunger and thirst to be righteous by means of the experience of God in Jesus will be fulfilled.

Blessed are the merciful (Matt. 5:7): Mercy could be understood as forgiveness, pity, compassion, or loving kindness. The experience of the mercy of God is consistently linked to our own willingness to offer mercy to fellow human beings – another repeated theme in Matthew (Matt. 6:12; Matt. 18:35)! Those who are able to be empathetic toward others, being sensitive to their suffering, will themselves be embraced by the compassion of the Lord.

Blessed are the pure in heart (Matt. 5:8): “Pure of heart” could imply being one-minded about God: like the arrow that is out of the bow on target toward the bull’s eye. Those who seek God – like the lion hunting its prey with its eyes fixed firmly on the prey, its muscular system entirely geared towards it, and its full attention of mind focused on it – they will see God! They will have a *dharshan*¹ of God – the beatific vision of God. In fact, it is God who seeks us out like a lion,² we only have to respond to him with purity of heart, and see the face of God.

Blessed are the peacemakers (Matt. 5:9): Peacemakers are likened to the children of God. How do I deal with my own tendency towards anger, competition, and violence? Do I deal with all that mars the image of God within me? When we deal with all tendency towards discord and dichotomy within ourselves, we become like little children (Matt. 18:3): we enter the kingdom of God, we become part of the reign of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness (Matt. 5:10-12): If I embrace the righteousness proposed by Jesus, I am likely to be laughed at. If I make myself vulnerable, living through an inner pain, humble before God and merciful to all, totally being

one-minded about God, I am likely to be ridiculed by the values of the world. Do I have the courage to live for the cause of the values of Christ? When I embrace fully the values of the kingdom of God, the reward is also internal, something beyond this world: I am likely to consistently experience a heavenly bliss. As a transformed disciple, I follow Jesus in transforming the world.

By living the values of the Beatitudes in our life, as individuals and as a community, we become the salt of the earth. And as a community of disciples transformed by the values of the Beatitudes, we challenge the world that is obsessed by values of pleasure (immediate gratification), power (wanting to be in absolute in control of everything and everybody around), and possession (drawing my identity from having rather than being). We become a blessing in the world, and invite the world towards an encounter with God. In this way, we become the light of the world.

Questions for Reflection and Group Discussion

1. What do terms such as “blessed” and “happiness” evoke in you personally?
2. What are the challenges that you (as an individual and as a Christian community) face living the values of the Beatitudes?
3. Called to transform the world, how can a Christian community be salt of the earth and light of the world in the contemporary situation?

Prayer³

*Gracious God,
you have so richly blessed us with life,
with love and joy,
with hope in the midst of despair.
Help us to be the salt of the earth.
Help us to be the light of the world,
sharing with others that which we have received,
boldly proclaiming the good news of your love,
finding the seeds of your kingdom within us
and letting your way grow in our lives and throughout the world.*

*Give us eyes to see the ways you are changing the world in which we live.
Give us ears to hear your call to join with you in the great transformation.*

*Hear us now, o God,
as we pray for the coming of your kingdom.*

About the Author

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Notes:

¹ Sanskrit for “vision.”

² V. J. Donovan. (1982) *Christianity Rediscovered*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, N.Y.

³ John W. Vest, “Prayers of the People,” 21 July 2013, <http://www.fourthchurch.org/prayer/prayers-of-the-people/2013/072113jv.html>.