

The secret of becoming a real Christian: reflections on the beatitudes of Christ

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I start with a short anecdote and will end it with a second, somewhat longer story.

The first is about an unbelieving Canadian who could not become a Christian. The second will be about a Buddhist from Nepal who did become a Christian. Apart from Christ's words in Matthew 5:3, these stories will help one to understand the secret of being a Christian; the essence of the Christian; what it really means to be a Christian.

The Canadian gentleman said he would like to be a Christian one day. Upon the question "Why not now?" his reply was: "I cannot, because I am not good enough." This man thought he should *deserve* to become a Christian. He did not know that the grace of God is the secret of the Christian faith. Such a viewpoint is not new. In fact, all non-Christian religions are efforts – in a variety of ways – at *self*-salvation. Matthew 5:3, however, provides a totally different answer.

The grace of God is the secret of the Christian faith.

First a brief look at the Sermon on the mount as a whole, before we focus on Christ's beatitudes.

1. The Sermon on the mount: an overview

Christ's well-known sermon can be divided into two main parts:

- The beatitudes: Matthew 5:3-12
- The rest of the Sermon: Matthew 5:13-7:29

The first part is about *grace* – a gift from God. The second part explains our *duty* – the commandments of God, or the justice of the Kingdom of God. This is the reason why this sermon is on the one hand so wonderful, but on the other hand so unsettling – Christ wants one to be nothing less but perfect!

• The beatitudes: the most astonishing

The introduction to this long sermon (the beatitudes) is the most surprising – not only to the audience then, but also today. Why? Because Christ completely turned around the teaching of his day. He inverted the *ordo salutis*, the way to be saved. No wonder that the last verse (Matt. 7:2, 29) reports as follows on the result of this sermon: "When Christ had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he did not teach as the teachers of the law." What did the teachers of law teach? And how did Christ overturn their views?

• What the teachers of the law taught

In those days the people of Israel were very poor. It is estimated that 70% of them lived below the poverty line. According to the beatitudes, they were also hungry, ill, insulted, oppressed and mourning. All of them longed for a better life. But what did their leaders give them?

The Scribes and Pharisees did not comfort them or helped them, but condemned them, because they did not know the law. They were not good enough – like the Canadian fellow mentioned at the beginning. *First* these poor people had to observe the law – including the about 600

additions to it – *then*, only then will they find salvation and be happy. Salvation, therefore, was not at the *beginning*, but at the *end* of a long, arduous road. Salvation should be worked for, be earned.

- **How Christ inverted their whole scheme**

Christ does not begin by reprimanding and condemning the crowds, but by blessing them. According to Him, salvation is not at the end of an impossibly difficult road, but right at the beginning. Happiness is not rewarded virtue, but an undeserved gift. In other words, no one can enter his kingdom except through the gate of grace. But there are more: once one has received the wonderful gift of grace (the beatitudes), fulfilling the duties (the second part of the Sermon on the mount) become a joy as well.

2. The beatitudes, the introduction to the Sermon on the mount

- **An immense richness**

Because of the unfathomable richness of the beatitudes, I can only provide an introduction to encourage further reflection to understand the nine times “Makarios!” (The Greek word *makarios* indicates happiness in its extreme or ultimate joy, total blessedness.)

- **Four questions**

The following four questions can be asked: *Who* is pronouncing the nine-fold *makarios*? *To whom* is it addressed? *Where* and *when* did it happen? *How* are the beatitudes connected to each other, or *how* are they structured?

After answering these questions, we will have a look at the first beatitude, asking: Who are the poor? And why are they blessed?

- **Who is pronouncing the beatitudes?**

It is Christ himself that is pronouncing the beatitudes and He is speaking here as the King, the King of a kingdom. Central in the

Bible is the idea of the kingdom of God. This concept includes the following aspects: The *fact* that God is King; the *realm* of his kingdom, which includes the entire world; the *citizens/subjects* of his kingdom – we as Christians; and the *blessings* to be enjoyed in his kingdom.

In the beatitudes Christ describes the last two aspects, viz.: The subjects or citizens of his kingdom (or how Christians should look like) are mentioned in the first part of every beatitude. The *blessings* these people enjoy are mentioned in every second part of the beatitudes. For instance, in the first beatitude: They are poor (their character) and to them belong the kingdom (the blessing).

It is important to keep in mind that the beatitudes are not random pronouncements promising all sorts of things to different people. They *all together* give an image of the subjects of God’s kingdom. They describe how one’s life as Christian should look like.

- **To whom are the beatitudes addressed?**

It was not only addressed to a few people, for example Christ’s disciples: they were not saints but ordinary people. It was also addressed to the crowds (Matt. 7:28, 29), people from all walks of life; it was not only intended for Jewish believers, but even foreigners from surrounding pagan countries; it was spoken to people with all kinds of problems, like poverty, suffering from different diseases (physically and mentally), oppressed by their own and foreign rulers, people caught in the cruel grip of the devil. Today it is still addressed to everyone who wants to hear. After 2 000 years the beatitudes have lost nothing of their newness and richness.

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- **Where and when were they proclaimed?**

There are many speculations about the *where*? But it must have been near Capernaum, probably on a small hill (only 319 metres) called today Karn Hattin. A beautiful place with a magnificent view around: To the north one could see Mount Hermon, to the south the heights of Tabor and Carmel, to the east the Lake of Gennesaret, and to the west, far away, the Mediterranean Sea.

Some exegetes believe the beatitudes were proclaimed in springtime. On the hillsides and in the valleys below many flowers were in bloom: tulips, carnations, irises and lillies. It was in the springtime of Christ's public appearance, close to the beginning of his ministry. This is his inaugural sermon. It sets the stage for his whole teaching ministry. It focuses on the essence of the Christian faith, telling one what it really means to be a Christian.

- **How do the beatitudes fit together?**

The beatitudes do not describe different people with different qualities, but the citizens of one kingdom – the people later on called "Christians". This is clear from their structure. They can be divided into the following three parts:

- Firstly, the *heading*, in which the kingdom is promised to the poor (v. 3).
- Secondly, the *body*, in which the character of the poor is described in more detail in their relation to God as sorrowing (v. 4), hungry and thirsty (v. 6), pure of heart (v. 8). Also in their relation to their fellow human beings as gentle (v. 5), compassionate/merciful (v. 7), peacemakers (v. 9).
- Thirdly, a *subscription* (v. 10-12), in which Christ says that the people characterised in verse 4-9 will be persecuted. But even in this they will be blessed – the same promise of the kingdom of the first beatitude is repeated!

One should also be aware of the specific style used in the beatitudes. It is done in the *mashal*-style, which is like a riddle which holds a surprise. After each beatitude one has to wait. For instance, "Blessed are the poor". Wait and ask yourself "How can this be possible?" Then follows the unexpected surprise: "To them belongs the kingdom." This should be done in every beatitude.

With this broad picture of Christ's beatitudes as background, a brief look is taken at the first one: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (v. 3).

3. Who are the poor and why are they blessed?

Two important questions can be asked:

- **Who are the poor?**

This is a very important question. Who is included/excluded? Am I/we included? If "poor in *spirit*" indicates the mentally retarded, then (most of) us are not included. This, however, is not the meaning of the beatitude. Luke's version simply says: "blessed are the poor" without any further qualification. The Greek word for *poor* actually means *beggar* or *poor like a beggar*. As already indicated, most people in those days were dirt poor, living from hand to mouth. One of the reasons was the exploitation by their own rich countrymen as well as the Romans.

It is important to understand that poverty is not merely something material. People who are badly off materially and financially also suffer spiritually. They feel unwanted, rejected, worthless. Perhaps Matthew wants to emphasise these spiritual effects of material poverty. When he, therefore, uses the expression "poor of spirit" he does not *limit* poverty to something spiritual, but he actually *reinforce* the impact of material poverty.

Therefore, in summary, the poor were the materially poor who were vulnerable and unwanted in society. They were nothing in their own eyes, had nothing to be proud of. They were totally dependent on God

alone, expected everything from his grace only.

- **Why are they blessed?**

The astounding answer is that the poor are not poor at all. They are rich – immensely rich! – because “theirs is the kingdom of heaven”. Is this not perhaps opium, a promise in the sky when you die? Does “the kingdom of heaven” indicate that only in the hereafter the poor will be blessed?

No, because this expression only indicates the *origin* of God’s kingdom, not its *place* – here on earth. The expression wants to emphasise that this kingdom is established by God himself, not by human efforts to be good. Therefore it is the only undestructable, eternal kingdom. All other kingdoms come and go. It is also the only kingdom where real full lasting joy can be experienced. This is amazing, real *good news*!

4. What about ourselves?

To apply this fantastic message, we have to ask ourselves: Are we *poor*, or are we *rich*?

- **Are you poor?**

The Gospel in many places warns against wealth, because riches tends to make one feel independent, so independent that you forget your utter dependence on God. You don’t stand in front of God as beggar any more. This is the reason why someone once when reading the beatitudes said that he wished he was poor. Poverty, however, is not enough, because many poor people are not humbled by their poverty, but they rebel against God.

Am I poor? I think I still have a long way to go. I still tend to plan and secure my own life. Daily I have to learn what it means to be totally dependent on God in every aspect of my life.

- **Are you rich?**

Christ’s message is very clear: To become rich, one first have to be poor, dirt poor, aware of the bankruptcy of your own life.

One has to realise that one can in no way save oneself or deserve one’s salvation by being good. This is where the (true) story of the Christian from Katmandu in Nepal has to be told. He became a Christian only thirteen years ago.

When I asked this man why he left his Buddhist faith to accept Jesus Christ as Saviour, he did not hesitate for a moment. He also did not provide a long explanation. He simply said: “Because grace in Christ is free – you don’t have to earn or deserve it.”

As a pagan this man realised that all his meditations, ascetic practices, beautiful prayers, fastings and spiritual knowledge were of no avail. He was humble enough to accept the vanity of his own religious efforts to obtain salvation. He first had to discover his own poverty to see the richness of faith in Christ.

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What makes the Christian faith unique is that it is the only belief where one does not need to earn salvation. In all the other non-Christian religions one has to, in some way or the other, try to save oneself. To this man it was the most wonderful experience of his life to discover the Gospel, real good news, for the first time, after so many efforts of self-salvation.

But he also told me that he could clearly see how Christians in the second and third generation do not realise any more how new and unique their religion really is. Amazement and wonder are disappearing.

Is this not the case also with many people who have grown up as Christians? And, as soon as the absolute amazement

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disappears, the old pagan idea start influencing one's faith again, viz. that one has to earn or deserve salvation. At the same time you lose your humility. That is why John Calvin once said that to be a real Christian requires, in the first place, humility, in the second place: humility, and in the third place: again humility!

- **How to keep and increase one's richness in Christ**

Only when you are really spiritually poor, totally humble, utterly dependent on God, only then can you really be rich, belonging to God's eternal kingdom.

But how can one know that you possess it and how can you keep this great wealth? The answer is simple: When you don't keep it only for yourself, but share it with others. This can be done in a congregation and by way of missions. However, one need not be a minister or an evangelist to share this deepest secret of life. You can do it as a housewife, a farmer, a lecturer, a teacher, a man/woman of business, et cetera.

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5. Conclusion: *sola gratia*

To be a real Christian according to Christ's beatitudes is amazingly simple. It is so simple that small children can understand it. But it can also be too simple for adults to accept it.

One only has to acknowledge that you can do nothing, absolutely nothing, to give meaning to your own life. The only thing one can do is to stretch out your open hands and receive God's grace – his free grace. But then one also have to live according to God's commandments (the second part of the Sermon on the mount) and share your wealth with others.