Will The Real Jesus Please Stand Up?

A Closer Look At The Beatitudes

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As a child growing up in the sixties, I can remember the many varied stories I was taught about Jesus. Jesus wanted me to be good, yet he got angry with his mom and turned over tables in the temple. I wasn’t supposed to smoke or drink but Jesus could turn water into wine. He hung out with hookers and the riff-raff of his day, but I was to choose my friends carefully and they needed to be good people. He talked back to the Pharisees and other grownups and I knew what happened when I did that. He could do all these fabulous things according to my preteen mind and according to my teachers… walking on water, raising people from the dead, healing them of sickness, yet he couldn’t keep them from killing him. Then they told me he died because of me… the ultimate guilt trip. Also, I was never able to wrap my mind around those kids in China who were hell-bound simply because they had never heard about Jesus.

Is it any wondered I was confused and conflicted about this man they called Jesus? In the sixties there was a game show on television called *To Tell the Truth*. They would have three different people up front, all trying to convince the panel and those watching that they were who they said they were. All three would claim to be the same person, yet they were obviously not. At the end of the show the announcer would say with a flourish, “Would the real _______, please stand up?” Looking back, I think that is how I felt about Jesus and what I was taught about him. I just wanted to say, would the real Jesus please stand up?

Now, some forty years later, I believe I have found answers that challenge and satisfy me. I can clearly see the many faces and portraits of Jesus that are painted in the gospels and other second testament writings. When I look at the different writers I can
see their agendas; the brush with which they paint Jesus and the creative vision that they each held for the story they were telling. When I look at current scholar’s best guess as to who wrote what when and then put the stories about Jesus in some semblance of chronological order, I can observe and follow the thread. I can see the changes in the story and the different emphasis that each writer places on aspects and pieces of the story. Suddenly what appeared to be a critical difference or even a contradiction in the stories begins to make sense in light of who wrote what and what they wished to convey. You might even say the real Jesus begins to appear.

For the purposes of this paper we will examine a portion of the “Sermon on the Mount” (or on the plains) known as The Beatitudes. Even more specifically, we will look at the two statements within the Sermon that show up in Thomas, Matthew and Luke. This portion of the story was chosen because it demonstrates the way each writer recorded what was essentially an oral story and how they each put some of themselves and their worldview into their versions. The Beatitudes also show up in three places, which provides the necessary contrast. They are in some form in two gospels, Matthew and Luke, and in the non-canonical gospel of Thomas. The fellows of The Jesus Seminar also give these portions of The Beatitudes the distinction of red and/or pink lettering, meaning that they agree that Jesus said something like this. It is these portions that we will focus upon for this paper. In Thomas, we will look at sayings 54 and 69:2. In Matthew we will examine the corresponding verses found in Chapter 5, verses 3, 4, and 6. Finally, in Luke we will look at Chapter 6:20-21.

First we will take a brief look at the story and the traditional way that it has been interpreted. This will allow us to establish our first line of questioning, our thesis. Then
we will compare that with Unity’s traditional meta-physical interpretation and see what similarities or differences we may find. We will then look at each of the three gospels for possible time of writing, their intentions, their reorganizations, deletions and particular emphasis. This will provide our antithesis or second line of questioning. The third line of questioning, or synthesis, will hopefully provide a clearer picture of “the real Jesus” and his intentions with this sermon. It is here that we ask the question, what does this story mean to me and how do I apply it to my life.

The Story and Traditional Interpretation

For a brief synopsis of our story we will turn to The New Oxford Annotated Bible, NRSV (2001). Perhaps the most familiar version in the Gospels comes from Matthew and for our purposes we focus on chapter 5, verses 1-4 and 6:

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:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Growing up I was taught that this was Jesus telling each of us how to live our lives, how to show up in the world, and what would happen if we showed up otherwise. The Matthew version was always used as a teaching tool, never Luke, and Thomas was probably not known to my teachers and would have been considered heresy! It was not in the Bible. This sermon was presented as a straightforward teaching from the mouth of Jesus telling me how I should behave.

Interestingly enough, in my research I find that even the traditional take on this story has grown since the sixties. In The Idiot’s Guide To The Bible (2003), the writers
James Bell, Jr. and Stan Campbell have this to say about the Sermon on the Mount and about the Beatitudes:

One of the more familiar and significant blocks of Jesus’ teaching was what is known as his “Sermon on the Mount.” It is debated whether this was a collection of his teachings or one extended discourse, but either way it was probably not a sermon as we think of preaching. It was a teaching session for his disciples and anyone else who wanted to listen, and more than likely it was broken up with questions, debates, and tangents that varied from the topic at hand. One thing we know for sure: Jesus had some ideas and ideals that were fresh, unexpected and quite unorthodox. From the opening statements of the Sermon on the Mount, popularly known as the Beatitudes (declarations of blessedness), it was quite clear that Jesus had some different opinions about life.

We will hear more on this later in our exploration of this teaching.

Unity’s Traditional Metaphysical Interpretation

I was not able to find any mention of the Sermon on the Mount or the Beatitudes in *The Metaphysical Bible Dictionary* (1931). In *The Revealing Word* (1959), Charles Fillmore has this to say about the Beatitudes, “Jesus in exaltation is blessing spiritual man with the attributes of God and also blessing the natural man with the attributes of the spiritual man.” (p. 22) The Encarta World Dictionary (accessed online 4/7/08) defines the word exaltation as “a feeling of intense or excessive happiness or joy”. I could find nothing in any of the three gospels to support Charles’ statement of “Jesus in exaltation”. His statement of “blessing… man with the attributes of God” closely parallels the traditional interpretation that Jesus is teaching us how to live more spiritually.

Mr. Fillmore and Unity obviously used the Matthew version of this story. The only other references found in The Revealing Word were the phrase “poor in spirit” and the word “righteousness”, both of which are only present in Matthew’s version. “Poor in spirit—Those who have denied personal consciousness. They are poor in the spirit of
selfishness, but rich in the Spirit of Christ” (p. 150), “Righteousness—A state of harmony established in consciousness through the right use of God-given attributes. It leads directly to eternal life. Truth working in consciousness brings forth the perfect salvation of the whole man—Spirit, soul, and body—and righteousness (right relation) is expressed in all his affairs” (p. 170). Essentially, Fillmore rewords the biblical passage yet says much the same. This is Jesus teaching us how to live our lives and how to be more God like.

In 1959 Unity published *Your Hope of Glory* by Elizabeth Sand Turner. In it she gives an interpretation that would have made the writers of Matthew proud. She stresses the Sermon on the Mount as the “New Law” (p. 114). Interestingly, in her interpretation of the gospel of Luke she barely mentions the existence of another version of the Sermon on the Mount and makes no mention of the different or reworked Beatitudes found in Luke.

Regarding Matthew’s version she writes:

Soon after the selection of the Twelve Apostles, Jesus delivered the immortal lessons that comprise the Sermon on the Mount. Even as the law that Moses received on Mount Sinai is the heart of Judaism, the Sermon on the Mount is the heart of Christianity. The Sermon is the new law; it is not meant to abrogate the revered Mosaic law but it is to teach us how this law may be fulfilled spiritually. The first law given to Moses, and which came from the heights in the Sinai wilderness, was accompanied by thunder and lightening. The new law was enunciated from the summit of a grassy hill in Galilee, probably from an elevation known as the Horns of Hattin, as its two peaks resemble an oriental saddle. Here a crowd gathered to see and hear the Master, whose words were spoken in quietness and love. The “Thou shalt not” of the Ten Commandments is replaced by the words “Blessed are you” in the Sermon on the Mount. The Decalogue’s stern delineation of right and wrong is mitigated in the Sermon to a compassionate appeal for righteous thinking and feeling. Moses stated the law; Jesus explained the way to obey it. (p. 114)
Sand Turner’s interpretation closely mirrors the traditional interpretation and focuses on Matthew’s presentation of the Sermon as the “new law”. She seems certain that it was on a mountainside, even identifying a possible location. She even seems to disagree with Fillmore about the manner in which the Sermon was delivered, saying it was “spoken in quietness and love” as opposed to Fillmore’s picture of “Jesus in exaltation”, joyously exhorting his disciples with blessings. Her interpretation paints a colorful and rich picture of the giving of both the first law and the new law that is not found in scripture.

Her metaphysical interpretations of the selected passages we are exploring are as follows: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. This is the first of the great statements called the Beatitudes. Each statement says that we shall be blessed when we attain certain attitudes of mind. The “poor in spirit” are people who relinquish their human concepts that they may learn from God…” (p. 115) She seems here to clearly indicate that she is talking about attitudes of mind and consciousness rather than specific deeds.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Trials and tribulations cause us to mourn… when woes beset us we turn to him and receive comfort.” (p. 116) There is not much interpretation here.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Righteousness is the right or spiritual use of mental, physical, and spiritual faculties, which are manifested as right action. When our desire to express the Christ is more powerful than our desire for personal gain or for personal power, we are hungering and thirsting after righteousness.” (p. 116) Finally, we have something that is clearly a
Unity interpretation, i.e. “express the Christ”. This is our Unity spin on how to live more spiritually.

So here we have our thesis or our first line of questioning, which we find in the literal, traditional and also to some degree in the Unity metaphysical interpretation. For the second line of questioning or antithesis we will look at each of the gospels in turn seeking to understand the Jesus they each portray. We will look at them in what is believed by current scholars to be the order in which they appeared.

**Thomas**

Writer Bart Ehrman in *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction To The Early Christian Writings* (2004) says that, “individual sayings found in Thomas may go back to Jesus himself…. Moreover, there are grounds for thinking that some of the 114 sayings of this particular Gospel, especially some of the parables, are preserved in an older form than in the canonical Gospels, that is, they may be more like what Jesus actually said” (p. 206).

In *The Gospel Of Thomas: The Hidden Sayings Of Jesus* (1992), author Marvin Meyer gives us insight into the structure and composition of this Gospel:

“As a collection of sayings of Jesus, the Gospel of Thomas is closer in genre to other ancient collections of sayings than to the New Testament Gospels…. Sayings are particularly prominent in Jewish wisdom literature. Jewish sages compiled documents like Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Wisdom of Solomon…. These documents belong to an exceedingly old tradition of wisdom literature in Egypt and the ancient Middle East, a tradition that extends back to the second and third millennia B.C.E.” (p. 4)
This structure is important as we begin to see the Jesus that Thomas seeks to portray, emerge. Marvin Meyer writes poetically of the Jesus we find in Thomas:

“As a gospel of wisdom, the Gospel of Thomas proclaims a distinctive message. In contrast to the way in which he is portrayed in other gospels, particularly New Testament gospels, Jesus in the Gospel of Thomas performs no physical miracles, reveals no fulfillment of prophecy, announces no apocalyptic kingdom about to disrupt the world order, and dies for no ones sins. Instead Thomas’s Jesus dispenses insight from the bubbling spring of wisdom…” (p. 6f)

The picture of Jesus that emerges is at the same time complex and clear. Meyer says, “Some of Jesus’ sayings in Thomas disclose an everyday wisdom about life in the world that is familiar from other wisdom documents in the Jewish scriptures and elsewhere.” (p. 7)

Another facet or nuance that comes to light is the presence of “a more provocative and radical kind of wisdom that subverts the conventions of society…. a counter-culture wisdom” (p. 8). Sayings urging disciples to leave family and renounce the world or give their money and possessions away are examples of this.

Other sayings in the Gospel of Thomas “show a more esoteric interest in transcending the world and identifying with the divine…. Sometimes scholars have considered such sayings to be representative of a Gnostic point of view” (p. 8).

In the Nag Hammadi codices, which were discovered in 1945 in Egypt, scholars eventually found a text that had been lost for centuries: the Gospel according to Thomas. The manuscript was written in Coptic, a later form of ancient Egyptian. The fellows of the Jesus Seminar, in the book *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* (1993), write that this “Coptic manuscript of Thomas was written about 350 C.E.; other Greek fragments of Thomas have been dated to around 200 C.E., based on an analysis of the
writing style. Thomas probably assumed its present form by 100 C.E., although an earlier edition may have originated as early as 50-60 C.E.” (p. 474). If we accept this dating, that would place the earliest Gospel of Thomas around the time of the first writings and letters of Paul and some twenty years earlier than the first of the synoptic gospels.

The sayings that correspond with those in red or pink in Matthew and Luke are sayings 54 and 69:2. Saying 54 reads, “Jesus said, Congratulations to the poor, for to you belongs Heaven’s domain” (Funk, 1993, p. 504) “In these so-called beatitudes, Jesus declares that certain groups are in God’s special favor. “Blessed” is an archaic way of expressing this idea. The Scholar’s Version has replaced the traditional term with its modern equivalent: Congratulations!”(Funk, 1993, p. 138).

The Jesus Seminar designated this statement red, giving it the second highest weighted average of all the sayings attributed to Jesus! “There is no question about Jesus’ consorting with the poor, the hungry, the persecuted. He announced that God’s domain belonged to the poor, not because they were righteous, but because they were poor. This reverses a common view that God blesses the righteous with riches and curses the immoral with poverty” (Funk, 1993, p. 504). Could this be the counter-culture Jesus saying that the rich can be immoral and the poor righteous?

Saying 69:2 reads, “Congratulations to those who go hungry, so the stomach of the one in want may be filled” (p. 512). This statement was judged pink and it is believed it can be traced back to Jesus in some form. So in Thomas we find presented a practical, provocative, counter-culture Jesus who teaches us to identify with the divine. I happen to find this picture of Jesus very intriguing and thought provoking.
Matthew

“The Gospel of Matthew was one of the most highly treasured accounts of Jesus’ life among the early Christians” (Ehrman, p. 92). The picture that we see of Jesus in Matthew is one that clearly portrays his Jewishness. Indeed, “Matthew appears to portray Jesus as a new Moses. Some scholars have suggested that this collection of his teachings into five major blocks of material is meant to recall the five books of the Law of Moses”, says Ehrman (2007). Now believed to be written circa 82-85 CE, Matthew “stresses Jesus’ Jewishness as the Jewish messiah sent from the Jewish God to the Jewish people in fulfillment of the Jewish Law…” (p. 110).

In considering the Sermon on the Mount one cannot help but note the parallel to Moses going up the mountain to receive the law. Matthew is the only one who places this sermon on the mountain. Luke says he went out onto a plain and Thomas makes no mention of where he was when he said these things. Ehrman further surmises that since Luke has the sayings scattered throughout his gospel and Thomas has them ordered differently, “it appears that the Sermon on the Mount may be Matthew’s own creation. By taking material dispersed throughout his sources, Matthew has formed them into one finely crafted collection of Jesus’ important teachings” (Ehrman, 2007, p. 110).

From the Beatitudes, the two passages Matthew has in common with Thomas and Luke (that are red/pink) are chapter 5, verses 3 and 6. Verse 3. Congratulations to the poor in spirit! Heaven’s domain belongs to them. Verse 6. Congratulations to those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. They will have a feast.
We can see here how Matthew spiritualized these sayings. The Jesus Seminar writes, “Matthew’s versions of the poor, weeping, and hungry sayings were designated pink, because the reasons for congratulations, in these two instances, have been interpreted as referring to religious virtues rather than to social or economic conditions” (Funk, 1993, p. 139).

In Matthew we find a supremely Jewish Jesus, one who is concerned with humility and righteousness. Matthew’s Jesus believed that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. Ehrman explains, “This kingdom does not refer to the place people go to when they die. Rather, it refers to God’s presence on earth, a kingdom he will bring at the end of this age by overthrowing the forces of evil…. If the Law of Moses was meant to provide divine guidance for Jews as the children of Israel, the teachings of Jesus are meant to provide guidance for his followers as children of the kingdom of heaven” (Ehrman, 2007, p. 110).

**Luke**

In the Gospel of Luke we find a third portrait of Jesus for our consideration. While Matthew focused on Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, Luke put particular emphasis on Jesus’ role as a prophet. “…Luke understood Jesus to be a prophet sent by God to his people” and while much the same can be said for Mark and Matthew, “Luke places an even greater emphasis on Jesus prophetic role as the spokesperson for God who came to be rejected by his own people…”(Ehrman, 2004, p. 121). So because the Jewish people rejected the salvation that came to them through Jesus, “The message was then sent into the whole world for the salvation of all people, Jew and Gentile” (p. 129).
A second emphasis that we find in Luke is twofold. Luke spends time making his case that the mission to the Gentiles has always been a part of God’s plan, which in turn impacts his belief about the end of the world. “In Luke, Jesus does not envisage the end of the age happening immediately. How could he? First the Christian church had to be spread among the Gentiles and this would take time” (p. 128).

The third and perhaps the most distinctive emphasis found in Luke “also relates closely to the delay of the end: Jesus’ social concerns” (p. 129).

Throughout the history of religion, people committed to the belief that the end is near have occasionally withdrawn from society and shown little concern for its ongoing problems. Why commit oneself to fighting poverty and oppression if the world is going to end next week? Jesus knows that the end is not imminent, and this may explain one other way in which his gospel stands out as unique. More than either of the other synoptics, Luke emphasizes Jesus’ concern for the social ills of his day. (p. 129)

The two verses we are using for comparison are Luke 6:20-21. Verse 20 reads, “Congratulations, you poor! God’s domain belongs to you.” And Verse 21, “Congratulations, you hungry! You will have a feast.”(Funk, 1993, p. 289). “The Fellows of the Jesus Seminar were virtually unanimous in their view that Jesus is the author of the first two congratulations. They are also convinced that the Lukan versions of those addressed to the poor and the hungry are more original” (p. 290). In contrast to Matthew, “Luke’s concern here is for literal, material poverty. Whereas Matthew’s Jesus says “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness,” in Luke he says, “Blessed are you who are hungry now” (Ehrman, 2004, p. 129).
In Luke we see a picture of Jesus that is both prophet and social worker, focused on empowering the poor and the hungry, meeting their basic needs along with his message.

**Synthesis/Maieutic**

Here you have it, three gospels, and three very different portrayals of one man. Which one is real, which one is true? What if there was truth in each writer’s portrayal as they looked through their own lens, their own worldview? Could we see this more as variations on a theme rather than one right and two wrong answers?

For our third line of questioning we ask three different times, what about this author’s Jesus resonates with me? In Thomas, we find the provocative; counter-culture Jesus that speaks wisely and succinctly to the issues of his day and encourages his followers to identify with the divine. I resonate with this Jesus because I too wish to be an effective communicator, able to speak clearly and concisely, synthesizing ideas and concepts so that people can grasp them easily and grow spiritually.

What of Matthew’s Jesus? When do I identify with the master-teacher, steeped in tradition, law, and order? I do resonate with this picture in that I desire order, eloquence, and respect tradition. I learned years ago in understanding my own Myers-Briggs profile that if faced with a choice I most often defend the history/tradition rather than the radical thought. Perhaps that is changing.

Then we have the Jesus pictured in Luke. He is a prophet concerned with social justice. This man resonates for me now and would seem to for Unity as well. The AUCI’s Sacred Social Action Team is the largest ministry team ever.
There are elements of each Jesus that ring true. Perhaps we see here the beginnings of the teachings about Jesus begin to take center stage. We move from the basic sayings of Thomas, which show Jesus as wisdom teacher with little mythology surrounding him, to the highly spiritualized Master-Teacher of Matthew, to the man concerned for the social ills of his day in Luke.

Conclusion

Would that it was so easy as to say: Would the real Jesus please stand up. Just tell me what to believe please. No? I didn’t think so. So we are left with the counter-culture, radical Jesus speaking words of wisdom, bringing the spirit of a new law and arguing against the letter of the old law, and speaking a social gospel of love, inclusion and forgiveness.

In looking at methods of teaching and interpreting the Bible, I find that I can no longer simply pull a passage and interpret it through one lens. To do so would be to give an incomplete picture, only part of the story. I love the richness that I find in the historical-critical method. It is there that I find what for me is the real Jesus.


Encarta World Dictionary. Accessed online 4/7/08

Fillmore, C. (1959). The revealing word. Unity House, Unity Village, MO


