

Reading Blessing in the New Testament (Matthew 5:3-11)

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Introduction

There exists a prevalent understanding in which material blessing convey a sense of reward in contemporary Nigerian Christian milieu. Blessing, as salvation in the sense of beholding the beatific vision, remains, for a Christian, the ultimate purpose of existence. That seems so far removed from religion on the ground. Rather a temporal meaning of blessing secured in material wellbeing is pursued with utmost fidelity, which also means that lack of material wellbeing can be conceived as a curse. Similar thought exists in African religious traditions, trends which intertwine with worship in many African Christian worshippers, be they the African Independent Churches, the New Religious Movements or the Mainline Churches. The whole system of the African cult of ancestors aids in the understanding of blessing and curses in that religious tradition. Adherents of African religious traditions expect these worldly blessings; a thought of other-worldly blessing appear non-existent. Indeed, favour from the gods inform, to a large extent, the elaborate purification rites in African indigenous religions.

Such thought, deeply connected to the African worldview, appears to flow into, if not, inform the insistent craving for this-worldly blessing. Blessings have come to represent material interests, wealth, fertility, and other such favourable conditions. In the same vein, an absence of these advantages suggests curses; curses according to blessing seekers cannot be the portion of a good Christian. Hence, blessing seekers traverse distant lands in search of powers that unlock treasures of good fortune or ward off real or imagined extra-terrestrials that could potentially threaten their lives. An unconscionable sense of being blessed, “I must receive my blessing today”, reduces to gibberish the kernel, the centre of importance of The Lord’s Prayer, “Give us this day, our daily bread”

(Matt 6:11, cf. Luke 11:3).¹ In these musings, however, it would be wrong to ignore a hermeneutics of faith and not throw away the baby with the bath water but that would also require another thesis. But the question remains the influence of the Christ-event in the lives of blessing seekers. Put differently, of what benefit is a life in Christ for a Christian?

Theologians across the centuries have written volumes on how a person comes to life in Christ, insights which inform Christian spirituality and teaching. The present concern anchors on blessings in the New Testament and through the lens of the Matthean beatitude. According to the NT, to belong to Christ Jesus, is to be blessed (in Greek, *makarios*, happy). Moreover, the word “happy” or “blessed” can become a synonym for “holy”, suggesting that one gains true happiness (blessedness) by a faithful practice of the beatitudes in daily life.²

This sense of happiness is prominent in the Matthean Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-10) and a Lukan redacted version Luke 6:20b-23 as well as other related text in the NT. The absence of prosperity related ideas in the beatitudes points poignantly to its eschatological appropriation. For persons who chose not to embrace the beatitudes as a pathway of life and chart other forms of relationships, happiness in the sense of blessing may continue to be elusive. Perhaps such indefinability produces the contemporary problem.

With narrative criticism, intertextuality, and cultural hermeneutics as tools, the paper explores appropriate understanding of the concept of blessing that suffuses religious expressions in contemporary Nigerian Christianity. Insights derived from the study contribute to a more robust reading of blessings in the New Testament. An exegetical survey of the Matthean text under study is limited to exploring the term, *makarioi* as it

¹ A concentric structure emerges from the Matthean Lord's Prayer (6:9-13), ABXB¹A¹ in which X element, “Give us this day our daily bread”, is the kernel, the centre of importance. Similarly, the three verses of the Lord's Prayer in Luke (11:2-4), has a ring structure ABA¹ where also B element, “Give us each day our daily bread”, is the kernel as well. The Christian need for any form of blessing is already embedded in the Lord's Prayer.

² See, Francis, Apostolic Exhortations, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate* of the Holy Father Francis on the Call to Holiness in Today's World, No. 64, 19 March 2018.

applies to select verses and does not cover the specific details of the beatitudes. Contextualization of the text follows with a conclusion.

Exegetical Survey of Matt 5:3-12 (Parallel, Luke 6:20b-23)

The Text: Matthew 5:3-10

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure of heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (NRSV).³

Background to the Beatitudes

Located at the beginning of the first of the five discourses of Matthew's Gospel (chapters 5–7, 10, 13, 18, 23–25), the Sermon on the Mount (5–7), begins with the Beatitudes. The beatitudes (Latin, *beatitudo*) are examples of a common form known as *macarisms* found in Egyptian, Greek, and Hebrew literature.⁴ Pieced together from material scattered in Q, Mark, and other material, this formula seems to have belonged to a liturgical context but appears for didactic purposes in literary material.⁵ According to Benedict Viviano, in form, the beatitude is an exclamation

³ All biblical quotations are from the *New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition, Anglicized Text* (Harper Catholic Bibles, 1999).

⁴ Warren Carter, "Beatitudes", David Noel Freedman (ed.), *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 158–159.

⁵ Carter, "Beatitude".

of congratulations that recognizes an existing state of happiness, beginning with the Hebrew noun *ašrê*, or the Greek adjective *makarios*.⁶

The beatitudes represent the core of Jesus' teaching of which subsequent teachings are but explanations. Furthermore, the Matthean beatitudes appear to bear the character of their original social context, a milieu characterized by inter-Jewish conflict as well as instability in first century Palestine. Written about A.D. 80, one can discern from the Gospel the struggles between the Matthean community and the local Jewish communities and leaders. Cast in the role of Moses the Lawgiver, Matthew's Jesus proclaims the message of the kingdom, of liberation, from the Mount to the great crowds, the throng, who followed him from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. In the beatitudes, therefore, the author describes the ideal characteristics of the members of the Matthean community, specifically in terms of blessing, which has roots in the Good News of deliverance proclaimed in Isa 61:1-4 (cf. Luke 4:18-19). Many passages in the Hebrew Scriptures, particularly the Psalms convey the sense of blessing found in the Matthean beatitude.⁷ The NT beatitudes, belonging to both the wisdom (Rom 14:22) and apocalyptic traditions (Rev 19:9; 20:6 22:7), appear in approximately 40 instances in the NT.

Analysis of the Text (Matt 3-10)

Blessed in these verses, translates the Greek *makarioi* (adjective normal nominative masculine plural). Although the term happy is more faithful to the original Greek, the term blessed gains more currency. However, happy closely approximate the sense in which *makarioi* is applied to the Matthean text under review. In addition, blessed may be used to translate the Hebrew *ašrê*, which might also be rendered "happy", and equivalent to the NT *makarios*. The word "happy" and its cognates: satisfied, fortunate, favoured appears usually in the sense of privileged recipient of divine favour, the terms can as well express *makarioi*. But "happy" tends to focus narrowly on emotional well-being, not taking into account that

⁶ Benedict T. Viviano, "The Gospel according to Matthew", Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (eds.), *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Bangalore, India: Theological Publications in India, 1995), 640.

⁷ See, Pss 2:12, 32:2; 40:4; 41:1; 65:4; 84:4-5; 106:3; 112:1; 128:1.

within relationship to God sin is confessed (Psa 32:3-5). Matthew 13:16, for instance, expresses similar meaning: *humōn de makarioi hoi ophthalmoi hoti blepousin...* (But blessed are your eyes, for they see . . .) as well as John 20:29: *makarioi hoi méidontes kai pisteusantes* (Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe). But *makarioi* applied in the beatitudes, means much more than temporal happiness; *makarioi* means a real happiness, durable joy that is not limited to this life but a joy with eschatological significance. It is a cry of joy that signifies the nearness of the kingdom (Cf. Isa 61:1-2), which *makarioi* expresses in the first three beatitudes in Jesus' mission to the needy (the poor, the mourners, the hungry), in Israel and the dawn of a new era of salvation history.⁸

V. 5:3: The classical NT beatitude has three parts: (i.) the adjective “blessed”; (ii.) the identification of the “blessed” person(s) by a descriptive clause or participle; and (iii.) the condition assuring “blessedness”. Thus, for instance, in 5:3, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven;”

- the adjective: blessed
- the identification of the blessed person(s): the poor in spirit (in Luke 6:20b, the poor)
- the condition assuring blessedness: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The poor are blessed not because they are poor, materially or spiritually; common knowledge shows that being poor hardly has positive value. Rather, the happiness of the poor comes from their knowing their dependence, their need of God. Such knowledge of God, regardless of circumstances, assures happiness. Luke's beatitudes (6:20b-23) carry a similar sense of the *makarioi* found in Matthew.

Contextualization

The disproportionate emphasis on blessings, prevalent among some contemporary Nigerian Christians, undervalues the ethics of *metanoia* that is associated with religion and questions the purpose of religion

⁸ Viviano, “The Gospel According to Matthew”, 23.

itself as well. Penitence or spiritual conversation is less cultivated in religious circles. These have given way to self-fulfilment in terms of what material possessions, termed blessings, can be acquired. Today, the rate and volume of blessings that a believer can acquire appear as a primary motivator in becoming a member of one Christian church denomination or another, in a way making religion out of blessings. But much of the blessing sought is consistent with worldly possessions, the blessing of a holy life is hardly pursued neither is a blessing of purposeful service of others. Blessings in material wealth, health, fertility, longevity, land, honour, victory, and power and much more, overwhelmingly define the objects sought, implying this-worldly salvation. Pastoral agents, overwhelmingly, seem not to preach enough sermons on temporal blessings, such as: “you will receive your blessing now!” to which worshippers respond with a thunderous Amen, Amen and several Alleluias. In a sense, blessing seem to be equated with a miracle because many blessing seekers contribute next to nothing towards that for which they desire to possess, a trend which may also lead to untoward behaviour (Cf. James 4:2). The problem of corruption in present-day Nigeria also has links with this form of blessing mindset.

Often times such miracle or magical blessings are expressed in exuberant rhythmic choruses as:

The Lord will bless someone today

The Lord will bless someone today

It may be you

It may be me

It may be someone by your side

Primarily, faith in the God of our Lord Jesus Christ is a blessing. Blessing is applied generally to all those within God’s redemptive covenant, established with Abraham. It does imply therefore, that the blessing sought in the above song may not differ from the one already conferred by the Christian religious faith but rather a blessing pointing towards this-worldly wellbeing. Contemporary events within the local communities support the assertion. Enumerating some excesses would be superfluous, but it suffices to state the need for proper biblical and

theological education for the masses of Christians, who remain locked-down in this-worldly blessing as primary motivator for religious faith.

Arguments that support blessings in the NT as only other-worldly border on naiveté. New Testament blessings also concern this present life as well. The blessings of the present, that is, here and now, represent, in part, a realized eschatology for persons, who profess faith in Christ. Christ's coming into the world is already a *makarios*, a happy event in history of redemption; in other words, a realized eschatology. But future eschatological blessings belong to those who lived the beatitude (Matt 5:3-11). Moreover, a close reading of *makarioi* in Matt 5:3-11 is devoid of this-worldly-related ideas as a source of happiness. Rather what it confers is otherworldly happiness for those who pursue the blessing that God offers, "theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (v. 3), if they accept the Lord's invitation to live simply and to share in the life of those most in need.

To earn the kingdom of heaven, a Christian lives the life lived by the Apostles, and ultimately, configures himself or herself to Jesus, who, though rich, "made himself poor" (2 Cor 8:9).⁹ To be happy is also to be comforted (5:4), to inherit the earth (5:5) and be satisfied, be filled with the good things of God (5:6). To be blessed, that is, truly happy, entails seeing and acting with mercy (5:7). Those who live the beatitude "will see God" (5:80); "they will be called children of God" (5:9); and culminating in "for your reward is great in heaven" (v.11). The tense, almost entirely future, poignantly points to the eschatological perspective of the beatitudes. Indeed, the letters of Paul undoubtedly convey the notion of pursuing eternal happiness even while engaging in this-worldly affairs.

Furthermore, although blessings in the NT, in some way, include this-worldly sense of the word, their thrust remains eschatological and grounded in being blessed in Christ (Eph 1:3), the blessings of Christ include the blessings of forgiveness (Rom 4:7-9); the ability to believe without seeing (John 20:29); as well as the many blessings on martyrs in the Book of Revelation (1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). These blessings derive from the ministry of Jesus, the Christ, particularly the

⁹ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, No. 70.

blessing on the poor, the mourning, and the hungry (Matt 5: 3, 4, 6; cf., Luke 6:20-21). They exemplify Jesus' concern for the poor and maintain a tension between belonging to Jesus, who, through his life, death and resurrection, enables Jew and Gentile alike to inherit the blessings promised through Abraham. The blessings of the Hebrew Scriptures still remain valid for Christians who believe in the blessing God "swore to our ancestor Abraham to grant us" (Luke 1:73). Consequently, New Testament blessings settle the perennial prayer for progeny from many church pulpits across the land, a "blessing of the fruit of the womb", which should rather be termed "a blessing of the seed of the loins", because praying for *the fruit of the womb* places a heavy burden on the female, a unique bearer of a womb. Hence, genealogy becomes less significant for those, who, believing in Christ, have become the "seed" of Abraham, who believed (Gal 3:9). Only the earth-bound would continue to make a religion, *re-ligare* (to bind together), with things of the earth, that is to say, constructing religion out of worldly blessing.

Moreover, blessings have come to be attached to the massive acquisition of landed property by the mega churches. Some interpret it as a blessing of the beatitude (Matt 5:5). But the blessings to inherit the land is not territorial; it implies another way of referring to the kingdom of heaven (1 Pet 1:4; Col 1:12), a thought that coheres with Jesus' declaration "My kingdom is not from this world" (John 18:36; Heb 11:8-16; 12:22). Thus, this-worldly blessing-seeking Christians fail to grasp the beatitude as a charter of the kingdom of heaven. In addition, eschatological appropriation of blessing also explains how the beatitude can develop the theme of blessing through suffering. Blessing understood in Matt 5:3-11, does not exclude suffering.

Pope Francis helps us to see that suffering aids in living the happiness of the beatitude. According to him: "Much energy is expended on fleeing from situations of suffering in the belief that reality can be concealed. But the cross can never be absent".¹⁰ Moreover, the beatitudes climax with positive promises to the reviled and persecuted (Matt 5:10-12). This sense of blessing intertwines with suffering agrees also with 1 Pet 4:14:

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, No. 75

“If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting upon you”. In sum, the eschatological appropriation of blessing also explains how the NT can develop the theme of blessing through suffering. Again, the NT blessings remain future focused but do not deny that a part of the future blessing has also been realized by those who already encounter God’s reign, a realized eschatology.¹¹

Matthew does not present his *makarioi* as reward for religious accomplishments, but as an act of the grace of God in the lives of believers. No Church or denomination can confer blessings, and not even one’s moral or spiritual achievement can confer blessing. The beatitude underscores the fact that sinners stand within a forgiving relationship made possible by the saving act of Christ, an encouraging reflection for the struggling Matthean community of first century Palestine, a situation not dissimilar to contemporary Nigeria.

Conclusion

Matthew’s beatitudes encapsulate the core teachings of Jesus in the NT. Blessing, a deep desire of a Christian, is a free gift, a descending gift. A gift can only be realized in its response; hence, God’s descending gift demands an ascending response, a self-gift, which can be found in the beatitudes. Thus, the teaching on blessings in the Gospel beatitude presents a full blend of the Christian life, in the sense that what is this-worldly is rooted in its eschatological dimension. The beatitude produces a joy, a happiness that is not centred on self; rather, a happiness that is in purposeful service of others, even if it entails suffering for the sake of the kingdom. The NT makes clear that a notion of blessing that is anchored on worldly prosperity only is no longer a mark of God’s blessing, thus reorienting some thought on the subject carried over from African religious traditions. The coming of Christ has transformed believers into a church from all nations, belonging to a heavenly land with heavenly blessings. Little wonder the apostle Paul declares that God “has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (Eph 1:3), an assertion, which confirms God as the source and origin of all human blessings (Num 6:22-27; 23:20). Consequently, the secularizing

¹¹ Carter, “Beatitude”.

influence of prosperity theology, which literally equates blessing in worldly possession to true indication of acceptance by God, remains fundamentally flawed. The tripartite structure of the Matthew's beatitudes undoubtedly elucidates a robust rendition of blessing in the NT.