

## Are You Flourishing?

Matthew 5:1-12

*First Sunday in Lent/ 10<sup>th</sup> March 2019*

We know these words well, maybe too well. On the surface, these words of blessings, these Beatitudes sound so unassuming, seemingly harmless, comforting, assuring. We find them on plaques and refrigerator magnets, offering inspiration, aspiration, offering hope for what is to come. Depending upon the occasion we can lift out the verse we need to hear, the one that speaks to us, the truth we need to hear. Sometimes we offer that truth to someone who needs to hear it. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Mt. 5:4). “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Mt. 5:9). Each of the blessing statements can stand on their own. The Beatitudes are made for Twitter; they are eminently Tweetable. Each one fits quite nicely into a tweet.

Go below a surface reading of the text, however, go into the Greek, connect the text to the rest of the Sermon of the Mount, connect the sermon to the rest of Matthew’s Gospel, and we discover that things are not that simple—or harmless or all that comforting. Well, they are comforting, but not in the way we usually expect.

Behind the English “blessed” is the Greek word *makarios*, which is notoriously difficult to translate. *Makarios* can be translated as “blessed,” but it can also mean “blissful,” “happy,” “fortunate,” or “flourishing.” Blessing-statements or *macarisms*, as they’re known, were not unique to Jesus; they were widely used in Second Temple Judaism of the first century, as well as throughout the Greco-Roman culture. The Greeks used the word *makarios* in their mythology to describe the life of a human being who lives like the gods, beyond care, beyond labor, beyond death. In other words, *makarios* describes what a blessed or happy life looks like.

There’s another reason to know the backstory of this word, *makarios*. Between 300-200 BC, the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek, into what is known as the Septuagint. This Greek translation was used widely by Hellenized Jews shaped by Greek philosophy and culture, although it was considered inferior to the original Hebrew text. This is because, in part, the Jewish worldview does not sit easy within Greek culture. The early Christian theologian Tertullian (160-220), aware of our roots in Judaism, famously asked in his *Prescription Against the Heretics*, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?” Nevertheless, Greek ideas shaped Jewish (and later Christian) thought.

We can see this in Psalm 1. “Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread” (Ps. 1:1). “Happy” could also be translated “blessed.” What we need to remember is that in Hebrew there are two words for “blessing”: there’s *beraka*, which is God’s act of blessing, and there’s *asre*, which describes the happiness, the blessedness of human life in relationship with God, walking in the way of God. Here in

Psalms 1, the Hebrew is *ashre*. It's describing a life that is in relationship with God. And when the Hebrew scriptures were translated into Greek, they chose *makarios* for *ashre*. It's important to know this because, as Jonathan Pennington reminds us, "English term 'blessed' is so heavily loaded with the narrower sense of 'divine favor' that the sense of human flourishing is almost always lost."<sup>1</sup>

The Judaism of the Second Temple, the Judaism of Jesus and Matthew, was heavily influenced by Greek thought, was driven by this question: what does a good life look like? What does a flourishing life look like? And here in Matthew's Gospel we find Jesus using this word, offering "blessing statements," but reframes their meaning in light of his vision and mission proclaiming the coming realm of God. In other words, Jesus wants his followers to know that when we follow him, yes, we will be blessed, but more significantly, we will discover what human flourishing looks like—but remember, to many, human flourishing, from Jesus' perspective, will look odd, bizarre, different, even scandalous. “

And there's another problematic Greek word here; it's the word, *hoti*, often translated "for." "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom." The use of the word "for" in each statement creates the impression that these descriptions of blessedness will be experienced one day, in the future. It's also easy to read or hear these verses as saying: *If I am poor in spirit, God will bless me, and then I will enter the kingdom. If I am meek, then I will inherit the earth. If I am pure in heart, then I will see God, etc.* If I live this way, I will be blessed. Isn't this the logic we often assume with these sayings? If "p," then "q." The problem, however, is that this "if-then" approach is a "flat," one might say even *boring* way of reading this text.

So, what if we translate *hoti* (for) as "because," which would also be correct. When we translate the Beatitudes this way, and use "flourish" instead of "blessed," everything changes.

*Flourishing are the poor in spirit because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.*  
*Flourishing are the mourners because they will be comforted.*  
*Flourishing are the humble because they will inherit the earth.*  
*Flourishing are the ones hungering and thirsting for righteousness because they will be satisfied.*  
*Flourishing are the merciful because they will be given mercy.*  
*Flourishing are the pure in heart because they will see God.*  
*Flourishing are the peacemakers because they will be called the children of God.*  
*Flourishing are the ones persecuted on account of righteousness*  
*because the kingdom of heaven is theirs.*  
*Flourishing are you whenever people revile and slander you and speak all kinds of evil*  
*against you on account of me. Rejoice and be glad....<sup>2</sup>*

When?

Now!

Why?

Because right now that future, God's future is already on the way and is at work in us when we live this way, because it's at work in Jesus, and he wants us to know what human flourishing looks like.

It's a tricky word, flourishing. Some might define flourishing as achieving wealth, property, power, influence, possessing many things in a process of endless growth. It's a word easily coopted by prosperity gospel preachers. However, the counter-cultural element is clear in what Jesus is saying. We are flourishing when we are poor in spirit because we are acknowledging our spiritual poverty, confessing what we lack, what we need, that we are all beggars before God. We are flourishing when we mourn—that's a tough word to hear. Many who mourn don't see themselves as flourishing. Jesus is calling his followers to a different kind of mourning, mourning for the present state of things, grieving for the injustices in the world, at the border, in our communities, in our families, mourning for the poverty of Baltimore City, mourning for those who have sold their souls to wealth and possessions. We will be comforted because this kind of mourning and grieving, ironically, actually calls to a fuller life because it calls us to action, to change. We can go through the rest of the beatitudes with this view, especially "Flourishing are the peacemakers because they will be called children of God." We flourish when we are advocating for peace, making peace real, suffering for the sake of mercy, hungering for righteousness—and if we're not doing this, then from Jesus' perspective we're not flourishing at all—and we're probably wasting our lives.

I can't take credit for this reading of the Beatitudes. We've been working through the Sermon on the Mount on Thursday mornings. I've been blown away by Jonathan Pennington's new study, published last year. In the Sermon on the Mount, especially the Beatitudes. Jesus not only tells us, he shows us what a flourishing life looks like. Each of these beatitudes also describe the life of Jesus. He lived a flourishing life because he was poor in spirit, and he mourned and grieved for our waywardness and ignorance and inability to flourish; he was meek, and he hungered for righteousness, for justice; he was merciful and lived with a single-hearted devotion to God's claim on his life; he was a peacemaker; and he was persecuted because he was a servant of the Most High; he was ridiculed, mocked, and eventually killed for wanting to show us the things that make for life, for real life, for joy. Yes, even joy. Scripture calls us to look to him, "...who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising its shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2). Jesus invites to follow him into a richer, fuller life, and he enables us to actually live this way.

And all of this is all connected, as we shall see in this series, to what might be (and I think that it is) the linchpin of the Sermon, Matthew 5:48, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." Except, the Greek should not be translated "perfect"—which is an unfortunate translation of the Greek *teleios*. This word should be understood as "whole" or "complete." What Jesus is trying to get us to see what whole-hearted human flourishing looks like and feels like. Be whole-hearted as God is whole-hearted, Jesus says, and when we live this way we discover what a flourishing human life looks like, can be like.

I agree with Pennington who believes, "A close and careful reading of the Sermon of the Mount will help the church recover the profound and pervasive theme of human flourishing in God's redeeming work in the world."<sup>3</sup> Christianity, like Judaism, is a way of life—it must not be

reduced to doctrine and ideas and concepts, on the one hand, or reduced to moralistic “do-goodism,” on the other. To follow Christ, to claim him as Lord, is to follow in his way; it’s about the totality of a life in the life of the Kingdom. We’re called into the kingdom of God, here and now; and in the Kingdom we discover what a human life looks like when it’s flourishing.

This is what Jesus is summoning us toward. It’s the same call that summons us, every day. Not to “live up to this” way of living, or “think like this or that, and then we’ll live well.” It’s easy to slip into a works-righteousness and think it’s all about what we have to do. Yes, grace always come first. But, then virtue, the good life, a richer life itself follows in its wake. And, so, Jesus invites us to live into this vision, lean into grace, lean into this future, and when we do we’ll discover what human flourishing looks like. It will be unique for each person, but it will definitely stand in sharp contrast to a world (and sometimes even the church) that doesn’t understand mercy or justice or peace or a heart devoted to God’s vision of wholeness. We might even be mocked for living this way—probably will.

But, don’t worry. When we we’re flourishing we are being salt and light in the world, visible signs and heralds God’s new world that is on the way toward us and now is. But salt and light will have to wait to next week.

<sup>1</sup> Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 50. Throughout this sermon, I am heavily indebted to Pennington’s recent scholarship on Matthew 5-7.

<sup>2</sup> This is Pennington’s translation of the Beatitudes.

<sup>3</sup> Pennington, 309-310.