

OPENING:

There's something about human psychology where the advertising 'powers that be' know exactly what you want to hear and how you want to hear it.

They have it down to a pretty simple formula:

provide a number between 3 and 9...

followed then by advice on how to help you improve your life.

This formula has worked for decades on the covers of magazines, like *Cosmo* or *Men's Health*:

“5 Ways to lose weight” OR

“6 Tricks for stopping hair loss”

In the internet age, we call these efforts: “click-bait”—where those ‘clicks’ lead to articles that promise to better your life.

This formula is sometimes applied to the Beatitudes, the name given to the series of statements made by Jesus in today's Gospel, turning them into an easy slogan or clickbait.

Thus, the latest enticing article on the internet, or the intriguing cover of the glossy edition at the magazine stand, might read:

“Seven Blessings from Jesus” (parenthesis) if you just do ‘x, y, and z.’

The Beatitudes get reduced to a formulaic “Click here” where you will find all the rules you need to follow, in a digestible dose with a manageable number.

BEATITUDES:

Popular Christian self-help books have contributed to this tendency with cheesy titles like “Let the Beatitudes be your attitude” or “The ‘Be Happy’ Attitudes” that follow this line of thinking and themselves would be great magazine headlines.¹

And this is not a modern phenomenon,

Famously, Augustine fashioned the Beatitudes into seven discrete steps up a ladder that you use to climb towards salvation.

In the 12th century, Hugh of St. Victor took those 7 Steps, combined them with the 7 petitions in the Lord's Prayer, which then led to the (‘count ‘em’) 7 Gifts of the Spirit. All used to combat the 7 deadly sins.²

¹ Schuller, Robert Harold. 1996. *The Be Happy Attitudes*. Dallas: Word; Harris, Marlin. 2012. *Let the Beatitudes Be My Attitude in You: Begin the Quest*. Bloomington, IN: Westbow.

² Yieh, John Y.H. 2012. *Conversations with Scripture: the Gospel of Matthew*. Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 47-48.

A recent scholar made it even more complicated, writing that: the first four Beatitudes emphasized the persecuted condition of Jesus' disciples, while the latter four emphasize ethical qualities. Within each quartet, the scholar goes on, the first and third are roughly synonymous. The first four also exhibit an alliteration with (the Greek word) π... Finally, each of the quartets has 36 words, a perfect balance.³

All this gives you an idea of how central the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount are to Christian ethics and, also, and unfortunately, how easily they are reduced to the language of self-help.

This was not, of course, Matthew's intention, or Jesus'. No one was trying to predict Madison Ave or Silicon Valley methods for the perfect marketing blitz. The caricature that I have highlighted is simply how it's sometimes perceived and where human nature takes it.

SHIFT

Now, maybe that's not how you hear it. I, myself, have already come clean: and if you attended the Sunday Adult Forum about Matthew, you already know this: this is not my favorite Gospel, actually it's my least.

Why? Partly, because I don't know what to do with the Beatitudes.

Whenever I hear them, I am struck by their poetic beauty, but also the utter impracticability of them being followed.⁴

The Beatitudes are just SO HARD. The Sermon on the Mount is just SO PREACHY. I wonder if the disciples and the crowds eyes start to glaze over when they heard them. If only, if only it were all that easy. If only we were as perfect as the Beatitudes.

I feel like that's okay to admit all this this morning. I know that I often talk about my favorite book of the Bible, my favorite hymn, my favorite prayer. I think to establish some credibility, you always have to offer up some of the opposite and this is mine

Still, for someone in my position to admit that takes some doing, it's a little risky, so please don't start inching towards the door.

By God's grace, and maybe design, I am going to get some help, we have a pinch hitter, a guest preacher coming in next week to relieve me and talk to you Matthew and the Sermon on the Mount. Two weeks later, I am going to invite another one.

³ Gundry, Robert H. 1994. (2nd Ed.) *Matthew: a Commentary on his Handbook for a Mixed Church under Persecution*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 73

⁴ Feasting on the Word, PP.

You might be thinking: It's only January, we have a whole Matthew year, and I am already soliciting help!!!

BACK TO IMAGE

Until then, let's return to that image of the magazine headline and the online clickbait. Recall what happens next in that sequence: you see the cover, you are attracted to the message, you open the magazine, and what happens? Tons of those little white magazine re-subscriptions fall out. Same thing on the internet, you click on that link that poses so much promise, what happens? A blizzard of ads. Eventually you read the article, but it all feels a little empty. All you get is judgement, burden and maybe even some shame.

What happens when you do the same thing with the Beatitudes, when you click on Jesus' famous statements? What is the equivalent?

You get the opposite... you don't get demands on your time and money and effort, you don't get self-righteous judgement and the grating exhortations of the language of self-help.

Instead, you come upon the balance and the serenity and the love of the person of Jesus Christ.

There is a demand, there is an appeal, I will give you that. But there's also this sense of calm, this sense of peace that comes with a teacher who knows who he is. And knows who you are.

LAW+GOSPEL

The Beatitudes are gifts, they are free gifts, Jesus gives us to them with both every expectation that we will follow them, and every expectation that we cannot.

What do you do with that sort of love? With that sort of non-demand demand?

Jesus has the audacity to just sit there, and say "love one another as I have loved you." Where does he come off?

Here's the thing, the Beatitudes are not "if, then" constructions. We subconsciously read them as such, but they are not actually imperatives saying "Do this and you will get this."

They are in the indicative mood, for you Grammar nerds, they are a statement of reality, again a gift of truth.

There is a Meme about Jesus and the Sermon on the Mount that is floating out there, indeed on the internet, and that I posted on our Church Facebook page yesterday. It has a picture of Jesus doing a "facepalm" with a caption that reads: "I gave them the Beatitudes and all they do is quote Leviticus."

Our response, human nature, is that we want accountability, needs a 7 point plan, needs deliverables, we demands justice and sacrifice from us all.

Give me an ethical code, give me a step-by-step accounting, don't give me the gift of your unconditional love. Now, there are 750 rules in Leviticus, that's way more than the 7 Beatitudes, that's what we secretly want... because all those rules are actually easier to follow then the Great Commandment.

CONCLUSIONS (and INTRODUCTIONS)

So I still struggle with the Beatitudes.

I remember when teaching my students/ teenagers how to write, the hardest thing was always how to start, what the introduction is. I used to tell them just start in the middle. Karl Barth used to say that sermons were the same way, that if preachers would simply take out their introductions, they would be left with the Gospel.

Scratch page one, begin with page two and you will be all right

Jesus proves that wrong here, he starts his Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, what an opener!

I actually disagree, I love writing the beginning, to me but it's so much harder to end a sermon. I particularly don't like sermons which end with a "Let us" moment. Where the preacher, says "therefore" and then provides an imperative. DO THIS, DO THAT. I have probably been guilty of doing that, but what I want to do, frankly, is preach the gospel, model the beatitudes, describe what the Kingdom of God is in the indicative tense and then let God do the rest.

CONCLUSION

So here goes, as I close. Here is just 3, count 'em three beatitudes.

I cannot do it like Jesus, these will fall short.

"Blessed are you when you decided to go to attend those support meeting"

"Life is a lot easier when you let go of that hate in your heart"

The final one: "I hear that Jesus is offering free gifts, free advice, free love, down by the mountain." Go click on it and see what happens next.

AMEN