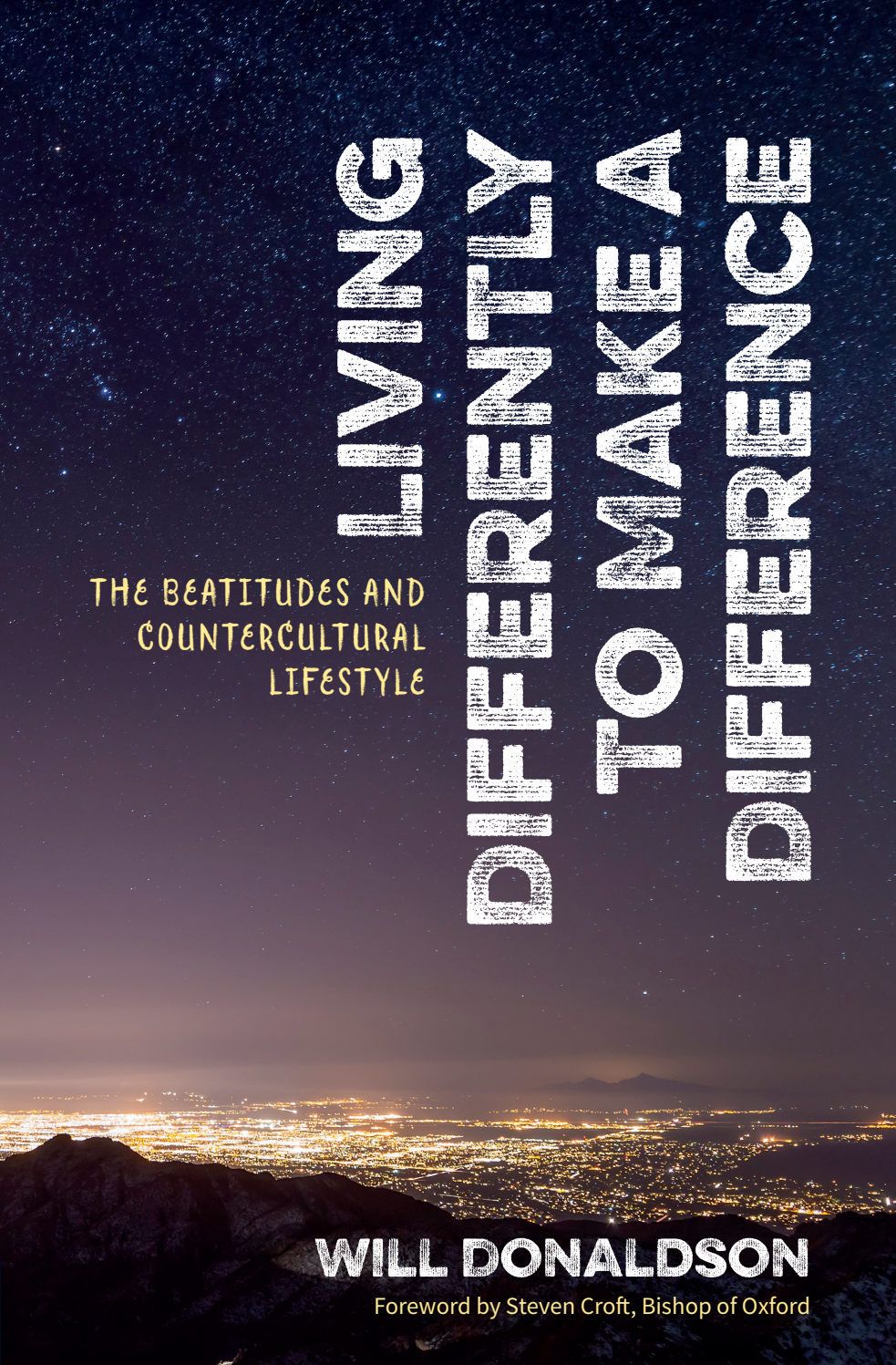
LIVING DIFFERENTLY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE
THE BEATITUDES AND COUNTERCULTURAL LIFESTYLE
WILL DONALDSON
Foreword by Steven Croft, Bishop of Oxford

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WILL DONALDSON

BRF

CONTENTS

FOREWORD

Matthew takes great care in setting out the teaching of Jesus in five sections of the gospel. The first and the longest is the sermon on the mount. At the head of the sermon on the mount, with almost the first words of Jesus in this gospel, Matthew sets the beautiful sayings beginning with 'Blessed': the inexhaustible beatitudes. They are a kind of manifesto (and a manifesto of kindness).

There are signs that the beatitudes are coming back into focus in the life of the church as a text for the 21st century. They are pithy and memorable. Each one can fit into a tweet, yet each is like clicking on an icon: exploring even a single word unlocks many layers of the biblical tradition. In the Diocese of Oxford, we are part way through a whole year of asking every church, chaplaincy and school – and every Christian – to set these words of Jesus at the centre of what it means to be the church. We are trying to knead the beatitudes through the life of the church as a baker kneads yeast through dough, and we are waiting to see what good things will emerge for the kingdom of God.

Will Donaldson has written a clear, deep and practical guide to living the beatitudes for every disciple. The book's focus is not simply on understanding the text but on living in this way as a disciple and as part of a community of disciples: the church. As we read and study and live this text, so we see more clearly, as Will argues, the face behind the beatitudes: the self-portrait of the one who, long ago, walked up the mountain and began to teach his disciples and, in that teaching, began to change the world.

Rt Revd Dr Steven Croft
Bishop of Oxford

INTRODUCTION: UNHEALTHY LIFESTYLES

This morning I watched a young doctor on BBC Breakfast TV offer a solution to the overstretched and underfunded UK National Health Service (NHS), which is fast approaching breaking point. Dr Rangan Chatterjee, a GP from Oldham in Greater Manchester and an established thought leader in the field of preventive medicine, has focused on 'lifestyle medicine'. He argued that the NHS is in crisis largely owing to unhealthy lifestyles, such as poor diet, smoking, low levels of physical activity, excess alcohol and extremely high stress levels. These factors now fuel the majority of global deaths and diseases. To quote from his blog:

> Our training (as doctors) is not as useful for the current epidemic of chronic lifestyle-related conditions that are now flooding our surgeries. I focus on finding the root cause of diseases and help my patients make their illnesses disappear.[1]

A BBC1 documentary, called *Doctor in the House*, follows Dr Chatterjee as he is allowed into the homes of sick patients to assess their lifestyles during the day and night over the period of a few weeks. Dr Chatterjee says: 'I stayed 13 full days with them, spread over a period of seven weeks so that I could immerse myself in their lifestyle and see the kind of foods they were eating. I also stayed two nights to monitor their sleep patterns and what they were doing to wind down'.[2] He then offers them a diagnosis, with a prescription of lifestyle changes rather than prescription pills.

Dr Chatterjee comes up with a series of steps to better health, which, put concisely, are 'eat, move, sleep, relax'. Dr Aseem Malhotra,

consultant cardiologist and advisor to the National Obesity Forum, agrees with him:

> Our current NHS crisis is the product of a broken system rooted in too many prescription medications of dubious benefit that come with side effects combined with unhealthy lifestyles resulting in a public health disaster… The future of sustainable healthcare will require taking less drugs and utilising more lifestyle interventions, which will not only save the NHS billions but improve the quality of life for millions of UK citizens.[3]

What if the unhealthy lifestyle problems facing the NHS are a reflection of the wider social and spiritual problems facing the whole of the world today? Despite all the advances in science, medicine, technology, social care and human rights – and they are significant – we live in what can only be described as a wounded and broken world. The range of problems facing our global community seems bigger than ever, beyond the capacity of any leaders or organisations to sort out. Globalisation seems to have failed to deliver the quality of life that it promised and has left many disillusioned and marginalised. Consumerism and materialism have not provided the inner contentment and satisfaction that they promised, but have only deepened the sense of the emptiness of life. As the scientific and rationalistic certainties of the modern era have given way to the uncertainties and scepticism of the postmodern world, people have been left wondering whether there is any meaning or purpose in life at all, causing a profound sense of lostness. A distressed student expressed exactly that to me last week with chilling clarity in a pastoral encounter.

The financial systems of many nations have collapsed or are in long-term deficit. Environmental concerns continue to grow in severity as governments repeatedly fail to deliver their national targets. International tensions continue to escalate between the West and Russia, the US and North Korea, and regional struggles persist in the Middle East. Serious terrorist strikes have put European capitals on

high alert with alarming frequency. Millions in developing nations live in abject poverty, lacking the basic necessities of food, clothing, clean water, shelter, healthcare and education. Family life and marriages throughout Europe are under pressure, and there is a staggering rise in mental health problems among children and young people. Our prisons in the UK are overfull and understaffed, and drugs and violence are commonplace among the inmates, with high levels of reoffending after release. There has been a relentless media exposure of celebrities, politicians and church leaders who have abused children and young people to suit their own selfish pleasures.

In addition, technology and robotics, for all their blessings, can have dehumanising, disempowering and destructive effects. The dark side of the internet is well known, with a billion-dollar pornography industry that exploits and dehumanises those involved, and with terrorist websites that radicalise vulnerable young people. Social media has a dark side too, with cyber bullying, paedophile grooming and sexting very common among children and young people.

Yuval Noah Harari is an Israeli academic who is trying to look into the future and predict how the human race is evolving, particularly in the light of our growing dependence on computers, smartphones and robots. In his latest book, *Homo Deus*, he says: 'We increasingly outsource mental and communicative activities to computers. We are merging with our smartphones.'[4] He believes this has political as well as personal ramifications, with power to rule moving to those who know about algorithms and biotechnology, and who have the ability to process information centrally, because they will be able to 'construct a total surveillance regime that follows every individual all the time', including phone calls, emails and movements.

As regards robotics, they are mainly being used at present in work situations where there is a danger to human life, such as bomb disposal or manufacturing industries. But, in Japan, robots have much more developed and controversial roles: as companions for humans, especially the elderly, as sexual partners or entertainment

bots, even as humanoids hired as priests to take funerals, chanting Buddhist sutras in a computerised voice. There is also the extremely worrying dimension of cyberattacks and cybercrime, brought centre stage by two recent major cyberattacks that targeted operating systems used by many businesses. A report published by the insurance market Lloyds of London warned that the financial implications of a major incident could be as high as $121 billion, based on the worst-case impact of a 'malicious attack that takes down a cloud service provider' having knock-on effects for many other businesses.

Another perspective of our Western brokenness is poignantly documented in *Hillbilly Elegy: A memoir of a family and culture in crisis* by J.D. Vance.[5] Vance grew up in white, working-class communities in Ohio and Kentucky and, after leaving high school, served in the Marine Corps in Iraq, became a graduate of Yale Law School and now works as an investor in a leading venture capital firm, writing occasionally for *The New York Times* and the *National Review*. His personal story charts the social decline of his family and community, and provides a troubling meditation on the loss of the American Dream for a large segment of the population.

What if all these social, political and technological problems were connected to the same fundamental root cause: a chronic lifestyle dysfunction? What if Oswald J. Smith was right when he said: 'The heart of the human problem, is the problem of the human heart'? What if Archbishop Thomas Cranmer was not overstating the seriousness of the human condition and the state of our souls in his prayer of confession in the Church of England's Prayer Book?

> Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred, and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; and there is no health in us.[6]

What if, despite being fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God, and being capable of lofty heights in the arts and sciences, music and culture, literature and sport, kindness and compassion, there is – at the end of the day – 'no health in us'?

Then we would need a doctor, a divine physician of the soul. Then we would need a 'doctor in the house' who would enter our world and come and live alongside us, and observe the dysfunction of our lives and give us a truthful diagnosis about the way we need to change our lifestyles.

And what if the God of heaven has indeed sent a divine physician, a Saviour, a practitioner in the healing of souls? What if he was the one about whom John said: 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us… full of grace and truth' (John 1:14)? What if he said to those who would listen to him: 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but those who are ill. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance' (Luke 5:31–32). What if coming under his lordship and rule over our lives brought the healing and peace we so desperately wanted, as he indicated in Matthew 11:29: 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.' What if the restoring of our souls was only a small part in a much bigger plan to 'make all things new' (Revelation 21:5), putting the world to rights, creating a new heaven and earth?

Then there would be hope. But for that hope to be realised there would need to be, firstly, a careful listening to his diagnosis; then, a personal application of his prescription; and, finally, a daily attentiveness to his teaching, adjusting our lifestyles to his ways.

This book invites us on that journey of healing, the reordering of our lives around the central call of Jesus to discipleship in the beatitudes. John Stott, in his commentary on the sermon on the mount entitled *Christian Counter-Culture*, helpfully described them as follows:

> The Beatitudes set forth the balanced and variegated character of Christian people… they are Christ's own specification of what every Christian ought to be. All the qualities are to characterise all of his followers… they are his ideal for every citizen of God's Kingdom… they paint a comprehensive portrait of a Christian disciple.[7]

They are strategically placed at the entrance of the sermon on the mount, so they provide the necessary gateway through which all should enter this world-famous treatise. The beatitudes are giving us the principles and values that will be illustrated and worked out in practice in the various sections of the sermon. In doing this, Jesus is announcing the arrival of the messianic kingdom, foretold in the Old Testament, and fulfilled in his own life and ministry. So, the New Cambridge Bible Commentary on Matthew by Craig Evans, distinguished Professor of New Testament at Acadia Divinity School in Nova Scotia, highlights the importance of the beatitudes in terms of their being a proclamation of his messianic kingdom: 'One of the striking features of Jesus' beatitudes is the many parallels with Isaiah 61:1–11.'[8] In this, he is following the scholarly work of Davies and Allison, who identify very similar allusions to Isaiah 61, concluding: 'If, as seems overwhelmingly probable, the core of the beatitudes… be dominical, Jesus must have formulated them with Isaiah 61:1–3 in mind… the influence of Isaiah 61 should be located at the fount of this tradition.'[9]

Isaiah 61 was the Old Testament passage that Jesus read in the synagogue at Nazareth to announce the arrival of the Messiah, and he finished with those explosive words: 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:21); and Isaiah 61 is heavily alluded to in his reply to John the Baptist's disciples who come to him and ask: 'Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?' (Luke 7:20). And Jesus' reply is, in effect: 'Take a look at what is going on; does this not look like Isaiah 61? Of course I am the Messiah!' However, here too in the beatitudes, Craig Evans finds no fewer than seven deliberate allusions to Isaiah 61 and we shall note

these – and more – when we get to them individually. But the point to grasp is that Jesus, in the beatitudes, is once again announcing the arrival of the messianic kingdom, foreshadowed in Isaiah 61 and now fulfilled in their very hearing. This is a messianic manifesto – setting out which kind of people are and will be part of it, and what it means to live under the just and gentle rule of the anointed Christ.

The beatitudes have also been very important in the history of the church. Robert Warren, in his book on the beatitudes, makes this point while lamenting the fact that the church seems to have lost sight of them recently:

> In the early Christian centuries they were one of the key texts for those being initiated into the faith, alongside the Lord's Prayer and the Creed. Those three texts helped newcomers to the faith to know what to believe (the Creed), how to pray (the Lord's Prayer) and how to live (the Beatitudes)… for much of the history of the church they have been the roots from which Christian spirituality, moral behaviour, and discipleship have been nourished and inspired.[10]

More than that, we shall see the beatitudes being embodied in Jesus' own life and ministry, brought to us by the gospel narratives. So, in this sense, they express who he was, what he valued, and how he behaved. In calling us to live them out, he is really calling us to follow his example, to be Christlike in who we are, what we value and how we live. John Stott's last speaking engagement before retiring from public ministry at the age of 86 was at the 2007 Keswick Convention. During it he said:

> What is God's purpose for his people?… I want to share with you where my mind has come to rest as I approach the end of my pilgrimage on earth, and it is – God wants his people to become like Christ. Christlikeness is the will of God for the people of God.[11]

He supported this statement persuasively with three key texts – Romans 8:29, 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 1 John 3:2 – and it was unarguably conclusive and profound. But he might have chosen Matthew 5:1–10 as a call to Christlikeness, for this is a lesson from Jesus himself in how to live like him and imitate the beauty of his life.

In this way, Christ is also calling us to be countercultural, to be different from a world that has a completely different set of values. Dr R.T. France, in his magisterial commentary on Matthew, says: 'His committed disciples… are called to a radically new lifestyle, in conscious distinction from the norms of the society. They are to be an alternative society, a Christian counterculture.'[12] The world might say: Blessed are the strong, the ones who exercise the force of their character, the ones who aggressively assert themselves, the ones who climb the ladder, the rich and powerful, the ones who know how to manipulate the system, the ones who are willing to trample over others to get ahead. It is a view of the world as a jungle and it is all about the survival of the fittest. But none of this is found in the beatitudes. In fact, not only are these kinds of values conspicuously absent, but the opposite kinds of values are being exalted and exemplified. It is the poor, the meek, the merciful and peacemakers who show that they are God's people.

So this is where the beatitudes will take us: they will enable us to become more like Christ and, at the same time, allow us to be different, marked out from the world in order that we can be salt and light (Matthew 5:13–14), influencing society with the values of heaven, effecting change for the kingdom of God, and bearing witness to the reality and beauty of our heavenly Father. It is a call to be different in order to make a difference.

In *The Christ of the Indian Road* by the missionary E. Stanley Jones, the author asked Gandhi how to naturalise Christianity into India. Gandhi replied: 'I would suggest first of all that all of you Christians… begin to live more like Jesus Christ.'[13] The beatitudes give us an opportunity to learn how to do that in our generation, in the places

and communities where God has placed us. Will you come with me on this journey to explore Matthew 5:1–16 – what St Chrysostom called a 'golden chain' – linked inseparably together in a way that will set us free to be the people God intended us to be? Welcome to the beatitudes.

This book can be used for personal study and reflection, and there are suggestions at the end of each chapter to help you do this. But it can also be used for discussion in a small group setting and there is a study guide at the end of each chapter too. I pray that, however you use it, it will be a blessing.

1

LIVING WITH GENUINE HUMILITY

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

MATTHEW 5:3

The happiest people on earth

Who are the happiest people in the world? That is a question posed by the United Nations 'World Happiness Report' (March 2017),[14] following the first report published in April 2012. It aims to 'redefine the growth narrative to put people's well-being at the centre of governments' efforts'. The main six factors found to support happiness, it suggests, are: income, social support, health and life expectancy, freedom to make life choices, generosity and good governance (freedom from corruption). By these measurements, the report tells us, Finland was in first place in 2018, followed by Norway, Denmark, Iceland and Switzerland. The US has slipped to 18th place, five places down from 2016. The UK comes in 19th place (behind Germany, Canada and Australia) and many countries in Africa frequently appear towards the end of the list. In richer countries, the internal differences are not mainly explained by income inequality, but by differences in mental health, physical health and personal relationships. In poorer countries, income differences matter more, but, even there, mental illness is a major source of misery. Work is also a major factor affecting happiness. Unemployment causes a

major fall in happiness, and even for those in work the quality of work can cause major variations in happiness.

These six criteria really matter and make a vast difference to people's lives; certainly, governments should be working at all of them. But each of them is founded on a set of values that are formed by a worldview, a set of beliefs about who we are, why the world exists and why it matters to be living happy and contented lives. Jesus would say that that worldview must have God at the centre of it, because he is the creator and sustainer of all life: 'In him we live and move and have our being' (Acts 17:28). So happiness – according to Jesus – flows from a worldview that has God at the centre. That is why each of the beatitudes begins with the exclamation 'Happy' or 'Blessed' – this is the deepest definition of happiness the world will ever know. This is the kind of life that brings true joy and from which flows a quality of life marked by these important criteria. This is what John Newton (1725–1807) expresses in that famous hymn, 'Glorious things of thee are spoken':

> *Solid joys and lasting treasure,*
> *None but Zion's children know.*[15]

Zion's children are people who have put God at the centre of their lives. They are happy and blessed in the ways that the beatitudes will describe. And the invitation is open to anyone: the sermon on the mount begins with Jesus teaching the disciples, but finishes with a large crowd listening in, amazed at his teaching. We too are invited to listen and learn to live in this way.

Poor in spirit

Let's be honest: we all love a bit of celebrity culture! It is incredibly hard to resist those alluring magazines at the hairdresser or the doctor's surgery, inviting us to nose around in the lives of the rich and famous.

There is a positive side to it all. Firstly, celebrity culture is mainly good for those who are being profiled because it gives them the status and publicity that usually help their careers and lifestyles. I say 'mainly good' because there is the downside of the paparazzi and public scrutiny, but that is the cost that comes with the fame. Secondly, it is good for the media industry because it is guaranteed to sell newspapers and magazines in their millions and attracts large audiences for TV chat shows. Thirdly, because celebrities are usually very successful in their professional and public life, by putting themselves 'out there' and becoming household names, they make us genuinely intrigued to know all about their personal lives as well: how are their relationships going, where did they go on holiday, who has had plastic surgery and what did they wear on their big night out at the Oscars? Fourthly, celebrities do a lot to promote good causes and support charitable initiatives – look at the phenomenal success of 'Band Aid' and 'Children in Need'.

There is, however, a darker, more worrying, downside to celebrity culture. It tends to divide the human race into two kinds of people: the famous and successful on the one hand, and the normal and mundane on the other, leaving most of the human race feeling insignificant, undervalued and unimportant. It encourages a voyeuristic curiosity and envy, causing us to aspire unrealistically to their luxurious lifestyles and vast fortunes. It allows some people to be fabulously wealthy when others have no food or home or access to healthcare. It leans towards an amoral assessment of human behaviour: because they are talented and famous, we make allowances for their excesses because that's what people like them do in their sphere of life owing to the pressures they are under. Worst of all, it feeds an overinflated view of their own importance, encouraging pride, superiority and misplaced self-satisfaction.

All of this seems a million miles from the first beatitude. The 'poor in spirit' are those who know the poverty of their own lives and their need of God to heal, forgive and restore. Davies and Allison explain the meaning like this:

> In the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms, the Greek word and its Hebrew equivalents refer to those who are in special need of God's help… and in time 'poor' came to be a self-designation for the meek, humiliated and oppressed people of God.[16]

They have no delusions of grandeur, no pretentions to holiness, no inflated estimations of their own importance. Instead, they are desperately in need of God's saving help. They are not standing on an arrogant and misplaced self-confidence; instead, they are calling out to God for mercy and grace.

Jesus is also deliberately alluding to the great messianic prophecy in Isaiah 61:1: 'The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.' The 'poor in spirit' were, originally, the Jewish exiles suffering hardship and poverty in exile in Babylon. They had lost everything because of their own sin and disobedience to the requirements of the covenant: their land, their city, their temple, their status as the people of God, even their trust and confidence that God loved them and could rescue them. They were desperate, throwing themselves on the mercy and grace of God for help. So Jesus, by a deliberate reference to Isaiah 61:1, is declaring that this promise of salvation and blessing is now being fulfilled in an even more wonderful way. These people will know the restoration of their fortunes: 'for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Matthew 5:3).

In short, these people who are blessed have a humble spirit: they say with Isaiah: 'Woe to me… I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips' (Isaiah 6:5). They pray with King David, after his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of her husband, Uriah: 'For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight' (Psalm 51:3–4). They say with the centurion, whose servant is desperately ill: 'Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed'

(Matthew 8:8). They exclaim with Peter, following Jesus' miraculous catch of fish: 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man' (Luke 5:8). They call out with blind Bartimaeus, sitting by the roadside, begging: 'Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!' (Mark 10:47). They say with Paul: 'Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst' (1 Timothy 1:15).

Jesus illustrated this spiritual poverty in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Luke 18:9–14). Two men went to the temple to pray. The Pharisee spent his time telling God how dutiful he had been in all his spiritual observances. The tax collector could not lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast and said: 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' He was the one who went home justified, in a right relationship with God. He was poor in spirit, and the kingdom of heaven belonged to him.

This spiritual poverty is also seen in the parable of the lost son (Luke 15:11–31). The younger brother takes his share of the family inheritance and goes off to a far country, where he squanders it all on wild living. Poverty and hardship drive him back to his father's home: 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants' (vv. 18–19). He has messed up big time and reached the end of his own resources. In his sheer desperation, he throws himself on the mercy and grace of his ever-loving father, and receives the most surprising and moving welcome:

> The father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' So they began to celebrate.
>
> LUKE 15:22–24

The poor in spirit are indeed blessed, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Honesty and humility

The first beatitude, therefore, requires honesty and humility from us. Honesty is needed because it is not easy to admit that we are messed up and that we are fully responsible. More than that, we are caught in a trap that we can't escape from. We have reached the end of our resources and there appears to be no hope. This desperation is expressed in many hymns and prayers of God's people down the centuries, but perhaps nowhere more honestly and starkly than in 'Rock of Ages' by Revd Augustus Toplady (1740–78):

> *Nothing in my hand I bring,*
> *simply to thy cross I cling;*
> *naked, come to thee for dress;*
> *helpless, look to thee for grace;*
> *foul, I to the fountain fly;*
> *wash me, Saviour, or I die!*[17]

What honesty to see ourselves as empty-handed, clinging on to the cross, naked, helpless, foul and soiled by our sin! This is what it means to be 'poor in spirit'. This does not deny that we are made in the image of God and therefore we are possessed of creativity and intelligence, of a capability for kindness and an ability to love. Nor does it deny the truth that we are infinitely precious in God's sight and known and loved by him to the very core of our being – for that is why he sent his Son to be our Saviour (John 3:16). But it is to be realistic and honest about the ways we have wounded that love and marred his image in us, as the Church of England prays in one of its prayers of confession.

Humility is the other requirement of the 'poor in spirit': there are no grounds for pride or arrogance for those who have to go, cap in hand, and ask for help. At university, I prided myself on being a fit and healthy young man who was used to getting a knock or two on the sports field. So when I got a squash ball hit into my eye during play, I shrugged it off as a black eye. A friend advised me to get it checked,

so I reluctantly went up to the eye hospital. There they diagnosed a very serious eye injury that even threatened my sight, and I had to spend a week in hospital lying very still to allow it to recover. It was a humbling experience, but I am so glad I swallowed my pride and asked for help.

The 'poor in spirit' have done the same: they have swallowed their pride, admitted they need help and gone to find it from the healer of our souls, Jesus Christ. They have owned up to their sin, acknowledged their guilt and taken hold of the forgiveness that Christ has won on the cross. And because we continually stumble and fall, this becomes a lifelong attitude of mind: we return to the cross again and again in personal and public confession. Honesty admits we need help; humility enables us to go and find it.

I knew a man who told me that he never apologised to anyone about anything. The reason for this, he said, was that he was very intentional in everything he said and did, and took responsibility for his words and actions. He had no regrets and it would injure his pride and make him look small if he were to admit he had made a mistake and have to apologise. To a lesser extent, politicians fall into this way of thinking: they sometimes find it hard to admit that they made a mistake or said something wrong because it would be an admission of failure and so let their party down. Yet I believe the first beatitude allows us to admit our mistakes, own our failures and have the humility and courage to apologise and find forgiveness. I think the world needs people with honest humility, following the example of Jesus, who 'made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant… He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross' (Philippians 2:7–8).

At Wimbledon in 2017, a new British star, Johanna Konta, was born in the hearts of the public, following a victory that won her a place in the Ladies Singles semi-finals against the legendary Venus Williams, an achievement that had not been seen on Centre Court for almost 40 years. Only two years earlier, she was labouring outside the top

150 seeds. 'Talented, dedicated, and growing fast into a national icon' was the headline in *The Times*. Yet she displayed a remarkable degree of humility for one who might, one day, become a Wimbledon champion. As she was leaving the court to the roar of the crowd, she stopped and made time to pose for a selfie requested by a Chelsea Pensioner; *The Times* said that he had grabbed 'the ultimate post-match selfie'. And in the interview afterwards, Konta said: 'In terms of the home support I feel very excited and very humbled by it'.[18]

If someone who is on the edge of stardom can display this level of genuine humility, how much more should those who profess to be followers of Christ? 'What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God' (Micah 6:8).

Personal reflection[19]

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

- Am I poor in spirit, poor within, having abandoned everything to God?
- Am I free and detached from earthly goods?
- What does money mean to me?
- Do I seek to lead a sober and simple life that is fitting for someone who wants to bear witness to the gospel?
- Do I take to heart the problem of the terrible poverty that is not chosen by but imposed on so many millions of my brothers and sisters?

Prayerful response

Use Mary's song of praise (the Magnificat) as she is humbled and honoured to be the mother of the Messiah (Luke 1:46–55):

My soul glorifies the Lord
and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has been mindful
of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me –
holy is his name.
His mercy extends to those who fear him,
from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants for ever,
just as he promised our ancestors.

You could pray the following prayer:

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen

Discussion questions for small groups

Poor in Spirit

Starter (15 mins)

- Do you get dazzled by celebrity culture?
- What does contemporary society think will make people really happy and contented?
- How much of this would Christians agree with?

Main course (60 mins)

- Put into your own words what Jesus meant by this opening beatitude.
- What kinds of people in the gospels illustrate this attitude of desperation for God's help?
- Describe a time when you have been desperate for God, and how he responded to your cries for help.
- Why is this attitude so countercultural in today's world?
- What is so attractive about people who are honest about their weaknesses and shortcomings, and are humble towards others?
- Who do you know who exemplifies this honesty and humility today?
- What steps could you take to 'humble yourself… under God's mighty hand' (1 Peter 5:6)?

Dessert (15 mins)

- Spend some time in open prayer, humbling yourselves before God.
- Let the Holy Spirit convict you of pride and arrogance, hardness of heart and an independent self-reliance.
- Silently confess any sins that are on your conscience, asking for God's forgiveness.
- Realise that we deserve nothing, but we are who we are because of God's grace and mercy.

This book is for those who want to make a difference, to change the world one step at a time. Jesus Christ calls us in the beatitudes to live an authentic, countercultural lifestyle. By being different we can make a difference, becoming the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Through living the beatitudes, we could reflect the beauty of God's grace, grow in our likeness to Jesus and make the world a better place.

Having been in parish ministry for 25 years, Will Donaldson is Chaplain and Senior Welfare Officer of St Edmund Hall, Oxford University. He is also Area Dean of Oxford and Director of Pastoral Care at St Aldates, Oxford. He is the author of *Word and Spirit* (BRF, 2011).

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