



## All Saints YA 2020

What would you say is a blessing? For many cultures and nations, blessings are good fortune. To illustrate this, I want to show you the Chinese word for fortune/luck/prosperity. On the left hand side of the word is part of the word for “clothes”. On the right hand side, starting on the top is a horizontal line representing a roof over one’s head. The square below that is the word for “mouth”, meaning food to eat. The final part below is a sketch of the fields, where there is harvest. In total, blessings mean clothes, shelter, food and harvest.

The Chinese are not unique among the world’s cultures to see blessings as being wealthy in these things. American culture shares this view, too. So did Ancient Greek and Roman culture. In light of the generally accepted sense of blessings among cultures throughout time, the blessings we hear from Jesus in the beatitudes are very strange. In fact, they are flipped. Who would think it is a blessing to be poor and meek? Who would think it is a blessing to be persecuted and reviled? Common sense says wealth and strength is a blessing and poverty and meekness is not. We certainly don’t kneel at our beds at night and pray, “God make me poor,” or “God make me weak.” The thing is, in our longing to see justice and goodness in the world, we also wish we were stronger and more powerful to stop those who oppose what is right. Sometimes, we even make handshakes with violent thoughts and methods. But, the beatitudes challenge even this. Christians have heard these blessings for so many centuries and some even hang them on our walls. But do we really believe them? More importantly, do we trust them?

Today, I want to consider trusting the beatitudes by exploring together the first beatitude. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. In the Greek and Roman world, blessings of prosperity were conferred on by the gods. Having a god or spirit favor you was good luck. People who were blessed were said to have *eudaimōn* (“good demon”). It

was something like, “wealthy in spirit/demon”. The beatitude would be, “Blessed are the rich in spirit/demon, for they will be prosperous.”

It has been a topic among readers of scripture why the first beatitude in Luke is slightly different from Matthew. Luke just says, “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Whereas, Matthew says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Some have inferred that Matthew was spiritualizing poverty. But, really, what Matthew is probably doing is contrasting Roman blessing by demons/spirits with the blessing from God. If I were to rewrite this blessing, I would write Spirit with a capital “S”. “Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”. Here, “Spirit” is the Spirit of God. The Spirit of God enfolds the poor. God cares for the poor. God says the poor are going ahead into the Kingdom. The Kingdom contrasts with the Empire of Rome; it is an empire of grace and mercy.

The beatitudes are signalling a reign that is unfolding, where God is the ruler. As the old hymn sings, “Not by might, not by power, but God’s grace, we are saved.” We might love the poor, but God loves the poor more. If we are to walk into the Kingdom of God, we must trust that God enfolds all that is painful and suffering. We persevere in the work we do with God to lift up those who are hurting and in need. We trust that doing this work is worthy of our whole life. We trust that it is worth even the persecution that will follow. For in it all, we will be blessed.