
BLESSED (makarios)

TERENCE Y. MULLINS

The Beautitudes are not a quiet preface to larger issues. They are more like the detonating cap which sets off an explosive. They have their own shattering power. Or they sit like the diamond bit on a drill.

Now in recent years we have been persuaded to translate the Greek word *makarios* as meaning "happy." This is a singularly unhappy choice of word. A person is made happy by a brief occasion, and the emotion is as transient as its source is slight.

The writers of the New Testament had a wonderfully rich vocabulary on which to draw, and they drew upon it in a wonderfully selective way. Among the words available to them was the Greek word for "happiness," *eudaimonia*. Not a single New Testament writer ever used that word. No writer ever used the adjective happy, *eudaimon*. These were famous words. Plato had said that happiness was desired by all. He made happiness the object of laws. And in his *Ethics*, Aristotle agreed that happiness was the "good" for humanity. The Stoic philosopher, Epictetus, wrote often about happiness, but it is not until the Epistle of Diognetus that a Christian writer does so—and then echoing Epictetus rather than Matthew. In New Testament times, everyday people used "happy" in their speech and in their letters. Yet New Testament writers avoided it.

It is devilishly ironic that so many versions of the Bible today translate *makarios* as "happy." For example, the *Good News Bible* not only uses "happy" throughout the Beatitudes of Matthew and Luke but even inserts the gratuitous headings "True Happiness" and "Happiness and Sorrow." Yet the translators could not bring themselves to translate *I Timothy 1:11* with "happy God" or *6:15* with "God, the happy Rul-

er." In both cases they had the good taste and better scholarship to translate with "blessed." J.B. Phillips does the same. The constraint of meaning at times overcomes the panic of popularity—but only at times.

Now happiness is not evil any more than a statue is evil, but the substitution of happiness for blessedness is perilously close to a form of verbal idolatry. Any time we replace God or the satisfactions of God with human manufactures or human projections, we diminish the scope of the human spirit. What we have been promised by God is not only greater than anything we can hope for or desire, it is unexpectedly other than what we can naturally hope for or desire. Gifts and presents may make us happy, but only God's gift can make us blessed.

Some people do not realize how often Jesus used the word "blessed." They are aware of the importance of the nine Beatitudes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, but they do not fully comprehend the complex way this thread is woven into the language of Jesus, nor the richness it adds to the texture of the fabric of his teachings.

Three places in Matthew are especially revealing. In *11:6*, *13:16*, and *16:17* Jesus applies the word to those who display a special relation to him, a relation characterized by closeness, insight, and willingness to witness. This relation can hardly be called happiness, even in our libidized use of the word and certainly not in the Greek sense. It does not refer to emotional satisfaction but to spiritual benefaction. The Holy Spirit had blessed Peter with insight. This did not make Simon bar Jona a happy man but it did make him a more effective servant of God.

The word occurs more often in Luke than in Matthew—15 times to 13. All

but 2 are from the lips of Jesus. One of the exceptions is significant in itself. A woman piously says, "Blessed is the womb that bore you, and the breasts that you sucked" (*Luke 11:27*) and Jesus refuses to let this maudlin misuse of the word go unrebuked. He replies at once, "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it" (*11:28*). The word simply must not be permitted to acquire the overtones of "fortunate." It is to be reserved for those persons whose lives have been shaped by a responsive interaction with Jesus and his message. Blessed describes not a familial but a tutorial relationship.

Let us take a final example. Jesus said, "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you and say all evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and exult for your reward is great in the heavens . . ." (*Matthew 5:11-12*). There were three times in that sentence where some form of the word "happy" might have been used: blessed, rejoice, exult. It was avoided each time. In Namibia today, thousands of Christians are suffering just such persecution as Jesus was talking about. They are slandered as communists, terrorists, and murderers. They are persecuted and killed. And God has given them strength to hold fast to their faith, to continue the struggle for freedom, and to rebuild their churches and homes. They may be said to be blessed. But the situation is scarcely one to produce happiness.

Author, pastor, and editor of adult Bible curriculum, Terence Y. Mullins is a frequent contributor to professional journals at home and abroad.