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Journey Without Luggage

And he 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 and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came forth from him and healed them all.

And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said:

"Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

"Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied.

"Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh."

—*Luke 6:17-21 (cf. Matthew 5:1-9)*

When Jesus had taken his place and saw the great crowd of people gathered around him he began to read what he saw in the multitude of eyes directed at him.

What was written in those eyes?

It was probably a mingling of hope and fear, of anxiety and covert expectation.

To begin with, there was the host of the miserable, the guilt-burdened, the lonely, the incurably ill, the careworn, the people who were hagridden by anxiety. They gaze at him with inscrutable eyes that can be fathomed only by the Savior himself.

Normally, we never see the miserable gathered together in this way. Suffering and sorrow usually creep away and hide themselves.

Just suppose that suddenly all the hospitals and asylums were emptied. Could we bear the sight of the crippled and mutilated, the pallor of death, the hopelessness? Could we bear to listen to the shrill cacophony of mumbling, babbling, lunatic voices, the shrieks of people tormented by persecution delusions and demonic possession?

So all these miserable, burdened people are gathered here around Jesus; for in some mysterious way Jesus attracts the miserable. He draws the sinners and sufferers from their hiding places like a magnet. Undoubtedly, the reason for this is that men sense in this Figure something they do not see in any other man.

For one thing they see (and we all see) that he stands among us as if he were one of us; he stands the test of misery. He does not act as do the influential "upper ten thousand" of this world, who build exclusive residential districts where they cannot see the world's misery, who send a monthly check to an institution for the destitute, but whom ten horses could not drag to the place where they would prefer to send their unfeeling money by itself. They are afraid to expose their hearts or even their nerves to all this. They fear that their Persian rugs would begin to burn beneath their feet and they would no longer get any pleasure out of them. They are afraid that their gleaming chandeliers would no longer be able to sweep away from their eyes the darkness they would have to gaze into there.

So these people are grateful to the Savior for coming to their miserable slum, grateful that he does not close his eyes as the vast army of those who are shadowed by suffering passes by.

At the same time, however, they see in him something else, which is far more incomprehensible and, put alongside of their first observation, almost inconceivable: the fact that the powers of guilt and suffering cannot touch him, that, mysteriously, these powers retreat as he comes by. To be sure, his heart, too, shuddered beneath the onslaughts of hell in the wilderness; for, after

all, it was his will to possess a human heart, to which nothing human, no temptation, no dread, is alien. But sullen Satan was defeated and left the arena without having accomplished anything whatsoever. The same thing happened on the Cross. There, too, he was clutched and clawed by physical pain and the dread of dereliction; but again his spirit burst through the deadly encirclement and found the way to the Father's hand.

So they all sought to get near to him. They gazed with wistful longing at his hands that could do so much good and never wearied of blessing and healing.

But now his hands were at rest. Now he seated himself and began to speak.

We wonder whether they were not a little, perhaps even greatly, disappointed. People generally prefer "practical Christianity, the religion of action." They would much rather have him satisfy their hunger, bind up their wounds, and drive the mad fear from their minds.

But here he is opening his mouth to speak. Why does he turn to speech when all this misery cries out for action? Now, these people think, now come the theories and the doctrines that never feed and heal a man, that never warm a man's bones, that never bring back a dead son, never fill the dread emptiness of the future.

But even more: perhaps what he says will only make us more sick than we were before. Haven't people always been claiming that this is so? All respect to practical brotherly love! But have not the "dogmas" of Christianity brought miseries upon miseries to the world? Hasn't it constantly been creating separations between people? Hasn't it broken up communities, unleashed wars, troubled consciences, and robbed us of peace of mind?

So these people here may be thinking too. What will he have to say?

Probably what everybody already knows anyhow: that the misery and suffering gathered there before him represents a *judgment*, that the whole creation is corrupt, and so on. Oh, we know that old story of the preachers!

At any rate he'll be calling us to repentance, as John the Baptist did not long ago. He won't have anything else to say except to go on repeating with painful monotony: The ax is laid to the root of the trees and the Last Judgment is near.

These people who are gathered around Jesus know, or at least think they know, what is coming when Jesus opens his mouth: God's declaration of war against man, denunciation of sin, painful, scrutinizing exposure of those innermost thoughts with which God is not pleased.

The preachers are always beating this same old track. Everybody knows this. These people know precisely what is coming. And this in itself is very distressing and tiresome. Nor will they be able to contradict it, for this preacher of penitence from Nazareth is certainly right. But this only makes it more painful and depressing. That stuff never gets you anywhere. Nobody is helped by negatives, even when they are true.

Then Jesus opened his mouth and something completely unexpected happened, something that drove these people to an astonishment bordering upon terror, something that held them spellbound long after he ceased speaking and would not let them rest. Jesus said to the people gathered around him, people who were harried by suffering, misery, and guilt: "Blessed are you; blessed are you." The Sermon on the Mount closes with the remark that the crowds were astonished and frightened, even though it was a sermon on grace. But this is what always happens when God unveils his great goodness. It is so immense, so far beyond and contrary to all human dimensions and conceptions that at first one simply cannot understand it and we stand there in utter helpless bewilderment. The shepherds at Christmas were also unable at first to exult over the great light

that broke through the darkness over the earth but could only fall to their knees in fear and scurry for cover.

When Jesus preached repentance, when Jesus wept over Jerusalem, which even then would not recognize the things that make for peace, he did so in a voice almost choked with tears. How is it that the language of the Bible, which is normally so strong and unsentimental, should at this point speak of tears? Jesus wept not only because these were *his* people who were lurching so unavertibly toward the abyss. No, Jesus wept because he knew the power of the Seducer, the menacing mystery of the devil, who seizes even the upright, the respectable, the morally intact people by the throat, and grips them in such a way that at first even they themselves (if they do not have the gift of distinguishing between spirits) have no premonition of the dreadful slopes to which they are being edged by a consummate cunning.

This is, after all, the ghastly mystery of the terrible twelve years in which we were dealing with this dark power in Germany, years in which the devil proved himself to be a master of every ruse and camouflage. In those years that lie behind us he did not appeal to the *base* instincts of our people, but challenged the sacrificial spirit and devotion of men. He caught hold of youth at the point of their idealism and their love for their country and, posing as an angel of light, played his diabolical games with the best attributes of our people.

Only because Jesus knew this power of the Seducer and because he grieved over those who were being seduced are we brought to the point where he wrests from our hearts the innermost willingness to *accept* judgment from *him*.

This is rather an amazing thing. For can there be any harsher judgment than that of the Cross of Golgotha, surrounded not only by the hangman's myrmidons and the masses roused to the pitch of sadism, but also by the best and most moral examples

of humanity? And yet all of them together constitute a chorus, giving appalling expression to megalomania, their vanity, and their bad conscience. The fact is that we are all represented in that furious mob around the Cross. "Mine, mine was the transgression, But thine the deadly pain."

And yet we accept this judgment that comes from Golgotha. Simply because we sense that here a man died for those whom he himself would have to accuse, that here a man gave his life for those who have forfeited their lives, that here a man stood at bay, in his own flesh and blood, and therefore in an ultimate comradeship with us all, against the powers that would torment and destroy us.

The hard judgments which the Sermon on the Mount hurls upon us all, relentlessly unmasking the deepest secrets and urges of our hearts, are spoken by a Savior who in the very midst of judgment calls out to us "Blessed are you," a Savior who does not only fling out the cry "Woe to you," but invites us to the Father's house. These judgments are spoken by a Savior whose hand is not clenched into a smashing, repulsing fist, but is opened in the gesture of blessing, and as he blesses we see the wounds he suffered for our sake.

This leads us to the second point at which the utter difference between the judgments of God and the way in which we men are accustomed to judge and condemn becomes clear.

No man has ever yet been healed by judgment and punishment. Always the merely negative only makes us sick. What good does it do if in the midst of the judgment and retribution that comes to us we must say it serves you right; you can't kick; you made your bed and now you must lie in it.

I ask: What good does it do to have this insight into judgment? Obviously, none at all. It only pitches us into deeper hopelessness and inner paralysis, and in not a few people stirs up the horrible and sinful desire to end it all by violence.

The judgment by itself is no help at all if there is nothing else besides. Therefore God too is never the judge, but always, in the midst of judgment and in the midst of personal, vocational, and family catastrophe, he is the seeking God, the God who is seeking to bring us home, the "Savior," the restoring God. God is always positive, even in the very worst of the judgments and terrors that he must permit to come upon us.

That's how the beatitudes are to be understood: a hand stretched out to us in the midst of suffering and care, a hand that makes it clear that God still has a design for us and that he wants to lead us to goals so lovely that we shall weep for joy. God never merely stops with our past, though he does not let us get away with anything and puts his finger upon our sorest wounds. He is always the Lord who is concerned about our future, paving the way to save us and guiding us to his goals.

If we really want to learn to evaluate and rejoice in this positive side of judgment and be able to reach out for it in every time of need and suffering we shall have to guard against two misconceptions.

The *first* is this. We all know that familiar saying of Goethe: "Blessed is he that cuts himself off from the world without hatred. . . ." All of us have gone through hard, desperate, fear-scourged, hopeless hours of life, times in which we have tried to escape on the wings of dreams to some region where, to use Adalbert Stifter's phrase, the "gentle law" still reigns. At such times older folks may dream of the days of their youth when things were different and youth may dream of a future when things will be different. But is that true blessedness, true happiness? Isn't it only a shot of morphine that makes us dependent and unfit and only throws us back more helplessly into hard reality?

Jesus says something altogether different to us in his beatitudes. For he addresses his call specifically to those who are in a predicament, the poor, those who are suffering because of their

own shortcomings and failures, the guilty, the grieving, the persecuted, the hungry and thirsty. Why should he call these, of all people, blessed? Is this merely cruel irony? What would someone who had been told yesterday by the doctor that he was suffering from cancer say if you called him "blessed"? What would a woman who had been betrayed by her husband and robbed of her dignity say? Or a mother who sees her child going wrong? Or a young man who lives in desperate loneliness in a rented room somewhere in a big city?

Isn't it sheer mockery to call these people "blessed"—whether in Goethe's sense or even in the sense of Jesus of Nazareth?

But now, listen to this.

When we are dealing with the beatitudes of Jesus, we must not leave out of account *him* who spoke them; we dare not assess them as sentences or maxims of a general philosophy of life which are to be measured by whatever truth they contain within themselves.

In all of these utterances Jesus is secretly pointing to himself. And if we hear them addressed to us today by him who has been exalted to the right hand of power and looks down upon us from the glory of his eternity, then this is what he is saying to us:

"The first reason why you who are miserable and afraid are to be called blessed is simply because *I* am in the midst of you. You complain because you must suffer? Look, I myself found my real mission and learned obedience in what I suffered. You complain because you have to drink a bitter cup? Look, when I myself was compelled to drink the most ghastly draught any man ever faced I learned to say, 'Not my will, but thine, be done.' So I found peace in unconditional acceptance of the will of my Father. You complain that in all your sufferings the face of God has vanished, that you cannot feel his presence at all, and you are left so dreadfully alone? Look, *I* too had that feeling of Godforsakenness; it found its vent in that terrible cry of dereliction, and the sun was darkened because it could not bear

the extremity of that loneliness. But while my tortured body drooped, but was held and could not fall because of the burning nails, suddenly the Father's hand was there beneath me to break my fall and snatch my spirit from the anguish.

"Don't you understand this, my brothers? The first beatitude is that *I* am in the midst of you and that, because you are suffering my sorrows, I will also lead you to my fulfillments and my blessings."

Then the *second* reason for blessedness.

We should not think that Jesus merely wanted to give us a few maxims of practical wisdom, that he merely intended to talk about the blessing of suffering and poverty and console us by telling us that suffering would make us more mature. Jesus knew all too well that it can turn out just the opposite, that a man can break down under suffering, that it can drive us into cursing instead of prayer, and that its ultimate effect will perhaps be bitter complaining and accusing of God for his injustice.

No, because it is *he* who is present, because he is in the midst of us, he comes not as a teacher but as the Savior. These are not just words, words, words; something *happens* to us.

For now we have a signature, sealed with blood and sanctified by the Savior's sufferings, declaring that heaven has been opened to us, even when everything around us is locked tight, even if there should never again be any improvement, any future, any merriment or laughter in our lives. We have the signature which certifies that "*in everything* God works for good with those who love him" and that now (but actually only because that signature is valid) it is precisely the empty hands that shall be blessed, because they have long since lost all human hopes and consolations; that the worst sinners shall be comforted, because even the last shreds of any illusions as to their own consequence have been stripped away from them and now for the first time God has a chance to work in them. Now we have the assurance that those who come with nothing in their hands will learn, to

their humiliation, that God is *everything* to them. When they hold the hand of God they learn that fabulous certainty with which we can step into the uncertainties of each succeeding day. We have the signed statement, sealed by the sufferings of Christ, that now those who go aimlessly stumbling through life are literally surrounded with joyful surprises, because they will learn (on this *one* condition, that they really dare to trust God) how God is always there, that his help is supplied with an almost incredible punctuality. They learn how he sends some person to help us up again; how he allows us to catch some word (which need not even be in the Bible) to which we cling; how he brings money into the house and bread to our table; and how in the hour of our greatest sorrow he may perhaps send the laughter of a little child.

He who dares to live in this way, in the name of this miracle, in the name of this opened heaven will see the glory of God, the comforting stars of God shining in the darkest valleys of his life and will wait with all the joyful expectancy of a child for the next morning where the Father will be waiting with his surprises.

For God is always positive. He makes all things new. And the lighted windows of the Father's house shine brightest in the far country where all our "blessings" have been lost.

Blessed are you—not because the far country cannot take away from you the dream of home and better times to come. No, blessed are you because the door is really and truly open and the Father's hand is stretched out to you—as long as he who came in the name of the Father stands among us and proclaims, nay, fulfills, the words, "Blessed are you!"