

## **Fourth Sunday in Epiphanytide**

**Micah 6:1-16; Psalm 15; Matthew 5:1-12; I Corinthians 1:18-31**

**Micah 6:1-16** is the centerpiece of the book of Micah and arguably the single clearest statement of authentic and legitimate Yahweh worship that appears anywhere in the Hebrew Bible. It is a telling of God's great trial of Israel, culminating in the single clearest statement of God's intentions for Israel (vs. 8). Although the passage classically ends with verse 8 (as it does in this lectionary), the vision itself doesn't end until verse 16. So in this exposition of this passage, we will examine it in its entirety – through verse 16.

The opening lines of this powerful drama set the stage:

“Hear what the Lord says: ‘Rise, plead your case before the mountains and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the Lord, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel (6:1-2).

The scene is that of a trial commencing at the city gates of Jerusalem – the “courtroom” for every legal adjudication. The defendant is Israel, who is the one on trial. God is prosecuting attorney. And the mountains that surround Jerusalem are the judge and jury, for the mountains and hills have been there before Israel entered the Promised Land, and are therefore the silent witness of all that God has called the nation to be and eye-witness to the continuing response of Israel to that call.

So God commands Israel, “Go ahead! Plead your case! Make your defense before the mountains of the crime of which I accuse you, for the mountains have been an eternal witness of that to which I have called you, the irresponsible responses you have made, and my continuing patience with you, and my amazing grace that has thus far been surprisingly – even unreasonably – patient with you.”

But now, Israel's hypocrisy and refusal to even understand – much less acknowledge or obey – what they are called by God to be as a nation has gone on too long. God can take such blindness only so long, and then he must act. To do otherwise is to be irresponsible.

“The Lord has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel.”

Thus, the trial begins.

God states the case. “O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me” (6:3)!

God begins his prosecution by asking a simple question of Israel. “What have I done to you that can provide a possible or even far-fetched explanation for why you have chosen as a nation for over 400 years to disregard the covenant made between us, and to ignore the shalom community I have called upon you to live out in Israel? What possible explanation is there for your actions? Give me an answer!”

But there is no answer forthcoming. Israel remains mute before God. And the reason is obvious. There is simply no rational reason for or justification of their national actions. So God continues his prosecution.

“For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of slavery; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron and Miriam. O my people, remember now what King Balak of Moab devised, what Balaam son of Beor answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the Lord” (6:4-5).

God now reminds them of what He has done for Israel in forming them as a nation and providing for them a realizable vision of what corporate life should be like in human society. God does this by beginning a recital of Israel’s salvation history. He does this by reminding Israel of four facts:

1. It was God, in his totally unexpected and undeserved mercy, who confronted Pharaoh, defeated Egypt, and brought out the Israelite slaves from bondage, exploitation and oppression. This act of liberation was nothing that they did but that God chose to do by acting mightily through Moses.
2. God gave them powerful, visionary and yet practical leaders in Moses, Aaron and Miriam, whose leadership helped form the nation and its institutions.
3. God intervened in their history to guide, protect, use and strengthen them in spite of all the shrewdness, deceit and power of other nations. In this instance, Micah uses as examples King Balak of Moab and Balaam, a prophet (Numbers 22:1-24:25). Balak sought Israel’s destruction but Balaam, as a faithful prophet, could not speak a negative prophecy against Israel. Implied here was that the pagan Balaam was more faithful to and obedient to God than the children of Abraham who supposedly knew Him and His covenant.
4. God’s guidance of Israel’s affairs is also noted in Micah’s reference, “what happened from Shittim to Gilgal”. The Balaam story is immediately followed by a reference to Israel being in the territory of Shittim (Num. 25:1) until their arrival in Gilgal (Joshua 4:19). In other words, what Micah refers to, in these few words, is that segment of Israel’s history in which the wilderness wanderings come to an end in the recitation of the Law and Joshua’s succession of Moses, to Israel’s invasion of the territory east of the Jordan River (Moab, Ammon and Edom) and their entrance across the Jordan into the Promised Land. Gilgal is particularly important (Josh. 4:19-5:12), because it is there that a covenant renewal ceremony is held in which (1) marking stones are raised to remind Israel of its formation as a nation encapsulated by the miraculous crossings of both the Red Sea and of the Jordan River, (2) all the men are circumcised as a sign of their commitment to the covenant (“The Lord said to Joshua, ‘Today, I have rolled away from you the disgrace of Egypt.’ And so the place is called Gilgal (cr., the Hebrew *galal* for “to roll”, and circumcision is the “rolling back” of the foreskin of the penis) to this day” (Josh. 5:9), and (3) the first Passover is held in the Promised

Land – connecting their miraculous deliverance from Egypt and the defeat of that nation and its deities to Israel’s present resolution to conquer the new land.

So, in Micah 6:4-5, God presents a strong case of God’s deliverance, protection, guidance and *chesedh* love for Israel – all of which has not been embraced by Israel but ignored and scorned. All of this was done so that “you (Israel) may know the saving acts of the Lord”. But, instead, you have ignored and scorned that 400-year-long act of unmerited and continuing grace.

God has now completed his prosecution of Israel. It is now the nation’s opportunity to present their defense. That defense is extremely telling:

“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (6:6-7)

The nation’s response to Yahweh’s accusation is intriguing. First, Israel’s response indicates that they acknowledge their national, corporate and personal sin. The very response presupposes Israel’s recognition that they have not been faithful to the covenant they had made with God in Sinai and had repeatedly renewed throughout their history. They agree that they have strayed from being the shalom community.

But once recognizing their sin, what is particularly intriguing is Israel’s understanding of how to put things right. It is as if they were saying, “All right, Yahweh, we agree! We have not been faithful to your covenant of shalom. We have sinned as a people and as individuals. We know that! Now, what must we do to put things right with you? Will you forgive us if we worship you? Will you pardon us if we bring thousands of burnt offerings before you? Or will our repentance have to be so deep that we sacrifice our children to you, surrendering “the fruit of our bodies for the sins of our souls”? Will such sacrifice convince you to forgive us as a nation?”

What is captured in Israel’s response to their accusative God is their intense frustration with that God. The words are deeply emotive words. This is not a passionless, well-reasoned argument Israel is presenting. It is highly-charged emotionally, intense and driven. They don’t know what will satisfy what they perceive as an unsatisfiable God and thus wipe the slate clean for them. So they resort to superlatives. Will it take “thousands of rams”, “ten thousands of rivers of oil”, the sacrifice of their own “firstborn” children? Will that finally satisfy you, God?

What is intriguing here is that Israel cannot perceive that forgiveness can come by any other means than through participation in the Temple cult – participation in the sacrificial system. They do not perceive and almost seem unable to perceive any other standard to which God would hold them than the standard of ritual, liturgy and sacrifice. This, in itself, is an indication of how far Israel has fallen away from the shalom community. It is simply outside their experience and their perception to understand that God already forgives them and that they are consequently called not to engage in cultic and esoteric rites but to radically alter the way they live their public life both as a nation and as individuals, so that they embrace in their life together, the shalom community.

God has presented his case against Israel. Israel has responded in its defense. Now, it is time for the judge – the mountains – to adjudicate the case, and to pronounce sentence. The mountains do so in what is perhaps the single clearest statement of Hebrew faith and the finest statement in the Old Testament. Here is the judgment by the mountains.

“He has told you, O mortals, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God” (6:8)!

To what is Israel called by God? What is the practice to which they are called individually, corporately and systemically? It is not that of sacrifice (because that is rejected in Micah 6:6-7) or participation in the cultic or ritualistic rites of Israel. Nor is it a mystery, for it is proclaimed clearly and plainly through the Law and the covenant. What God wants of God’s society is as plain and as obvious as can be.

We, as a nation and as people, are:

1. To do justice;
2. To love kindness (the Hebrew says, “to do *chesedh*”);
3. To walk humbly with God.”

First, the nation and its people are called “to do justice”. Justice, in order to be justice, is to be both political and economic. It is a justice of equality before the Law – of equal status before the law for commoner and king alike. But it is also an economic justice that is to be practiced in Israel – of perceiving all wealth as belonging to God, distributed to the people for their care of the same to benefit the commonwealth, an equitable distribution of the nation’s wealth “so that there is no poor among you”. It is compensatory justice, not distributive justice, which seeks to right the balances. This is beautifully expressed in the account of the Exodus when the departing Jewish former slaves not only left Egypt’s capital city but were commended for taking the jewelry and wealth of the Egyptians in compensation for their enslavement for 400 years (Exod. 12:35-36).

Second, the nation and its people are called “to do *chesedh*” (“to love kindness”). There is no English equivalent for the Hebrew word *chesedh*; therefore the word can only be approximated into English by using synonyms or by manufacturing a word (e.g., “lovingkindness”). *Chesedh* is the Hebrew word which describes God’s love for humanity, and therefore our godly love for each other (as it is used here in Micah 6:8).

*Chesedh* can be understood only within the parameters of the Hebrew concept of covenant; it is the love of such a covenant – the covenant lived out in life. God has made an irreplaceable, irreducible covenant between Himself and Israel, a covenant God will never break nor abandon – no matter how greatly Israel departs from that covenant. God is never going to let Israel go, for they are cut into the very palm of his hands (Isa. 49:16). The nearest New Testament equivalent of such *chesedh* covenantal love is the concept of “grace”.

As God loves us with such perfect love which will not let us go but binds us to God in an irreducible covenant, so that is how we are to love one another – the children of the covenant!

We are to have *chesedh* love for each other. And that love is manifested not in our words, but in our actions – how we choose to treat each other. Thus, when it says that the love of David for Jonathan exceeded the love of women (II Sam. 1:23-26), that is *chesedh* love that is being described – not sexual love but of an intense commitment to each other. It is because we live under the shalom covenant that we are not to treat each other legalistically, but with *chesedh* (I Kings 5:1; Prov. 10:12; 17:9; Exod. 21:5; Deut. 15:16; Lev. 19:18; 19:34; Deut. 10:19; Prov. 14:21, 31). As it is brilliantly stated in Deut. 15:7b-8, “Do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward your needy neighbor. You should rather open your hand willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be.” In other words, even a compensatory justice that equitably distributes wealth and eliminates poverty is not enough. Society must also operate on *chesedh*; otherwise, justice will become cold, legalistic and formal. Only *chesedh* brings heart into a society.

Third, the nation and its people are called “to walk humbly with your God.” We are to recognize that no society can truly be built on any other foundation than the foundation of humble love for God. For all societies will be built on the worship of *a* god – whether that is the god of communism or socialism or fascism or capitalism or sensuality or militarism or even nationalism and patriotism. But only a society built upon Yahweh is built upon the sure foundation where “the rains fall and the floods came and the winds blow and beat upon that house, but it does not fall, because it has been built upon the rock” (Matt. 7:25). Therefore, Micah is telling Israel that their nation will stand strong and permanently only if that society’s and each person’s acting out of justice and *chesedh* is built upon devotion and commitment to Yahweh. All else will fall. “God has told you, O mortal . . .”

Here, in the words of Micah, is that prophet’s embrace of the Deuteronomic vision of the shalom community. He sees that community, and the covenant made between it and God as the only sure foundation for the nation. If the nation adheres to it, then the nation will stand. If they despise or ignore it, then that nation is doomed! Thus states the eternal mountains and hills who are adjudicating Israel’s trial, as they call the nation to repentance and compatible action.

The next portion of Micah 6 is not normally considered a part of the trial scene, but is seen as its own stand-alone prophecy. That may be the way to read it. But, on the other hand, to include it in the trial scene completes the trial, for it brings the trial to a verdict. This is the way I prefer to read the passage; therefore I have expanded the lectionary reading to include verses 9-16.

Thus far, God has prosecuted Israel for rejecting him and the covenant (6:3-5). Israel has presented their defense, responding to God’s accusations with incredulity and frustration (6:6-7) because they have perceived themselves as having been obedient because they have kept all the liturgical laws and maintained the sacrifices. The hills then adjudicate the case by stating what it was that God wanted all the time from Israel (6:8) – not liturgy, ritual and sacrifice but the conduct of their public life on the principles of justice, equitable distribution of wealth, elimination of poverty, and compassion and commitment to each other – and out of that transformed public life, walking in humility and in personal relationship with God.

Now, in verse 9-16, God pronounces the verdict of the court. It is a three-fold verdict.

First, God can no longer tolerate Israel's public life of oppression and exploitation, covered over with a religious veneer (6:9-12). The cheating by the wealthy of ordinary people (vss. 10-11), the violence of the powerful, the lying and deceit upon which a government lusting for power and an economics of greed operate (vs. 12) can no longer be tolerated by God. For God sees both what Israel had been called to do (vs. 8) and what they are actually doing (vss. 9-12) – and both the leadership and the people of Israel know it, too. Therefore, even though God loves them totally, they must be held accountable.

Second, the verdict is that they will become a nation and a people who will never be satisfied. No matter how much they have, it will never be enough. Their hunger for power and wealth will become like a “gnawing hunger within you”, and you will see all that you have tried to accumulate continually slipping away from you.

“You shall put away, but not save; and what you save, I will hand over to the sword. You shall sow, but not reap; you shall tread olives, but not anoint yourselves with oil. You shall tread grapes, but not drink wine” (vss. 14b-15).

The reason why you will live in perpetual discontent and want is because you have allowed yourself to be seduced. You embraced the perspective and world-view upon which Omri and Ahab built their rules, rather than that of David. They yearned to be Oriental despots and sought to subvert all of Israel's “statutes and ordinances” to accomplish the same (I Kings 16:21-22:40). And you have followed in their footsteps (vs. 16a).

Third, the ultimate verdict will be through your own unquenchable greed and lust for power – the destruction and destitution of your nation as the direct result of the political and economic policies of greed and the building of unilateral power that you have practiced. “Therefore, I will make you a desolation, and your inhabitants an object of hissing; so you shall bear the scorn of my people” (vs. 16b). The nation will eventually destroy itself because of its being possessed by its own greed and lust to dominate and to control, hidden under a blanket of religious observance. This is the fate of any nation that will choose not “to do justice, to do *chesedh* and to walk humbly with its God”!

**Psalm 15** cannot be understood, except in relation to Psalm 14, with which it is meant to contrast.

Psalm 14 examines the nature of evil people. “The Lord looks down from heaven on humankind to see if there are any who are wise, who seek after God. They have all gone astray, there are all alike perverse; there is no one who does good, no, not one” (14:2-3).

“Evildoers” are given several titles in Psalm 14, which in their naming, describes the breadth of their sin. They are godless (vs. 1), corrupt (vs. 1), not good (vs. 1), perverse (vs. 3), evildoers (vs. 4). They deny the existence of God and because they do, they have no ground of being and therefore abuse people. And they are, at least to some degree, everybody (vs. 3)!

But there are those people who, though also sinners, essentially seek to do the good. A description of them is found in Psalm 15.

Who are the good? They are those who “abide in (God’s) tent,” who worship in his sanctuary (15:1). And who is worthy to enter into the presence of God? Psalm 15 lays out their characteristics. Those worthy of being in God’s presence are:

- ? Blameless (vs. 2)
- ? Do the right (vs. 2)
- ? Speak the truth (vs. 2)
- ? Do not slander others (vs. 3)
- ? Do no evil to others (vs. 3)
- ? Do not act reproachfully toward others (v. 3)
- ? Do not associate with evil people (vs. 3)
- ? Honor those who love God (vs. 4)
- ? Keep their promises (vs. 4)
- ? Do not lend money at interest (vs. 5)
- ? Do not take bribes (vs 5).

It is intriguing to reflect on this list. The truly Godly people, the Psalmist is saying, are not perfect people. But they are responsible people. They are people who assume accountability for their actions. In particular, they are committed to working for justice for all, particularly for economic justice. And they are concerned with calling forth the best out of the people. The Psalmist recognizes that evil permeates all of us, because this is a part of the human condition. But also the capacity to do good exists in us, as well, and so the Psalmist demonstrates that the truly “good” person is that person who intentionally chooses to act in a responsible and accountable way. Such folk, the Psalmist concludes, “those who do these things, shall never be moved” (15:5)!

**Matthew 5:1-12** presents the well-known “Beatitudes” that open Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount – the principle statement of Jesus’ teachings found in the Gospel of Matthew. Although the word “beatitude” does not occur in the Bible, it is used by the church to refer to these blessings given by Jesus to the people; a beatitude is a literary form which starts with the word “blessed” and then presents a declaration of praise for an individual or group because of their meritorious action.

The Greek language has two words that are translated by our one English word “bless”. But in reality, each of these Greek words has its own unique nuance. *Eulogeo* means “to speak well of”. *Makarios* means “happy”. The word used here in the Beatitudes is *makarios*. So these are the “be-happy” or joyous beatitudes!

There are beatitudes that appear in the Gospel of Luke, as well – and they are clearly related to the Beatitudes presented in the Gospel of Matthew. Most scholars agree that the Lukan Beatitudes are the earlier set. In reflecting upon Matthew’s Beatitudes, it is important to be aware of the unique twist on those beatitudes presented in the Gospel of Luke.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew records Jesus as saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Again, “blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled” (Mt. 5:3, 6). But Luke remembers Jesus’ words quite differently. He records Jesus as saying, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Lk. 6:20-21).

The difference is marked. Not “blessed are the poor in spirit”, but “blessed are you poor”. Not “blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness”, but “blessed are you hungry”. Not “blessed are those who mourn”, but “you who weep”! The emphasis is entirely different. Whereas Matthew seems concerned with the spiritual condition of people (“poor in spirit”, “hunger after righteousness”), Luke is concerned with the physical, political and economic condition of the people (“poor”, “hunger”, “weep”). And to change the “blesses” from “the poor”, “those who hunger or mourn” to “you poor, you hungry, you who weep” shifts the emphasis from talking about people of need to talking to the people themselves!

Then, just to be sure that the reader has no doubts about the intent of Luke, this writer records the next saying by Jesus that does not appear in Matthew at all. “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for this is what their ancestors did to the false prophets” (vss. 24-26). Those who now live in the luxury and power of the establishment, Jesus is saying, will someday see their status and role reversed. The rich will be made poor, the full will be hungry, those who presently experience the exquisite enjoyment of the most luxurious refinements will someday be broken and will mourn for what they have lost, for those whom the systems now embrace will someday be rejected by all.

What is clearly being proclaimed by Jesus in Luke is the upside-down nature of God’s kingdom. There will be a great reversal, Jesus proclaims in Luke. For the day will come when wealth and food will be redistributed, and those who currently enjoy the bounty of life will be destitute while those who are now oppressed and exploited will be on top – all because the wealthy and powerful would not share their wealth and influence (as Deuteronomy required) in order to bring about an equitable leveling of society.

But, hold on! I would contend that the Matthean beatitudes are far less “spiritual” than they at first seem to be, and that they join with Luke in proclaiming God’s great reversal when the poor and the exploited will have a blessed future in the kingdom of God.

The nine Matthean beatitudes divide into three groupings.<sup>1</sup> The first four beatitudes (“the poor in spirit”, “those who mourn”, “the meek”, “those who hunger and thirst after righteousness”) deal

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<sup>1</sup> Traditional biblical interpretation divides the Beatitudes into two groups of four, with the emphasis on the first four beatitudes being about people in need and the last four being people in service. F. Dale Bruner presents the arguments for the two-part division, but also makes a strong case against this reading of scripture while championing the tri-part division I present above (*The Christbook: Matthew 1-12* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004], pp. 155-156). I am indebted to Bruner for his creative work on the Beatitudes in his masterly *The Christbook* commentary on Matthew (pp. 154-194), upon which I have considerably leaned in the following exegesis.



with the poor, the “little people”, the “have nots” of Israelite society – the 10% to 12% who were the poorest of the poor. The next three beatitudes (“the merciful”, “the pure in heart”, “the peacemakers”) are the “haves” of Israelite society, those middle- and upper-class people who use their wealth and power for the advantage of the poor. The final two beatitudes (“the persecuted for righteousness sake”, “persecuted for Jesus’ sake”) are for the “hurt” people – those who, because of their commitment to God, God’s kingdom and to Jesus, are persecuted by those threatened by and opposed to a redistribution of wealth, power or control. So the beatitudes deal with three types of people: the “have-nots”, the “haves”, and the “hurt”!

The commentary that appears below on the nine beatitudes will be divided into two sections. The first section will be an exegesis of each beatitude. The second section will conclude this study of the beatitudes and will summarize the lot. Thus, the preacher or teacher who wants to preach or teach a series on the beatitudes will have sufficient material to develop that series. But one who simply wants to summarize the entirety of the beatitudes has sufficient material to accomplish that objective, as well, without being overwhelmed by detail.

### ***An Examination of Each Beatitude:***

***The first beatitude*** is also both the most famous of the beatitudes and the key beatitude to the understanding of the rest. It is, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for there is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3). Earlier, I pointed out that Luke had quoted Jesus as saying, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Lk. 6:20). On the face of it, it seems that Luke is making a direct commitment to the poor, but Matthew is spiritualizing the text, and thus dulling its cutting edge, by extending God’s blessings to all who are “poor in spirit” (which could conceivably include the wealthy humble or those who have taken a vow of poverty or the intentionally poor). But that interpretation is missing the point of Matthew’s statement.

The key to understanding Matthew’s first beatitude is the actual word that apostle uses to refer to the poor. Matthew uses the Greek word *ptochoi*, which means the involuntarily oppressed or the economically exploited (the root word from which *ptochoi* is derived, *ptosso*, literally means “to cower, to cringe”. It is the strongest possible word in the Greek language to refer to the “poorest of the poor”, the “helpless poor”, the “bottom of the heap”. Since Jesus would have spoken in Aramaic, not in Greek, he would have used the Aramaic derivative of the Hebrew word, *anawim*, which means people so ground down by their poverty that they have lost all capacity and willingness to fight. These are the people who are beaten by life, the marginalized, the broken, the wretched of the earth. These are the people who are “poor in spirit”.

Matthew actually goes a step further than does Luke. Luke has Jesus commit himself to the poor, Israel’s peasants, unclean and beggars. But Matthew takes it one step further. Matthew, in essence, declares in this beatitude, “Poverty is greater than a lack of money, position or power. Poverty destroys a person’s spirit, the capacity to stand on his feet and look even God in the eye! Poverty creates cowed, cringing, broken beings that are robbed of any sense of their own self-worth. They are not only poor. They are poor in spirit. The act of economically exploiting them, of marginalizing them, of oppressing them has robbed them of their very humanity, so that they are spiritually, emotionally and psychologically robbed as much of their dignity than if they were physically robbed!”

It is significant that it is only in the Gospel of Matthew that Jesus declares to the poor, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (11:28). Only Matthew seemed to understand the emotional and spiritual price that is paid by the poor for their poverty; so only he offers a lifting of that burden by Jesus.

But this beatitude doesn’t end with the words, “Blessed are the poor in spirit”. It ends with the words, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. The construction of this sentence in Greek is particularly significant, because it is an exclusive construction. The word “theirs” is at the beginning of the subordinate clause for emphasis. That means that this would be the word emphasized if the sentence was spoken rather than read. “Blessed are the poor in spirit for *theirs* is the kingdom of heaven”. God’s kingdom is not meant for anybody else. It is meant exclusively for “the poor in spirit”. The kingdom of heaven is meant for the poor who are so poor that all hope and spirit has been beaten out of them! The kingdom of heaven is meant for the very bottom of the heap, the “untouchables” of society, the truly-broken of society.

What Matthew is here declaring in this first beatitude was perhaps best put by the great Christian polemicist, Origen, who wrote in the third century, “The poor are said to be the rag, tag and bobtail of humanity. But Jesus does not leave them that way. Out of material you would have thrown away as useless, he fashions people of strength, giving them back their self-respect, enabling them to stand on their feet and look God in the eye. They were cowed, cringing, broken things. But the Son has set them free!”<sup>2</sup>

The “poor in spirit” is for whom God’s kingdom exists. And those who are not “poor in spirit” will be excluded from that kingdom. Thus, Matthew joins Luke in teaching the great reversal, that those who are now on the bottom will be placed by God at the top, that those who hold the lowest status in life will someday be most honored by God. It is a hard saying for those of us who are middle- and upper-class people. But there it is. And we must deal with it. Only by joining the poor in their struggle for equality and equity do we become a part of the “poor in spirit”! This is the lesson of the first beatitude.

***The second beatitude*** continues the first set of four on the “have nots” of Israelite society. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matt. 5:4).

The strength of this beatitude is found in the Greek word, *penthountes*, here translated “mourning”. The word has more of a sense of being “*in* mourning” rather than just “mourning”. In the Jewish culture of Jesus’ day, there were professional mourners who would be paid to weep and moan over a person’s death. In reality, they could care less about the person who had just died; they were doing it as a *job*! This is not what *penthountes* means. It means “being broken-hearted”, grief-stricken, heart-broken; the person is “*in* mourning”. Because the verb is in its participial form, it means a continuing state of broken-heartedness. The pain is not going to go away. It is not a condition for a season, but for a lifetime.

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<sup>2</sup> Origen, *Contra Celsus*.

“Blessed are those who mourn”. When Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision, was for the first time exposed to the tragedy of civil war in pre-communist China, of brother killing brother, and of seeing the result in the abandonment and helplessness of infants, he wrote in the flyleaf of his Bible, “Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God”! That was what Jesus was referring to when he said, “Blessed are those who mourn”. What God wants is broken-hearted people! What God wants are people who are being broken over “the things that break the heart of God”. People who give a profound damn are the people whom God blesses!

What is intriguing about this statement is that there is no object presented for one’s mourning. The beatitude doesn’t say, “Blessed are those who mourn over aborted babies”, or “Blessed are those who mourn over the abandoned elderly”, or “Blessed are those who mourn over those treated unjustly”. It simply says, “Blessed are those who mourn!” What God wants are broken-hearted people. They are the spiritually and emotionally “have-nots” of the kingdom of God! And because they are so agitated and in such pain at whatever pain in the world as might face them, God can do in and through them a work He cannot do through the rest of us!

*The third beatitude* is “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (5:5). This is probably the most quoted beatitude, most often in a critical and even sarcastic way as the speaker ridicules Christianity’s founder as not being assertive and take-charge enough. But to quote it this way is to thoroughly misunderstand what this beatitude is saying.

The trouble comes in the word “meek”. The word “meek” has undergone a profound change since it was first used in the new English translations of the Bible of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Today, the word “meek” means “mild”, “submissive” or “moderate” – even “deficient in spirit and courage”.<sup>3</sup>

But that was not what the word “meek” meant 400 years ago. It meant “the powerless”, “the oppressed”, “the exploited”, or, as some translators have put it, “the little people”! It was the description, not of an attitude (“mild”, “submissive”, “deficient in courage”), but of a condition (“powerless in the eyes of the world”). “Meek”, as used in the third beatitude is, in reality, a synonym of “poor in spirit” of the first beatitude and “those who mourn” in the second beatitude!

Therefore, what Jesus was saying in this beatitude is that God is on the side of the little people, the poor, the powerless of human society. They will be the people who “will inherit the earth”. That is, Jesus was declaring that those who are poor will not have their final consolation in heaven, but rather, right here on earth. It is the direct opposite of that which Marx accused Christianity of teaching: “pie in the sky by-and-by”! Jesus was proclaiming that he had come to turn the world upside down so that the powerful would be brought low and the “meek” lifted up – right here, right now! The powerless would become new people in Christ as they discovered in him a new foundation for building a new society for humanity and a new life for themselves. This earth is to be the scene for the coming Kingdom of God. It isn’t going to happen in a heaven somewhere or in a “sweet by-and-by” someday. Jesus’ revolution turning human beings and their societies upside down is going on right now, in our lives and – if we are going to effectively live out our redeemed lives in our actions in the world – in our actions to work for political justice, economic equity and spiritual wholeness on this earth. We *meek* ones, both

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<sup>3</sup> Merriam-Webster’s *Collegiate Dictionary, 11<sup>th</sup> Edition* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2007), p. 771.

through Christ's transforming work in our lives and our resulting application of that work in our work for justice, will indeed inherit the earth!

***The fourth beatitude*** is “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matt. 5:6).

The first four beatitudes deal with the “have-nots” of Israelite society. Each beatitude presents one aspect of being the marginalized of a society. The first beatitude presents the blessed as being poor – without sufficient wealth to survive. The second beatitude recognizes that those who are poor are not just economically deprived, but will inevitably be depressed and weighed down by their poverty. The third beatitude recognizes poverty as creating powerlessness – that poverty is not simply economic; it is inevitably both psychological and political; the poor are people devoid of sufficient influence and power to be taken seriously by the rest of the world. Now, in the fourth beatitude, Jesus names as blessed the poor, depressed and powerless who are also devoid of “righteousness”! What does he mean by “righteousness”?

The key is to realize that in the Beatitudes, Jesus is not presenting a great “ought” – that is, that our behavior will determine our spirituality (that, once again, is a works-righteousness). Rather, the people he names in the first four beatitudes that deal with the “have-nots” of society are people who, in their present condition, *cannot help themselves!* It is those who are helpless because they have been rejected and ostracized by society that Jesus declares receive God's blessings! This reality is the key to understanding what Jesus means by “righteousness”.

Again, the change in the meaning of a word over centuries of time is at play here (think, for example, of how the word “gay” has changed in over 400 years). The word “righteousness” in present-day English means being morally or ethically right. Older English captured the use of the word in both Hebrew and in Greek; it meant “acting from an outraged sense of justice”. In other words, the word “righteous” was a synonym for “justice”. It is the acted-out emotion one feels when he sees injustice being done.

The other nuance in Jesus' statement of “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness” is that he is not saying that the people about whom he is speaking *are* righteous; rather they *hunger and thirst* to be righteous people. They feel starved for and empty of righteousness, and therefore they want it in the worst way.

Combine these two ideas together – that “righteous” is the acted-out emotion one feels when he sees injustice being done, and that those who are “have-nots” aren't “righteous” but “hunger and thirst” to be righteous, what one realizes that what Jesus is saying here is absolutely astounding. What he is saying is that the truly blessed people are those who are poor and powerless, who have been beaten down by life, who recognize their poverty – and now want to do something about it! They are not going to wait for the world to rescue them! They are now recognizing that they need to commence to start to begin to help themselves! Nobody is going to do it for them. And Jesus says, “When people get this angry about their situation that they decide to do something about it, then these are *blessed* people because these are people who are beginning to move toward their own liberation!”

The question then becomes, “What can the *haves* do when the *have-nots* are ready to act on their own behalf to strengthen the arms of the have-nots in their effort to take charge of their situation?” The answer to that question will have to await the remainder of Jesus’ beatitudes.

What Jesus has done in these four beatitudes has been to build an ethic of empowerment that must be done by the “have-nots” of society themselves, if they are to build lives worth living. It is as if Jesus says to them, “Blessed are you who acknowledge that you are both poor economically but also poor in spirit, when you allow your heart to be broken over both your plight and your neighbor’s plight, when you recognize that you have been made powerless by political, economic and spiritual forces around you, and then, when you finally come to the place when you say, “I’m not going to take this anymore” – it is then that I can begin my good work in you and your compadres!”

Jesus ends this beatitude with the most amazing words: “Blessed are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness, because they will be satisfied!” They will be filled up! They will be satisfied! When the “have-nots” of the world come to the place where they both understand their condition and the reasons for those conditions and become angry enough to do something about it, it is then that God can begin a good work in them so that they can deal with their situation. Until one wants to do something about his situation, he cannot. Undesirable situations and hard lives can lead to brokenness and victimization. But they can also lead to the drive to join with others to change their situation. And until a person has made that decision to change his/her situation, there is little that even God can do with that situation. Thus, committed to making a difference and to bringing about change, those who are poor and powerless can become “satisfied” because God can truly work in and through them to enable them to become “righteous” people – people who “act out of an enraged sense of justice”. But that work which must occur within a person to bring him or her to the place where they will act on their rage rather than succumb to their oppression is a work that only God can do in their lives, as God rubs raw their incipient anger over the unjust ways they have been treated. This is God’s great work both among and to the “have-nots” of the world!

The second set of beatitudes is beatitudes for the “haves” of the world. These are the fifth, sixth and seventh beatitudes. And it is with these beatitudes that the entire text makes a significant shift. Whereas the first four beatitudes deal with the “little people” of Israelite society, the next three beatitudes deal with the middle- and upper-class Israelites who have the potential to use their wealth and power for the advantage of the poor. Whereas the first four beatitudes are ones of gift and grace, the next three are beatitudes of responsibility. But whether the beatitudes are for the “have-nots” or for the “haves” of society, it is important to keep in mind that they are “beatitudes” – not demands or regulations. They are all blessings, privilege, gifts given to God’s people (no matter who or what they are) for God’s people to use to be a blessing to those who are distinct from them. For just as the “haves” can be blessings to the “have nots”, so the “have nots” can be blessings to the “haves”.

***The fifth beatitude*** is “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy”. This is the only beatitude where a person receives exactly what he gives. If one is “merciful”, then he will receive “mercy”. There is a direct correlation between how we treat people and how we get treated ourselves. What goes around comes around! Fullness of mercy received is meant not to

be hoarded but to be shared as fully as it has been received. The blessing comes, not just in receiving God's mercy, but in sharing it with others – in giving it away. Our salvation is unmerited and comes through God's grace, but in a profound sense, a sharing of that grace not only blesses those who receive such treatment from us, but blesses us in the act of sharing it. It is not that we have to be willing to give mercy away in order for us to receive mercy; that would lead to a "works-righteousness". Rather, giving away the mercy we have received is an inevitable consequence of us having authentically receiving mercy; we can't help but share it!

But what is meant by "mercy" or the "merciful"? To Matthew, it is those people who have become empathetic toward the poor, those whose hearts have been broken by their own and their neighbor's plight, those who are powerless, and those who have decided to take charge of their situation. To Matthew, the "merciful" are the people of Israel's middle and upper class who become understanding of, angry about, and committed to the plight of the poor and powerless.

The word, "understanding" truly captures the sense Matthew would give to the word "merciful". To be "understanding" is to be "under-standing" – that is, "standing under" those who are poor in body and spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who are powerless. It is the person who intentionally places themselves under those who need support in order to support them, to become empathetic toward them, to allow their compassion to blossom, and then become angry enough to join with the poor in working side-by-side to right the situation. These "haves" are those who have such a heart and an anger regarding the poor that they will use their position as "haves" to work for a society that not only cares for their "have nots" but will work to transform the situation so that such "have nots" have been liberated from their poverty and powerlessness and have become part of the company of the "haves", as well.

***The sixth beatitude*** is "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God" (5:8). This, like the beatitude before it, is directed to the "haves" of Israelite society.

The key to understanding this beatitude is in the examination of the word "heart". In both the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament, "heart" meant the central and unifying "organ" of life. Although the Jews recognized the physical role of the heart, they used the heart as a metaphor to refer to one's spiritual and interpersonal life, as well. Thus the "heart" was the seat of a person's emotions, desires and appetites (Prov. 27:11; II Kings 6:11; Num. 32:7; Lk. 24:32; Rom. 1:24). It was the seat of one's intellect (Judg. 5:16; Mark 2:6), and of one's volition and morality (Zech. 7:12; Matt. 19:8; Duet. 8:14; Ps. 51:10; Luke 8:15). Most importantly, the heart was one's point of contact with God (Ps. 27:8; Rom. 10:10; Deut. 30:14). The point is that, to both Old Testament and New Testament Jews, the "heart" was not simply the physical organ that sustains one's life but the core in a human being that connects him or her to everyone else and to God, out of which one's compassion, commitment and love – and conversely, one's callousness, avoidance and hate -- flows.

Thus, when Matthew has Jesus declare "Blessed are the pure in heart", what he is saying is that those who are truly blessed by God are those who are single-minded in following these beatitudes. The "pure in heart" are those who are committed to the liberating of the poor, whose hearts have been broken by their own and their neighbor's plight, and those who work for the empowering of the poor by joining them in taking charge of their situation. They are the "single-

mindful” who are totally focused on the transformation of the world into God’s kingdom, where there will be no “have nots” or “hurting”, but only everybody having what God wills for every person. As Martin Luther so dramatically put it, “Seek God in the miserable, erring, and laboring ones, for that is where one sees God, there the heart becomes pure, and all arrogance lies down”.<sup>4</sup>

What is particularly remarkable about this beatitude is the biblical understanding of sin. To the biblical writer, sin permeates all that we do and are. Sin, like a virus, permeates every part of us – our body, our soul, our mind, our will – and everything we create – our relationships with others, our families, our labor, our schooling, our neighborhood, our church, our city, our culture, the world! It is not that we can’t act in good ways or even have good motives. It is not that we can’t act in a noble manner or to seek justice – for we can. But it is that none of us ever acts out of a purely benevolent motivation; there is always a little bit of us that acts out of selfishness or wanting the advantage or to serve our own ends. Sin permeates everything that we do (Gen. 6:5; Psalm 14:2-3; Eccl. 7:20; Mark 7:21-23; Romans 3:9-12).

So the biblical writers in no way short-change sin. And yet, thoroughly accepting this permeating recognition of sin in our lives and in our societies, Matthew has Jesus say, “Blessed are the pure in heart”. Blessed are the single-minded. Blessed are those who are committed in the totality of their being and to the depth of their being to working for the transformation of the world into the kingdom of God. Blessed are those committed to the poor and poor in spirit, those whose hearts are broken with the greed and evil of the world, those who are focused on the empowering of even the most hurting and abandoned people on earth. “Blessed are those”, who are living “a long obedience in the same direction”, even though their own capacity to act for their own self-preservation and self-aggrandizement permeates what they do. It is that “long obedience” for which God is looking, and when God sees it in a person, God celebrates it!

The speaker of this beatitude states the inevitable result of one who lives such a focused and single-minded life – “they will see God!” They will meet God in their neighbor. It is such people as these – not the religious professional, the observer of the rules and regulations of religiosity, not even those who make a career of studying the Bible – who will “see God”! Because such single-mindedness is what God Himself is all about!

***The seventh beatitude*** is “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (5:9). This is the final of the “haves” beatitude, and as such, summarizes the whole.

The key to unlocking this beatitude is its use of the word “peace”. When we Americans hear the words, “Blessed are the peace-makers”, we think of it simply as being those who seek for reconciliation, harmony and perhaps even pacifism in the human experience. But, when used in scripture, the word “peace” means much more than that.

Actually, the word Jesus would have used here translated “peace” would not be the Greek word “eirene”, but the Aramaic word “shelam”, which is an adaptation of the Hebrew word “shalom”.

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount*, p. 38, as quoted in Bruner, *The Christbook* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), p.176.

So Jesus would have spoken of “shalom-makers”. But what is “shalom”? And how is it different than “peace”?

When one works with the original Hebrew in the Old Testament, one is stunned by how often the word *shalom* is used and how rich the nuances of that word are. *Shalom* is used a total of 397 times in the Hebrew Bible! Its Greek counterpart, *eirene* is used 89 times in the Christian Bible (New Testament). Such heavy usage is a clear indication of how important a word it was – that it was a concept that permeated both Hebrew and early Christian society.

The second reality that strikes one is the multiplicity of ways *shalom* is translated into English. In order to capture the unique nuance of the Hebrew word as it is used in specific contexts, translators have had to use the following English words: weal, welfare, completeness, to cause to be at peace, to make peace, peace offering, at rest, at ease, secure, safe, to finish well, to prosper, to be whole, to be perfect, to be victorious. In other words, in any given context, *shalom* can mean any of the above English words.

The same is true to a lesser degree of the Greek equivalent of shalom, *eirene*. While not as rich a word as shalom, *eirene* still requires other English words to translate it besides “peace”; including unity, concord and to desire peace.

What this comparison reveals to us is that *shalom* and *eirene* do not simply mean what the English word, “peace” means. The English word is essentially a negative word – that is, the word “peace” is expressing the absence of something – war, conflict, violence or confrontation. Therefore, “peace” exists in conflict’s place. But the Hebrew word *shalom* goes far beyond that.

*Shalom* can be used simply as a greeting or a wish to a friend or loved one (“Shalom to you, my friend!”). But at its fullest, *shalom* captures the Hebrew vision of human society, the non-human world and even the environment in an integrated and relational whole where “the wolf and the lamb shall feed together and the lion shall eat straw like the ox” (Isa. 65:25). *Shalom* is the theology of hope of Israel and of the early church, its vision of what the world will someday be.

*Shalom* can best be understood as being presented in scripture for two distinct groups of Israelites – those who are in positions of power and influence (the “haves”) and those who have faced in the past or who are presently facing oppression and exploitation by those in power (the “have-nots”).<sup>5</sup>

The tradition of the “have-nots” begins with Moses, and moves from him through Joshua, Samuel and most of the prophets, and then culminates in the New Testament in the person of Jesus. This is a *shalom* for people who live in a precarious place, who are economically exploited, politically oppressed or religiously controlled. Their *shalom* is understood in terms of their crying out in their pain and of being delivered – whether that deliverance is from slavery in Egypt, from precariousness in a new land, from the injustice of dominating and exploitive Jewish

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<sup>5</sup> I am indebted to Walter Brueggemann for his analysis of the two shalom traditions in Scripture – the traditions of liberation and of stewardship, and particularly his labeling of these two traditions as shalom for “haves” and “have nots”. Brueggemann’s primary development of these two traditions is found in his book, *Peace* (St. Louis, MO.: Chalice Press, 2001), pp. 25-53.



kings, from the persecution and humiliation of Babylonian exile or from domination by Rome and the Jerusalem clerical aristocracy. Such *shalom* is captured in such scripture as “The Israelites groaned under their slavery and cried out. Out of the slavery their cry for help rose up to God. God heard their groaning, and God took notice of them” (Exodus 2:23-25).

Such *shalom* is an action of liberation, of salvation, of setting free – whether such setting free is from political oppression and economic exploitation (Egyptian slavery), physical deformity (Bartimaeus’ blindness in Mark 10:47-52) or was yet another domination. In all instances of *shalom* for the have-nots, the theme is one of being set-free, of being liberated. It is therefore a tradition of liberation and salvation.

But there is a second, and equally valid, tradition in the Hebrew and Christian traditions. That is *shalom* for the “haves”. This tradition can be traced through Noah, Abraham, David, the wisdom literature, Isaiah and the rabbis and culminating in Paul (who was a former rabbi). This tradition is for people who are essentially secure and who are consequently concerned about the appropriate management of the resources God has placed at their disposal as well as celebrating the good things of life provided for them from a generous God (e.g., II Samuel 7:8-16).

This is a *shalom*, not of a tyrannized people but of a secure people, not of a people living under oppression, but a people of well being. Therefore, it is a *shalom*, not of liberation, but of celebration and of the wise management of the resources God has invested in you (in this case, management of the kingdom God has invested in David). Thus, this *shalom* is carried out in the recognition that when a community is economically or politically well off, that is an indication of God’s blessings upon it. Therefore, with such a *shalom*, the community’s task becomes the wise use of those resources (stewardship) as an investment made in that community by God and thus to be managed in such a way that justice and economic equality will result for everyone. People in this tradition do not want a disruptive act of liberation – God’s “outstretched arm” freeing them, but rather the continuance of a social order that will continue to benefit them and those around them. They want security, not liberation!

The biblical message on *shalom* is that it is for both the “haves” and the “have nots”. It is both for those who lack power and are in need of liberation and for those who hold power and seek to appropriately manage the resources God has placed at their disposal. Both kinds of people are in every church. And one of the essential tasks of the church is to bring together through Christ those searching for liberation or salvation with those who are the managers of society and seek security, so that they might work together to build a *shalom* that is truly just and equitable for all, that brings people into an ever-deepening relationship with God and each other and consequently contributes to the formation of society as God intended it to be lived. That is what the Beatitudes is all about.

In the scriptures, there were three primary indicators that God’s intentions for a community, a city or a nation were actually being carried out. These three indicators of *shalom* occur in the economic, political and social/spiritual systems of a community. Since *shalom* has to do more with public justice than private morality (Lev. 26:3-13; Isaiah 32:15-17; Luke 10:1-12; Romans 14:13-20), what does God intend for the political, economic and social/spiritual systems upon which society is built? How does God want a political system, an economic system or a

social/spiritual system to operate? Intriguingly, the scripture is both universal and specific in its answer.

The primary indicator is whether or not the people exhibit a dynamic, personal relationship with God that is manifested in their relationships with each other. Exhibiting a dynamic relationship with God is not manifested by liturgy or ritual but by the way one treats his neighbor. Likewise, relationship with each other is manifested in acting justly and mercifully (Numbers 6:24-26; Philippians 3:10). The church, as a mediating institution in society, is to be about the task of seeking to pressure its society's institutions to be truly just in their management of public life while being particularly compassionate toward those who could become powerless.

The second indicator of shalom is that of political justice. There is no more famous statement that articulates that reality than Micah 6:8, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" What is being laid out in this magnificent summary of the Hebrew Bible is that the political task is twofold. Whether it is the ordering of a family, a church or synagogue, a neighborhood, a city or a nation, God intends that the primary political task is both to do "justice" and to "love kindness" (the Hebrew word used here is *chesedh* which refers to God's unconditional love for us, but which the prophet Micah states we are to manifest towards others) within the context of "walking humbly" with God. All that God wants out of God's people and their systems is three things: to do justice, to do *chesedh* and to be in relationship with God. That's all God wants – no sacrifices, no liturgies, no rituals, no slavish practices, no observance. All God wants is a relational people, relational systems, a relational and just culture.

And, finally, a nation and culture built on relationship with God and a politics of justice for all in the nation must inevitably deal with how wealth is generated and distributed. It is in the book of Deuteronomy that the clearest economic indicators are given for a nation that truly desires to live under God (Deut. 6:10-12; 15:4-11; 23:19-20; also see Lev. 25). Deuteronomy is reminding Israel that all that they possess as a nation and as individuals is a gift from God. Any wealth the nation possesses is a free gift from God, a wealth that God has chosen to invest in them, a result of God's own *chesedh* toward Israel. What, then, does God expect of Israel? There is only one reason why wealth is given to a nation, Deuteronomy states. God makes a nation wealthy for the purpose of eliminating its poverty (Deut. 15:4-11; Lev. 25; Deut. 23:19-20; 16:1-17). *The elimination of poverty is to be the primary agenda both of the systems and of each individual Israelite!*

It is intriguing to note that the commitment to compensatory economic justice was not only a part of Israelite culture. It was also central to the life and mission of the early Christian church (Acts 4:32-35). The early church was a communitarian culture because that was the acting out of Jewish religious, political and economic beliefs and actions about how the *shalom community* should live.

In the light of the biblical emphasis that God's intentions for our world is that we might live in a society of shalom, "doing justice, loving mercy and walking humbly with our God" (Micah 6:8), and yet in the light of the harsh biblical social analysis that we and the political, economic and religious systems we create to order our lives will corrupt our systems to oppress, exploit and

dominate each other, what are we called to do as God's people in the world? How are we to work for the realization of shalom in our midst?

This is what the Beatitudes in general, and this beatitude in particular is about. All of them are really about what God's people are to do – whether they work among the “haves”, the “have nots” or the “hurt” of our society, whether they are the “have nots” or the “haves” or the “hurts”. They are blessed by God if they take on the work of being “shalom-makers”. If they are committing themselves to the empowering of people, the doing of justice, the working for economic equity, the seeking of authentic relationship with God and each other – then they are working for “the shalom of the city” (Jer. 29:7). They are living their lives and acting out in their lives exactly what God wants them to do with their lives – to be “shalom-makers”.

Note that they are called to be “shalom-makers”, not “shalom-keepers”! It is “*peace-makers*” that are to be blessed – not “*peace-keepers*”! There is a profound difference. To “keep” the peace is to maintain what is already there; police and the military “keep” the peace. But to “make” the peace is to assume an entirely different responsibility toward the world. It is to actively and intentionally “work for the *shalom* of the city to which I have sent you” (Jer. 29:7), to the universal ministry of shalom-making (Matt. 5:9).

The scope of the work of the people of God when they become “shalom-makers” is captured in the varied English words used in Jer. 29:7 for the Hebrew *shalom*; that word is variously translated in different translations as “peace”, “prosperity”, “welfare”, “good”.<sup>6</sup> Each translation seeks to capture the rich implications of this command – for, in a profound sense, our task is to be working for the peace *and* the prosperity *and* the welfare *and* the good of all the people, the systems and structures, and even the principalities and powers of our community. It means that nothing is outside the purview, concern or commitment of the Church, whether it is political, economic, religious, social, cultural, environmental or spiritual, whether it is in the public domain or in the private. To work for the full and total transformation of all the people, forces and structures of the city with the love of God is the call and responsibility and joyful task of God's people wherever they may be!<sup>7</sup>

Jesus built his theology around the concept of the “kingdom of God” (or, in Matthew, the “kingdom of heaven”). It takes very little reading of the Gospel accounts to recognize that what Jesus meant by the kingdom of God was simply the full living-out of shalom upon the earth. The “kingdom of God” was *shalom* personified and particularized in the life of God's people.

The supreme gift of Jesus to his followers was to be *shalom*, which was to be lifted above the commonplace and the everyday to its highest level – living in unbroken union with God in the midst of the adversities of life, and manifested in our union as brothers and sisters in Christ (John 14:27). This comes about as the result of each of us, and all of us together, embracing the life, death and resurrection of Jesus as our own and in our stead (Acts 10:36; Ephesians 6:15, 2:17). Full *shalom*, therefore, is not something we can manufacture or earn, but comes as God's free

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<sup>6</sup> The New International Version, the Living Bible, the New Revised Standard Version; the Jerusalem Bible.

<sup>7</sup> *Building A People of Power*, *op. cit.*, pp. 87-90. Used by permission.

gift to us – a gift of *amazing* grace (Col. 1:2, Rom. 1:7, I Cor. 1:3, II Cor. 1:2, Gal. 1:3, Phil. 1:2, II Thess. 1:2).

Finally, *shalom* is the ultimate hallmark, the identifying mark of the authentic Church. Christ has broken down the wall of estrangement between all human dichotomies that separate and alienate us from each other (male versus female, slave versus free, parents versus children, race versus race, systems versus the people, “haves” versus the “have-nots”). Instead, God’s free gift of *shalom*, continually provided to us as individuals and as a community, draws us into one body (Eph. 2:14-17; Heb. 7:2). This is God’s continuing act of redemption, its intended scope being the restoration of the whole creation to its proper harmony (Col. 1:19-22).

And what is the result of being “peace-makers” as God’s “haves” in society? “They are to be called children of God!” Here is the highest accolade of all. When people focus themselves with singleness of heart on being “shalom-makers”, no matter their position or rank or comparative wealth or authority in the world, then they are called by others who see such a life style being lived out, “children of God”. They are “saints” to others. They become, by who they are and by what they do, the living expression of God in the world today. And people instinctively know that, and respond to that witness. With such an accolade, Jesus ends his beatitudes for both the “have-nots” and the “haves” of society, inviting each into an entirely different way of life that will become transforming both to the world and to the people learning to live in this Christ-like way!

***The eighth beatitude*** is “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:10). With this beatitude, there is again a significant shift in these promises. Whereas the first four beatitudes dealt with the “have-nots” of the world and the next three with the “haves”, these last two beatitudes deal with the “hurt ones” of the Kingdom of God. It is about those who, because of their successful living out of their faith in the world – whether they are “haves” or “have-nots” – are “hurt” by society for that lived-out faith. In this beatitude, the “hurt” is that of rejection, while the final beatitude is persecution – the two principal ways society can dismiss those who, by their actions, would otherwise convict them!

One of the greatest plays of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *A Man for All Seasons*, ends in a most telling way. The play is about the last days of Sir Thomas More, the former chancellor of England who resisted Henry VIII’s effort to divorce his first wife (Catherine of Aragon) and to marry another (Anne Boleyn), an action that eventually resulted in his excommunication from the Roman Catholic Church and of Henry’s establishment of the Church of England (Anglican Church) in retaliation against Rome. The play concludes with Sir Thomas being convicted of treason against the crown and his subsequent beheading. But after Sir Thomas is executed, one of the primary characters of the play, “Common Man”, steps to the footlights and speaks these words:

“I’m breathing. Are you breathing, too? It’s nice, isn’t it? It isn’t difficult to keep alive, friends – just don’t *make* trouble – or if you must make trouble, make the sort of trouble that’s expected. Well, I don’t need to tell you that. Good night. If we should bump into one another, recognize me”.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (NY: Vintage Books, 1960), pp. 162-163, italics in the original.

The curtain then falls, and the play has come to its end.

This beatitude is about making trouble in a way that is *not* expected! It is about making trouble “for righteousness’ sake”. What Jesus is in essence saying in this beatitude is, “If you live life according to these beatitudes – if you work for the liberation of the powerless and the sharing of wealth with the poor in a way that enables them to build their own power and self-determination, and if you allow your heart to be broken with the injustice that breaks God’s heart, if you work for the shalom (political, economic and spiritual transformation) of your society, then there will be consequences of such action! There will be the Devil to pay! Neither the people who benefit from society or the church operating as it does, nor the structures of society benefiting from the status quo will be pleased with what you are doing. If your ministry is not resulting in rejection or persecution, then you are likely not doing ministry by these beatitudes! You are being a Sir Thomas More to the King Henry’s of this world! And the King Henry’s will, indeed, act! This is the way life is!

But if you live your life and carry out your ministry in conformity to the demands of the beatitudes, then you will experience the reward of this beatitude. “Theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:10b). Intriguingly, the promise of the eighth beatitude is the same as the promise of the first beatitude (5:3b) – word-for-word! You will experience the kingdom of God. You will embrace and even absorb into your life God’s intentions for all life – God’s intentions for you and for all humankind. You may be rejected, you may be ignored, you may be persecuted – but you will be blessed, because you will discover for your life what God wants for every human life – unity with God in working together for the political, economic and spiritual kingdom which God intends for all his creation. And what greater reward can one have than that!

***The final beatitude***, and the second of the “hurting” beatitudes is “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (5:11-12).

The intriguing reality about this beatitude is that it changes from the third person to the second person, from “they” to “you”! In doing so, it has become intensely personal. Although the previous beatitudes are describing different types of people in Christ’s kingdom (the “poor in spirit”, the “meek”, the “pure in heart”, the “peacemakers”), with this change Jesus is describing all Christians. He is not suggesting that it is “if” you will be reviled or persecuted, but it is “when”! The lot of any who authentically follow the Christ is that they will stand over-against their culture, and because of that, each Christian will be reviled, persecuted, and lied about! It can be no other way. If you are authentically working as a change-agent in society for Christ and His Kingdom, you will be opposed by those seeking the status quo. There is no other way! It is a most sobering insight.

The Ninth Beatitude is not only the final of the beatitudes, but the summarizing beatitude. It seeks to gather all the beatitudes into one final blessing. Its objective is to bring all the other beatitudes home to each Christian so that each person realizes that these beatitudes deal with every one of us who name Jesus “Lord”. For the result of living out the Christian faith will be persecution and rejection by society. But both in the living out of our faith and in its resulting

rejection, we will find ourselves “blessed” by God, for we have pleased Him and have strengthened our life together with our brothers and sisters in Christ who share the same rejection.

### *A Summary of the Beatitudes:*

The nine beatitudes, considered together, have an intriguing flow to them. The first four beatitudes describe God’s people as victims, as the “have nots” of our world. The people God particularly loves are those who are poor, broken-hearted and powerless. But they are also about to discover how God calls them to do all they can to lift themselves from such weakness and marginalization. Then, the next three beatitudes send such people out into the world to be Christ in the world today, acting in mercy, purity and in working for the peace (shalom) of the world. But the final two beatitudes then recite the inevitable result of such liberation from powerless and building themselves into a people of power, working for the transformation of the world. That inevitable result will be their rejection by the powerful, the secure and those who benefit from the powerful and secure. The “powers that be” and their people will become threatened by the work of liberation God’s people are doing, so those powers will seek to do whatever they can to stop the redemption of the world. This they will do by first seeking to subvert the church (i.e., getting the church to accept the world’s standards as its standards) and, failing that, will seek to persecute the church into submission.

But the message that Jesus would give to a church that has been lifted up by Christ, gone out to transform the world and has had to go down under persecution is, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”! What was good for the prophets is good for God’s people. So the blessings the prophets received from God for being prophets is the blessing that God’s people will receive for working for God’s new order in the midst of an evil world. We will be blessed by God, and thus live in “the joy of your Lord”!

So blessed, may we pray with John Calvin, “Almighty God, as thou hast hitherto shown to us so many favors since the time thou hast been pleased to adopt us as they people, O grant that we may not forget so great a kindness. May we not be led away by the allurements of Satan, nor seek for ourselves inventions which may at length turn to our ruin. May we instead continue fixed in our obedience to thee, and daily call on thee, and drink of the fullness of thy bounty, and at the same time, strive to serve thee in this, thine city and world, and thus glorify thy name. Thus may we prove that we are wholly devoted to thee, according to the great obligations under which thou hast laid us, when it pleased thee to call and adopt us as thine own in thine only-begotten Son. Amen.”<sup>9</sup>

**I Corinthians 1:18-31** “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God”, the Apostle Paul writes (I Cor. 1:18). In the Epistle Lesson for today, Paul compares the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God.

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<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Prophet Jeremiah and Lamentations*

There are two ways that one can respond to the good news of the Gospel, the apostle suggests. One way is to reject it – and the result of such rejection is to be rejected by God. The second way to respond is to embrace the gospel –and the result of such an embrace is that you will continue in “being saved” (Isa. 6:9-10; Luke 2:34; Rom. 9:10-12; II Cor. 2:15-16). Those who are “being saved” are “those who are already called” by God (v. 24; Rom. 9:16).

Before everyone, Paul states, there is a choice. It stood before the Israelites when God met with them at Mount Sinai and gave them the Ten Commandments. It stood before the two nations of Israel and Judah as they considered Micah’s call to them to “do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God” (Micah 6:8). It stood before the psalmist proclaiming the nature of “good” people. It stood before the Jewish priests of Jesus’ day who held control over the religious, political and economic apparatus that governed Israel. And it stands before us. Which will we choose? Will we choose for a golden calf or for Yahweh, for political domination and economic wealth or for Jesus, for allegiance to Rome’s Caesar or allegiance to God’s Caesar – Jesus? What will be the priorities of our lives? Choosing those priorities will choose the one (or One) we will serve.

There is, Paul states, the world’s wisdom and God’s wisdom. There are those who see the gospel of justice, equitability, elimination of poverty and relationship of God as scandal and folly. But there are also those who see it as God’s power at work shaping society into God’s intentions for it. There are those who are awed by the systems of apparent strength of a Rome or of a Jewish clergy aristocracy. And there are those who recognize that God’s power is revealed in our weakness (vss. 20-22). To be among “those who are called” (vs. 24) is to be among the foolish, the weak, the marginalized of the world. But, because “we proclaim Christ crucified” (vs. 23) as a symbol of weakness and defeat, we actually belong to those who will transform the world. For our gospel of cross is also the gospel of resurrection.

“God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness stronger than human strength” (vs. 25). Working both in and through us as the followers of the One who exorcised the Temple and returned the true Israel to God’s intentions for society as encapsulated in the Ten Commandments, God has demonstrated that real foolishness belongs – not to those who embrace Christ and His Kingdom, but those who choose to oppose Him (vs. 27).

Paul then concludes, “God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord”” (vss. 27-31).

There are, of course, no words more inspiring than those that Paul wrote in the opening of this section. “God chose what is foolish to shame the wise, what is weak to shame the strong, what is despised to reduce to nothing the standards considered important.” God, through Jesus Christ, has turned the world upside down – so that it is precisely the “have-nots” – the foolish, the weak, the despised – the very bottom of the heap that God uses to proclaim and bring liberation in Christ to the world. Thus, the foolish, so acting, make the wise look foolish, the weak make the

strong look weak, the despised to make the political, economic and religious leaders look stupid! Through Jesus, God indeed turns things upside down!

But Paul goes further than that. It is easy, in the high emotion of his poetic words, to lose sight of his much more sedentary prose. Paul writes that Jesus “became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (vs. 30). Those are not just pretty words! In choosing these words at precisely this place in this important passage, Paul is telling us a great deal both about Christ and what Christ has done for us that enables us foolish, weak and despised people to act with wisdom, strength and as exemplar. And Paul does so by using four very technical words in the vocabulary of his theology.

“Wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, redemption”. What, precisely, has Jesus done for us to turn us from fools, the weak, the despised – that is, the “have nots” of our society – into people of wisdom, strength, and example to the world? He has done four things for us.

First, Jesus has been “wisdom” for us. Our liberation comes about from the foolishness, powerlessness, poverty (or poverty of spirit), and our rejection by others only when we gratefully receive the model of life that Jesus provides for us. It is his wisdom that leads us to embrace the truth about ourselves and the world, and not be destroyed by the dark side of that truth.

Second, Jesus has become “righteousness” for us. It is He who is right with God. It is He who lives in perfect justice toward the neighbor. Thus, by embracing Him, we are able to experience for ourselves rightness with God and justice toward our neighbor. It is not that we “pick ourselves up by our own bootstraps” and start to act right with God and toward the neighbor. We can’t, because we are so dominated by our own sin-nature. But Christ has done it for us. So, by embracing the saving act He has already done for us, we receive His rightness and justice and thus become both right with God and acting justly toward the neighbor.

Third, Jesus has become “sanctification” for us. Sanctification means “being made holy” or “set apart for God”. “Being holy” doesn’t mean that we are good, and never commit any sin. “Being holy” means to be “set apart”. This is beautifully stated in the covenant made between Israel and Yahweh at Mount Sinai, when God says to them, “You shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:6). That is, to be a holy nation is to become a kingdom of priests – those who act as a go-between between God and humanity. It is a people “set apart” for that priestly duty. Thus, “sanctification” means “consecration”. When Jesus has given to us His wisdom in the understanding of the world as it should be, the world as it is, and what we are called to do to contribute to making the world as it should be, and when we have embraced for our own lives what Jesus has already done for us in making us right with Him and with all humanity, then we can become a people “sanctified” (set apart, consecrated) to the holy work of transforming the world into God’s kingdom.

Fourth, Jesus has become “redemption” for us. “Redemption” is actually an economic term in both the Old and New Testaments. To “redeem” something is to pay the agreed-upon price to purchase an item, whether it is a fresh purchase or whether (as it is more often used) it is paying the balance of the money owed on an item so that it becomes wholly yours (thus, paying off the mortgage on a home or business, for example). So, Paul is teaching us, Jesus has become our



“redemption”. He has paid the price for all that has gone into making us either a literal (economic) “have-not” or a spiritual “have-not” of the world. And with that price, he has become our new owner. And as our owner, his first act is to set us free! We have been “redeemed”! So, since we have now been shown what God intends for the world and our role in making it so (“wisdom”), we have been made right with God by God’s action through Christ, not by our actions (“righteousness”), we have been set apart for the mission for which God created us and to which God calls us (“sanctification”), and God has removed all the liabilities that have kept us in captivity before (“redemption”), then we are able to become the formerly fools, weak and despised who are now God’s wisdom, strength and exemplar to the world.

In the light of what God has done for us in enabling us to become God’s liberated, then we take no credit for what we do or make no boast of our performance. Rather, we realize that all that we are and all that we do in ministry is the inevitable result of God’s work in and through us. We love, because He first loved us. We work for justice because He was just toward us. We seek to build confidence and assurance in people who were formerly beaten down by life and powerless because He enabled us to “stand on our own feet and look God in the eye”! So, both made whole by God and sent forth by God to work for the wholeness of the world, we make our boast, not in and for ourselves, but in the Lord. For “let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (vs. 31)!

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