

The Teachings Of Jesus

(The Sermon on the Mount)

Maurice W. Lusk, III

FIRST BLOCK (5:3-16)

The Historical Context of the Beatitudes

As his disciples gathered around him, Jesus began to discourse on the theme of moral character. Moral character, not the life lived out of conformity to a collection of oral codes, is the key to a blessed or happy life. He begins this discourse with a series of beatitude sayings(5:3-12). Similar sayings (i.e., "How blessed are the ones") are found in the OT; especially in the poetic writings of Psalm' and Proverbs).

Jesus then follows this series of beatitude with two sayings (5:13-16); one concerning salt, the other concerning light, both of which are practical applications of what he has said in the series of beatitudes. The word "beatitude" is from the Latin word *beatus* meaning, "to bless, be blessed, to be in a state of well-being." The Greek term found here in the Matthew text is *makarios*, a word rich in meaning. In the first century Greek-speaking world this word had a variety of meanings, depending on the context in which it occurred. The meanings range from, to have good fortune, to be smiled upon by the gods, to be given special gifts, or favor by the gods (e.g. wealth, health, family, talents, or special abilities), being gifted with wisdom and insight, or for a prophet or seer, to be given special visions or revelations from the gods.

Makarios was, to the average person, to be favored in some way by someone of great importance, especially by the gods. This understanding followed from the way the word was used in the Classical Greek writings

(i.e., Homer and other writers of the Classical period of the fifth century BCE). *Makariotes* (blessedness) was the possession of the gods alone; they were *hoi makares*, "the blessed ones." All persons who were blessed in this life received their blessings from "the blessed ones." In fact, in Attic Greek, the term *makarioi* was used to refer to the upper classes - the privileged by the gods.

This is significant for our purposes in this study, in that the Greek understanding appears to have been the Hebrew understanding as well. In the Hebrew language of the OT Scriptures, there are two different words used to convey the idea of blessed. The first is the word *barak*, which is translated as "blessed" in over 180 occurrences in the OT. In each of its occurrences it refers rather to God as "the Blessed One," (39 occ), or to blessings that come from God. There is an interesting root idea associated with the Hebrew *barak*. It literally means, "to kneel," and what we have in the word's usage in the OT is a word picture - that of kneeling, either to call upon the Blessed One or to receive his blessings. This term is also used for offering praise to God or beseeching God for his blessing. But this is not the word with which we are primarily concerned in our study, in fact, this word is most usually translated in the Greek OT (LXX-the Septuagint) by a different word than the Greek *makarios*

The second Hebrew word *asher* which is translated as "blessed" in 31 occurrences and "happy" in 19 occurrences in the OT. This term is consistently translated in the Greek OT with the Greek *makarios*. It is the primary term used in the OT beatitude sayings: Psalms 1:1; 33:12; 34:8; 40:4; 41:1-2; 84:4, 5, 12, 89:15; 94:12; 119:1-2; 127:5; 144:15; 146:5; Proverbs 3:13; 8:32, 34.

A reading of these passages will quickly give one a sense of the OT flavor of the beatitudes of Jesus, as well as a sense of how they would have been understood by his disciples. The most probable reason why the Hebrew *asher*, rather than *barak*, is used in these beatitudes is that *asher*, as well as the Greek *makarios*, has to do with the idea of "happiness" or "having a sense of well being," a state of existence rather than the giving or receiving of praise to God or the request for benefits. The idea with which we are working here has more to do with a blessed life than with blessings one

receives in life. This may be seen in the root idea within the two Hebrew terms here under consideration. In *barak* the root idea is that of "kneeling" (i.e., to receive a gift), where in *asher* the root idea is that of "proceeding" as in a course of life. On my wall in my office I have a saying that reads: "Happiness is not a station you arrive at but a manner of traveling." This is the idea of the Hebrew *asher*, and the sense of the Greek *makarios* as found here in these sayings of Jesus in Matt 5:3-12.

Historical Context of the Beatitudes

The terminology and concepts with which we are dealing here in these words of Jesus are clearly OT. In fact, many of the same themes found in Jesus' beatitudes are found together in many OT texts. In Psalms 37, one finds a number of the motifs of Matt 5:3-12, in terminology and concept: the poor and needy and their realization of their dependence on God, the meek inheriting the land, the search for righteousness and persecution of the righteous by the wicked. So also with the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 61:1ff. Beatitude lists with similar themes are found in much of the literature of the Jews not included in the canon of Jamnia on the Sea in the late first century; e.g. the books of *Enoch*, *Testament of the Twelve Patriarchs*, the *Wisdom of Solomon*, and in the Dead Sea Scrolls collection discovered in 1947. All of these writings reflect ideas or concepts that were "in the air" in first century Palestine. Especially, would this have been so in the literature associated with the Jewish messianic expectation.

The Beatitudes and the Messianic Agenda of Isaiah 61

The Messianic expectation of first century Palestine was very diverse. One of the major messianic figures expected to come to deliver Israel was a redeemer figure who was a descendent of David. In fact, the designation, "Son of David," one of the messianic titles used to speak of him in first century Judaism. This was, no doubt, due to the fact that what the Jews longed for most was most was a military deliverance from Rome. Jesus, however, had a different messianic agenda; in fact, immediately after his baptism and temptation period in the wilderness, he returned to Nazareth, and entered into the synagogue, and there set out his messianic agenda and

with it his concept of who the Messiah was to be. He read a messianic text from the scroll of Isaiah:

*Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of him went out through all the surrounding region. 15 And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified by all. 16 So he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and stood up to read. 17 And he was handed the book of the prophet Isaiah. And when He had opened the book, he found the place where it was written: 18 **"The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; 19 to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.** 20 Then he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on him. 21 And he began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing," (Luke 4:14-21.)*

From this passage it appears that Jesus' concept of his messianic agenda was taken, in part, from Isaiah 61:1-3. The themes within that text, especially with reference to those he came to deliver, are very interesting and informing with reference to Jesus' view of his task. This messianic prophecy, as it appears in Isaiah 61, read as follows:

*The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good tidings to **the poor** [Hebrew *anawim* - the oppressed, afflicted, poor, meek, the marginalized or disenfranchised of society]; he has sent me to heal **the brokenhearted**, to proclaim liberty to **the captives**, and the opening of the prison to **those who are bound**; 2 to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort **all who mourn**, 3 to console those **who mourn in Zion**, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for **the spirit of heaviness**; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified (Isaiah 61:1-3).*

What we see promised in this passage is messianic deliverance. Those who came to see Jesus the Messiah were those who saw themselves

most needing deliverance from some kind of oppression or affliction. These were the oppressed of society, not the powerful and the proud of society, but the powerless and the humble that cried out daily for God to come to their aid. It is to these that Jesus' words of Matt 5 would have had the most meaning.

Jesus' Messianic Agenda and the Audience of the Sermon on the Mount

A critical question here concerns the meaning of expressions as "poor in spirit," "the mourning," "the meek," "the hungering and thirsting for righteousness;" especially as compared to the Luke 6:20-22 sayings: "Blessed are the poor, the hungry, etc." Many scholars try to merge the two lists because some of the language of the sermon of Matt 5-7 is found in the discourse of Luke 6, but there is nothing unusual about a teacher or preacher using the language and themes of one sermon in another sermon. The primary issue here concerns the understanding his original audience would have had to such expressions as poor in spirit, meek, those who mourn, etc.

In the Luke 6 discourse, Jesus appears to be surrounded by what the Hebrews called the "*anawim*" (i.e., the meek, the poor, the oppressed of Isaiah 61:1). The *anawim* were those who had lost all hope, except their hope in God; and the theme throughout the Luke 6 discourse is that of "divine reversal," a theme very prevalent in Luke. In that context, Jesus speaks to them of the God of the oppressed. The poor he speaks of there were, no doubt, the poverty stricken of society; and the promise he gives them is that God can change their misery, he can reverse their fortune or misfortune.

In Matt 5:3ff, Jesus is not speaking to an entirely different audience, but his emphasis does appear to be somewhat different. Here his emphasis is on attitudes, and mind-sets resulting from life's oppression; i.e., poverty of spirit, the spirit of mourning, or of one brokenhearted, the spirit of meekness or gentleness, the spirit of one longing for the righteousness of God to prevail in their world, all of which are descriptive of "the *anawim*" of the OT Scriptures; especially of Isaiah 61:1-3.

The *Anawim* in First Century Palestine

The people who heard Jesus gladly (Mark 12:37) were mostly the meek and lowly of society. The high and mighty had no use for Jesus' teachings. In first century Palestine there was a sharp distinction between the meek and lowly and the high and mighty - a major class distinction, in fact, there was no middle-class as we have in our culture, there was only the rich and the poor.

The people of the Dead Sea sect well exemplify the attitude we need to see. In fact, they identified themselves with the oppressed of society and even called themselves "the *anawim*." The expression "poor in spirit" is the exact equivalent of the Hebrew expression "*anawe ruach*," found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. The people of the Dead Sea community were a monastic group who lived their lives in a spirit of humility, meekness or gentleness. In their writings they often contrasted themselves with the religious hierarchy of Jerusalem, those of a proud and arrogant spirit. They believed that the Jewish leaders of Jerusalem had perverted the true religion of God and leagued themselves with the power of Rome. God would destroy them and give the land promised to the fathers back to the humble and Lowly. In the Manual of Discipline scroll, the Qumran scribe, in discussing the work of the spirit of truth, would send into the world, says:

It is of the spirit of truth to enlighten the heart of man, and to level before him the ways of righteousness, and to set fear in his heart of the judgment of God. And to it belong the spirit of humility/meekness (*anawe ruach*, literally, "poor in spirit") and forbearance, of abundant mercy and eternal goodness, (IQS [*Manual of Discipline*] 4:2-3).

This same expression is found in the War Scroll and in the Qumran-Commentary of Psalms 37, which also contains many of the ideas we find in Jesus' list of beatitudes: especially references to the *anawim* (i.e., the poor, and he lowly or meek). In Psalms 37:11, 14 we read,

Yet a little while and the wicked will be no more; I will examine his place and he will be no more. [The explanation of this concerns all

wickedness: at the end of the forty years they will be wiped out and on the earth not a wicked man will be found]. But the humble (*anaw ruach* – poor in spirit) will possess the earth and taste the delights of perfect bliss [The explanation of this concerns the congregation of the poor who accept the time of affliction and will be delivered from all the snares of the pit, (*Essene Writings from Qumran, Commentary on Psalms 37, 1:5b10.*)

In the Dead Sea Scrolls, this expression clearly stands for the meek and lowly of society, or better, those who possess an attitude of humility or meekness rather than an attitude corrupted by power, avarice and greed – those of a self-serving spirit. The root of the Hebrew term *anawim* is the same for most of the terms we are working with here, poor in spirit, the humble, the meek or lowly, the afflicted or oppressed (i.e. those who mourn) this is a fact of no little significance for our purposes here, in that the terminology and concepts found in these beatitudes would have been immediately recognized by the audience to whom Jesus was speaking, viz. "the *anawim*," He was speaking of the meek and lowly of society, not the arrogant and powerful.

Jesus words were spoken first to the oppressed, those who have experienced suffering, pain, who have wept, who know what emptiness is, what it means to be helpless, and who acknowledged their need for the deliverance of God. Here is the point to see, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth God's deliverance was in their midst, God's response to their cries for deliverance was there, the messianic promises of Isaiah 61 were being fulfilled in their very presence. Blessed (*makarios*) were those who could see that.

"Today!" Jesus says, as he closed the scroll of Isaiah, "this Scripture is being fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). To have been there to hear Jesus' words would have truly been a blessing; but even more, to have been able to see who this person Jesus of Nazareth really was, the one who was the very presence of God there in their midst, that would have been a *makarios!*

MWLIII