

Beatitudes Introduction Fr. Scalia

On The Way

The Beatitudes: Introduction

Throughout Lent we considered the Ten Commandments, and ultimately how Jesus fulfills them perfectly by his death and resurrection. For Easter season it seems fitting to turn our attention to the New Testament's fundamental moral code, the Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-12). In fact, Saint Matthew describes the preaching of the Beatitudes in such a way as to deliberately evoke the giving of the Ten Commandments. The first Christians were Jewish converts. When they heard that Jesus "went up the mountain," they would immediately have thought of Moses's ascent of Mount Sinai. They would have understood Jesus as another teacher ascending a mountain to give a law.

At the same time, there is a clear difference between the two teachers. Moses went up to *receive* the Law while our Lord ascends to *give* the new law of the Gospel. Further, when we hear that Jesus "sat down," we should understand that he's taking the authoritative posture of a teacher. In the ancient world the teacher or preacher would be seated while his disciples stood (which explains why ancient homilies are so much longer than modern!). In this case, it is God Himself, the ultimate Authority, who teaches and not just one of his prophets.

The word "Beatitudes" comes from the first word in Latin for each verse: *beati* – "blessed ones." Sometimes the original Greek (*makarioi*) is rendered "happy," but that doesn't work for various reasons (e.g. Happy are they who *mourn*?). More importantly, by giving a description of who is "blessed" – or, rather, what it means to be blessed – our Lord is following the tradition of the Hebrew scriptures. The Psalms and the prophets describe the path of the blessed, of how the blessed person lives. In fact, Psalm one sets the tone for the entire psalmody with its first verse: "Blessed is the man..." Thus the Beatitudes are not commandments but a description of what kind of life the disciple of Christ is meant to pursue.

To be "blessed" doesn't mean to be lucky, or fortunate, or happy. It means to live in communion with God. We *will* experience sufferings, struggles, and setbacks. But even in the midst of them, we can be blessed by our union with him. To be blessed, then, means to be happy not in human terms but in divine, to participate in God's own happiness.

Still, our Lord's first hearers, like us, tended to equate blessedness with good fortune. If a man was wealthy and had good standing in society, then he was blessed. To be poor, persecuted, and hungry was not perceived as a blessing. So for them, as for us, the Beatitudes are a shock to the system. They propose just the opposite of what we think will make us happy and fulfilled.

There are technically ten verses with "blessed." And you may have learned that there are eight Beatitudes. But the Church's traditional reflection on the Beatitudes has abbreviated them (for various reasons too many to include in a bulletin column) to seven (Mt 5:3-9). Further, centuries of reflection have discerned in the Beatitudes a structure for the Christian life, a kind of ladder by which we ascend to a greater likeness to Christ. They trace a process of purification (1-3), illumination (4-5), and union (6-7).

Finally, the Beatitudes are ultimately a description of Christ himself. They have been described as tiles in a mosaic that taken as a whole enable us to contemplate the face of Christ.

– Fr. Scalia