

Matthew's Beatitudes: A New Interpretation

Matthew 5:3–12 is one of the most famous passages in the Bible. It presents a series of nine “beatitudes” or blessings on people who are described by Jesus with distinctive phrases. The classic interpretation of the passage has been to identify the phrases that describe the blessed as *virtues* that God wants people to exhibit.

In an article written for *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*,¹ I propose a different interpretation, one that has come to be favored by many interpreters. I divide the Beatitudes into groups or stanzas in a manner that he deems more consistent with Jewish poetry. I then read only the second stanza as blessings for the virtuous. The first stanza (the first four beatitudes) is interpreted not as naming virtues to be rewarded, but rather as naming unfortunate circumstances that will be reversed when God’s will is done.

What follows is a brief outline of my interpretation.

Structure of the Beatitudes

Matthew 5:3–10 is a unit, beginning and concluding with “Theirs is the rule of heaven.” 5:11–12 is an addendum, worded in the second person. Verses 3–10 may also be subdivided into two groups of four (vv. 3–6 and vv. 7–10), with each group containing the same number of words (in Greek). When divided, each set of four exhibits

parallelism, referring to the same group or type of people in four different ways.

Thus Matthew 5:3–6 and Matthew 5:7–10 each refer to a particular class of people who are blessed. Matthew 5:11–12 applies the beatitudes of both groups to the reader.

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

Matthew 5:3–6: The First Group

Who are the blessed?	the disadvantaged and the dispossessed
	the poor in spirit = the despondent; those who have no reason for hope
	those who mourn = the miserable; those who have no cause for joy
	the meek = the weak and vulnerable; those who are deemed lowly and insignificant
	those who hunger and thirst for righteousness = the victims of unrighteousness/injustice; those who earnestly desire for righteousness to prevail, so that they might be treated the way they ought to be treated (with righteousness/justice)

What is the	eschatological reversal
-------------	--------------------------------

blessing?	
	heaven rules them (an alternative translation to “theirs is the kingdom of heaven”)
	they will be comforted
	they will inherit the earth (have their fair share of the earth’s resources)
	their desire for righteousness and justice will be satisfied

In the rule of God announced and initiated by Jesus, the disadvantaged and the dispossessed will have what has been denied them. This *will* happen when God’s kingdom comes and God’s will is done; it *does* happen whenever God’s kingdom comes and God’s will is done.

Matthew 5:7–10: The Second Group

Who are the blessed?	those who do the will of God
	the merciful = those who exhibit the divine quality of peace
	the pure in heart = those whose motives for serving God are sincere and unselfish
	the peacemakers = those who actively work to eliminate the injustice that breeds contempt and conflict
	those who suffer for the sake of righteousness (or justice) = those who are so committed to God’s will that they are willing to suffer to see it accomplished

What is the blessing?	the accomplishment of God’s will
	they will receive mercy
	they will see God
	they will be called God’s children
	heaven will rule them (theirs is the kingdom of heaven)

The coming of God's rule is itself the ultimate blessing for those who seek it. Those who commit themselves to the establishment of God's righteousness are assured that it will triumph and that the things they strive for (peace, mercy, justice) will be realized.

The Link between the Two Sets

The first set (5:3–6) promises reversal to the disadvantaged. The second set (5:7–10) promises rewards to the virtuous. But there is a logical connection between these two stanzas:

- the virtuous are rewarded for enacting the blessings bestowed on the disadvantaged
- it is God's will to aid the disadvantaged people of the world (that is why disadvantaged people are blessed)

Also:

- it is God's will to aid the disadvantaged through virtuous people who allow God to use them in this manner (that is why virtuous people are blessed)

Matthew 5:11–12: Personal Application—and a Warning!

Who are the blessed?	you
	the disciples of Jesus
	the readers of Matthew's Gospel
Note that "you" exhibits qualities of both groups above	
	you are despised, reviled, and

	persecuted, like the persons in 5:3–6
	you are so regarded because you do the will of God, like the persons in 5:7–10

Thus if “you” take the side of the disadvantaged, you will become one of them—the world does not discriminate between the oppressed and their advocates but curses them both.

What Is the Blessing? Identification with the People of God

God is on the side of the oppressed. If “you” are on the side of the oppressed, then you are blessed also because God is on your side. God also does not discriminate between the oppressed and their advocates but blesses them both—both come under the rule of heaven.

1. For a more developed presentation of this interpretation, see Mark Allan Powell, “Matthew’s Beatitudes: Reversals and Rewards of the Kingdom,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (July 1996): 460–79.