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# Understanding Jesus' Beatitudes

## SCOTT HOEZEE

The *Sermon on the Mount*, as we find it in Matthew 5, is undoubtedly the most famous sermon in the world, and for all time. Jesus covers a lot of ground in Matthew Chapters 5, 6 and 7, but today on *Groundwork*, we will begin a short series that will examine the way the sermon opens. As many people know, Jesus begins with a series of blessings that we call the *Beatitudes*; but who gets blessed and why? The things Jesus promises to those who are under such blessings are often rather surprising. So, let's dig into the *Beatitudes*. Stay tuned.

## DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we are beginning, with this program, a short, three-part series to look at Matthew 5:1-12, and the blessings Jesus pronounces there. So, in this program, we are going to consider the context and setting of the *Beatitudes*; and then, in the next two episodes, we will go through and ponder each blessing one at a time. And we are happy to be joined in all three of these programs by Dr. Danny Daley. Dr. Daley is an Assistant Professor of New Testament at Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He also recently published a book on the *Beatitudes* titled *Ideal Disciples: A Commentary on Matthew's Beatitudes*.

So, Danny; welcome to *Groundwork*.

## DANNY DALEY

Excellent to be here. I appreciate the invitation; and I am excited about this. Obviously, if I wrote a whole book on the passage, I enjoy talking about it.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

That is what we are counting on; and talk a little bit about what led you to write your commentary. What was kind of the path that got you to start on that book?

## DANNY DALEY

There are two quick things I would say about that. The first is, I had already written another book on Matthew, where I had to deal in that first book quite a bit with one of the beatitudes in particular: Matthew 5:5, that is the third beatitude; and of all the things I talked about in Matthew...and that is quite long book...that was the thing that I enjoyed engaging with the most; and then, because of all the time I spent on it, whenever I had readers of that first book who would comment on it, that was always what they wanted to talk about: What would you say about the other beatitudes? How would you take what you said about this one and expand it to the others? That gave me the idea that I should just then write a book where I could do something like that.

Another little bit more sort of anecdotal reason was my grandfather, who had read my first book, which was very academic, and he called me one day and he said: You know, I read this thing because I love you, but I cannot make heads nor tails of it. Can you write something a bit simpler? And so, the second beatitudes book was also a way to kind of simplify what I was trying to say about them.

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

So, you were able to just bring it into layman's terms for everybody to be able to grasp it and understand the concept behind it?

Danny Daley:

That is the hope. I mean, I do kind of engage with like the Greek text, and I do a few sort of more academic things. I get in the weeds a little bit on the second beatitudes book, but I try to avoid that as much as possible and be as clear as I can because I really do hope that it feeds maybe a wider audience, yes.

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

It's going to be exciting to get into it. Then I think that we need to understand, in this episode, we are going to be thinking about all of the *Beatitudes* as a set, but we are also going to talk about where they come from. So, in this episode, we want to talk about if there were Old Testament or Hebrew Scriptures that count as a forerunner for it, or how does what we know in the Old Testament speak into what Jesus taught in Matthew 5?

## **DANNY DALEY**

That is a great question, because Jesus does actually quote old Jewish scriptures in the *Beatitudes*. So, here is what is really interesting about that. The Jewish scriptures do have beatitudes...actual beatitudes in them. At the very beginning of the Psalms, for example, is a beatitude right out of the gate, and there are several in the Psalms, and there are beatitudes in various places. And then you have a lot of other contexts that are not in beatitudes; so, what Jesus does is he takes beatitudes, which is a known form of speech to them at the time, but when he quotes Jewish scriptures in his own beatitudes, he quotes passages that are not themselves beatitudes in their original context...

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

Okay.

Danny Daley: Right; so, for example, in the *Beatitudes* in Matthew 5, he quotes Isaiah 61 several times, but Isaiah 61 does not have any beatitudes in it. He quotes Psalm 37 very clearly, but he takes something in Psalm 37 that is not a beatitude and turns it into one. So, he takes the form of a beatitude, which would have been familiar to them, and then texts that are not beatitudes, and he takes those and turns them into beatitudes for his own purposes. Beatitudes typically in the Jewish scriptures would have served two purposes: One would have been wisdom teachings, talking about how to live a better life; and some of them are what we might call eschatological promises or future hopes...

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

Yes.

Danny Daley: Like things are not going well for me; what is going to happen to me? And then the beatitude would be a promise from God to say: Hey, don't worry; I've got you...I've got you covered. Things will improve.

Jesus, in his beatitudes in Matthew 5, in my view, actually merges those two things. They are wisdom teachings and they are future hopes all rolled into one.

## **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Very good...interesting. Well, before we go much further, let's actually hear what Jesus said. So, listen to Matthew 5:1-12: Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came with him, <sup>2</sup>and he began to teach them. He said: <sup>3</sup>"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup>Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. <sup>5</sup>Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. <sup>6</sup>Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

## **DARRELL DELANEY**

<sup>7</sup>"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. <sup>8</sup>Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. <sup>9</sup>Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. <sup>10</sup>Blessed are those who are

persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. <sup>11</sup>Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Now, one thing we could note, Darrell and Danny, is that in verse 1 we are told that there are crowds of people surrounding Jesus, but it appears that the disciples are the primary audience, right? So, Jesus turns to the disciples and he taught them. Why might that be significant, Danny, in terms of how we understand, especially the *Beatitudes*, but maybe the whole sermon?

### **DANNY DALEY**

Well, I think both pieces of that are pretty significant. The crowds being there and present and being able to listen in is significant because Matthew treats the crowds like a character group; but the fact that the disciples are the main audience certainly is significant, because what Jesus is doing is telling his disciples: If you want to live a kingdom-oriented life, then this is a bit of what that looks like; and that is what the *Beatitudes*, I think, primarily are meant to convey.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes; and does it also...if we realize that these people had already been called in by grace alone: Follow me. So, it is not as though the *Beatitudes* are entrance requirements for the kingdom. They are already in by grace; this is the kingdom lifestyle.

### **DANNY DALEY**

Right; it is if you are going to live according to the standards of the kingdom; or in other words, if you are going to show the world what the kingdom looks like through the things that you do, the way that you conduct yourself. I think the *Beatitudes* are, as you said, not entrance requirements, but clearly set up as...that is why I called my book *Ideal Disciples*...if you want to show ideal discipleship to the crowds, who are listening in, then this is what you would display to them in terms of sort of a pattern of the way that we live our lives as disciples of the kingdom.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

So, I see two things that are happening: One is that Jesus is setting the standard for: This is what the kingdom is like; and second, you just made it a missional component, because if we live according to the way the kingdom is, then we now have a witness that we showed those watching crowds, right?

### **DANNY DALEY**

Yes.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

And so, I really am appreciating the fact that you brought that up; and also, are there nine beatitudes? Are there nine blessings? I mean, because the word shows up nine times, and I am just trying to get a little clarity around how many beatitudes there are.

### **DANNY DALEY**

Yes; there is a longstanding debate about that because the word that we translate typically in an English Bible as *blessed* is *makarios*, and it does appear nine times. Some would say that there are only eight beatitudes, because if you say that there are eight, then the first four and the second four split pretty cleanly into two stanzas; they even have the exact same number of words...the first four would have thirty-six words and the next four would have thirty-six words; and there is kind of a repetition to them in the way that the structure of them lays out; and then, the ninth one is very long and it feels very irregular; and the eighth and the ninth are the same basic topic. They are both about persecution. Some have tried to argue that the ninth is just a commentary on the eighth and that there are only eight beatitudes. It is probably more right, I think,

to say that there are, in fact, nine. I think the ninth one is just unique enough that it is not necessarily just a commentary on the eighth. I don't think in the end it really matters whether we think there are eight or nine for the way that we interpret the *Beatitudes*, but I think it is probably just a bit more accurate to say there are nine of them here.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Very good. Well, much more to discuss. We are going to keep doing that in a moment, so stay tuned.  
*Segment 2*

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I am Scott Hoezee; and joining us for today's study of Jesus' *Beatitudes* is also Dr. Danny Daley; and Danny and Darrell, let's begin this part of the program by pulling the camera back a bit from the *Beatitudes* in Matthew 5, and let's think about the nature of the entire Gospel of Matthew. Danny, who do we think wrote the gospel, and who do we think the author's primary target reading audience was?

### **DANNY DALEY**

Well, certainly in tradition, there has always been a belief that it was written by the disciple whom we call Matthew. Because that is tradition, I think people have a hard time entertaining the possibility that it might have been written by somebody else; but it is important to note that actually there are no early, early manuscripts that actually attribute it to Matthew. We are not entirely sure exactly who wrote it. I think the best thing we can say with any certainty is that it was almost certainly written by a very early disciple of Jesus who is almost certainly Jewish; and was addressing this text to a fairly Jewish audience; and we can say that with some certainty because, for example, in Mark, when he talks about very Jewish realities. He often has commentary to clarify those things. Matthew has no need to do that. He assumes when he talks about things that are particular to the Jewish culture that his audience is going to pick them up without any problems. So, it might have been written maybe in Antioch in a diaspora community of Jews outside of Judea. Its main goal here would have been probably to convince them that Jesus is the Messiah.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

So, there are some breadcrumbs there. I am glad that you mentioned that. I think that one of the breadcrumbs of his authorship when they start with Abraham as the descendent who everyone comes from...number one. Number two: The Messianic prophecies...

### **DANNY DALEY**

Yes.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

So, it is really interesting that they are understood by the crowd, and they don't go into detail. So, I am glad that you brought that up.

### **DANNY DALEY**

Yes; I mean, if you look at Luke's version of the genealogy of Jesus, he goes all the way back to Adam; it seems a bit more universal, where Matthew roots it in, you know, the very first verse is that it is a record of the beginnings, or genesis of Jesus the Christ, son of David, son of Abraham. He roots it very much into very important Jewish heroes in particular; and the genealogy has that kind of very strong Jewish flavor to it, rather than a more universal ones. So, it seems like that is really his aim.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

Maybe as part of seeing what Matthew does with the *Beatitudes*, and what makes Matthew more distinctive, we could look at a parallel version of these blessings from Luke 6. Luke places Jesus, not on a mountain but on a plain, and he includes some things Matthew's Jesus does not have. So, let's listen. This is Luke 6 at verse 20: Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. <sup>21</sup>Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. <sup>22</sup>Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man."

## DARRELL DELANEY

<sup>23</sup>"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. <sup>24</sup>But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. <sup>25</sup>Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. <sup>26</sup>Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets."

So, we see here, just like we saw in the *Gospel of Matthew*, that Jesus is talking to the disciples, but everybody happens to be listening. It is kind of like when Scott and I...I know he has done weddings; I have done weddings; we are talking to the bride and groom, but just the party and everyone else who is listening within earshot, hear the gospel message as well. So, I think that Matthew and Luke both show Jesus doing that.

## DANNY DALEY

Yes, absolutely.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we said in the first part of this program that it is your belief, Danny, that Matthew has nine beatitudes. Luke only has four; but when you look between Matthew 5 and Luke 6, Danny, what else kind of jumps out at you by compare and contrast?

## DANNY DALEY

There are a couple of really important differences. The first is that Luke's are addressed to the second person plural: You, meaning the people whom he is speaking directly to. It seems to be more poignantly directed to that group. You know: Blessed are *you* who are poor. Matthew instead has it in the third person plural. So, it is more of whoever: Whoever is poor in spirit...I always refer to Matthew's beatitudes as the whosoever beatitudes: Whosoever finds himself in this position. So, he is speaking to the disciples, but the crowds might be among that *whosoever*. He hears and thinks: Oh, that is me as well; I am in this position, or I want to be in this position, or whatever. So, that is one important detail is that Matthew seems to be more of an invitational beatitude as opposed to poignantly directed at one group.

The other important thing, though, is that Luke, for example, talks about the poor, where Matthew uses the same sort of idea...the poor...though in Matthew it is *ptochoi*, the Greek word for poor, but he adds: *in spirit*. There is a bit of a debate about whether what Luke is doing has more sort of boots on the ground, economic, financial, physical realities behind it—genuine economic poverty. Matthew seems to make several different linguistic moves to internalize it and turn it towards the heart. The Beatitudes seem to be focused more on an internal condition rather than an outward condition or manifestation of genuine economic poverty and the like, which fits their gospels really, really well. I mean, Luke is very concerned with actual economic poverty, and Matthew shows very little concern for that at all, actually; and so, the little shifts...the linguistic shifts...seem to serve their gospel purposes pretty well.

## SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the things that leaps out at you when you look at Luke 6 as opposed to Matthew 5, is that Luke has something Matthew doesn't have any of, and that is the corresponding set of woes: Woe to you who are rich; woe to you who are well-fed; woe to you who laugh; woe to you when everyone speaks well of you.

Matthew does not have that in the Beatitudes, but in your book, Danny, you think Matthew still has that. Tell us how you worked that out.

### **DANNY DALEY**

Yes; so, they are there, but he moved them...separated the woes from the beatitudes by a considerable distance, because in Matthew 5 we have our beatitudes but we don't get the woes until Chapter 23. I do believe very much, and I argue in the book that they still are supposed to correspond to one another, just like they do in Luke. Luke keeps them together. So, in Matthew it is hard to see the correspondence. Another thing that is interesting is that in Luke the woes are directed...although it is the second person plural...to you, they also do feel more general; just anyone who is rich needs to pay attention to this. When Matthew moves them to Chapter 23, they are focused very specifically on the scribes and Pharisees: Woe to you, a particular group of people for particular purposes. If you would line up the beatitudes in Matthew 5 and the woes for the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23, and look at them side by side, you can actually see in many places where they directly contrast one another. It is as if Jesus is using the Beatitudes to say: This is ideal discipleship; and the woes in Matthew 23 to say: This is the opposite of ideal discipleship; and the neutral crowds stand in between those two, and they have to decide which of them they want to be.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

I really thought it was interesting that we are comparing the Matthew version and the Luke version of the beatitudes, and we are trying to figure out... Maybe, Danny, you can help us out with this. Jesus preached some of these parables, and maybe parts of some of them, like multiple times, or is this all kind of one? Because it is different in those gospels in the location and the emphasis. So, how can you help us understand if he preached it over and over, or is this one collection?

### **DANNY DALEY**

Yes; even if you go back to like John Calvin, he had a view that the Sermon on the Mount was probably not actually one sermon that Jesus preached at one time, but it was one of the greatest hits; and all of us who preach know that sometimes you make adjustments to sermons; you preach a similar one at one time or another; you know, we reuse our material that works really, really well. I am sure even Jesus, as the Son of God, had this habit of the greatest hits.

So, really, what we have is these beatitudes came down to the gospel writers through oral tradition. So, there were probably various oral traditions being told about different sermons he preached at different times. To me, the best likely scenario, is that what we really have here is different traditions, but it is also probably the case that the gospel writers took those traditions and chose among them the ones that would fit best in their overall sort of goals and aims for the gospel they were trying to write. Because the ones that Luke features very much fit the overall themes of his entire text; and the ones Matthew features very much fit the themes of his text. So, I also think there is some selective picking and choosing going on by the gospel writers, but it is almost certain, I would think, that Jesus probably taught them in different contexts and in different ways in various, different times.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

Yes; it is beautiful that you would say that so they can emphasize each one of those points. But as we close the program, we want to get into some of the theology of the Beatitudes. So, stay tuned for that.

*Segment 3*

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

I am Scott Hoezee, with Darrell Delaney and Danny Daley, and you are listening to *Groundwork*.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

Well, we have been covering a lot in this program with Dr. Danny, and with Scott here, talking about the *Beatitudes* of Jesus in Matthew 5, and we are going to do that again in the next two episodes; and we just wanted to talk about this word *blessed*. Of course, you said earlier that the word is *makarios*; and so, can you help us understand what that word means, and what some translations have been using along the ages about

the word *makarios*?

### **DANNY DALEY**

Yes; it is a tough question because, of course, like other traditions, we fall so in love with the way a word is translated; especially if you love this passage, you might be quite offended if one of your English bibles one day changed it, even if they had a really good reason for it; but *makarios* does not have to be translated...or *makarioi* in the plural, as it is here...does not have to be translated *blessed*; and actually, in most recent scholarship, most scholars have been arguing that it is probably actually not a very good translation because it is too passive. The reality is, is that what Jesus seems to be doing here is describing to his disciples something about the nature of flourishing within the kingdom of God. So, it is not just if you happen to be these things, you will be blessed by God passively. There is a sense in which you should go out and cultivate these things and become these things in a very real sense. So, some translators have changed it to something like *happy*; and actually, when you find this in other beatitudes in other places in the Bible, where people would notice less, you will see English translations changing it now to *happy* in other passages, but they just do not change it in this one because it would make people upset, I think. Then another possibility is *honorable*. Honorable are those who do these things, or potentially doing well...doing well are those who are poor in spirit. In my translation in my commentary, I chose the word *flourishing*, which I actually got from another scholar named Jonathan Pennington; this idea that if you do these things, you are flourishing according to the standards of the kingdom of God. Those are various possibilities that have been proposed. I actually think *blessed* is one of the least usable in my opinion of the few that I just mentioned. It is not a terrible translation, but I would prefer something less passive.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes, interesting; and you are right. People are so used to *blessed* that they are not going to like it if we change it, but I like what you said there, and *flourishing* makes a lot of sense.

Danny, what are some of the major schools of thought and interpretation of the *Beatitudes* in the history of the Church? What have people thought along the ages?

### **DANNY DALEY**

I identify in the book seven different major interpretation possibilities. I will not go through all of them for time's sake, because only a few of them are really prominent. One of them you mentioned, Scott, earlier here in this episode, the idea that some might be confused and think that these are entrance requirements, but we know that that is not the case because Jesus invites the disciples to follow him *before* he teaches them these things; they have already been invited in, right? So, the idea is not that. So really then, there are two other major possibilities: either that these are sort of future hopes...eschatological reversals you might call them...this idea that we are in a poor condition. You would have to interpret that *poor in spirit* and *mourning* and all these things as negatives. That if we are in these negative conditions, then the second half of the *Beatitudes* are promises for things to get better. Another possibility is actually that instead of seeing them as negatives, but they are positives. You are supposed to do these things—cultivate them. It is good to mourn, and we can talk about that in the next episode, I guess, what that might mean; but if it is that they are *good* things, then it is not that you are in a bad condition, hoping for a reversal. It is that you are going to cultivate and pursue these things, and as you do them...as you flourish according to the kingdom...then the future promises are then afforded to you; or, you know, then those promises are given to those who are flourishing according to the context of the kingdom of God. So really, it all comes down to that: Do you think that the first half of each of these beatitudes refers to positive things like virtues that you should cultivate, or negative things that are unfortunate circumstances that you are hoping God will one day reverse on your behalf? I choose the first of those two scenarios, but those are really the major ways different people have interpreted them.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

I think it is really powerful to note the comparison and contrast that you are saying there. I think also, too, when Jesus is talking about this, the blessings include situations and people that most people would not consider to be *blessed*—the ones who are left out; the ones who are least; and the ones who are lost. But

Jesus promises to include them in inheriting the whole earth; but I want to wonder about what society considers to be “blessed people”, and how Jesus interprets what he says about blessed people, and what you think about that.

### **DANNY DALEY**

Yes; I mean really, it all comes down to how these words function in the rest of the text. I am not really a big fan of what you might call narrative interpretation. So, for me what Jesus means in the *Beatitudes* is sort of unpacked throughout the entire rest of the text. For example, you know, we will get to this in the next episode, but when you look at mourning, we actually see Jesus later in this text doing that. So, if it is such a terrible thing, right...why is Jesus then practicing all of these beatitudes throughout the rest of the gospel? So, really what he is doing is telling his disciples: Here is what it means to flourish; to do these things; and then he goes out and models all of them himself. So, when you do them, you are imitating Christ in doing so, and that to me lends credence to this idea that we are, in fact, supposed to pursue and cultivate them.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

And I think that is, you know, such an important lesson, because, indeed, some of the situations...the states of mind...the states of heart that Jesus talks about here, they are what a lot of people in society would call *losers*, right? Who do we think are blessed? Well, the rich, the powerful, the successful, the movie stars, the big country and western singers...

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

Athletes.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

Yes, athletes, those are the winners, right? So, I think to hear Jesus going to the underside...or what the world regards as the underside of life, to show that it is really where the kingdom is dwelling, and that is really what an ideal disciple looks like, I think that is highly significant; and I think one of the things that we hope will emerge, even from this *Groundwork* series...and I think what you hope, Danny, from your book...is that we can school ourselves to better display these kingdom virtues; this idea of ideal discipleship to the world. When we do that, we can say: Thanks be to God.

### **DARRELL DELANEY**

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Darrell Delaney with Scott Hoezee; and joining us today was Dr. Danny Daley. We hope you will join us again next time as we examine the first four of Jesus' *Beatitudes* in Matthew in more depth, and discuss how we could show up in the Church today doing those things.

Connect with us at [groundworkonline.com](http://groundworkonline.com) and share what *Groundwork* means to you, or to tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

### **SCOTT HOEZEE**

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