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Matthew 5

Matthew 5.¹⁻¹²— Meditation 1 (introductory)

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

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

⁴Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

⁷Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

¹⁰Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

¹²Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

The Sermon on the Mount contains some of Jesus' best known and difficult sayings and teachings. In it we find such things as his beloved Beatitudes, his difficult warnings about judgement, retribution and loving one's enemies, his indispensable directions concerning prayer, his song worthy parable of the house built on a rock, and, based on world history since its utterance, his impossible counsel concerning money and economic materialism. Even those who know little of him and those who do not believe him to be God or God's son, even they know and respect his world-changing suggestion that we treat others as we would like to be treated.

If we knew nothing else about this man or his teachings, what we do know of him and his teachings from this sermon of just under 2500 English words would be enough to mark him out as an extraordinary thinker and teacher of high ideals. If the world adopted only his counsel about money and materialism, or his counsel concerning our enemies, or his counsel to treat others as we would be treated, the world would be a far, far different place. If the world were to adopt all the sermon's principal teachings, it would be so thoroughly revolutionized as to lose its telestial status and move into the realm of the celestial. But, we cannot be too hard on "the world," I suppose, when, alas, even those of us who profess to admire, worship, and follow him fall far, far short of his high ideals.

Much that Jesus taught in this sermon is, truly, difficult. It is intimidating. When we see how far short of its ideals we fall, we can grow anxious. That's o.k. A little anxiety never killed anyone. More dangerous than anxiety is the ignorance that enters in when we begin to rationalize and domesticate Jesus' teachings; when we conclude that he didn't really mean what he said, or that he meant something different than what the words on the page suggest, or that he wasn't talking to everyone who would ever hear or read his words.

Because of the sermon's difficulty, perhaps, we read it less often than we should. Maybe we don't want to be challenged. Maybe we feel guilty. Maybe we have other things to read. Maybe we have other things we would rather do. Whatever the reason, we should probably repent. We should probably have it on a very regular reading schedule. We should probably be in constant motion trying to fulfill the high ideals. And when we are overcome with the difficulty of following Jesus' teachings and with the ease with which

we fail, we should probably engage more fully and faithfully in that act about which Jesus taught in the sermon: the act of prayer.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 18, 2024)

Matthew 5.¹⁻¹²— Meditation 2 (introductory)

Jesus' beatitudes contain some of his best known and beloved teachings. Like much that is found in the "Sermon on the Mount," the beatitudes are also known to stretch our spiritual capacities. Perhaps it is this sermon's uncomfortable stretching of our spiritual capacities that led Jesus to begin by comforting those who felt themselves destitute of spiritual energies and capacities: "Blessed are the poor in spirit."¹

We will devote a meditation to each of the beatitudes. In this meditation, we wish to make some general observations concerning the title, "Beatitude," and the nature of existence that "blessed" suggests.

The title, "Beatitude," comes from Latin, *beati*, "blessed, happy, fortunate, rich," with which the Greek word, *makarioi*, was translated. This Greek word has the same range of meaning. The Hebrew word, if Jesus indeed spoke Hebrew when he delivered this message (he often spoke Aramaic), is *'ašrê*. The word can mean "blessed," "happy," "content," "secure," "fortunate," "satisfied," "fulfilled." It seems likely that this Hebrew word is derived from the root, *šr*, meaning, "to go forward," "to walk on," "to march steadily." Thus, it can mean "to make progress," "to advance."

Translation is not a science. Human language is imperfect. Misunderstandings in speech and translation are inevitable. The translation of these three words—*beati*, *makarioi*, and *'ašrê*.—is a case in point.

The traditional translation, "blessed," works just fine. However, given its most common usage today, it might fall short of the idea that Jesus had in mind. Today, when we think of one who is "blessed," we might most often think of an individual in whose life God has *directly* acted to bestow or insert some specific benefit (blessing) at a given time and place. While such an individual could be called, "blessed," the "blessedness" of which these three words consist does not require a *direct* act of God and is more generalized than a specific moment or event in time and space. An individual might be called "blessed" who simply lives a life consistent with principles—divine or culturally normative—that lead to a sense of general and consistent happiness, contentment, peacefulness. Some might argue that this latter form of happiness is also God-given since God inspires the principles upon which the happiness is based. In this case the "blessedness" is an *indirect* act of God. I am O.K., with this, but in today's usage we often think in terms of a specific moment or event in which God acts directly. "Blessed," works as a translation as long as we understand that it as a more general and pervasive sense of happiness, contentment, fulfillment, or peace than any transitory moment of wellness.

For many, "happy" works best. Indeed, it seems to have grown to be the most common translation. However, this word too has drawbacks. We can use "happy" for many things. We can be happy to go to the fair. We can be happy at eating our favorite food. We use "happy," then, in a diluted form for many life events that seem too trivial for the sort of "happiness" that Jesus brings or hopes to bring into our lives.

I am often tempted to translate the word, "progressive," as in "advancing," "developing, improving." But this is not very poetic, sounds weird, and, today, has political connotations. Yet, when one thinks of the psychology of true human happiness, the idea of being what one should be and finding improvement in one's life is central. In addition, God, we are told, wants us to be "happy." But theology seems to locate this human happiness in the form of advancement. In traditional Christian theology that advancement is

¹ Or, if Matthew is seen as stitching Jesus' teachings together in order to create one sermon—Luke sprinkles Jesus' teachings found in Matthew's single "Sermon on the Mount" throughout his work—then Matthew is responsible for this beginning's nod to the difficulties that lay ahead in the sermon.

from this flawed human existence on earth to a perfected existence in heaven. LDS theology can hardly conceive of “happiness” outside the terms of “eternal progression.”

So, there is something to be said for each translation: “blessed,” “happy,” and “progressive.” Whatever word is finally utilized, the reader should be aware that “blessedness” has something of each of these three things in it. God wishes us to be happy and secure and contented in life. He wished to see us advance in character and capacity. He plays an enormous role in our lives as we seek these divine goals.

However, we bear a good deal of responsibility for our own happiness and progress. And much of this responsibility comes in the form of following the standards He has so generously provided to produce that happiness and progress. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus advances the standard established by “the scribes and pharisees”² calling us to exceed their standard. It is often a demanding and intimidating standard. We can be forgiven for feeling overwhelmed at times by it. Nevertheless, we must remember from beginning to end that first beatitude that set the entire sermon in motion: “Blessed are those who lack spiritual energies and capacities.” Although it may seem impossible, “with God all things are possible.”³

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 18, 2024)

² See Matthew 5.²⁰

³ See Mark 9.²³

Matthew 5.¹⁻¹²— Meditation 3 (introductory)

Before examining each of the nine beatitudes, we wish to note the form that they all have in common. Each one is composed of two parts. In the first part, we have a statement of what we call “condition.” Jesus addresses individuals who are “poor in spirit,” “meek,” “merciful” “pure in heart,” “peacemakers.” He speaks to those who “mourn,” “hunger and thirst after righteousness,” “are persecuted,” and “revile[d].” In the second part of each beatitude, we have a statement of what we call “promise.” In this second part, Jesus promises “the kingdom of heaven” and “mercy.” He promises individuals that they “shall be comforted,” “shall inherit the earth,” “be filled,” “see God,” “be called the children of God,” and receive a “great...reward in heaven.”

There is no doubt that all the “promises” are positive and desirable. We likely aspire to all of them. However, we may possess less certainty about the “conditions.” Some of the “conditions” may seem positive and desirable. They may represent “conditions” for which we aspire. We may aspire, for example, to be “merciful” or “pure in heart.” Others may seem less desirable. We may not aspire to have them in our lives. We may not wish, for example, to “mourn” or be “persecuted.” We may be uncertain about others. Is it good or bad to be “poor in spirit”? Is “poverty” ever a condition for which we aspire? Do we aspire to “hunger and thirst after righteousness” with its implication that we actually lack, rather desperately it seems, righteousness—else why would we be hungry and thirsty?

As we consider these “conditions,” their desirability, and whether we aspire to possess them or not, we might benefit from remembering that Luke, too, recorded some of Jesus’ beatitudes. The “promises” as recorded by Luke are not significantly different than those recorded by Matthew. However, the “conditions” do possess a marked difference. Here are the “conditions” of the four beatitudes as Luke reports them.

“Blessed be ye poor”

“Blessed are ye that hunger now”

“Blessed are ye that weep now”

“Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake.”¹

Almost certainly there is not a single one of us who aspire to a single one of the “conditions” as Luke records them. We *might, possibly*, think it good to be “poor in spirit,” but we certainly do not aspire to simply be “poor.” Likewise, we do not aspire to be hungry. Period. Even a short fast is a trial for some. Try being hungry all day long every day. Nor do we wish to mourn or be persecuted.

So, one of the questions we should consider is whether or not Luke’s recording of the beatitudes might or should guide our understanding of the beatitudes, especially the “condition” part of each, as Matthew records them.² If not, why not? Do we examine them separately, as if they have nothing to do with each other? In this case, it seems, we would be concluding, essentially, that one or the other or neither actually came from Jesus but were the creation of the two Gospel writers. Do we give priority to one version over the other? If so, which is preferred and on what basis do we pass such judgement?

To treat them separately, it seems to me, causes as many problems as it *seems* to solve. To prioritize one over the other is, in my mind, unjustified. I suggest that in the final analysis they may not be so very

¹ Luke 6.²¹⁻²²

² Using Matthew’s beatitudes to guide us in the interpretation of Luke’s beatitudes seems more fraught.

different as we might imagine them to be at first glance.

Jesus' standards for "righteousness" found in the Sermon on the Mount are certainly high. He does deliverer some difficult challenges. In some cases, they can seem impossibly high and difficult. Some seem, almost, to read at least some of the beatitudes as "commandments" or "admonitions." But, with his initial beatitudes, Jesus is not so much challenging as he is comforting and inviting. In them, I hear the same kind of comfort and invitation that Matthew records Jesus offering later in his ministry:

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."³

As I read the beatitudes, they are comfort, indeed. They are solace for souls intimidated by many of the afflictions with which the world so abounds.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

³ Matthew 11.²⁸

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

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

⁴Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

⁷Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

¹⁰Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

¹²Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

I have serious doubts concerning the traditional understanding of Jesus' first beatitude. Here is the beatitude followed with the traditional understanding.

Beatitude

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

Traditional understanding

"Blessed are the humble: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

I should say, perhaps, that it is really the traditional understanding of "humility" to which I object. To be humble, I have heard more times than I can count, is "to be teachable." Well, if that's what it means to be humble, then, humility has nothing to do with Jesus' first beatitude. However, if by "humility" one means "humiliation," well then, the traditional notion that Jesus' first beatitude is about humility might just not be so far off the mark. Unfortunately, however, few enough people think of humility in terms of humiliation as to make it none. All such interpreters as think of "the poor in spirit" in terms of humility have so domesticated humility as to think that they want to be humble while none of them want to experience humiliation. Yet, it is of and to those who experience humiliation, I believe, that Jesus speaks in his first beatitude.

In this meditation I will offer my reasons for rejecting "the poor in spirit" as indicative of traditional humility and my reasons for accepting Jesus' "poor in spirit" as those who experience the humiliation of spiritual privation.

We have first to do with Jesus' saying, as recorded in Matthew. Jesus is unlikely to have preached in Greek, but in either Hebrew or Aramaic. Yet, we are stuck with Greek as no Hebrew or Aramaic original exists. We have no choice, then, but to put our faith in the faithfulness of the Greek translation of Jesus' original Hebrew/ Aramaic saying.

We begin with Jesus' "poor." This is Greek, *ptōchós*. It means to be "destitute," "mendicant."¹ It is

¹ See, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

indicative of “one who crouches and cowers.” It is “to be beggarly,” or to be a “beggar.”² “It is worthy of note that in distinction from *pénēs*, which refers to those who are poor and have to work for a living, the *ptōchós* group refers to the total poverty which reduces people to begging.”³ So, Jesus’ “poor” indicates far more than deficiency. It points to a very real and very deep destitution and impoverishment that makes the individual so inflicted dependent upon others, reducing them to begging. Now that’s humility. That’s humiliation. The poverty of which Jesus is speaking, then, isn’t to be found in a conscious willingness to accept teaching. It is found in a near total absence of necessities.

This brings us to our second word, “spirit.” The impoverished individual whom Jesus blesses is one who is destitute of “spirit.” “The Greek word for spirit is *pneuma*. It indicates that which gives energy and power and force and ability and vitality. “Always... there is force in *pneuma*. Power flows from it, is mediated by it, and disappears with it.”⁴ “The spirit of a person is the... principle of life within him or her.”⁵

To help us understand this fundamental element of spirit, we can think of ‘school spirit.’ School spirit is enthusiasm for, optimism about, and energy toward school. The ‘poor in spirit’ is one who possesses a desperate lack of spiritual energy, power, strength, force, ability, and vitality.

Then again, we can think of other ways we use “spirit.” We speak sometimes of the “spirit of the law.” What we really mean is the “meaning of the law.” So, to have “spirit” is to have “meaning.” The “poor in spirit,” then, might be thought of those who are “poor of meaning.” Life isn’t working for them. They can find no meaning in their life and their experiences. With this, there is little energy; little reason to be hopeful about their future.

It should be clear from the vocabulary that the “poor in spirit” whom Jesus blesses and to whom he offers hope are those who have had their spirit broken. They are deflated and dejected. Broken. They are anxious and worried. They are weak and impotent. But, we need not rely upon lexical resources for this conclusion. In this case, we also possess Luke’s record of this beatitude.

“Blessed be ye poor.”⁶

Now is not the time to explore the difference between Luke’s temporal understanding and Matthew’s seeming more emotional and spiritual understanding. It is enough to say for now that Luke has real poverty in mind. Luke’s beatitude cannot be construed in some type of voluntary act of temporal poverty or a willful or learned meekness or humility as it is often thought of in its domesticated sense. Luke has in mind a poverty that is imposed upon an individual. Being poor is an affliction not a blessed choice of agency. It seems reasonable, then, to conclude that while Luke and Matthew consider poverty in different life spheres—temporal or emotional—they both have actual poverty in mind. Just as Luke’s “poor” are under the duress of physical want, so are Matthew’s “poor in spirit” under spiritual duress and want.

It seems to me that Jesus’ pronouncement, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” should never be read as encouragement or commandment “to be humble.” It must be read as invitation and encouragement to those who are in involuntary want of emotional and spirit resources needed to live securely and happily,

² See, *Vines Complete Expository Dictionary*.

³ See, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Ed., Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI, 1968, p. 335.

⁴ See, again, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.

⁵ “The Gospel According to John,” *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, Leon Morris, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1995, p. 195.

⁶ Luke 6.²⁰

and endure meaningfully. No one chooses to be “poor in spirit” anymore than they choose to live in physical poverty. Understanding “poor in spirit” as some type of happy choice requiring an exertion of willpower, it seems to me, flies in the face of not only the plain meaning of this beatitude, but of the tenor of all the beatitudes. This beatitude is a word of hope for the spiritually and emotionally destitute; for the humiliated. If the beatitude challenges anything, it is not an individual’s will to improve, it is the world’s upside-down value system. This beatitude is an example of Jesus turning the world upside down, just as his mother foresaw he would do.

“He hath put down the mighty from their seats,
and exalted them of low degree.
He hath filled the hungry with good things;
and the rich he hath sent empty away.”⁷

Rejoice, you who have felt spiritually weak and impotent. For Jesus has a blessing for you. Beware, you who think of yourselves as something other than spiritually impoverished.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 18, 2024)

⁷ Luke 1.⁵³⁻⁵⁴

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

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

⁴Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

⁷Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

¹⁰Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

¹²Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

In this meditation we will, as we did in the previous beatitude and will for each remaining beatitude, consider this beatitude's two parts: condition and promise. In considering the condition, we will ask, again, whether we should read the condition in terms of command or invitation/ comfort and of what the nature of the condition consists.

In examining the condition of the first beatitude, "poor in spirit," we reject all attempts to domesticate the saying and turn it into a command to exercise one's will and agency "to be humble;" to turn being "poor in spirit" into an acquired virtue. Rather, we heard in the condition the Savior's invitation and comfort spoken to all who are self-aware enough to know that they are in very deed destitute of spiritual resources one expects of those who might inherit the "kingdom of heaven." If this is "humility" it is not due to "teachableness" but to the real humiliation of real spiritual impoverishment.

Objections to the spiritually weak being comforted with and promised the kingdom of heaven seem, to me, pathetic and self-righteous. What? Do those who object to this reading imagine they are not spiritually impoverished? Do they imagine themselves to be some type of spiritual millionaires, billionaires? If so, they should consider Luke's anti-beatitude associated with the first beatitude: "But woe unto you that are rich! For ye have received your consolation." Or are they possessed by the petty human fear that someone they think is less than them is getting something equal or superior to themselves? Both objections to the spiritually weak being comforted with the promise of the kingdom of heaven are not only pathetic. They exhibit the worse kind of spiritual deformity. Jesus, we think, would all it hypocritical and pharisaical.

Unfortunately, we sometimes witness the same type of spiritual deformity in the understanding of the second beatitude: "Blessed are they that mourn; for they shall be comforted." Mourning, is turned into a command and morphed into a virtue.

"Why," I was once asked, "would Jesus offer comfort to any ol' person who mourns for any ol' reason? Humans mourn for any number of reasons, not all of which deserve Jesus' comfort." This inhumane bit of callousness shocked me and brought many possible retorts to mind. But after counting to ten, I finally asked, "So, what type of mourning is it, do you imagine, that "deserves" Jesus' comfort?"

“We can expect to be comforted if we mourn sin—ours and others. Then again, we can expect to be comforted when we keep our baptismal covenants “to mourn with those that mourn; yea, and comfort those that stand in need of comfort.”¹

You just can’t make this stuff up. Such virtue signaling! Such absurdity. These are what I call the happy mourners. But such perversion does what so many self-righteous need it to do. It turns the beatitude into a virtue acquired through obedience. The blessing becomes an earned award. It is simply incomprehensible to many that a divine promise could be acquired without effort, will, and agency. And, again, this opens up the whole can of worms that perhaps someone is comforted that does deserve it as much as us. But such deformed ideas and attitudes have nothing to do with Jesus.

As Jesus teaches on the mount, he means to be clear. He is talking to every single mourner. He mourns with every single mourner—yes even those who mourn because of their own folly—and comfort those who stand in need of comfort, whether their need for comfort flows from their own folly or that of another. And if they mourn because of their own folly, their mourning is no less deserving of divine comfort.

Jesus promised comfort to those who mourn. Period. Jesus promised comfort to those who live a life of mourning, to whom joy seldom comes. Millions have and do so live. Their time of recompense is coming. It is not the happiest people on the face of the earth but those who weep and mourn who find in Jesus such a friend. One wonders if those such as my inquisitor above will ever find comfort and joy in Jesus. For Luke has an anti-beatitude for this second beatitude just as he did with the first.

“Woe unto you that laugh now! For ye shall mourn and weep.”²

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 18, 2024)

¹ Mosiah 18.⁹

² Luke 6.²⁵

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

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

⁴Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

⁷Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

⁹Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

¹⁰Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

¹²Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

Mercy has been and still is conceived of in various ways. It has been thought of at times as a strictly emotional response, a passion. Depending upon the times and the philosophical outlook, the Greeks thought of this emotion or passion both negatively and positively. It has sometimes been thought of primarily in terms of behavior. It has been thought of in terms of behavior in response to emotion stirred by another's misfortune. We could go on. There are many insightful ways to view mercy. Here, I would like to offer one that might provide fertile ground for thought and meditation.

I would have the reader consider the similarity between English, "mercy" and French, "merci." According to etymological studies, the two come from Old French, *merci* or *mercit*, meaning "gift, kindness, grace, or pity." It is easy to see how French, "merci," came to mean "thank you (for the gift)" and then simply "thank you." "Thanks," after all, is a response to some act beneficial to the one doing the thanking. Furthermore, "thanks" implies appreciation for a benefit and, more, acceptance of the benefit. When we say, "thank you," we are essentially saying, "I accept your proffered benefit."

Interestingly, English, "grace," often associated with mercy, and Italian/ Spanish "grazia/ gracias" sound similar, with the two non-English words developing into "thank you" just as French "merci." We often speak of "saying grace" when we offer "thanks" over a meal.

All this suggests that standing behind the words "mercy" and "grace" is the idea of "appreciative acceptance." God's "mercy" and "grace," at least in part, speaks to a divine characteristic of acceptance. God is an accepting Being. He is appreciative and accepting of others. He finds pleasure in others. His mercy/ grace is a kind of "thank you." "I accept who and what you are." Scripture bears witness that God's "acceptance" goes far, far further than we imagine. It is not in his nature to be easily dismissive—to easily reject others.

"For as the heaven is high above the earth,
so great is his mercy toward them that fear him."¹

In his fifth beatitude, Jesus offers happiness to those who are 'merciful,' or, as we have it here, who are

¹ Psalm 103.¹¹

“appreciatively accepting.” One moment’s thought reveals how utterly logical and mundane this statement is. We all know how unhappy we are when we reject another or their actions. Indeed, such feelings often leave us feeling as bad and unhappy as the individual who is the target of our dismissiveness or rejection. Rejection leaves a black cloud over everyone—both the one doing the rejecting and the one being rejected.

Our mercy or capacity to appreciatively accept others is unlikely to reach as far and wide as God’s mercy and grace. We possess in bits and pieces what he possesses in fullness. Nevertheless, Jesus promises us more happiness and true joy in our acceptance of others than in our dismissing and rejecting of others.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 18, 2024)

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

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

⁴Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

⁵Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

⁶Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

⁷Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

⁸Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

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¹¹Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.

¹²Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.

One question we may have when we read Jesus' fifth beatitude—"Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy"—is, "Is one who refuses to be merciful denied mercy?" I am inclined to answer this with a "yes" and "no."

We answer "yes," when we consider human relations. Individuals who are shown no mercy by another, are inclined to not show mercy to the unmerciful party. While this reaction is not inevitable, and certainly not mandatory, it is common. So, individuals who deny mercy to others are less likely to have others grant mercy to them. By the same token, individuals who extend mercy to others are likely to have others extend mercy to them. This is simply human nature,

But what about Divine nature? Is God inclined to show no mercy to those who, themselves, show no mercy to others? To this question, we answer, "Doubtful." It seems likely that God extends mercy to the unmerciful just as he extends mercy to any type of sinner. Yet, mercy extended may not be mercy accepted. And it may be in this way that the unmerciful do not experience divine mercy. The unmerciful may refuse to extend mercy out of principle, false though it be, and decline and refuse another's, including God's, mercy out of the same false principle.

I think we could illustrate this attitude using the famous Book of Mormon anti-Christ, Korihor. We are all familiar with his denial of Christ. Most often we attribute this denial to his belief that the future could not be known. However, there seems to be another reason. Korihor maintained

"that there could be no atonement made for the sins of men, but every man fared in this life according to the management of the creature; therefore every man prospered according to his genius, and that every man conquered according to his strength..."¹

As far as Korihor was concerned, an atonement undermined his radical notion of individualism and accountability. Personal life management was the be all and end all of human existence. An atonement in which poor life management was somehow ameliorated and, worse, seemingly rewarded was anathema to him. In other words, mercy undermined personal accountability. Mercy robbed justice as he viewed it.

¹ Alma 30.¹⁷

Korihor, then, rejected an atonement out of principle; rejecting the forgiveness of mismanagement and the granting of mercy. If Korihor stuck to his principles in death and during judgement, then he might be expected to reject any offer of divine mercy however consistently God might be in the offering.

We observe similar negative attitudes toward mercy in today's America, particularly on its political right with its radical individualism and false ideas of accountability.

It is impossible to know whether or how the certainties of the next life overcome principles and prejudices thoroughly adopted over the course of a mortal lifetime. But the existence of "sons of perdition" who reject God in the full light of His presence, suggests that some become so completely committed to false ideas and principles adopted in mortality that even a personality as compelling as God cannot penetrate them in eternity.

It might be, then, that those who deny justice to others out of principle reject mercy that God offers them out of the same false principle. This all suggests that we should be very careful about becoming overly dogmatic about anything during mortality lest we become implacable and immovable in the next life even in the face of God's and the universe's realities, and then miss out on such pleasing experiences as God's mercy as Jesus warns.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: may 18, 2024)

²³Therefore if thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; ²⁴leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift.

²⁵Agree with thine adversary quickly, whiles thou art in the way with him; lest at any time the adversary deliver thee to the judge, and the judge deliver thee to the officer, and thou be cast into prison. ²⁶Verily I say unto thee, Thou shalt by no means come out thence, till thou hast paid the uttermost farthing.

Lent is a season of increased sorrow for sin, deeper, more heart-felt repentance, and a more faithful looking to God for forgiveness. When Jesus refers to our bringing a “gift to the altar,” it seems likely that he has our desire to be reconciled to God foremost in mind. During Lent we can place upon the altar what, astonishingly, is to God the most prized of gifts: our broken, wounded heart, sickened heart. And we can do so with full confidence that God will handle it with care and the utmost tenderness.

But, as Jesus makes clear in today’s reading, our relationship with God is bound up with our relationship with others. God cares very much about these relationships. So, as we seek reconciliation with God, Lent is also a time to take stock of our relationships with others and to attempt reconciliation with those with whom we are out of sorts. We cannot achieve reconciliation with God without doing all that we can to be reconciled to our “brother.” There are times when the latter takes priority over the former.

We place a high value on ordinances. Many would not dream of regularly missing out on partaking of the sacrament and thus receiving the weekly renewal promised in the ordinance. Temple attendance is often viewed as the height of spiritual attainment. Jesus might beg to differ. There can be no thought of worshipping God, engaging in ritual activities, and seeking spiritual renewal while our relationship with others is in shambles. This would become pure, or impure theater. A sham.

Isaiah makes this point passionately at the beginning of his Book. He begins with the Lord’s complaint about sham, legalistic religious practices that Israel so meticulously observed.

“Hear the word of YHWH, leaders of S[°]dōm.

Incline your ear to the instruction of our God, people of ‘A[°]mōrâ.

‘Why do you offer your many sacrifices to me?’ asks YHWH.

‘I have had my fill of ram offerings,

and the fat of specially prepared sacrificial animals.

As for the blood of bulls and lambs and goats—

I find no value in any of it.

When you come to present yourselves to me, who has asked this of you?

It is merely the sound of trampling feet in my courts.

Do not continue to bring such meaningless tributes?

The odor of your sacrifices is abhorrent to me.

New moon, šabbāt and calling of assemblies—

I cannot stand the iniquitous assembly.

Your new moon festivals and your other sacred times—

my soul hates.

They rest upon me like a burden.

I am weary of bearing them.

When you lift your hands to me,
I shall turn my eyes away from you.
Though you may multiply prayers,
I won't be there listening.
Your hands are covered with blood!.”¹

This is the equivalent of Jesus' "bringing thy gift to the altar." Israel brought their sacrifices to keep peace between itself and God and to find reconciliation with God when it was out of sorts with Him. However, to be in right standing with God and to be reconciled to Him when necessary, something far different and more difficult was required.

“Wash yourselves!
Clear yourselves!
Remove your evil deeds from my sight.
Stop doing evil.
Learn to do good.
Seek after justice.
Set things right for those treated unjustly.
Take the side of the orphan.
Plead for the widow.
¹⁸Come! Let us reason together,' says Yahweh.
'Though your sins be as scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow.
Though they are as red as scarlet died fabric,
they shall be as wool.”²

The real key to cleanliness or right standing with God is not the gifts we bring to the altar but the way we treat others; the justice and compassion we exercise in the lives of others. Interesting, Isaiah suggests that it is how we treat those who might in some way be vulnerable to us that God is particularly sensitive to and observant of.

We should give more thought to those who are in some way vulnerable and the relationship that exists between them and those whom Jesus speaks of having "ought against" us. There can be little doubt that those toward whom we are unjust and merciless will have and feel "ought against" us.

That we are responsible for our own feelings and are to snuff out feeling "ought against" our "brother" is a given. When we feel "ought against" another, we put ourselves in spiritual turmoil and danger. But Jesus ups the ante. He does not counsel us concerning our own feelings toward others, but the feelings of others toward us—"if... thy brother hath ought against thee." This is not encouragement toward narcissism, but toward community and at-one-ment. Jesus reminds us of the impact we have on others and places responsibility upon us to be a healer.

Whether our "brother" admits it or not, his possessing "ought against" us, whether it is justified or not, puts him in turmoil. It disturbs his emotional equilibrium and diminishes his spiritual capacities. It places him in a spiritually vulnerable place. It doesn't matter "who's at fault" in the ruptured relationship, we have a responsibility to at least reach out and attempt to be a healer in our "brother's" life. We do not do so in such a way as to convince him of our rightness and of his wrongness. We do what we can to put him

¹ Isaiah 1. ¹⁰⁻¹⁵

² Isaiah 1. ¹⁶⁻¹⁸

back in equilibrium and out of turmoil. We try to leave him with the renewed spiritual capacities that he will need to meet life's inevitable challenges.

We act, in other words, as we would have God act in our life as we approach the altar. We bestow reconciliation upon others as we seek reconciliation with God. Only then can we return to God's altar with our gift in hand and plead in good conscious for the healing reconciliation with God that renews us, empowers us to meet life's challenges, and makes it possible for us to be what God intends us to be: a blessing to others.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

(edition: march 19, 2024)