

Christian Platonism

Rediscovering Ancient Wisdom

St. Augustine on the Esoteric Meaning of the Beatitudes

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Whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock. (Mat 7:24)

THE THEME of Jesus' teachings in the Gospels is the *kingdom of heaven*. This *kingdom* is not of this world (John 18:36; cf. Luke 17:21), but is within. Nowhere is the message of the kingdom, and its role in attaining to holy, happy and blessed living, presented more directly than in the Sermon on the Mount, of which the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–10) are the essence. The Beatitudes are one of the great prayers of the Christian tradition. Unfortunately they are too often regarded as mere platitudes, or else as moral commands to change the exterior world by promoting social justice, peace and so on. But while things like social justice are undeniably important, the Beatitudes seek something greater still: the union of the individual soul with God, which is the essence of beatitude and the purpose of true religion.

St. Augustine — always mindful in his writings of the soul's journey to God — supplies a beautiful and insightful commentary on the interior meaning of the Beatitudes in Book 1 of his *Commentary on Matthew*, shown below. The translation here is that of Jepson (1948).



Matthew 5

- [3] *Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*
- [4] *Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.*
- [5] *Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.*
- [6] *Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.*
- [7] *Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.*
- [8] *Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.*
- [9] *Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.*
- [10] *Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

CHAPTER 1

The Sermon on the Mount is the perfect pattern of the Christian life. The poor in spirit. [Note 1]

3. Now, what does He say? *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* We read in the Scriptures concerning the craving for temporal things: *All is vanity and presumption of spirit.* [Qoh 1:14; LXX]. Presumption of spirit means boldness and haughtiness. In common parlance, too, the haughty are said to have "high spirits"; and rightly, since spirit is also called "wind." Whence it is written: *Fire, hail, snow, ice, stormy wind.* [Psa 148:8] And who has not heard the haughty spoken of as "inflated," blown up, as it were, with wind? So, too, the expression of the Apostle: *Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth.* [1 Cor 8.1] For this reason the poor in spirit are rightly understood here as the humble and those who fear God, that is, those who do not have an inflated spirit. And there could be no more felicitous beginning of blessedness, whose ultimate goal is perfect wisdom: *The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.* [Pro 1:7; cf. Sir 1: 14; Psa 110:11] Whereas, on the contrary, we have the attribution: *The beginning of all sin is pride.* [Sir 10:13] Let, therefore, the haughty seek and love the kingdom of the earth; but *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

CHAPTER 2

The other Beatitudes.

4. *Blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the land by inheritance.* [Notes 2, 3] The land I take in the sense of the Psalm: *Thou art my hope, my portion in the land of the living.* [Psa 142:5] It stands for something solid, the stability of an undying inheritance, where the soul in a state of well-being rests as in its natural environment, as the body does on earth; and thence draws its food, as the body from the earth. This is the life and rest of the Saints. The meek are those who yield before outbursts of wickedness and do not resist evil, but overcome evil with good. [Cf. Rom 12:21] Therefore let those who are not meek struggle and contend for earthly and temporal things; but *blessed are the meek, for they shall possess the land by inheritance* from which they cannot be expelled.

5. *Blessed are the mourners, for they shall be comforted.* Mourning is sadness for the loss of dear ones. But when people turn to God, they dismiss what they cherished as dear in this world; for they do not find joy in those things which before rejoiced them; and until there comes about in them the love for what is

eternal, they feel the sting of sadness over a number of things. They, therefore, will be comforted by the Holy Spirit, who especially for this reason is named the Paraclete, that is, the Consoler, that disregarding the temporal they may enjoy eternal happiness.

6. *Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice, for they shall have their fill.* Here He means those who love the true and unshakable good. The food with which they will be filled is the food that the Lord Himself mentions: *My meat is to do the will of my Father*, [John 4:34] which is righteousness; and the water, of which whoso shall drink, as He Himself says, *it shall become in him a fountain of water springing up into life everlasting.* [John 4:14]

7. *Blessed are the merciful*, for mercy shall be shown them. He pronounces them blessed who come to the aid of the needy, since it is paid back to them so that they are freed from distress.

8. *Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God.* How senseless, therefore, are they who look for God with bodily eyes, since He is seen by the heart, as elsewhere it is written: *And seek Him in simplicity of heart.* [Wis 1.1] For this is a clean heart, one that is a simple heart; and as the light of this world cannot be seen save with sound eyes, so God cannot be seen unless that is sound by which He can be seen.

9. *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.* Perfection lies in peace, where nothing is at war; and the children of God are peaceful for the reason that no resistance to God is present, and surely children ought to bear a likeness to their father. And they are at peace with themselves who quell all the emotions of their soul and subject them to reason, that is, to the mind and spirit, and have their carnal passions well under control; these make up the kingdom of God. In this kingdom everything is in such perfect order that the noblest and most excellent elements in man control without opposition the other elements which are common to us and animals. Moreover, what is most distinguished in man—mind and reason—is subject to a higher being, which is Truth itself, the only-begotten Son of God; for it cannot control the lower unless it puts itself in subjection to its superior. And this is the peace which is given on earth to men of good will; [cf. Luke 2:14] this is the life of a man who is rounded out and perfect in wisdom. From a kingdom of this sort enjoying greatest peace and order has been cast out the Prince of this world who lords it over the perverse and disorderly. With this peace set up and established in the soul, whatever onslaughts he who has been cast out makes against it from without, he but increases the glory which is according to God. He weakens nothing in that structure but by the very ineffectiveness of his machinations reveals what strength has grown within. Hence it follows: *Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* [Mat 5:10]

CHAPTER 3

The Beatitudes mark the stages traversed towards perfection.

10. ... [Note 4]

For blessedness starts with humility: *Blessed are the poor in spirit*, that is, those who are not puffed up, whose soul is submissive to divine authority, who stand in dread of punishment after this life despite the seeming blessedness of their earthly life.

The soul next makes itself acquainted with Sacred Scripture according to which it must show itself meek through piety, so that it may not make bold to censure what appears a stumbling block to the uninstructed and become intractable by obstinate argumentation.

The soul now begins to realize what a hold the world has on it through the habits and sins of the flesh. In this third step, then, wherein is knowledge, there is grief for the loss of the highest good through clinging to the lowest.

In the fourth step there is hard work. The soul puts forth a tremendous effort to wrench itself from the pernicious delights which bind it. Here there must be hunger and thirst for righteousness, and there is great need for fortitude, for not without pain is the heart severed from its delights.

At the fifth step it is suggested to those who are continuing their energetic efforts how they may be helped to master their situation. For unless one is helped by a superior power, he is incapable of freeing himself by his own efforts from the bonds of misery which encompass him. The suggestion given is a just proposition: If one wishes to be helped by a more powerful person, let him help someone who is weaker in a field wherein he himself holds an advantage. Hence, *Blessed are the merciful, for mercy will be shown them.*

The sixth step is cleanness of heart from a good consciousness of works well done, enabling the soul to contemplate that supreme good which can be seen only by a mind that is pure and serene.

Finally, the seventh step is wisdom itself, that is, contemplation of the truth, bringing peace to the whole man and effecting a likeness to God; and of this the sum is, *Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.*

The eighth maxim [Note 5] returns, as it were, to the beginning, because it shows and commends what is perfect and complete. Thus, in the first and the eighth the kingdom of heaven is mentioned: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; and, Blessed are they that suffer persecution for justice' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven* — when now it is said: *Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation? or distress? or persecution? or hunger? or nakedness? or danger? or the sword?* [Rom 8:35]

Seven in number, therefore, are the things which lead to perfection. The eighth maxim throws light upon perfection and shows what it consists of, so that, with this maxim beginning again, so to speak, from the first, the two together may serve as steps toward the perfection of the others also.

Notes

1. In paragraphs 1 and 2, omitted here for brevity, Augustine gives a brief introduction. He suggests that the Beatitudes supply a perfect pattern of the Christian life and embrace all the directives we need. Jesus states that those who hear and shape their lives according to his words spoken on the mount are like the man who built his house upon a rock. [Matt. 7:24-27]. Augustine proposes that the reference to Jesus “opening his mouth” [Matt.5:2] implies these are these are His words, i.e., the New Law, whereas previously in His ministry He was wont to open the mouth of the Prophets, i.e., the Old Law.

2. *by inheritance.* These words appear in the Old Latin version of the Gospels that Augustine used at the time of writing this (ca. 394). He didn't routinely use the Vulgate until around 400.

3. He inverts the order of the 2nd and 3rd Beatitudes.

4. We omit a paragraph wherein Augustine remarks on the grammatical difference between seven Beatitudes (Mat. 5: 3–9) and the two further maxims in Mat. 10–11.

5. That is, Mat. 5:10. Again, he considers this verse relevant to the present theme, but not one of the seven Beatitudes themselves.



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