

Reading the Beatitudes in the Company of Others

*Rebekah Eklund, Associate Professor of Theology
Loyola University Maryland, Baltimore, Maryland*

The Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-12; Luke 6:20-26) have captivated Christians for over two thousand years.¹ They are one of the most preached texts in Christian history. I have spent the past few years reading them in the company of the saints, poring over sermons, treatises, letters, artwork, commentary, and poems on the Beatitudes.² Books on the Beatitudes alone—not to mention the Sermon on the Mount as a whole—could fill a whole library.

Today, though, we tend to dismiss the insights of our past brothers and sisters. It is fairly common to claim that past thinkers got it wrong—that they misunderstood the Beatitudes as “entrance requirements into the kingdom,” when the Beatitudes are really eschatological reversals promised to the last and the lost.³ This view is relatively common in twentieth-century commentaries.

This modern lens proposes that the Beatitudes are either descriptions,

¹ Portions of this essay were delivered in slightly different form to a session of the Theological Interpretation of Scripture section at the Society of Biblical Literature (November, 2019). Other small portions of the essay have been adapted from Rebekah Eklund’s book on the Beatitudes, *The Beatitudes through the Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021), used here with kind permission of the publisher.

² For an example of how artists have illustrated the Beatitudes, see Rebekah Eklund, “The Blessed,” Visual Commentary on Scripture, <http://thevcs.org/blessed>.

³ Robert Guelich, “The Matthean Beatitudes: ‘Entrance Requirements’ or Eschatological Blessing?” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 95 (1976): 415–34. According to Mark Allan Powell, Hans Windisch was the first to call them “entrance requirements for the kingdom of heaven” (in *Der Sinn der Bergpredigt*). See Powell, “Matthew’s Beatitudes: Reversals and Rewards of the Kingdom,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 58 (1996): 470.

or they are commands. Do they describe undesirable conditions that God promises to reverse, or virtuous qualities that God promises to reward? Are they the entrance requirements of the kingdom, or eschatological blessings of the age to come? Usually, commentators narrate the two options as mutually exclusive categories. One must choose. The Beatitudes either prescribe, or they describe. They are a declaration of God's favor for the downtrodden and a promise of God's vindication of them, or they are the qualities to be pursued by all those in the community of faith. They cannot be both. How could they?

It seems sensible to propose that the Beatitudes are one or the other. After all, how could the same statement be both a positive quality to pursue and an undesirable condition to be overturned? How could the same beatitude both describe something and command something? "This is a pine tree" is not the same thing as "Be a pine tree!"

But the more I read my way through the history of interpretation, the more uncomfortable I became with this choice. After all, a beatitude is not merely a statement of fact; it is a value judgment.⁴ A beatitude is more like the declaration "That is poison." This is a description that suggests a certain response, but one that cannot be specified without a context in which that response becomes intelligible. I may respond to that declaration by deciding not to drink something, or by putting a container on a high shelf so my children cannot reach it, or by buying it and bringing it home to put out for the rats in the alley.

A beatitude is less like "This is a pine tree," and more like "That is poison," or perhaps even more like "A pine tree is a good and beautiful thing to be," especially if it is spoken by someone who happens to be a great authority on pine trees. This is a description that invites a response, but one (again) dependent on context: if pine trees are good and beautiful, and I happen to be a pine tree, I may rejoice or take comfort in this. If I am *not* a pine tree, I might wonder what it is about pine trees that makes them good, or perhaps even how I could become like one.

Descriptive and Prescriptive Approaches to the Beatitudes

Over time, I came to believe that the dichotomy between prescriptive and descriptive approaches is ultimately false. One reason for this is that I had trouble recognizing which option premodern readers took. I found myself unable to sort them, neatly, into one category or the other. To be

⁴ Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2017), 49.

sure, premodern readers were more likely to understand the Beatitudes as implicit commands, or as invitations into a good life, but I had a nagging feeling that they would have been, on the whole, bewildered at the description of the Beatitudes as “entrance requirements into the kingdom.”

That led me to examine this dichotomy more deeply. Jonathan Pennington helped me to see that the dichotomy is rooted in part in a disagreement over the genre of a beatitude.⁵ Do the Beatitudes emerge from the Jewish wisdom tradition or the Jewish apocalyptic tradition? If they derive from the wisdom tradition, then they are likely to be prescriptive: to be about wisdom, flourishing, virtues, and the like. If they are rooted in the apocalyptic tradition, then they are descriptive: they are about the dramatic in-breaking of God to bring about the reversal of all the things that cause people to suffer.

Pennington, however, points out that the wisdom and apocalyptic traditions were not cleanly compartmentalized in the Second Temple era but had become “inextricably interwoven.”⁶ If this is true in the context from which the Beatitudes had emerged, it seems likely that this intertwining is also true of the Beatitudes. Simply on the matter of establishing what a beatitude is, then, the dichotomy seems unhelpful. Furthermore, it tends to lead to certain problems.

For example, one of the functions of the prescriptive/descriptive dichotomy is to drive a wedge between Matthew and Luke. Viewing the Beatitudes only through a descriptive lens works well for Luke’s version, in which Jesus blesses the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the despised. This approach is less helpful for the beatitudes that occur only in Matthew, especially the merciful, the pure in heart, and the peacemakers. It’s hard to see how being merciful is an undesirable quality that will be reversed at the eschaton. This results in what initially looks like a clear division of labor: Luke’s beatitudes are descriptive, and Matthew’s are prescriptive.

A more complex option is to see Matthew’s first four beatitudes as descriptive and his second four as prescriptive, as when George Hunsinger writes that the first four describe “the needy,” and the second four “the faithful.”⁷ Hunsinger could be taking a cue from John Calvin, for whom the first four beatitudes are inward-looking (concerning one’s

⁵ Ibid., 43–54.

⁶ Ibid., 63.

⁷ George Hunsinger, *The Beatitudes* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2015), 1–3, 59–60.

relation to God), whereas the second four are outward-looking (concerning one's relation to neighbors). This two-part division mirrors Calvin's understanding (itself inherited from a longstanding Christian tradition) that the first "tablet" of the Ten Commandments (i.e., the first five commandments) relates to the love of God, and the second "tablet" (i.e., the second five commandments) relates to love of the neighbor. The first four beatitudes (the first stanza) are like the first tablet of the ten commandments; the second stanza is like the second tablet.⁸

In modern commentaries, however, the judgment that Luke's beatitudes are descriptive (whereas Matthew's unique beatitudes are prescriptive) is often related to another historical judgment, one about which beatitudes are more "original"—that is, which are closer to the teachings of Jesus, and which have been added or altered by one of the evangelists. The majority opinion of modern scholarship proposes that Jesus originally pronounced three or four beatitudes (blessings for the poor, the weeping, the hungry, and perhaps the hated), which represented hope in God's apocalyptic reversal on behalf of the suffering, whereas Matthew "spiritualized" and "ethicized" these more concrete blessings.⁹ This, of course, values one side of the dichotomy over the other: the original beatitudes (as spoken by Jesus) really were (or are) descriptive, and it was only later redaction that modified them to be prescriptive.

This is, at the least, a historical judgment that is open for debate. There are other possible ways to understand the relationship between the two versions. Premodern scholars sometimes agreed with the modern view that Matthew added the words "in spirit" to Jesus's blessing on the poor, but they proposed that Matthew did so in order to clarify the meaning of the beatitude. A few modern scholars, like Mark Goodacre, point out that it is just as plausible to say that Luke has "concretized" the original blessing on the poor in spirit, in accord with his repeated emphasis on God's good news for the poor and the coming reversal of the rich and powerful (Luke 1:46–55; Luke 4:16–19).¹⁰

In my view, none of these judgments should be allowed to determine the "meaning" of the Beatitudes, because they are only good guesses,

⁸ John Calvin, *Sermons on the Beatitudes: Five Sermons from the Gospel Harmony, Delivered in Geneva in 1560* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), 133, 247–49. Martin Luther offers a similar account of the Matthean beatitudes in Luther, *The Sermon on the Mount*, vol. 21 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), 45.

⁹ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew 1–7*, Hermeneia, trans. James E. Crouch (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress: 2007), 190, 199.

¹⁰ Mark Goodacre, *The Case Against Q: Studies in Markan Priority and the Synoptic Problem* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity, 2002), 133–51.

impossible to verify with complete confidence one way or the other. Equally tenuous are reconstructions of a possible “original” text, whether that be the hypothetical text of Q or the authentic words spoken by the Jesus of history.

Instead, the value of these judgments is to draw our attention to the way the words run in Matthew and in Luke—and thus to the wider contexts of the two Gospels as the contexts in which the Beatitudes are set.¹¹ If meaning derives in part from context, and these two versions of the Beatitudes have been deliberately placed within a certain context and narrative flow (two things I assume to be true), then we might begin an exploration of how the Beatitudes function first of all in their respective narrative settings. One result of this attention to the wider context of the two Gospels is that it complicates the neat division of labor proposed between Luke’s descriptive beatitudes and Matthew’s prescriptive ones.

In Luke’s Gospel, which modern scholars often see as more focused on material poverty, “the poor” is not merely a material category but has spiritual overtones.¹² Mary’s song of reversal places the poor and hungry in parallel with “those who fear [God]”; their opposites are the powerful and the proud, who do not. The poor widow gives generously to God, while the scribes devour her house (Luke 20:47-21:4). The rich fool stores up treasures for himself but fails to be “rich toward God” (Luke 12:16–21). Another wealthy man will not follow Jesus because he cannot renounce his riches (Luke 18:18–25).

Likewise in Matthew the same audience who is told that poverty of spirit is blessed are also told that they cannot serve God and wealth (Matt 6:24), and that it’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt 19:24). For both evangelists, the blurred line between spiritual and material—between poverty and humility—by implication blurs the line between prescriptive and descriptive approaches.

This brings me to an additional problem with the dichotomy, which is that it assumes the text means one thing—the Beatitudes mean *this*, or they mean *that*—always and for everyone. They describe, or they

¹¹ They can, of course, be abstracted from this context and set in a new context—e.g., in liturgy. But if meaning is drawn from context, the Beatitudes’ first context is their setting in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke.

¹² W. D. Davies and Dale C. Allison Jr., *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, International Critical Commentary (London: T&T Clark, 1988), 1:444; see also Herman Hendrickx, *Ministry in Galilee: Luke 3:1-6:49*, vol. 2A of *Third Gospel for the Third World* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1997), 289.

prescribe. (Luke always *only* describes; Matthew always *only* prescribes.) This is what Steve Fowl calls “determinate” interpretation—a mode of interpreting that seeks to bring clarity and closure to a text’s meaning. Fowl argues instead for “underdetermined” meaning: “Underdetermined interpretation is underdetermined only in the sense that it avoids using a theory of meaning to determine interpretation. Underdetermined interpretation recognizes a plurality of interpretative practices and results without necessarily granting epistemological priority to any one of these.”¹³

Like Fowl, I want to make a case against “determinate” interpretation in relation to the Beatitudes, especially in relation to whether we need to choose one side of the prescriptive-descriptive dichotomy over another. To do so, I will explore two main challenges to determinate interpretation through the following claims: 1) Multiple meaning is a feature of the Word through which the Spirit speaks; and 2) Texts do not have meaning in the abstract, but only in contexts in which those meanings become intelligible.

A Text Strangely Open: The Polyvalence of the Biblical Text

Hans Dieter Betz writes, “The interpretation of the church fathers, although imposition, was carefully grafted onto a text that provides points of contact and that seems strangely open to such interpretation.”¹⁴ One might choose to disagree with Betz in his claim that the church fathers always imposed their interpretations on the text, but it made me wonder why the text seems “strangely open” to multiple interpretations. Premodern interpreters assumed that every text contained within it more than one meaning. This comfort with multiple interpretations may have been inherited in part from Jewish reading practices, since rabbinic interpreters also took for granted that “the Torah text contains an infinity of meanings, a plurality of interpretations.”¹⁵ As one rabbi taught, “Just as the hammer breaks up into many sparks, so, too, may one passage give rise to several meanings.”¹⁶

Premodern Christian exegetes, like the rabbis, were not at all distressed by the idea that one passage could mean several things. Instead, they took it for granted that this was a basic property of the sacred text, one derived

¹³ Stephen E. Fowl, *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 10.

¹⁴ Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 108.

¹⁵ Shubert Spero, “Multiplicity of Meaning as a Device in Biblical Narrative,” *Judaism* 34.4 (1985): 463.

¹⁶ *Sanhedrin* 34b; quoted in Spero, “Multiplicity of Meaning,” 463.

from the character of Scripture as a living Word, as a text ultimately authored by God. The Gospel writers likely shared this comfort with multiple meanings. Dale Allison muses, “I have come more and more to think that this sort of nonexclusive interpretation often corresponds to how a text was intended to be heard and was heard from the beginning.”¹⁷

Premodern readers often offer several interpretations of the same beatitude—even readings that appear to stand in some tension with each other. They seemed to find this multiplicity, those tensions, generative rather than troublesome, a signal of the inexhaustible riches of Scripture and its ability to speak anew into new situations. “This can be explained in three ways” is a common refrain in Thomas Aquinas’s commentary on the Gospel of Matthew.

Augustine, for example, wrote a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount in which he connected each beatitude to a petition of the Lord’s Prayer and to a gift of the Holy Spirit (as named in Isaiah 11:2).¹⁸ He finds significance in these matches: this beatitude corresponds with that petition and with that spiritual gift. Yet despite the brilliance and originality of Augustine’s interpretation, he does not seem especially committed to viewing it as the only or even the best way to understand the Beatitudes. Later, Augustine preached a sermon on the Beatitudes without ever mentioning Isaiah or the gifts of the Spirit. He does pair one beatitude with a line from the Lord’s Prayer, but it is a different match from the one he made in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount. He quotes “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10) in relation to the blessing on those who hunger and thirst for justice, rather than his original match: the blessing on those who mourn.¹⁹

This premodern comfort with multiple meanings lingers in some modern writings, especially among preachers (it is, not surprisingly, less common in modern academic scholarship). In the early eighteenth century, Matthew Henry’s influential commentary presented multiple valid meanings for each beatitude (offering an especially complex and multi-layered read of the first beatitude). Billy Graham names five types

¹⁷ Dale Allison, “The History of the Interpretation of Matthew: Lessons Learned,” *In die Skriflig* 49 (2015): 10.

¹⁸ Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord’s Sermon on the Mount: With Seventeen Related Sermons*, Fathers of the Church 11 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 1.4.11–12 and 2.11.38.

¹⁹ Augustine, *Essential Sermons*, The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, ed. Boniface Ramsey, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 2007), 80–81 (Sermon 53A).

of mourning, three kinds of mercy, three varieties of purity, and six types of peacemaking that are all blessed.²⁰

Not only did premodern writers believe that the biblical text contained multiple possible meanings, they assumed that every jot and tittle of the text was bursting with significance. They believed that every word—every word, no matter how small—was a word of life for the church.

The Divine is in the Details

Most modern commentaries briefly note the setting of the Beatitudes in Matt 5:1-2, and they usually explain that the mountain echoes Mt Sinai, which Moses ascended to receive the Ten Commandments. (Unfortunately, this comparison has given rise to some particularly vicious anti-Jewish comparisons throughout history.) Premodern writers noticed this link with Moses, but they went much further in their exploration of the significance of Matthew's introduction to the Beatitudes in these two short verses. Two details captured their attention.

First, in Matt 5:2, Jesus “opened his mouth” (*anoixas to stoma autou*) before he began to speak. This phrase is present in the Greek but is often omitted in modern English translations. (Older English translations like the Geneva Bible and the King James Version retain the phrase despite its apparent redundancy.) For most modern interpreters, it is simply a Semitism: a common idiom borrowed from Hebrew or Aramaic that has no true English equivalent and is therefore left untranslated. Seventeenth-century Puritan preacher Jeremiah Burroughs, on the other hand, devoted one full sermon to Matt 5:1-2 and spent almost a full page meditating on the significance of Christ opening his mouth before he began to speak: he had something weighty to say (as in Job 32:20), and “his mouth was the door” to the rich treasury of his heart.²¹

Long before Burroughs, Hilary of Poitiers mused that Christ “opening his mouth” could indicate that “he had yielded the service of his human mouth over to the movement of the Spirit’s eloquence.” Ambrose of Milan suggested that it pointed to “the opening up of the treasure of the

²⁰ Matthew Henry, “An Exposition of the Old and New Testament,” in vol. 5, *Matthew to John* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d.), n.p. [commentary on Matt 5:1–12]; Billy Graham, *The Secret of Happiness: Jesus’ Teaching on Happiness as Expressed in the Beatitudes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955).

²¹ Jeremiah Burroughs, *The Saints’ Happiness* (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1867; Beaver Falls, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1988, 1992), 7.

wisdom and of the knowledge of God, the unveiling of the sanctuary of His temple.”²²

Second, Jesus *ascended* the mountain (Matt 5:1). On the one hand, this could be an action meant to parallel Moses’s action of going up onto Mt Sinai (Ex 19:20), a detail noticed by premodern and modern writers alike. Among premodern exegetes, an even more common view of the mountain saw it as a symbol of divine, heavenly things; that is, as Jesus ascended, he drew closer to God’s heavenly dwelling place. Upward was literally heavenward. This was true for Chromatius of Aquileia as for Augustine; for Hilary of Poitiers, who claimed that Jesus climbed the mountain in order to “[situate] himself on the height of the Father’s majesty” and to deliver “the precepts of the heavenly life”; and for the author of the *Opus Imperfectum*, who described Christ’s ascent as toward “the height of virtues.”²³ Thomas Aquinas, in his typically multifaceted way, wrote that Christ went up the mountain for no less than five reasons.²⁴

In the Reformation era, Catholic humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam wrote that Jesus climbs up to a higher place in order both to recall Moses’s example and to indicate that he is about to teach “all the things that are exalted and heavenly.”²⁵ The Protestant Reformers followed the premodern impulse to find significance in every detail but tended a bit more toward the practical. Martin Luther found a more practical significance in Jesus’s ascent: to show that preaching should be done in public and not in private.²⁶ John Calvin is among the Reformation-era interpreters who began to reject the allegorical reading of Scripture. He

²² Hilary of Poitiers, *Commentary on Matthew*, Fathers of the Church 125, trans. D. H. Williams (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2012), 59; Ambrose of Milan, *Commentary of Saint Ambrose on the Gospel According to Saint Luke*, trans. Íde M. Ní Riain (Dublin: Halcyon, 2001), 133.

²³ Chromatius of Aquileia, Tractates on Matthew, Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina 9A, Tractatus XVII, I.1–2.; Hilary, *Commentary*, 59; Augustine, *Commentary on the Lord’s Sermon*, 1.1.2; *Incomplete Commentary on Matthew* [Opus Imperfectum], Ancient Christian Texts 1, trans. James A. Kellerman, ed. Thomas C. Oden (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 83.

²⁴ The five reasons were to “show his excellence” (Ps 68:15), the loftiness and perfection of his teaching (Isa 40:9; Ps 36:6), and the loftiness of the church (Isa 2:2); and to correspond to the law of Moses (Exod 19, 24). Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, Chapters 1–12*, Biblical Commentaries 33, trans. Jeremy Holmes (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013), 399 (C.5 L.1).

²⁵ Erasmus of Rotterdam, *Paraphrase on Matthew*, vol. 45 of *Collected Works of Erasmus*, trans. and annot. Dean Simpson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 83.

²⁶ Luther, Sermon on the Mount, 7–8.

²⁷ John Calvin, *A Harmony of the Gospels Matthew, Mark and Luke*, vol. 1, trans.

dismissed the idea that the phrases “he opened his mouth” or “went up to the mountain” are symbolic or have deeper meaning.²⁷ Burroughs wondered if Jesus going up on a mountain was meant to fulfill Scripture (Isa 40:9; Joel 3:18), but ultimately suggested it was probably just for convenience: there were less people there.²⁸

Meaning is a Set of Relations

The second challenge has to do with how texts acquire meaning as particular readers read them. “Meaning,” as my mentor Klyne Snodgrass always insisted, “is a set of relations.” Texts do not mean in the abstract. As Susannah Ticciati writes, “If one is asked, ‘What does this text mean?’ one must ask in turn, ‘mean for whom?’”²⁹ A beatitude might indeed sometimes be prescriptive, and it might sometimes be descriptive—but we cannot decide which it is in the abstract, without a social context in which that judgment might become intelligible.

Another scholar who helped me to see this is Dale Allison. When Allison writes about the lessons he learned from studying the reception history of Matthew, he says: “... when I studied the debate as to whether the beatitudes in Matthew 5 are implicit imperatives and so moral ... or whether they are promissory and conciliatory ... I saw no need to make a choice. Why not both at the same time, or one or the other depending upon a hearer’s immediate circumstances?”³⁰

The blessings on the hungry or the merciful might function as a message of hope, a declaration of God’s favor, a warning, or an invitation to perform a certain action—depending on whether the hearers are hungry or full, merciful or merciless.

I want to be clear: I’m not proposing that texts mean whatever the reader brings to them. Texts can’t mean *anything*. My context does not fully determine the function of the Beatitudes any more than my particular location in time and space determines the meaning of the words “That is poison” when someone utters them to me. That phrase does not turn into “Puppies like to chase balls,” no matter what the context is. I take it this is more or less what Allison means when he writes that

A. W. Morrison, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1972), 168.

²⁸ Burroughs, *Saints’ Happiness*, 4.

²⁹ Susannah Ticciati, “Response to Walter Moberly’s ‘Theological Thinking and the Reading of Scripture,’” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 10 (2016): 117–23, 118.

³⁰ Allison, “History,” 9.

³¹ Dale Allison, *Studies in Matthew: Interpretation Past and Present* (Grand Rapids,

“the plain sense of a text usually guarantees some stability of meaning across the centuries.”³¹

As Sandra Schneiders claims, “Although there is potentially an unlimited number of valid interpretations for a given text, not all interpretations are valid, and some valid interpretations are better than others.”³² But where do these boundaries lie? How do we judge whether an interpretation is valid or invalid, better or worse?

One possible guiding factor is the wider context of the two Gospels, which we have already seen might point us in a certain direction. One typical guardrail for theological interpretation is the witness of the canon of Scripture as a whole. Of course, that witness is enormously complicated, diverse, and in some cases stands in significant tension with itself. Still, I take it as the primary way that God has spoken to us—the foremost of God’s gifts to God’s people that reveals the divine life. Therefore, if an interpretation stands wildly at odds with the tendencies and trajectories of the Old and New Testaments, we should, at the least, pause and wonder why. Tendencies and trajectories can be challenged, but only with great care.³³

Another common approach is Augustine’s suggestion that any interpretation that does not lead to the greater love of God and neighbor is not a proper interpretation: “Whoever, then, thinks that he understands the Holy Scriptures, or any part of them, but puts such an interpretation upon them as does not tend to build up this twofold love of God and our neighbor, does not yet understand them as he ought.”³⁴ So we might measure an interpretation by its fruitfulness—that is, by its ability to produce the good fruit of the two love commandments in the lives of those who seek to shape their lives around that interpretation.

MI: Baker, 2005), 62.

³² Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical, 1999), 164.

³³ See, e.g., Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (Harper: San Francisco, 1996), 399; and Luke Timothy Johnson, *Scripture and Discernment: Decision Making in the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1983, 1996).

³⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 1.35.40. Augustine was also concerned about how the author’s intention helped to determine the proper meaning of the text. He continues, “If, on the other hand, a man draws a meaning from them that may be used for the building up of love, even though he does not happen upon the precise meaning which the author whom he reads intended to express in that place, his error is not pernicious, and he is wholly clear from the charge of deception.” Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R. P. H. Green, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1.35.40, 27.

³⁵ John Thompson’s *Reading the Bible with the Dead* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans,

A final guardrail is reading in the company of others. If “meaning” is produced in the interaction between text and reader, then I must read with others so that the text is not held hostage to my own whims—my selfishness, my wounds, my joys. Who challenges my reading? Who shows me that I’m too trapped inside my own horizon to see otherwise? For me, past interpreters have been excellent company—enlivening, passionate, and sometimes completely surprising. They’ve challenged me to examine my own assumptions and biases, to consider and reconsider how I relate to the Beatitudes and indeed to God, to see things I would never have otherwise noticed.³⁵ Present-day interpreters who are not like me (in socioeconomic level, in citizenship, in ethnicity, and so on) have also been important company.

To illustrate this point, allow me to offer two brief examples: one from my study of the Beatitudes’ reception history, and one from my own context.

Dr. Takashi Nagai (1908–1951) was a Japanese Christian who survived the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki. His wife died in the attack. Nagai was also a nuclear physicist and dean of radiology in the medical school of the University of Nagasaki. On November 23, 1945, he gave a funeral address for the 8,000 victims of the atomic bomb who died in Nagasaki that day.³⁶ He later developed his thoughts from the funeral address at greater length in a book called *The Bells of Nagasaki* (a reference to the bells of Urakami Cathedral, which fell silent for months after the attack).

In his book, Nagai quotes the second beatitude: “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matt 5:4). His quotation of the beatitude weaves together many strands of suffering: grief for the 8,000 dead, “whom we deeply mourn”; the shocking suffering imposed by the bomb’s destruction and its aftermath; and the trauma of Japan’s defeat. “We Japanese,” he writes, “a vanquished people, must now walk along a path that is full of pain and suffering.”³⁷ Nagai then makes a riskier move: he narrates Nagasaki as a sacrifice, chosen by God’s providence “as a victim, a pure lamb, to be slaughtered and burned on the altar of

2007); and Bob Ekblad’s *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005) are two good places to start thinking about reading in the company of others, especially others who are unlike us.

³⁶ Takashi Nagai, *The Bells of Nagasaki*, trans. William Johnston (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1984), 106.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 108, 109.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 107.

sacrifice to expiate the sins committed by humanity in the Second World War.”³⁸ For Nagai, it is precisely his city’s status as an innocent victim that creates this painful and powerful resonance. The suffering survivors are the mourners of the beatitude, who continue to “walk this way of expiation,” following in the footsteps of Christ on the way to Calvary.³⁹ Like Christ, they mourn; like Christ, they suffer; like Christ, they were innocent victims who were destroyed—but (also like Christ) they will be comforted.

I reflect on Nagai’s example because it disturbed me (as a non-Japanese person, I would never have connected Nagasaki to an altar of sacrifice), moved me (his book is exceptionally beautiful), and convicted me (the events he recounts are, rightly, painful to read as an American). How does the beatitude function for me as a reader of Nagai’s book? I may mourn, from a distance, for the 8,000 victims, but as an American I must also mourn with repentance for the devastation that my country wreaked on Nagai’s city. Nagai’s use of the beatitude, and my own distance from his context, helped me to see how a beatitude can take root and flower in a particular setting.

Finally, I want to explore briefly what function the first beatitude (Matt 5:3; Luke 6:20, 24) might have in a church in a neighborhood called Pen Lucy, in Baltimore. The neighborhood is about 88 percent Black; median household income is well below average. The church is about 40 percent Black, 40 percent white, and 20 percent the nations (Ethiopian, Brazilian, Sri Lankan, Chinese, and so on).

In my experience, the first thing that would typically happen if one sat down with a group of people in this church to study the Beatitudes is that the two versions in Matthew and Luke would be put into conversation with one another. This will immediately launch an interesting conversation about what poverty is, what poverty of spirit is, whether they are the same thing or different or related, and why Jesus would declare both of these states to be blessed.

The declaration that the poor are blessed takes on a new layer when one is reading that verse in a neighborhood where a significant percentage of the residents live below the poverty line, and when members of the Bible study are struggling to pay their rent on time.

It becomes clear that poverty in and of itself is not a good to be pursued—at least not in this particular context—because one can see close at

³⁹ Ibid., 109.

⁴⁰ Richard Watson, *Exposition of the Gospels of St Matthew and St Mark* (London:

hand the suffering that results, the way it cripples people. It also becomes clear that whatever Jesus means by saying they are blessed because the kingdom of heaven is theirs, this cannot simply mean that they will be rewarded in heaven. I would not dare to look my hungry sister in Christ in the eye and tell her that when she is sitting at the same table as I am.

The person who struggles to pay their rent might talk about whether being poor has made them more poor in spirit, that is, more dependent on God. I might talk about whether my relatively comfortable social status has made it harder for me to depend on God, and how I might be more humble. Those of us who have any income above what we need for food and housing might wrestle together with how much of our wealth we should give to the poor, and the best ways to give. How do we treat the panhandlers and squeegee boys on the street corners? How do we love them as our neighbors?

In this context, the declaration that the poor are blessed is an implied exhortation in much the same way that the preferential option for the poor functions not only as an explanation of God's preferences but also as a job description for the church. If I read the beatitude and am led to believe that I can be as rich as I like, with no obligation to my poor neighbor, I've stepped out of bounds, because my interpretation has turned me away from loving the neighbor who is sitting right across the table from me.

Another place I find myself, in this particular Bible study, is in Luke's *Woe to the rich!* Or to put it another way, I might consider whether I will be on the receiving end of that woe when I balance my checkbook at the end of the month. The beatitude might function to cause me to give more generously, or to wonder whether I am in solidarity with my poor neighbors in Baltimore in any meaningful way. In Augustine's terms, it might press me toward more wholehearted love of God (displacing the stubborn hold the love of mammon has in my heart) and more concrete love of these neighbors here, at this kitchen table and in Pen Lucy.

Conclusion

Now is probably the time to notice, as I have so far ignored, that each beatitude has a second half: the "for"-clause. *For* they will inherit the kingdom of heaven. *For* they will be comforted. Perhaps it is best to call this neither the reversal nor the reward, but the divinely assured result: the meek *shall* inherit the earth, because God's plan cannot be thwarted. But when? The earth remains the inheritance of the short-tempered, the arrogant, and the powerful. The mourn still mourn. We still pray "Your

kingdom come.”

For readers of the Beatitudes throughout history, the “when” is always a matter both of the “now” and the “not yet”—glimmers now, fullness then—or, as one interpreter writes, “Grace here, and glory thereafter.”⁴⁰ The “not yet” does not absolve us of the responsibility to wonder how we might contribute to the glimmers in the now—comforting mourners, showing mercy, making peace.

John Mason, 1833), 68. John Farrer uses a very similar phrase in Farrer, *Sermons on the Mission and Character of Christ, and on the Beatitudes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1804), 252.