

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

CARDINAL VIRTUES OR EVANGELS OF A NEW AGE?

MATTHEW 5:1-12

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Analysis by Norbert E. Kabelitz

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

3 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. 8'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11'Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

DIAGNOSIS: The Weakness of Human Interpretation

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Seeing Jesus as a "New Moses"*

The temptation is powerful to interpret Matthew's five teaching sections as a new and more excellent Moses, a definitive Christian Pentateuch, a better Torah. In the light of Moses we are urged to see the beatitudes as a heavenly standard by which the Christian lifestyle is epiphanized. But then we would think of them as a string of virtues that compete with the Decalogue for public display. Thus one "should be merciful," or "one ought to be meek," like Jesus!

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *The Failure of Human Striving*

The motivation proposed by popular preaching of the beatitudes is "strive to be like Jesus." If you do this or become like that you will be blessed (vv. 3-6; see also Rom. 10:5, "the person who does these things will live by them!"). But to encourage a heroic pursuit of righteousness by one's determined will excludes faith and promise. Can we present these beatitudinal conditions as virtues by which we might win the Kingdom? The comfort, the inheritance, the fulfillment? If we see the beatitudes as the Christ-like thing to be and do, we might indeed will to do them, but such striving proves futile since my human possibilities are "sold into slavery under sin (Rom. 7:14-18). And wouldn't it be true for me, then, that whatever does not proceed from faith is sin (Rom 14:23)? Wouldn't "striving for my bliss" in the beatitudes end in dismal failure?

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Christ's Epiphany Is Obscured*

To think of the beatitudes as attainable virtues through which we are "blessed," or enter the Kingdom, ignores the preacher of them; Jesus initiates the blessings to reverse an undesirable condition, not enhance a virtue. Without that we are left "poor in spirit," as mourners, without an inheritance, and unfulfilled. The supposed virtues we sought become a curse because we did not (could not?) see Christ as the giver of a blessing

that overturns and redeems an unhappy condition. So do we view Jesus through a “veil” (2 Cor. 3:14-15)-by a moralistic reading of the beatitudes thinking of them as virtues or Kingdom characteristics? If we do, we are doomed to fail. We become losers on a cosmic scale: “No Kingdom ours remaineth.” Apart from the redemptive connection with Jesus as the Blessing, we miss God’s way of reigning. Jesus is then only a “better Moses,” and we are left with a Christ who cannot save us.

PROGNOSIS: God’s Weakness Is Stronger Than Human Virtues (1 Cor. 1:25b)

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – *Greet the Savior, Face the Judge*

The beatitudes do not affirm poverty, misery, humiliation, or powerlessness (vv. 4-6) as desirable circumstances by which we obtain a blessing. They are undesirable conditions that characterize our life when the good and gracious will of God is not done! They are negative conditions and circumstances where God finds us and from which Christ seeks to deliver. The blessing is God’s redemptive Word that seeks to undo the negative and restore God’s way of reigning, heaven’s will on earth as it is in heaven. The blessing counters cursed situations. “He comes to make His blessings flow far as the curse is found!” Jesus reverses the curse by becoming cursed for us (Gal. 3:13). He endures the negatives of vv. 3-6 and becomes for us an Epiphany of God’s grace through the characteristics of vv. 7-10: mercy, integrity, reconciliation (peacemaker), righteousness (as in making things right again). Or, to say it another way, “He undertakes a great exchange, puts on our human frame, and in return gives us His realm, His glory and His name!” (Lutheran Book of Worship #47, “Let All Together Praise Our God”).

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Gospelled,*

Graced, Gifted, Faithed

When we see the blessing as a primal gift and agent of change rather than as a list of virtues, we hear them as Gospel that generates faith and invites discipleship to participate in, suffer with, and identify with the vision of Jesus; so we seek to bless cursed circumstances in order to redeem them and show how God wills and reigns as a genuine Epiphany in the mission of Jesus.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Disciples of the Kingdom*

Blessed by Christ's redeeming vision, and his deeds on our behalf, we become partners in the redeeming reign and Kingdom of God. God's Epiphany of good will, mercy and grace makes us disciples of mercy, integrity, reconciliation, and makers of what is righteous. The beatitudes, in effect, turn an "upside down world right side up!" (See Mark Allen Powell's *God with Us*, pp. 119-140, Fortress Press, 1995; and Paul Bretscher's "The World Upside Down or Right Side Up?," *Immanuel Curriculum*, Valpo, Ind. 1985).