



# “Blessed Are the Poor in (Holy) Spirit”? (Matthew 5:3)

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I WOULD LOVE TO SPEAK THE LAST WORD ON THE FIRST BEATITUDE. THAT’S JUST ONE of my many vanities, and it may pit me squarely against the beatitude itself. In any case, the first of the beatitudes in Matthew’s Gospel continues to trouble me. Certainly the usual interpretations leave me unsatisfied.

Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens” (Matt 5:3). We all know that Luke reports the saying more simply, “Blessed are you poor!” (Luke 6:20). What is the force of those two little words “in spirit” in Matthew’s version of the saying?

## I. THE USUAL INTERPRETATION: THE PIOUS POOR IN BIBLICAL TRADITION

The prevailing interpretation is that “poor in spirit” means those who are not proud or haughty but are, on the contrary, humble and trusting in God. This interpretation is usually bolstered by references to Hebrew texts (especially Isaiah 61 and a series of passages among the Dead Sea Scrolls) which sing the praises of the *anawim*, those people in Israel who were poor but pious. The letter of James repre-

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*The first beatitude can be translated, “Blessed are those who lack powerful charismatic gifts.” Matthew challenges those who are rich in ecstatic utterance, miracle, and exorcism but poor in righteousness and mercy.*

sents this kind of piety when it speaks of those who are “poor in this world” but “rich in faith” (James 2:5). This interpretation with its various nuances is defended in almost every extant commentary on Matthew.<sup>1</sup>

Mark Allan Powell has recently raised an interesting question. He notes quite correctly that “poor” all by itself, without the addition of “in spirit,” could mean “pious and beloved of God.” So why the extra phrase? He suggests that Matthew did not intend to have Jesus speak a blessing on pious people at all. Quite the contrary. He thinks the beatitude speaks of “dispirited” people, people so badly beaten down by circumstances that they are not pious. They have lost faith and are empty of hope. Jesus promises them surprising reversal of their condition when the kingdom comes. Furthermore, suggests Powell, we should read Matthew’s gospel on the background of “Matthew’s universalism.” He concludes that this first beatitude has in view not the pious in Israel (the *anawim*) but rather “the dispossessed and abandoned people of the world in general.”<sup>2</sup>

## II. AN ALTERNATIVE PROPOSAL: MATTHEW’S STRUGGLE WITH CHRISTIAN INSIDERS

I cite a small part of Powell’s rich essay mostly to indicate that I am not alone in being less than fully satisfied with the traditional interpretation of the first beatitude. Nevertheless, my alternative suggestion is different from Powell’s. What I wish to propose is not completely new. It is based on a reading first defended, as far as I know, by Hans Leisegang back in 1922. In a monograph on the Holy Spirit, Leisegang wrote that the words of the first beatitude would make no sense to anyone coming to them from the realm of ancient hellenistic religiosity.

To possess the fullness of *pneuma* (spirit) and to be rich in *pneuma* was the highest goal of hellenistic religion. It is precisely what the pious sought in asceticism or cult. The *pneuma* was the source of spiritual joy and blessedness. The words of the sermon on the mount, stating that blessedness is to be achieved through poverty of spirit, also stand opposed to passages in early Christian literature which say exactly the opposite and, like hellenistic religion generally, praise the joy and blessedness that come from possession of *pneuma*.

Leisegang cites the *Letter of Barnabas* 19:2, “Be simple of heart and rich in spirit.” He concludes that the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:3 contradict an essential element of hellenistic piety.<sup>3</sup>

In a long essay on *pneuma*, Eduard Schweizer names Leisegang and objects to

<sup>1</sup>In an unusual move Ben Viviano combines the customary modern interpretation (“humility”) with the ancient understanding of St. Jerome (“detachment from wealth, voluntary poverty”) in his commentary on Matthew in the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990). Translations and interpretations vary to a certain extent because (a) we could understand “poor” literally or figuratively; (b) we could take “spirit” to refer to the human spirit or to the divine spirit; and (c) “the spirit” (dative case in Greek) might be taken to mean “with respect to spirit” or “by reason of the spirit.”

<sup>2</sup>Mark Allan Powell, “Matthew’s Beatitudes: Reversals and Rewards of the Kingdom,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58 (1996) 464.

<sup>3</sup>My translation of a passage from Hans Leisegang, *Pneuma Hagion* (Leipzig, 1922) 134. The phrase in *Barnabas* 19:2 has exactly the same form as the first beatitude: “rich in spirit” (πλούσιος τῷ πνεύματι [Barn 19:2])//“poor in spirit” (πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι [Matt 5:3]).

his interpretation. But he does so in a curious way. He contends that "'the poor in spirit' cannot mean those who are poor in the Holy Spirit," and then adds in a footnote, "as the Hellenist would take it." I understand Schweizer to be saying that Leisegang is wrong about the intention of Jesus or Matthew, but at the same time he is admitting that Leisegang is actually right in this: an entire class of ancient readers (namely, hellenists) would have heard the text saying, "Blessed are those who are lacking in the divine Spirit."<sup>4</sup>

Leisegang's interpretation did not make any sense to Schweizer. Nor did it work for C. K. Barrett, who paraphrased Leisegang's proposal this way, "Blessed are those who are poorly endowed with the Holy Spirit." Like Schweizer, Barrett grants the truth of Leisegang's remark that "this astonishing pronouncement is contrary to the general desire which is expressed alike in Hellenistic piety and in all other Christian literature. There the desire is to be rich in the Spirit."

But Barrett continued by saying that a "blessing upon those who possess the Spirit of God in small measure is entirely unprecedented in the NT," and that, therefore, "the obvious conclusion to draw from this is that the saying in question, if it is patient of any other interpretation, simply does not mean what Leisegang says that it means."<sup>5</sup>

I personally think that Barrett and Schweizer have retreated from Leisegang's proposal much too quickly. It makes excellent sense to imagine that Matthew meant to say, "Blessed are the poor in Holy Spirit." Or we might paraphrase the beatitude this way: "Blessed are you even if you are not a person of powerful charismatic endowment."

### III. MATTHEW'S SITUATION: A STRUGGLE WITH OUTSIDERS?

In attempting to sketch a background upon which to understand the first beatitude, I am not thinking in the first place of Jesus sitting on that mountain in Galilee in the opening days of his earthly ministry. Instead, I ask what is happening in Matthew's time and place. What is going on in Matthew's environment, moving him to report Jesus' beatitude in this particular wording?

The usual interpretation of the beatitude rests on the view that Matthew's Gospel reflects a late-first-century situation marked primarily by a struggle between insiders and outsiders, between "church" and "synagogue."

Understood on that background, the first beatitude is a piece of sharp polemic against Jewish thinking and behavior. It indicates, we are often told, that Matthew is offering an interiorized, spiritualized interpretation of the demands of the Torah over against alternative views (more legalistic, literalistic, and external), represented in his narrative by "the hypocrites" or "Pharisees and Sadducees." The latter, we are assured, are transparencies for the leaders of the synagogue in Matthew's own time and place, near the end of the first century somewhere in the vicinity of Syrian Antioch.

<sup>4</sup>"Pneuma," in G. Kittel and G. Friedrich, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 6:401.

<sup>5</sup>C. K. Barrett, *The Holy Spirit and the Gospel Tradition* (London: SPCK, 1966) 134.

## IV. OR IS MATTHEW STRUGGLING WITH FELLOW INSIDERS?

Largely overlooked in discussions of Matthew's situation are passages indicating that Matthew cast a critical eye on the behavior of leaders inside the young Christian movement. He struggled specifically against charismatically endowed Christian leaders disturbing the community. Two passages in particular stand out: Matt 7:15-23 and 24:10-12. To me these two passages, more than any others in Matthew's Gospel, disclose the situation confronting Matthew. I find them to be enormously revealing.

1. *Matthew 7:15-23*

Matthew reports Jesus as opening and closing the sermon on the mount with statements setting into opposition (a) possession of the spirit and (b) doing righteousness. The sermon begins with our strange beatitude, blessing the "poor in spirit," and it comes full circle when it climaxes in an astonishing renunciation of "spirit-rich" leaders. Jesus warns at the end of the sermon, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of the heavens." What counts is not mere mouthing of his correct title ("Lord") but "doing the heavenly father's will" (7:21). Jesus continues, "On that day (the day of judgment) many will say to me, 'Didn't we prophesy in your name? Didn't we cast out demons in your name? Didn't we do many miracles in your name?'" (7:22).

The fact that these powerful prophetic personalities (7:15) call Jesus "Lord" and have acted "in his name" (three times in v. 22) means that they are Christian insiders not outsiders. They are power-filled Christian leaders who point to their spiritual achievements as they plead their case with Jesus on the last day. They assume that they must be acceptable to the Judge of the universe on the basis of their spiritual works: prophecy, exorcism, miracles.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of their spiritual wealth, Jesus rejects them. Why? They may have been rich in spiritual endowments and works, but they were poor in deeds of righteousness. Jesus calls them "workers of lawlessness" (*ἀνομία*, 7:23). "Lawlessness" is a Matthean word which means "carelessness about God's will." It is the opposite of "righteousness."

Back to the beginning of the sermon. It opens with two stanzas of four beatitudes each. The first stanza begins by promising the kingdom of the heavens (denied to the spirit-rich prophets of 7:15-23) to the "poor in spirit" (5:3), and the stanza closes not with a blessing on spiritually poor people seeking to be spiritually rich and full but with a beatitude on those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (5:6). They will be filled. The eighth beatitude closes both stanzas by promising the kingdom to those who are "persecuted for the sake of righteousness" (5:10).

So the entire sermon on the mount is bracketed by passages which speak in

<sup>6</sup>Luke has a parallel to this judgment scene, but in his gospel people on the last day do not plead the charismatic triad of Matthew (prophecies, exorcisms and miracles) but a different set of three: "We ate in your presence, drank in your presence, and you taught in our streets" (Luke 13:26). Matthew alone has composed a judgment scene exposing the futility of spiritual riches in the absence of doing the will of God.

oddly negative terms about spirit and spiritual powers and in warmly positive terms of "righteousness" (5:6, 10) and "doing the father's will" (7:21) or "doing Jesus' words" (7:26).

## 2. *Jesus' First Public Act*

The sermon on the mount as a whole is a major clue to Matthew's situation. It holds a strategic position in Matthew's Gospel. Comparing it with the accounts standing in the same relative position in Mark and Luke reveals striking differences and similarities. Here is a sketch of the narrative sequence of all three synoptics.

1. Baptized by John	Mark 1:9-11	Luke 3:19-21	Matt 3:13-17
2. Tempted in the wilderness	Mark 1:12-13	Luke 4:1-13	Matt 4:1-11
3. Calling disciples	Mark 1:16-20	[Luke 5:1-11]	Matt 4:18-22
4. Out into the public arena	Mark 1:21-28	Luke 4:14-30	Matt 5-7

After his baptism and temptation (and call of disciples in Mark and Matthew), Jesus moves out into the public for the first time. As that happens, each evangelist offers a carefully crafted scene that serves as a graphic introduction to the ensuing ministry of Jesus. This first public action in each gospel is programmatic and reveals what we may expect from this Jesus.

Mark and Luke report teaching by Jesus in a synagogue (Capernaum according to Mark, Nazareth according to Luke). Mark, twice in his account (1:21-28), says that the people in the synagogue expressed astonishment at Jesus' teaching. They found it "new" and "exceedingly authoritative." We expect a sample of that teaching. Instead Mark tells how Jesus in the synagogue cast a demon out of a man with an unclean spirit. Jesus' first "teaching" in Mark turns out to be an exorcism! So Mark portrays Jesus, filled with the Holy Spirit, casting out a demon and moving forward into the gospel as "the exorcist of the universe," the one who has come to sweep the world clean of demons by means of his power and his cross.

In the great inaugural scene in Luke's Gospel (4:14-20) Jesus reminds his synagogue audience that he is Spirit-filled and Spirit-led: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me!" And by means of a quotation from Isaiah we hear that the Spirit-led ministry of Jesus will mean good news to the poor, release for captives, recovery of sight for the blind, and relief for the oppressed. The benefits flowing from God through Jesus are not to be confined to Jews meeting in synagogues. Jesus speaks of how God blessed the (pagan) widow of Zarephath and the Syrian general Naaman in the days of Elijah and Elisha. The people of the synagogue turned against Jesus for suggesting that the holy powers in him were to benefit people beyond their gathering, beyond their town, beyond their people. This first public appearance of Jesus in Luke's Gospel thus prepares us for the whole story of Luke-Acts, from Jerusalem and Judea to Samaria and all the way to Rome.

Like Mark and Luke, Matthew also opens his narrative of the public ministry of Jesus with a teaching scene. But in Matthew, Jesus does not enter a synagogue and take his seat among Jewish men. He ascends a mountain and sits out in the

open air, surrounded by a great international throng consisting of men and women, Jews and Gentiles. (Matthew 4:24-5:1).

Unlike Mark and Luke, Matthew does not introduce Jesus as an exorcist or spirit-filled prophet in the tradition of Elijah and Elisha. Matthew does not travel the same path as Mark or Luke, because he is having problems with Christian prophets and exorcists and miracle-workers. Beginning the way Mark and Luke did would have undermined his case. Matthew's Jesus is, of course, conceived by the Spirit and baptized with the Spirit, but the fruit of the Spirit in Matthew is righteousness and *agape*.

### 3. Matthew 24-25

Passages from Jesus' fifth and final discourse (Matthew 24-25) confirm the picture of a community disturbed by spirit-rich Christian leaders who neglect *agape* and righteousness, so that lawlessness increases.

In composing his version of Jesus' apocalyptic discourse (Matthew 24-25) Matthew has replaced Markan sayings about persecution at the hands of synagogue leaders (Mark 13:9) with gloomy predictions about trouble inside the Christian community as it moves out into the wider gentile world. How bad will it get as the end approaches? Disciples will be hated by all the nations; many disciples will stumble and fall; disciples will betray one another and even hate one another. In those days "many false prophets (charismatically endowed leaders) will arise" in the community, and they will "lead many astray" (24:11; cf. v. 24). As a result, "lawlessness (*ἀνομία*) will increase and *agape* will cool and decline" (24:12). And this fifth discourse closes, as the first also does, with a great judgment scene. The vision of the sheep and goats (25:31-46), like the judgment scene at the end of the sermon on the mount (7:21-23, 24-27), sings the praises of deeds of *agape* (25:31-46).

## V. MATTHEW, PAUL, AND CHARISMATA

Interpreters often set Matthew and Paul in opposition to one another, as though Paul were the champion of Christian liberty and Matthew the spokesman for retention of the law. Actually they have much in common, and reading Paul can throw light on Matthew's situation. Paul struggled with the issue of spiritual riches and their proper employment, especially in his letters to Corinth. In the opening section of 1 Corinthians, Paul tells his readers, "I thank my God for the grace given to you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were made rich (*ἐπλουτίσθητε*) in him, in all speech (*λόγος*) and in knowledge (*γνώσις*)" (1 Cor 1:4-5). He says that in fact they were "not lacking in any spiritual gift" (v. 7). As Paul continues his letter, he returns to the theme of spiritual riches, but he becomes increasingly critical. He begins to address the Corinthian charismatics with sarcasm: "You are already filled! You are already rich (*ἐπλουτήσατε*)!" (4:8). They were apparently boasting of their charismatic endowments and displaying them as infallible evidence of their intimacy with God. By contrast, Paul described himself as foolish, weak, disreputable, hungry and thirsty, ill-clad, buffeted, and homeless. He comes close to describing his opponents as "rich" in spirit and himself as "poor" in spirit.

Neither Paul nor Matthew wants to throw cold water on the fire of the Holy Spirit, but they do want disciples to test the spirits (1 Thess 5:19-22). And both Paul and Matthew name *agape* as the fruit of the Spirit, sought by God, and as the guiding principle for the use of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 13 and Matt 22:34-40). Paul and Matthew point to issues which engaged the church from the day of Pentecost at least until the time of Montanus in the middle of the second century.<sup>7</sup>

## VI. CHARISMATA AND NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

Sociological studies may help to interpret "the spirits" and to connect their activity to Matthew's concern for "doing the will of God." Sociologists of religion have long observed that the rise of new religious movements is regularly marked by the release of charismatic energy resulting in enthusiastic, ecstatic, and even orgasmic activities. Kenelm Burridge speaks of "uncontrolled weeping, sobbing, wild dancing, writhing, flopping, hysteria, trance, speaking in tongues or shouting obscenities." It is a time, he says, of "anomy" (his word!), of "no obligations," and often of "an orgy of sexual promiscuity." It is a time of social chaos, of throwing off rules and taboos. Burridge describes three periods in the life cycle of a new religion: the time of old religion, the rise of the new religion, the maturation of the new religion. Using the word "rules" as shorthand for entire social systems, he characterizes these three periods as times of old rules, no rules, and new rules.<sup>8</sup>

Paul's comments on Christian behaviors in Thessalonica, Corinth, and Galatia bear witness to his struggles with Judaizers who hanker after "old rules" and with enthusiasts who exhibit "no-rules" behavior. He seeks to move them to an appreciation of the newness of the Spirit together with deep commitment to *agape*,

<sup>7</sup>First John warns, "Do not trust every spirit (=every inspired person) but test the spirits" (1 John 4:1a). John asserts that "many false prophets have gone out into the world" (1 John 4:1b). John distinguishes sharply between the Spirit of God and the spirit of antichrist, between the spirit of truth and the spirit of error or deception. The tests he applies are what we might abstractly call confessional and ethical: Any prophet inspired by God will "confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" and will practice *agape*, as God is *agape* (1 John 4:2-8).

The author of Revelation, himself a seer and prophet, is deeply disturbed by other inspired Christian leaders whom he labels false. He nicknames them "Balaam" (Rev 2:14) and "Jezebel." The latter "calls herself a prophetess" (2:20), but it is clear that John judges her to be a deceiver. So Revelation bears witness to a struggle inside the Christian communities pitting prophet against prophet, spirit-rich leader against spirit-rich leader. Still other New Testament passages could be cited (e.g., 1 Tim 4:1), but these may suffice. The *Didache* (11:7-12) and *Hermas Mandates* (11:7-16), documents dating from a decade or two after the composition of Matthew and Revelation, bear witness to the same kind of struggle. Usually the authors sort out the false from the true prophets by applying some behavioral standard.

<sup>8</sup>The quotations in this and the following paragraph are from Kenelm Burridge, *New Heaven, New Earth: A Study of Millenarian Activities* (New York: Schocken, 1969). Speaking of the three stages of the life of new religions in terms of "rules" rings harshly in a Lutheran ear. Other works offering similar reflections in different language include Anthony Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956) 264-281; Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, ed. Talcott Parsons (New York: The Free Press, 1947) esp. 358-386; Bryan Wilson, *Magic and the Millennium* (London: Heinemann, 1973), and *Religion in Sociological Perspective* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1982), especially the chapter on "The Sociology of Sects," 89-120. Bengt Holmberg casts a critical eye on biblical studies using various sociological models in *Sociology and the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990). Especially relevant is his chapter on "Early Christianity as a Millenarian Sect."

which he calls a “more excellent way,” but which Burridge describes as “new-rules” behavior.

Matthew is regularly described as the evangelist with the most pronounced “conservative” or “old-rules” tilt, the one who leans in the direction of Judaism, portraying Jesus as a new Moses, reintroducing many elements of the law from which, according to Paul, Christians have been liberated. But it makes better sense to see Matthew as closely resembling Paul. Both of them struggle to remain true to the newness of Jesus while rejecting reversion to Judaism (“old rules”) and refusing to equate the sheer energy of charismatic endowments (“no rules”) with the kingdom of God. For Matthew as well as for Paul the fresh energies of the crucified and resurrected Jesus inspire *agape* and righteousness. Both understand Jesus as the bringer of freedom and of what the sociologist describes as “new rules.”

#### VII. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The first beatitude and all of Matthew’s striking formulations concerning inspired Christian figures lead me to question the scenario usually proposed for Matthew’s Gospel. That scenario imagines a rather smug and unified Christian movement speaking across and speaking down to a unified synagogue movement, ancient Christians versus ancient Jews.

But Matthew reveals a Christian movement of deep diversity struggling inwardly for its own soul. Matthew wrestles with the question, “What is the form of life and discipleship to which the resurrected Jesus is calling us?” Matthew answers the question by re-issuing the story of Jesus. The gospel reveals that Matthew (and Matthew’s Jesus) values righteousness and *agape* above charismatic display in exorcism, miracle, and ecstatic utterance. And, what has been asserted but not shown in this study, Matthew (and Matthew’s Jesus) values justice, mercy, and faith or fidelity above sacrifice (9:13; 12:7), above tithe (23:23-24), above the entire web of obligations characteristic of the time of “old rules.”

I hope it is neither silly nor superficial to remark that the Christian movement today, as a whole and even within my own ecclesial body, continues to struggle as did Matthew’s community. What do we owe to God, to church bodies with their rules, to our scriptures and our tradition, to one another, especially to the wayward and the broken, to the non-conforming, and to the strong in our midst who conscientiously disagree with us? We could do much worse than study Matthew’s Gospel together.

Mark Allan Powell offers a paraphrase of the first four beatitudes in his recent article, and I close with my own rather different paraphrase:

“Blessed are those who lack powerful charismatic gifts” (5:3).

“Blessed are those who do not rejoice but mourn at sin in themselves and others” (5:4).

“Blessed are the non-violent who pursue reconciliation and peace in the community” (5:5).

“Blessed are those who work and pray for God’s new world of righteousness” (5:6). ⊕