

Reflection on the Beatitudes

by Jim Seghers

Christian perfection consists in that love that unites us to God. "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them" (1 Jn 4:16). St. Thomas Aquinas teaches (*Summa Theologica*, II, II, q.24, a.9.) that there are three stages of development through which a soul progresses in sharing the divine life.

The first stage is that of the beginner, called the Purgative Way. In this stage, the primary focus of the beginner is to avoid sin and to resist concupiscence, because sin and concupiscence lead the soul away from God's love and can even kill that life in the soul. For a Biblical understanding of concupiscence read Romans 7:15-23. The second stage is that of proficient, called the Illuminative Way. In this passage, the pursuit is to progress in good. It is, in a sense, a second conversion. The focus of one's mind and heart is becoming more Christlike. "You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self, corrupt and deluded by its lusts, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness" (Eph 4:22). The final stage has as its chief aim and preoccupation union with God. Thus, it is called the Unitive Way. It is the way of childlike abandonment and unreserved love. It is a prelude to the beatific vision. "My desire is to depart [from this earthly life] and be with Christ" (Phil 1:23). The elements of this spiritual development through the three stages of the spiritual life can be seen in the beatitudes.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, the new Moses, perfects the old Mosaic Law and corrects the erroneous interpretations of it. The beatitudes are an abridgment of the whole sermon. They both condense the ideal of the Christian life and show its loftiness.

Jesus' first preaching promised *happiness* and taught the means of obtaining it. Jesus knows that we pursue this end unceasingly. He also understands that we often seek happiness in areas where we only experience wretchedness, loneliness, emptiness, anxiety, depression, unhappiness and despair. To help us keep properly focused, each beatitude ends by directing us toward true and lasting happiness--eternal life with God. In the beatitudes themselves, Jesus unfolds the means of achieving that end. Both the end and the means are contrary to the deceitful wisdom of this world.

The Purgative Way

The beatitudes are listed in an *ascending* order--this the reverse of the order found in the Our Father. The first three beatitudes teach that happiness is found in fleeing from evil and being delivered from sin. Freedom from sin is the primary focus of beginners in the spiritual life. These three beatitudes contrast sharply with the values of the world. The world declares that we achieve happiness in acquiring an abundance of things, of riches and in honors.

On the other hand, Jesus teaches, "Blessed are the *poor in spirit*" (Mt 5:3). Each beatitude possesses degrees of attainment. Thus, as the spiritual life grows, one achieves a deeper

fulfillment of each beatitude. God blesses the poor who accept their lot without murmuring, without impatience and without jealousy, and who place their trust in the Father. God blesses those who have wealth, but who are detached from its allurements. More blessed still are those who make themselves poor by leaving all to follow Jesus. Most blessed are those who are not attached to the goods of the body, or of the spirit, or to honors, or even to their reputation, but who seek only the kingdom of God. Ultimately, the perfection of this beatitude consists in total abandonment and trust in the Father. Jesus gives us the perfect example of this abandonment when he prays in the garden, “not my will but yours be done” (Lk 22:42).

The excessive desire of riches, the opposite of being poor in spirit, divides God’s family. It engenders quarrels. It leads to lawsuits and to violence. Love for riches is frequently the cause of war among nations. Therefore, Jesus teaches: “Blessed are the *meek*” (Mt 5:5). Blessed are those who do not become irritated and impatient with their brothers. Blessed are those who do not seek to take vengeance against their enemies. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Mt 5:44). Blessed are those who do not try to dominate others. “If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Mt 5:39). Blessed are those who do not judge rashly, but who seek in their neighbor a brother to be helped, not a rival to be supplanted. “Learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart” (Mt 11:29).

The world shouts that happiness lies in pleasures. Jesus declares, “Blessed are those who mourn” (Mt 5:4). Blessed are those who, like Lazarus, suffer patiently. Even more blessed are those who weep for their sins. Most blessed are those who weep for love over the goodness of the Savior who died on the cross for his brethren.

In summary, the first three beatitudes instruct us that the happiness for which we long is found in freedom from sin, in poverty accepted for the love of God, in meekness and in the tears of contrition. In contrast the world teaches, “Be a man of action.” Its message is one of pride. It tells us that “we find happiness only if we live and act as we please. “Do not allow yourself to be subject to anyone,” in another false message. The happy man, we are to believe, is the one who imposes his will on others.” In reality it is a message built on a lie and that always leads to unhappiness and death.

The Illuminative Way

“Blessed are those who *hunger and thirst for righteousness*” (Mt 5:6). “Righteousness” or “Justice” as used here refers to rendering to God all that is due him and giving to our brothers all that is due them out of love for God. This is the perfect order of obedience that is inspired by love and which enlarges our hearts. Blessed are those who so desire this justice that they literally thirst for it. Of this thirst Jesus says, “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. For the one who believes in me, as the scripture says, will have rivers of living water flow out of his belly” (Jn 7:37-38).

When sensible enthusiasm falls away, the Holy Spirit strengthens us with the *gift of Fortitude*. We live in a world of contradictions, scandals, hurts, hindrances, and disillusionments. The gift of fortitude prevents us from weakening and becoming disheartened. By his presence the Holy

Spirit develops within us a hunger and thirst for righteousness to such an extent that we can never be satiated in this life, any more than could a miser have enough money. It's a thirst that can only be fully satiated by union with God in the next life. It's a hunger that can only be partially satisfied in this life, even in spiritual goods.

In order to create a balance between this hunger and thirst for justice and what could become a bitter zeal toward the guilty, Jesus adds, "Blessed are the *merciful*" (Mt 5:7). In the person of Jesus, justice and mercy are united. It must be that way with us. We must come to the help of the afflicted as did the good Samaritan. We must have compassion for the sinner. "Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners" (Mt 9:13).

The Holy Spirit gives us the *gift of Counsel* to incline us towards mercy and to make us attentive to the suffering of others. This gift inspires us to find the true remedy, prayer and words that consoles and uplifts even if a gentle but firm reproof is needed. When our behavior is infused by the virtues of righteousness and mercy, together with the gifts of fortitude and counsel, our souls become disposed by the activity of the Holy Spirit to enter into intimacy with God.

These two beatitudes, hunger and thirst for righteousness and mercy, are directed towards our neighbor. They are the beatitudes for a Christian's active life.

The Unitive Way

"Blessed are the *pure in heart*" (Mt 5:8). Notice, Jesus does not say those are blessed who receive a powerful intellect, or who are deemed great and powerful. Rather he says those who are pure in heart will see God. That is because they are a spiritual mirror that reflects the very image of God. This purity of intention is so important that Jesus tells us to pluck out the eye and to cut off the hand that scandalizes us (Mt 5:29). He teaches that "if the eye is single, the whole body is full of light; but if the eye is evil, the whole body will be full of darkness" (Mt 6:22-23).

Purity of heart leads to contemplation. Through the *gift of Understanding* the Holy Spirit gives the soul true sight. It's a sight that sees God in one's neighbor, even persons that seem opposed to God. It enables one to see God in the Sacred Scriptures, in the life of the Church, and in the circumstances of one's own life. Even in trials, the soul is able to see the ways of divine providence and practical applications of the Gospel. Thus, after being flogged, the apostles "rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name" (Acts 5:41).

This contemplation of God leads to fruitfulness. "Blessed are the *peacemakers*" (Mt 5:9). This seventh beatitude brings the radiating peace that corresponds to the *gift of Wisdom*. This gift gives us a taste of the mysteries of salvation by allowing us to see, speak and experience all things in God. The perfection of this beatitude makes us docile to the inspirations of the Holy Spirit and radiates peace—an inner peace that gives the soul a deep inner tranquility, and an exterior calm that touches troubled souls, warms our enemies with love and ends strife with

words of reconciliation. It's a peace that only Jesus gives. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives" (Jn 14:27).

The eighth beatitude is the most perfect of all: "Blessed are those who are *persecuted for righteousness' sake*" (Mt 5:10). This is a totally supernatural beatitude. It embraces every degree of perfection from the person who suffers rejection because he performs a good deed to the person who dies for the faith. It is the most perfect of the beatitudes because it transforms us into the image of Jesus crucified. "Blessed are you when men 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" (Mt 5:11-12).

This transformation goes far beyond simple asceticism or the exercise of the virtues according to our own activity or industry. It is the fruit of a great docility to the graces and the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13). All spiritual growth is the work of grace!

The *Imitation of Christ* provides further insight into what is required to achieve true union with God. "Unless a man be disengaged from all things created, he cannot freely attend to things divine. And this is the reason why there are found so few contemplative persons, because there are few that know how to secure themselves entirely from perishable creatures. For this a great grace is required, such as may elevate the soul, and lift it above itself. And unless a man be elevated in spirit, and free from attachment to all creatures, and wholly united to God, whatever he knows and whatever he has is of no great importance" (Bk. III, chap. 31.).

Epilogue: Peter

In the person of Peter the Gospels show his development through the three stages of the spiritual life. After the miraculous catch of fish Peter is confronted with the knowledge of his sinfulness. "He fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man'" (Lk 5:8)! Peter is a spiritual beginner. He has entered the purgative way.

Peter had a long way to go. Like many beginners who have abandoned sin, he became self confident. Thus, when Jesus tells the apostles of his approaching passion and death, Peter presumes to correct the Master. Jesus "turned and said to Peter, 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'" (Mt 16:23). If sin and attachment to sin is the great struggle of the purgative way, pride and over confidence are the great obstacles of the illuminative way.

Even at the last supper, the apostles were arguing over which of them was the greatest. Thus, it was necessary to give Peter a final warning. "Simon, Simon, listen! Satan has demanded to sift all of you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your own faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Mt 22:31). Peter with his usual impetuosity responds, "Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death" (Mt 22:33)! This led Jesus to utter the prophecy, "I tell you, Peter, the cock will not crow this day, until you have denied three times that you know me" (Mt 22:34).

In the courtyard of the high priest the reality of imperfect love and over confidence came crashing down on Peter. After his three fold denials of his Lord, Luke records: "The Lord turned and looked at Peter" (Lk 22:61). What must have been in that look! "Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he has said to him, 'Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.' And he went out and wept bitterly" (Lk 22:61-62). Peter had entered the illuminative way.

The final scene in this drama is acted out on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias. "Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love [*agapao* - the perfect love of self-abandonment] me more than these?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love [*phileo* - the love of friendship] you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' A second time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love [*agapao*] me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love [*phileo*] you.' Jesus said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him a third time, 'Simon son of John, do you love [*phileo*] me?' Peter felt hurt because he said to him a third time, 'Do you love me?' And he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love [*phileo*] you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep. Very truly, I tell you, when you were younger, you used to fasten your own belt and to go wherever you wished. But when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go' (He said this to indicate the kind of death by which he would glorify God.) After this he said to him, 'Follow me'" (Jn 21:15-19).

Peter has entered the unitive way. He is humble and no longer boastful. There is no more debating about who is the greatest. Peter has surrendered himself to his Lord. He will continue in this union with God until he achieves the full blessing of those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. According to tradition Peter was crucified upside down at his request, because he felt he was not worthy to die like his Lord with whom he had already become one.

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