

The Meaning and Message of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount

Ranko Stefanovic
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Andrews University

The Sermon on the Mount recorded in Matthew 5-7 is probably one of the best known of Jesus' teachings recorded in the Gospels. This is the first of the five discourses in Matthew that Jesus delivered on an unnamed mount that has traditionally been located on the northwest shore of the Sea of Galilee near Capernaum, which is today marked by the Church of the Beatitudes.

New Testament scholarship has treated the Sermon on the Mount as a collection of short sayings spoken by the historical Jesus on different occasions, which Matthew, in this view, redactionally put into one sermon.¹ A similar version of the Sermon is found in Luke 6:20-49, known as the Sermon on the Plain, which has been commonly regarded as a Lucan variant of the same discourse. While the two discourses show some striking resemblances, they, however, also show some obvious differences. Common to them is that they each begins with a list of statements known as the Beatitudes and concludes with a short metaphoric parable of the two builders. The main difference between the two versions lies in what is found in between the Beatitudes and the parable of the two builders.

The position taken in this paper is, first of all, that the Matthean and Lucan versions are two different sermons with similar content delivered by

¹ Robert A. Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 35-36; Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary 33A (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 69, 89-91; Hans Dieter Betz, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Hermenia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 44-45.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Jesus on two different occasions.² Secondly, it seems almost certain that the two discourses are summaries of much longer ones, each with a different emphasis, spiritual and physical respectively.

Whatever position one takes, it appears that the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew is not just a collection of randomly selected pieces; the discourse displays one coherent literary theme. The Sermon is introduced with the Beatitudes, which are concluded with a couplet of short metaphoric parables on salt and light. This is further followed by a collection of practical messages in which Jesus contrasts true disciples with the Scribes and the Pharisees (5:20-7:23). The Sermon concludes with a couplet parable of the two builders. Accordingly, this paper suggests the following structure of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount:

- A. Beatitudes (5:3-12)
- B. Couplet Parables of Salt and Light (5:13-16)
 - 1. Righteousness that Exceeds (5:17-6:18)
 - a. Antitheses (5:21-48)
 - b. Fasting (6:1-4)
 - c. Praying (6:5-15)
 - d. Charity (6:16-18)
 - 2. Worrying about Tomorrow (6:19-34)
 - 3. Judging Others (7:1-6)
 - 4. Praying (7:7-11)
 - 5. The Narrow and Wide Gates (7:12-14)
 - 6. Known by their Fruits (7:15-23)
- C. Couplet Parable of the Two Builders (7:24-27)

In this structure, the Beatitudes (5:3-12) function as the springboard passage upon which the couplet of metaphoric parables on salt and light are built. The verb *μωραλίνω*, “to be foolish” (in 5:13) and its cognate adjective *μωρός*, “foolish” (in 7:26) link the couplet of parables on salt and light with the couplet parable of the two builders. This suggests that the parables on

² See Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 93; Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2004), 193-194. While the discourse in Matthew was spoken on a mount (5:1), in Luke it was spoken on an unidentified plain (Luke 6:17). In Matthew, the Beatitudes are in the third person plural, in Luke, they are in the second person plural. The emphasis of the Beatitudes in Matthew is on spiritual qualities, while in Luke it is on physical and material things with the addition of the “woes” (Luke 6:24:26).

STEFANOVIC: MEANING AND MESSAGE OF THE BEATITUDES

the salt and light and the two builders function as an *inclusio* defining the theological meaning of the rest of the Sermon.

Matthew 5:1-2 shows that Jesus spoke the Sermon on the Mount primarily with his disciples in mind as they were about to be sent to proclaim the message of the kingdom (Matt 10). The purpose of this paper is to explore the meaning of the Beatitudes in connection with the couplet of metaphoric parables of salt and light in Matthew 5:13-16 in light of the structure of the Sermon on the Mount and the message they originally communicated to the disciples.

The Beatitudes (5:3-12)

The Sermon on the Mount begins with an introductory section consisting of eight (or nine) pronouncements that are commonly known as the Beatitudes, each beginning with the Greek adjectival plural μακάριοι. The word “beatitude” comes from the Latin *beatitudo* which corresponds to the Greek μακαρισμός from which the Anglicized word *macarism* (“happiness”) comes. The term denotes a literary form that was commonly used in the ancient world commending or praising a person for favor received in life.³

In the classical Greek, the adjective μακάριος is a longer form of the older word μάκαρ (“blessed, happy”).⁴ The word μάκαρ was first used by poets to describe the transcendent happiness enjoyed by gods who were referred to as “the blessed ones” (οἱ μακάρες).⁵ The word was also used for deceased persons who shared in the supra-earthly existence of gods in the isle of the blessed.⁶

The meaning of the word μακάριος and its cognate verb μακαρίζω originally corresponded to the older form μάκαρ. However, the word gradually came to be applied to living persons; at first, it was used for the freedom of the wealthy from the worries and cares of life because of their wealth. From Aristotle on, it was a common word used to describe persons

³ Beatitudes probably originated in Egypt and were adopted by Greeks. See Jacques Dupont, *Étude sur les Évangiles Synoptiques*, BETL 70 (Leuven: Peeters and Leuven University, 1985), 2:793-831.

⁴ Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 1073. A number of philological studies suggest an Egyptian origin for the word μάκαρ- (see Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 92 notes 2-4).

⁵ See Friedrich Hauck, “μακάριος et al.,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 4:362.

⁶ *Ibid.*, (see also Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 95-100).

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

who were secure from the hardships of life.⁷ It usually appeared in a formal construction: μακάριος ὁς . . . (“happy is he who . . .”) or μακάριοι οἱ . . . (“happy are those who . . .”) omitting the copula.⁸ People were regarded fortunate and happy because they possessed things that were supposed to produce happiness including wealth,⁹ fame,¹⁰ power,¹¹ a life of pleasure,¹² freedom from suffering,¹³ family,¹⁴ wisdom and knowledge,¹⁵ etc. The word could also have a religious meaning of being “blessed.”¹⁶

In the LXX, μακάριος generally translates the Hebrew word אֲשֵׁר, which

⁷ A classical example of the meaning of the word in the Greco-Roman world is a Greek ode to the cicada ascribed to Anacreon of Teos (6th century BC):

We call you happy (μακάριζομεν), cicada,
when up on the treetops,
after you have drunk a little dew you sing like a king.
Yours are all the things you can see in the fields,
all that the woods produce.
You are honored by all people,
sweet prophet of summer.
The Muses love you,
and so does Apollo himself who gave you your shrill song.
Age cannot wear you down,
you earthborn sage and musician.
Free from the suffering of flesh and blood,
you are almost like the gods

(cited in R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, NICNT [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007], 160-161).

⁸ It occurred normally in the third-person form and only rarely in the second person address. See U. Becker, “μακάριος,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 1:215.

⁹ See Plutarch (*Artaxerxes* 12.4): τοὺς Θεοὺς εὐχόμεαι ποιῆσαι μακάριον καὶ πλούσιον (“I pray the gods to make him rich and happy” [tr. LCL, 11:154-155]); Libanius (*Autobiography* 1.154): νῦν δὲ ἴστε μὲν οὓς μακαρίζετε, παρ’ οἷς οἱ πλοῦτοι (“those whom you count the lucky ones—men with the money” [tr. LCL, 478:220-221]); cf. also Homer, *Iliad* 16.596; 24.536; *Odyssey* 14.206; 17.420; 19.76.

¹⁰ E.g., Stobaeus, *Eclogae* 3.1.106.

¹¹ Cf., Euripides, *Iphigenia in Tauris* 543; *Bacchae* 904.

¹² E.g., Euripides, *Alcestis* 169.

¹³ Plato, *Republic*, 5.465d; Euripides, *Electra* 1357-1359.

¹⁴ Homer, *Odyssey* 4.208; Euripides, *Medea* 1025; *Iphigenia in Tauris* 915; Aristophanes, *Wasps*, 1512.

¹⁵ E.g., Plato, *Laws* 2, 660e.

¹⁶ See Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1073-1074; Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 611-612.

STEFANOVIC: MEANING AND MESSAGE OF THE BEATITUDES

is used 45 times in the Hebrew Scriptures.¹⁷ The word occurs mainly in Psalms and the Wisdom Literature acclaiming persons for their piety and faithfulness to God. It is significant that Yahweh is never called אֲשֶׁר־מַאֲכָרִים in the fashion of the Greek gods, only humans.¹⁸

Since the translation of the word אֲשֶׁר־מַאֲכָרִים as “blessed” is derived mainly from the Latin *beatus*, and the word “blessed [by God]” in Hebrew is בְּרָךְ, and in Greek εὐλογητός, modern translators favor the word “happy.”¹⁹ However, the two words—“blessed” and “happy”—seem to express two facets of meaning found in the Hebrew Scriptures and the LXX. It is Yahweh who bestows earthly blessings upon persons. The recipients of those divine blessings are characterized as “blessed/happy.”

According to W. F. Albright, the meaning of אֲשֶׁר־מַאֲכָרִים corresponded to the meaning μακάριος conveyed in the Hellenistic world: “happy is the person who”²⁰ However, in the Bible, the word obviously pointed to more than mundane happiness; it denoted an inner state of being, which resulted from a divine act.²¹ Such happiness was an inner feeling for God’s blessings bestowed upon a person. Thus, the traditional translation of the word as “blessed” should not be easily discarded, due to the fact that the happiness that the word μακάριος renders in the Bible is a response to a divine act, a state of well being as a divine reward for faithfulness to God.²² Boring thus rightly concludes that the opposite of μακάριος in the Bible is not

¹⁷ Deut 33:29; 1 Kgs 10:8; 2 Chr 9:7; Job 5:17; Ps 1:1; 2:12; 32:1-2; 33:12; 34:8; 40:4; 41:1; 65:4; 84:4-5, 12; 89:15; 94:12; 106:3; 112:1; 119:1-2; 128:1-2; 137:8-9; 144:15; 146:5; Prov 3:13; 8:32, 34; 14:21; 16:20; 20:7; 28:14; 29:18; Eccl 10:17; Isa 30:18; 32:20; 56:2; Dan 12:12.

¹⁸ Becker, “μακάριος,” 1:216; G. Bertram, “μακάριος in the LXX and Judaism,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 4:364.

¹⁹ R. T. France asserts that the translation of μακάριος as “blessed” is misleading” (*The Gospel According to Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985], 108). On the other side, Eugene Boring argues that μακάριος “should be translated with the objective ‘blessed’ instead of the subjective ‘happy’” (“Matthew,” *The New Interpreter’s Bible* [Nashville: Abingdon, Press, 1995], 8:177).

²⁰ W. F. Albright and C. S. Mann, *Matthew*, The Anchor Bible 26 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1971), 46.

²¹ Bauer, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 611.

²² E.g., the ones who are ascribed as blessed in this life are those who fear Yahweh (Pss 112:1-3; 128:1-4), trust in Yahweh (Ps 84:12), take refuge in Yahweh (Ps 2:12); walk in the law of Yahweh (Ps 119:1-2; Prov 8:32), practice justice (Ps 106:3; Prov 20:7; Isa 56:2), care for the poor (Ps 41:1), etc.

unhappiness but being cursed.²³

During the Second Temple period, pronouncements of blessedness among the Jews generally replicated the conventional concept.²⁴ A classical example of a *macarism* is Sirach 25:7-11, in which the author lists nine or ten kinds of people that are described as happy:

There be nine things which I have judged in mine heart to be happy (εμακάριζω), and the tenth I will utter with my tongue: A man that hath joy of his children; and he that liveth to see the fall of his enemy. Well (μακάριος) is he that dwelleth with a wife of understanding, and that hath not slipped with his tongue, and that hath not served a man more unworthy than himself. Well (μακάριος) is he that hath found prudence, and he that speaketh in the ears of them that will hear: O how great is he that findeth wisdom! Yet there is none above him that feareth the Lord. But the love of the Lord passeth all things for illumination: he that holdeth it, whereto shall he be likened?²⁵

It can be easily seen how, among the Jews in the first century, the word μακαριος denoted the well being of a person experiencing earthly happiness in life.

In the New Testament, μακάριος occurs 50 times, of which 28 can be found in Matthew and Luke (the word does not occur in Mark).²⁶ The meaning of the word in the New Testament has been extensively treated by modern scholarship²⁷ and is beyond the scope of this study. Our focus is on the way the word is used in the Sermon on the Mount.

The Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12 consist of two clauses each. The first

²³ Boring, "Matthew," 8:177.

²⁴ See, Betz, *Sermon on the Mount*, 100-103; cf. Sirach 25:8; 48:1-11; Tobit 13:15-16; 1 Enoch 103:5; 2 Enoch 42:6-14; 58:2; 4Q525.

²⁵ Translated by Lancelot C. L. Brenton, *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1986). The conventional Greek use of the word is also found in 2 Enoch 42:6-14, which is very much in line with Psalms and the Wisdom literature.

²⁶ Matt 5:3-11; 11:6; 13:16; 16:17; 24:26; Luke 1:45; 6:20-22; 7:23; 10:23; 11:27-28; 12:37-38, 43; 14:14-15; 23:29; John 13:17; 20:29; Acts 20:35; 26:2; Rom 4:7-8; 14:22; 1 Cor 7:40; 1 Tim 1:11; 6:15; Titus 2:13; Jas 1:12, 25; 1 Pet 3:14; 4:14; Rev 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7; 22:14.

²⁷ See Hauck, "μακάριος, et al.," 367-370; G. Strecker, "μακάριος," *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 2:376-379; Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 2:437-444.

STEFANOVIC: MEANING AND MESSAGE OF THE BEATITUDES

clause gives a pronouncement consisting of the predicative μακάριος followed by the identity of the persons who are blessed²⁸ (“happy are those . . .”). The second clause states the reason for the blessedness consisting of a ὅτι clause (“for,” or “because”) stated in the future tense.²⁹ In the *macarisms* of the time, the ὅτι clause was not common outside the New Testament; as such, it is particularly significant in the Matthean discourse.²⁹ Two things may be observed in the Beatitudes. First, Jesus radically changes the conventional concept of happiness. Those who are μακάριοι are not “blessed” according to the conventional meaning of the conferral of blessings experienced in life in terms of good fortune and a life free of hardships, which is ephemeral and fickle. They are μακάριοι not *because of* [hardships in life], but rather *in spite of* [hardships in life]. True happiness is “not attached to wealth, to having enough, to a good reputation, power, possession of the goods of this world.”³⁰ The μακάριοι might possess nothing, be hungry, humble, afflicted, humiliated, endure hardships, and be persecuted; the circumstances of life may turn against them; yet life cannot take that happiness from them because life has not given it to them. In such a way, the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount depict a “reversal of all human values.”³¹

This true happiness is not to be understood as a mental or emotional state³² or in relation to ones feelings, but rather as the result of a divine act in human lives. God is the true source of happiness. The disciple is in a state of happiness when he/she is aware of God’s special blessings regardless of whether he/she is experiencing good fortune or hardships in life. In such a way, “what constitutes life as it was intended to be lived stands in stark contrast to conventional wisdom”³³ in which “happiness is something which is dependent on the chances and the changes of life, something which life may give and which life may also destroy.”³⁴ In Jesus’ teaching, μακάριος “describes that joy which has its secret within itself, that joy which is serene

²⁸ The obvious exemption are the first and last Beatitudes in which the ὅτι clauses use the present tense pointing to the experience in the kingdom of heaven here and now.

²⁹ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 89.

³⁰ Spicq, *Theological Lexicon*, 2:438.

³¹ Hauck, “μακάριος, et al.,” 368.

³² France, *Matthew*, NICNT, 108.

³³ Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 38.

³⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2nd ed., Daily Study Bible (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1975), 1:89.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

and untouchable, and self-contained, that joy which is completely independent of all the chances and the changes of life.”³⁵

The second thing that may be observed is that, in contrast to the Old Testament and the conventional concept where *אַשְׁרַי* or *μακάριος* respectively refers to one’s present well being, the Beatitudes go beyond the present situation to the future, in the fashion of Jewish apocalyptic literature.³⁶ While *μακάριοι* are blessed and, as a result, happy now,³⁷ the visible conferral of such blessings will not be experienced ultimately until the future realization of God’s kingdom on the earth. Thus, in the Beatitudes, the present and the future are related.

This futuristic character of the Beatitudes, however, is not to be understood, as U. Becker rightly observes, “in the sense of consolation and subsequent recompense. The promised future always involves a radical alteration of the present.”³⁸ The disciples are not happy because they are free of hardship in life, but rather because they are citizens of the Kingdom by following Jesus as they go through hardship in life. Their lives have meaning in light of the future realization of the kingdom. It is the future that provides strength for the disciples in the present.

In summary, the inner happiness spoken of in the Beatitudes is God’s gift of blessing granted to those who choose to be disciples. This blessing is a result of the realization of a person’s spiritual poverty (5:3) and an acknowledgment of one’s total dependence on God (5:5). The disciple is *μακάριος* because of the special relationship with God now and today as well as in the light of the future reward. Such blessedness and happiness cannot be taken away by adverse circumstances in life.

The Couplet Parables of Salt and Light

The Beatitudes are followed by a couplet of short metaphoric parables of salt and light that Jesus used to expand upon the role of the *μακάριοι* in the world (5:13-16).³⁹ As in the case of other parables, Jesus used here an

³⁵ Ibid., 1:89; so also Mounce, *Matthew*, 38.

³⁶ E.g., 1 Enoch 58:2 (“Blessed are ye, ye righteous and elect, for glorious shall be your lot”); also Pss. Sol. 17:50; 18:7. Also Rev 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14.

³⁷ This concept is emphasized two times in Luke 6:21.

³⁸ Becker, “*μακάριος*,” 1:217.

³⁹ W. D. Davies (*The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* [reprint; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989], 250-251) sees the two metaphoric parables on salt and light as a polemic against the Judaism of the time. While, on one hand, Jesus chose these two metaphoric parables in order to contrast the disciples with the Scribes and Pharisees, on the other, these

STEFANOVIC: MEANING AND MESSAGE OF THE BEATITUDES

illustration understandable to the first-century audience. Salt and light were common elements in antiquity. Pliny the Elder (AD 23-79), a contemporary of Jesus, stated: “For the whole body nothing is more beneficial than salt and sun.”⁴⁰

It appears that these couplet parables of salt and light in the Sermon on the Mount function as a dual-directional passage concluding the Beatitudes and, at the same time, introducing the rest of the Discourse.

“You are the Salt of the Earth” (5:13)

In the first metaphoric parable, Jesus likens the disciples to salt; “you are the salt of the earth” (ὁμεῖς ἐστε τὸ ἅλας τῆς γῆς.) The emphatic pronoun ὁμεῖς meaning literally “you yourselves [are salt]” refers to “you [are blessed/happy]” in verse 11. This suggests that those who are the salt of the earth as well as the light of the world are the μακάριοί of the Beatitudes.

In comparing his disciples to salt, Jesus referred to the mineral known today as sodium chloride. Salt was a necessity of life in Palestine, as in the rest of the ancient world. The book of Sirach lists it as one of the basic necessities of life (39:26). The Dead Sea was a major source of salt in Palestine. However, Dead Sea salt was impure, mixed with gypsum and other minerals producing an alkaline or bitter taste, for which reason the people of Palestine often purchased salt of a superior quality from the traders in the North.⁴¹

The word salt (ἅλας)⁴² occurs in six passages of the New Testament of which five times in the Synoptics in the sayings of Jesus (Matt. 5:13; Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34). The verb ἀλίζω simply means “to salt” or “to season with salt.” Salt is used exclusively in a figurative sense, taken, however

two parables were aimed to particularly be a critique of the Dead Sea sect, who withdrew from the world. While not excluding the possibility that the two parables addressed significantly the situation of the Qumran community, the context shows that Jesus chose them primarily to describe the salt and light of the disciples in contrast with that of the Scribes and the Pharisees (cf. Matt 5:20; also 5:21-6:18).

⁴⁰ *Quae totis corporibus nihil esse utilius sale at sole dixit (Natural History 31.102)*, tr. W. H. S. Jones (Loeb Classical Library, 8:440-441).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁴² The regular Greek word for salt is ἅλας; however, in the New Testament, the word ἅλας is used.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

from a domestic use.⁴³ Because of the wide use of salt in the ancient world,⁴⁴ commentators have made many suggestions of its metaphoric meaning in Matthew 5:13. Most of them interpret it as a preservative; but the context suggests that Jesus used the metaphor of salt exclusively in the meaning of flavoring: “If salt has become tasteless [μωρανθῆ] . . .” (Matt. 5:13; Luke 14:34) or, “If the salt has become unsalty [ἀναλον] . . .” (Mark 9:50). An interpretation of the salt metaphor in Matthew 5:13 that suggests a sense of preservation does not do justice to the text.

A debatable issue among commentators is regarding the rhetorical question made by Jesus: “If the salt has become tasteless, how can it be made salty?” Did Jesus mean that salt could lose its tasty effect? Some commentators believe that this loss of saltiness refers most likely to the aforementioned poor quality of the Dead Sea salt.⁴⁵ Because of its impurity, it has been argued that the salt in Palestine could lose its distinctive flavor.⁴⁶ In actuality, however, salt is a stable compound and, as such, it does not

⁴³ In Matthew 5:13, salt represents the disciples, while in Mark 9:50 Jesus tells the disciples to have salt in themselves. If salt loses its distinctiveness it has no value (Matt 5:13; Mark 9:50; Luke 14:34). In Colossians 4:6, Paul applies the salt’s seasoning function metaphorically to human speech.

⁴⁴ In antiquity, salt was an important ingredient to give taste to food. Adding salt in the preparation of food was common in antiquity. Job asked: “Can something tasteless be eaten without salt?” (6:6). Even animal food was flavored with salt (cf. Isa 30:24). In addition to culinary use, as with all cultures before the technology of refrigeration, salt was also used as a preservative. It functioned also as a fertilizer and a catalyst or purifier. Salt was also valued medicinally (see Pliny the Elder’s description of the medical effectiveness of salt in antiquity [*Natural History* 31.73-92]) and was rubbed on newborn babies (Ezek. 16:4). Besides its common uses, salt was also used in Israelite temple rituals; it had to be added to offerings and sacrifices offered upon the altar (Lev 2:13; Ezek 43:24; Ezra 6:9-10; cf. also Josephus *Antiquities* 3.9.1), wherefrom the expression “the salt of the covenant” denoting the permanent nature of the covenant relationship between God and his people. A covenant sealed by salt was believed to be everlasting; thus, the expression “a covenant of salt” (Num 18:19; 2 Chr 13:5) refers to the ancient Middle Eastern custom of ratifying covenant relationships where salt functioned as a symbol of loyalty. See also W. D. Davis and Dale C. Allison, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*, ICC (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988), 472-473.

⁴⁵ N. Hillyer, “ἅλας,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 3:446.

⁴⁶ W. D. Davies argues that the usual use and meaning of salt does not apply when interpreting what Jesus tried to communicate with the metaphor of salt in Matthew 5:13. In his view, Jesus chose the metaphor of salt of the Dead Sea to deliberately express a critique of the Qumran sect who withdrew from the world. In such a way, Jesus set the salt of the disciples against the salt of the Qumranians (Davies, *Setting*, 250).

STEFANOVIC: MEANING AND MESSAGE OF THE BEATITUDES

lose its saltiness. That such was the understanding among first-century Jews may be seen from a story attributed to Rabbi Joshua ben Haninia (A.D. 1st cent.). When asked if salt loses its flavor, the rabbi responded: “Does the mule bear young?” The point the rabbi tried to make was that salt could not lose its flavor as much as a sterile mule could not produce an offspring.⁴⁷

It seems that the question of whether salt can lose its saltiness is beside the point Jesus tried to make to the disciples. As R. T. France observes, Jesus was not teaching his disciples about chemistry or chemical processes; instead, he coined a proverbial illustration to make a theological point.⁴⁸ Real salt does not lose its saltiness. Salt without saltiness is not salt, and as such, it has no value and use; “so does a professed disciple who lacks genuine commitment.”⁴⁹ The verb for “tasteless” used in Matthew 5:13 means literally “become foolish [μωρανθῆ]” (so also in Luke 14:34).⁵⁰ Thus, a point Jesus makes is that, as it is impossible for salt to lose its saltiness, so the μακάριοι referred to in the Beatitudes cannot lose their spiritual flavor as long as they are the followers of Christ. However, salt that (hypothetically) loses its saltiness would be good for nothing. This notion sets the disciples in contrast to the popular religious culture and practice of the time (e.g., of the Scribes and the Pharisees; 5:20)

Craig S. Keener thus rightly observes that the first century listeners would have quickly grasped the point Jesus tried to make to the disciples.⁵¹ As salt gives flavor to food, so the disciples are to give flavor to the earth. Salt is supposed to flavor the earth, not earth the salt. Earth is here a synonym for the world (cf. 5:14).⁵² The salt mixed in food cannot be seen, only tasted. The most obvious characteristic of salt is that it is different from its locality. The disciples who lose saltiness are of no value any longer.

⁴⁷ Babylonian Talmud *Bekoroth*. 8b; see Craig, S. Keener, *The Gospel of Matthew: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 173.

⁴⁸ France, *Matthew*, NICNT 112.

⁴⁹ Keener, *Matthew*, 173.

⁵⁰ France, *Matthew*, NICNT, 112, shows that the Aramaic verb ܦܫܠܐ which was originally used by Jesus, means both “to become foolish” and “to lose its saltiness.”

⁵¹ Keener, *Matthew*, 173.

⁵² Contrary to Hillyer “ἅλας,” 3:445, who argues that Matt 5:13 should be best translated as: “You are salt *for* the soil” and balanced in parallelism with 5:14, “You are light for the world.” However, the context does not support such a translation.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

“You are the Light of the World” (5:14-16)

Those who are μακάριοι are further likened to light: “You are the light to the world (ὁμεῖς ἐστε τὸ φῶς τοῦ κόσμου)” (5:14). Light is a well-known metaphor both in the Bible and Judaism.⁵³ In the Old Testament, Israel is spoken in terms of a light to the nations (cf. Isa 60:1-3). The mission of the Servant in Isaiah is portrayed in terms of light (Isa 42:6; 49:6), which was in the New Testament fulfilled in the ministry of Jesus (Matt 4:16; Luke 2:32; John 8:12; 12:35-36). Paul also often uses the light metaphor for the gospel (2 Cor 4:6; Eph 5:8; Phil 2:15). Here, in Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus exhorts the disciples to be a shining light to the world,⁵⁴ just as he Himself is the light to the world.

It appears that the structure of the light metaphor (5:14-16) is comparably similar to the salt metaphor (5:13):

You are the salt of the earth	You are the light of the world
The salt must not lose its flavor	The light cannot be hidden

This comparison shows that the two metaphors are complementary to each other. In Matthew 5:14-16, Jesus reiterates the point made in the metaphor of “the salt of the earth” (v. 13). Just as salt provides taste and transforms food, so the lamp provides “light to all who are in the house.” Also, as it is impossible for salt to lose its saltiness, so it is impossible to hide or conceal the light— like a city on a hill: “The city on the hill cannot be hidden” (v. 14). In using this proverbial saying, Jesus could have in mind a number of cities in Galilee such as Nazareth and Gamala. However, as some commentators observe, Jesus most likely referred to the New Jerusalem of the messianic kingdom, radiating the light of divine glory throughout the world (Isa 2:2-4; 4:5-6; 60:1-22).⁵⁵

⁵³ See Keener, *Matthew*, 174-175; Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 475.

⁵⁴ W.D. Davies suggests that Jesus used the light metaphor to express another critique of the Qumran sectarians who called themselves “the sons of light” but hid their light under a bushel. Light is for the world, but the Sectarians “forsook the darkness of the world” and confined their light to themselves. They isolated themselves from the rest of the world “and hid their light under a bushel at Qumran and in enclosed communities” (*Setting*, 250).

⁵⁵ See Robert H. Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 77; also Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 475. It is also interesting that the Roman philosopher and politician Cicero (106-43 BC) described the city of Rome as a “light to the whole world” (*In Catalinam* 4.6).

STEFANOVIC: MEANING AND MESSAGE OF THE BEATITUDES

Jesus further enhances the metaphor of light with another proverbial saying: “Nobody lights a lamp and puts it under a basket but on a lampstand” (5:15).⁵⁶ Here, Jesus referred to a typical one-room Palestinian house. A lamp (λύχνος) was a small clay vessel with a spout on one end in which a wick was set. It was filled with oil and placed on a lampstand or a special hole in the room-wall to provide illumination in the house. In order to illuminate the house, the light is never covered with a basket.⁵⁷ The point Jesus made was that when a person lights a lamp, it is placed on a lampstand where it produces the most effective light for every person in the house. As such light cannot be concealed, as also should the light of the disciples. Their lives and deeds are visible to the world. “Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven” (5:16). Yet, the disciples do not generate light; their light is a reflection of their Father who is heaven.

The Metaphoric Parable of the Two Builders (5:20-7:27)

The rest of the Sermon on the Mount provides a practical application of what was stated in the Beatitudes and illustrated with the couplet parables of salt and light. The salt and light of the disciples stand in contrast to the popular religious culture and practice of the time: “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses *that* of scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20). In the rest of the Sermon, Jesus contrasts the righteousness of the true disciples with that of the Scribes and Pharisees.

What follows is the section known as the antitheses: “You have heard that . . . but I tell you . . .” (Matt 5:21-48). Here, the lives of the disciples are best portrayed, to put it in John Stott’s words, as “Christian Counter-culture,” which is “the life of the kingdom of God, a fully human life indeed but lived out under the divine rule.”⁵⁸ The disciples are the followers of Christ, and as such are called to follow in the footsteps of the master “who perfectly exemplified the character traits of the Beatitudes.”⁵⁹ Their righteousness is characterized not by external display of piety but by the

⁵⁶ The symbol of the lampstand occurs also in Mark 4:21 and Luke 8:16; 11:33.

⁵⁷ The Greek word μύδιος refers to a basket container with a capacity of about two gallons. In Mark 4:21 and Luke 8:16, the light is not put under the bed.

⁵⁸ See John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 19-20.

⁵⁹ David L. Turner, *Matthew*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 154; Keener, *Matthew*, 172.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

intrinsic attitude of the heart. It is visible in the way they give to the poor (6:1-4), pray (6:5-15), and fast (6:16-18). It affects and impacts every aspect of the disciples' life, both present and future (Matt 6:19-7:23).

The Sermon concludes with another couplet parable of the two builders (Matt 7:24-27) in which Jesus again reiterates what was stated in the Beatitudes and the couplet parables of salt and light. In the parable of the two builders, Jesus delineates the test of righteousness for true disciples, those who are μακάριοι (7:24-25), in contrast to those who do not obey His words (7:26-27). Just as the salt that has (hypothetically) lost its saltiness becomes foolish (μωρανθή), so is the foolish (μωρῶ) person who builds his/her house on the sand. Just as in the Beatitudes, where the ultimate result of the choice made is shown in the future, so in the case of the two builders. Only the blessings and happiness that are built on the rock, a symbol for God in the Bible, are permanent and stable. The future test will affirm the present spiritual stability of the true disciple.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Sermon on the Mount was originally addressed to the disciples (cf. Matt 5:1-2) as they joined Jesus and were about to be sent out to their task of preaching the good news of the Kingdom (chap. 10). The description of the Twelve in the Synoptics is given in terms of a group of Galileans whose association with Jesus was much motivated by popular political motives and an aspiration for "greatness" in the Kingdom (cf. Matthew 18:1-3; 21:20-28; Mark 10:35-45; Luke 9:46-48; 22:24-30).

However, as Jesus pointed out, true disciples are the ones who have accepted the conditions of the Kingdom. As such, they must be different from the world. "They were not to take their cue from the people around them, but from him, and so prove to be genuine children of their heavenly Father."⁶⁰ The secret of discipleship is not found in the empty ambition and greatness of the conventional culture of the here and now, but in the future reward. True disciples experience the fullness of blessedness and true happiness because they are the followers of Jesus, and, thus, are citizens of the Kingdom. Not that the disciples are only called to be different from the world, but they are also to be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Salt must be mixed with food. And the light must be set on a lampstand. Light normally penetrates and removes darkness. But it does much more; the denser the darkness, the more visible the light. So are supposed to be the

⁶⁰ Stott, 18.

STEFANOVIC: MEANING AND MESSAGE OF THE BEATITUDES

lives of the μακάριοι in a sin-darkened world as they follow in the footsteps of the Master.

While writing this paper, I could not but ask myself a question: What is the relevance of the Sermon on the Mount and how does it apply to the practice and life of the Church, which has been entrusted with the great commission (Matt. 28:20)—the church that we are all a part of? Are we truly what Jesus appointed us to be: the salt and light to the world?

As some of you know, I came from a country that used to be called Yugoslavia. When the country was politically united in one federation, the Church was also structured as one body into one Union Conference. Then, in the 1990s, a civil war broke out resulting in the subdivision of Yugoslavia into seven smaller countries. The issues that led to this disintegration were political, nationalistic, and religious. Concurrently, the Seventh-day Adventist Church in this region also split. What used to be one Union Conference, was eventually split into two; one with about 4,000 church members, and another with about 8,000 members. In contrast, other protestant denominations and the Jehovah's Witnesses did not have any problems continuing to live and work together as one body. The Seventh-day Adventist Church missed an opportunity to respond to Jesus' call to be the salt and the light to the region and to show to the world how the gospel removes ethnic, tribal, and nationalistic barriers and separation. Contrary, the Church lost its saltiness and was overcome by political and nationalistic darkness.

One may also reflect on how the political situation and/or nationalistic, racial, tribal, cultural, and ideological matters impact the relationships between the church members in some parts of the world, including this country. The followers of Christ referred to in the Sermon on the Mount are not to fall into the pitfalls of racial or nationalistic prejudices or theological and ideological clans, cliques, and clubs. One might also wonder what impact the Church can have on the world when devoted leaders and scholars are fervently attacked on the Internet and charged with spurious and unsubstantiated claims.

As Jesus stated in the aforementioned Discourse, if the church loses its saltiness and its light, it loses the reason for its existence. Jesus calls us to a higher standard than the people around us, to a "Christian counter-culture." I believe that the effort of the two societies, Adventist Society for Religious Studies and Adventist Theological Society, to interact and respectfully dialogue as colleagues and members of the same family of

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Christ will be a great testimony to others and will fulfill Jesus' prayer in John 17. Yet, Adventist scholars, as colleagues and friends, can disagree. While disagreement simply for the purpose of disagreeing is divisive, disagreeing for the purpose of searching and sharpening our understanding on biblical teachings is healthy disagreement. Unity does not mean uniformity and unanimity. We can be the great testimony to the gospel that unites rather than divides the followers of Christ. It is in such a way that we as leaders and scholars may be perceived as "the sons of our Father in Heaven" (Matt. 5:45) and, as such, be the true salt and the light to those around us.

Ranko Stefanovic, PhD, is Professor of New Testament in the SDA Theological Seminary, Andrews University. He is a member of the Society of Biblical Literature, Chicago Society for Biblical Research, Adventist Society for Religious Studies, and the Adventist Theological Society. In addition to numerous scholarly and professional articles, he has authored a commentary on the book of Revelation titled *Revelation of Jesus Christ* and the book *Plain Revelation*. In addition to several teaching awards, he was awarded the J. N. Andrews Medallion in 2013 by Andrews University. He is a sought-after speaker and lecturer at seminars, workers meetings, camp meetings, and churches across the globe. rstefano@andrews.edu