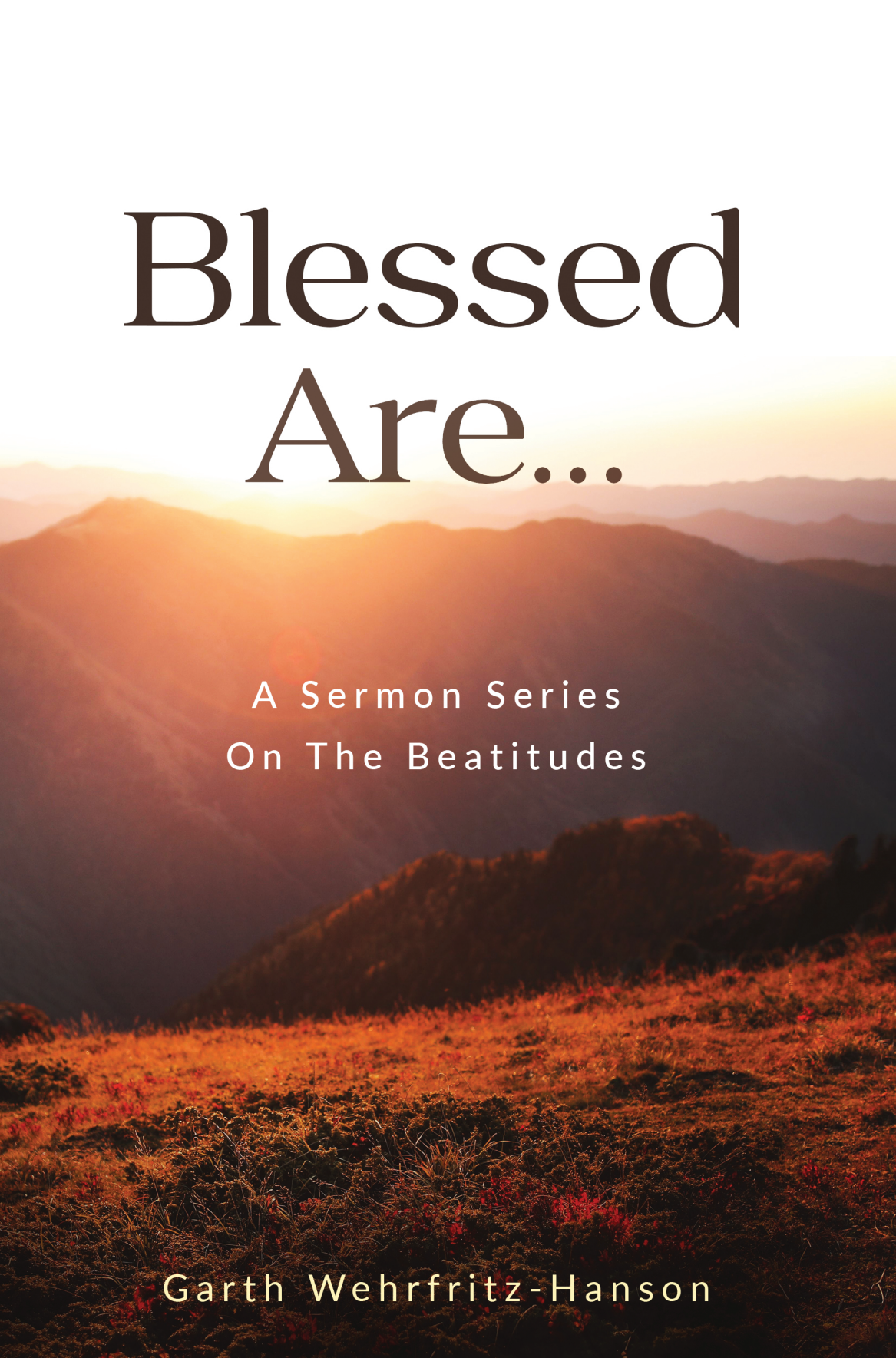
Blessed Are...



A Sermon Series
On The Beatitudes

Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson

BLESSED ARE

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CSS Publishing Company, Inc.
Lima, Ohio

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FIRST EDITION
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Wehrfritz-Hanson, Garth, author.
Title: Blessed are : a sermon series on the Beatitudes / by Garth Wehrfritz-Hanson.
Description: First edition. | Lima, Ohio : CSS Publishing Company, Inc., [2025]
Identifiers: LCCN 2024054701 (print) | LCCN 2024054702 (ebook) | ISBN 9780788031113 (paperback) | ISBN 9780788031120 (adobe pdf)
Subjects: LCSH: Beatitudes--Sermons.
Classification: LCC BT382 .W44 2025 (print) | LCC BT382 (ebook) | DDC 252--dc23/eng/20250108
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024054701
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2024054702

e-book:
ISBN-13: 978-0-7880-3112-0
ISBN-10: 0-7880-3112-0

ISBN-13: 978-0-7880-3111-3
ISBN-10: 0-7880-3111-2 PRINTED IN USA

Soli Deo Gloria!

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Introduction

Matthew 5:1-12; Luke 6:17-26

The Beatitudes. The name itself is derived from two other English words — beautiful and attitude, the beautiful attitudes. When we look at the Beatitudes, we may be inclined to disagree that they are beautiful attitudes. Some may refer to them as the scary attitudes because they seem rather dangerous and threatening. Others may refer to them as the challenging attitudes because they call us into a life of growth in areas that we may be content with and not so willing to change. Yet others may refer to them as the turning-the-world-upside-down attitudes because they seem so radically different from the normal attitudes of this world, instigating subversive and revolutionary activities. Still others may have different titles for the Beatitudes, depending on their background and outlook toward life. One thing is clear, Christians down through the centuries have been deeply inspired by the Beatitudes and have endeavored not only to put them into practice in their everyday living; they have also created beautiful works of art and music based on the Beatitudes. For example, one of my favorite contemporary hymns inspired by the Beatitudes is "Blest Are They," (#728 in *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*), by David Haas and Michael Joncas. And Estonian born composer, Arvo Pärt, has composed the most beautiful choral anthem for the Beatitudes that I've ever heard — it is absolutely heavenly! Moreover, in the secular realm, Christians and non-Christians alike have been inspired by the wisdom of the Beatitudes and their implications for good government, justice, peace and reconciliation in the world.

In the next few weeks, it is my hope and prayer that you may become more familiar with and appreciative of the Beatitudes as we explore them through a series of sermons. Today we shall begin with an introduction to the beatitudes and look at their context out of which they come in the gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke.

In order to help you get more out of this sermon, I have provided you with a reference sheet on which you will find Matthew's account of the Beatitudes on the left column and Luke's account on the right one. I encourage you to refer to it as we continue, and then to leave it in your pew rack for future reference during this sermon series over the next few weeks. However, before you look at the reference sheet, I would like to ask you a question.

If I were to ask you how many Beatitudes there are and to name them in their proper order how many of you would be able to do that? My guess is that only a few of you could do that — or maybe none of us could do that. Am I correct? The answer to that question also depends on which Gospel account of the Beatitudes we are referring to. Actually, the Beatitudes of Jesus appear in two different gospels, and the number as well as the wording and themes of the Beatitudes are different. For example, in Matthew, Jesus spoke nine Beatitudes, although the last two are often considered to be one, since their theme is the same or very similar. However, in Luke, Jesus uttered only four Beatitudes and along with them he included four corresponding woes.

In Matthew the first Beatitude was: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." In Luke, however, the first Beatitude, although similar, was worded a little differently: "Blessed are *you who are poor,* for *yours* is the kingdom of *God*." Did you notice the differences? Matthew had "the poor in spirit," whereas Luke had more direct speech: "you who are poor," and Luke did not include the words "in spirit." And at the end, Matthew had "theirs is the kingdom of heaven," whereas Luke has "yours is the kingdom of God." Perhaps Matthew's words "the poor in spirit" were more directed at those who in fact were not literally poor, but who had resources available to willingly care for the poor by heartfelt acts of love and kindness; whereas Luke's words seem to be spoken directly to those who literally are poor. We will explore this a little further in another sermon.

In Matthew, the second Beatitude was: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." Whereas in Luke the second Beatitude is: "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled."

In Matthew, the third Beatitude was: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Whereas in Luke the third Beatitude was: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh."

In Matthew, the fourth Beatitude was: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Whereas in Luke, the fourth Beatitude was: "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets." This fourth Beatitude in Luke was the last one, then Luke continued with four corresponding woes.

In Matthew, the fifth Beatitude was: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy." Whereas Luke's first woe was: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."

In Matthew, the sixth Beatitude was: "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." Whereas Luke's second woe was: "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry."

In Matthew, the seventh Beatitude was: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." Whereas Luke's third woe was: "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep."

In Matthew, the eighth and ninth Beatitude, which are quite similar were: "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And, "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Whereas Luke's fourth woe was: "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

As you can see from this very brief comparison, there are some rather interesting differences between the two gospel accounts of the Beatitudes. In part, at least, these differences can be understood in light of the fact that there were two different gospel writers and they were writing to two different faith communities. In addition to this, the original context in which the Beatitudes from Matthew's gospel arose may very well differ

from the original context of Luke's gospel. For example, Matthew introduced his account of the Beatitudes by saying: "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying." Whereas in Luke's introduction, Jesus was not on "the mountain," rather, Luke introduced his account like this: "He (meaning Jesus) came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. Then he looked at his disciples and said… ." This may mean then that there were two different occasions in which Jesus taught the Beatitudes. Or another possibility may be that looking back at the chronology of events of Jesus' life and ministry; one of the gospel writers may have mixed up when and where this actually occurred — since they were writing from memory several years after the events. One thing interesting that both Matthew and Luke mentioned here was that Jesus was specifically addressing his disciples with the Beatitudes. That may mean he had higher expectations of them than he did of the crowds who were also present, but not regarded as his disciples.

Another important message of the Beatitudes in both gospels was the first word of each Beatitude, "blessed," which in the Greek is, *makarios,* and the plural form used is *makarioi.* The word has the sense of an enthusiastic exclamation, that's why some have preferred to translate it as: "congratulations!" or "happy" instead of "blessed."

According to Elias Chacour, the Aramaic word that Jesus spoke here was *ashray,* from the verb *yashar. Ashray* is not passive. Instead, it means "to set yourself on the right way for the goal; to turn around, repent; to become straight or righteous." For Elias Chacour, Jesus' words in the Aramaic could be translated like this: "Get up, go ahead, do something, move, you who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for you shall be satisfied." Christianity is not passive but active, energetic, alive, going beyond despair. "Get up, go ahead, do something, move," Jesus said to his disciples.[1]

1 Elias Chacour, with Mary E. Jensen, *We Belong To The Land: The Story of a Palestinian Israeli who Lives for Peace and Reconciliation* (San Francisco: HarperSanfrancisco, 1990), pp. 143-144.

This too fits in well with the belief that God's grace is bestowed on the people who hear the Beatitudes and in the act of hearing; God gives the ability and capacity to respond to his grace. The Beatitudes emphasize that Christ saw in these people something very precious and beautifully blessed — beyond what kept them down, people were more than what oppressed them. That is the grace, love, and vision Jesus gave to all of his disciples, including us, and for that, thanks be to God!

Amen.

Questions For Reflection

1. There are alternative titles for the Beatitudes mentioned in this sermon. Discuss the implications of each title. Do you have any suggestions of alternative titles for the Beatitudes that would highlight their meanings?

2. What are the differences in the two versions of the Beatitudes in Matthew and Luke?

3. What do you think of Palestinian Christian Elias Chacour's translation of the Aramaic word for blessed?

4. Are the Beatitudes too idealistic or are they practical ways and states of being in which Christians live out their faith?

Blessed Are The Poor

Matthew 5:3; Luke 6:20 and 24

In this second of a sermon series on the Beatitudes, we focus on the first Beatitude, which is counted as the first one in both Matthew's and Luke's gospels, and Luke also added a corresponding woe. It is interesting and instructive that Matthew's wording of the first Beatitude is slightly different from that of Luke's. Matthew has: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." However, Luke had: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." Then in Luke's first woe, which corresponds to his first Beatitude, he had: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."

Those of us, who are Lutherans, prefer to deal with law, like the bad news, before we deal with the gospel, like the good news. In keeping with that tradition, we'll look at Luke's woe first. This "woe to you who are rich" is certainly an indictment on us who happen to live in one of the richest nations and provinces of the world — is it not? Well, maybe, it depends on our attitude toward our wealth and what we do or fail to do with it. Our history and the history of our ancestors is an interesting one. Many of us here today come from European ancestry either from Scandinavia or Germany or the United Kingdom. Our parents and grandparents left "the old country" for a better life here in Canada. Most of them were hard-working folks, influenced by the Protestant work ethic. They were willing, and in a lot of cases, determined to work hard and make sacrifices so that their children and their future generations would have a better life. However, once they started to apply themselves to their work, they began to prosper and become even way wealthier than many of them had even dreamed of in their earlier life back in "the old country." This legacy of wealth was passed on down to their children and the future generations. Is that wealth something to be ashamed of? Is it meant to be given away? No, in many cases our pioneer ancestors saw their wealth as a gift

from God and they gave generously back to the LORD for his church and the work of his kingdom.

So then, how did Luke's "woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" convict us and come across to us as law and bad news? Well, I believe that it convicts us of our sin and is law or bad news for us if we abuse or misuse our riches. We can abuse and misuse our riches in several ways.

First, we can become overly proud and arrogant -thinking that we are better than everyone else because we're rich and that we deserve and have earned our wealth. In history, that has led to a very powerful class system, dividing people into different groups. The rich, in their pride and arrogance have refused to associate with "those below them." Moreover, they have often plotted and schemed to gain their wealth in unjust ways by exploiting the poor. We see this in the ancient civilization of Egypt as the Bible described the cruelty of pharaoh's court and the suffering of Israelite slaves.

Second, the rich can become overly greedy with their wealth. They can harden their hearts and refuse to see those who are in need of help. They can refuse to show compassion and help the poor even when they are in a position and are given countless opportunities to generously help the poor. We see this attitude in the gospel parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31.

Third, the rich can place so much value in their wealth, in their material possessions that they become gods in place of the one, true God. Martin Luther said that whatever people value the most in their life becomes their God. Many people value their wealth, their material possessions the most in life — they allow their riches to get in the way of their relationship with Christ who wants to be LORD of their lives. Some people have the romantic, idealistic view that to be rich means to have a care-free life and perfectly happy life. Wrong! No, to be rich can actually have the opposite meaning of that. A lot of rich folks spend a great deal of their time and energy on worrying about their investments and insurance policies, or their collections of art, jewelry, dishes, and other stuff. They worry about their obligations toward their employees, the upkeep of their property and equipment, or their image, appearance, and reputation in public life — and the list could go on. Sadly, tragically, all of these kinds of things can and

do get in the way of the rich person and their relationship with Christ. After spending all of their time, energy, and wealth on things of this nature, they often have little or no time, energy, and wealth devoted to Christ and his church. Jesus warned elsewhere in the gospel about this temptation when he said that it was easier for the camel to go through the eye of a needle than it was for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God (Luke 18:24-25). That is also why Jesus required the rich ruler to sell all that he had and give the proceeds away to the poor — then and only then he would be able to follow Jesus (Matthew 19:21 and Luke 18:22). However, the requirements are not the same for everyone — there were rich, wealthy people who followed Jesus, people like Zaccheus, Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea. One can be rich as well as a faithful follower of Jesus if they do not allow their wealth to become their god in place of the one true God; and if they are wise and generous stewards of their wealth in the service of God and others.

What then did Jesus mean when he said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit," or "Blessed are you who are poor"? Well, as we learned from last week that word "blessed" can also mean "happy," or "congratulations," and it is a description of what one is and has already. That's why it could also be worded like this: "O the blessedness of the poor in spirit," or "O the blessedness of you who are poor." In other words, those who are blessed possess the gift of a special state of being, a special attitude, and are able, by God's grace, to behave and live in a special way that Christ says is pleasing to God. The other important thing to remember here is that in both Matthew's and Luke's introductions to the Beatitudes, Jesus seemed to be speaking directly to his disciples, even though crowds were also present.

We know that it was true that some of Christ's disciples were not wealthy folks. For example, Peter, Andrew, James, and John were fishermen — folks who likely had only the bare necessities of life without any extras. So, especially in the case of Luke's direct speech, Jesus could have literally meant that his disciples who were actually poor were blessed.

In the Greek, there are actually two words for poor — *penes* and *ptochos*. *Penes* referred to the working poor like Christ's fishermen disciples; those who made enough to live on, without

any luxuries. However, *ptochos* referred to total, abject poverty — those who had nothing. It is *ptochos* that Jesus used here in this Beatitude.[2]

In light of this, it makes sense that this particular Beatitude was the first one. Without one realizing that they have nothing and are nothing in and of themselves; it is not possible to turn to God and rely on God for life and everything in life. Only when we turn to Christ and admit that without him we are nothing and can do nothing; only then can we be blessed and become someone and accomplish something, according to God's grace and favor. This reminds me of what Professor Gustavo Gutierrez once said at a seminar many years ago: The poor are poor because no one is on their side, everyone has abandoned them. That is often why God is on their side, they have nowhere and no one else to turn to for life and help and blessings. In this sense, Luke's version of the Beatitude may be more appealing to the actual poor. Although, at the same time, Professor Gutierrez also stated that the poor, even though favored by God, are no better or no worse than the non-poor. They should not be romanticized, nor should poverty be romanticized. The poor are sinners and imperfect just like everyone else. And living in poverty is not a pleasant things — especially if you do not even have enough of the basic necessities of life each day.

Turning back to Matthew's version of the Beatitude again, it may be more all-inclusive, referring to everyone: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." According to Reverend Dr. Robert Smith: Centuries before Jesus, poor in the vocabulary of Israel had come to mean something deeper than lacking in wealth. As rich easily became a synonym for "self-sufficient" and then "arrogant," so poor came to signify "humble" and "trusting." It was proverbial to speak of those poor in the goods of this world as rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom of heaven (Psalm 34:19; 37:14; Isaiah 61:1; James 2:5).

But Matthew stresses poverty in spirit. He sees in this beatitude special encouragement for people who seem to themselves and to others to be deficient in spiritual gifts, lacking charismatic endowments. Others in the community, because they were rich

2 William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew: Volume One Chapters I to X* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1974), p. 85.

in shining gifts of the spirit — prophecy, exorcism, healing — were full of pride, puffed up, and acting as though their gifts were achievements (7:21-23; cf. 1 Corinthians 4:6-7, 18-19; 13:4-5).

Jesus opened his inaugural sermon with extravagant praise for those whose boast is in the Lord, whose one resource is God, whose prime gift is their emptiness, who rely without flinching on the inexhaustible grace of God. Blessed (*makarioi*) are they! This is a word of heartiest congratulations, of ultimate approval.[3]

Therefore, those people like our heroes in the faith, for example Dr. Albert Schweitzer who gave up his privileged life of fame in Europe to care for African lepers; and Mother Teresa who opened another center to serve the poor with her Nobel Prize money are among the blessed poor in spirit, since they willingly lived a life of humility and love; serving their Lord by serving the poor and destitute.

However, we too may rank as those who are poor in spirit insofar as we see the LORD's hand at work to bless us and make us happy and content in even the most simple of things in life. For example, recently I was visiting a person and read the following message on a poster in their bathroom: "Sometimes heaven is a hot bath." This poster made me realize how blessed I am, for being able to enjoy a hot bath so often. Indeed, the simplest things have a way of grabbing our attention and filling us with gratitude, so we are blessed. Being blessed in this way and in so many other ways, we are called to respond to our God by being compassionate and generously sharing our blessings with others — especially those in greatest need.

One day, God's upside-down kingdom will arrive in all of its fullness. Until then, we see glimmers of it as it comes in part through the poor and the poor in spirit. Those forsaken by the world's rich; those who rely on God completely, totally; those who admit they are empty and have nothing so that God can fill them and make them someone; those who devote heart and soul and all of their life and resources to work and live among

3 Robert H. Smith, *Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1989), pp. 81-82.

the poor; those who are filled with gratitude for the simplest things in life — are blessed and happy, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Amen.

Questions For Reflection

1. Why do you think that in Matthew's gospel Jesus spoke of the "poor in spirit," and in Luke's gospel he spoke more directly: "Blessed are you who are poor?"

2. What do you think Jesus meant in Luke's gospel when he spoke of a corresponding woe to the first Beatitude, and to whom do you think he was speaking?

3. Do you agree or disagree with Professor Gustavo Gutierrez's statement: The poor are poor because no one is on their side, everyone has abandoned them. That is why God is on their side? Discuss the reason for your answer with others.

4. Being poor can be experienced and understood in numerous ways. Can you think of a time when you were poor and blessed?