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OVERCOMING  
MORAL CHAOS

*with the* BEATITUDES

OUR  
GOOD  
CRISIS



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One

# FLOURISHING IN AN AGE OF CRISIS

**A**FTER SETTling INTO MY TECH-SAVVY dining booth at JFK international airport, I heard “breaking news” in stereo. News blaring—flat screens scattered throughout the terminal announced CNN had obtained a tape of a conversation between Donald Trump and his attorney Michael Cohen discussing how they planned to buy the rights to a Playboy model’s story of an alleged affair.

I looked around the terminal, scanning gates and bars filled with TVs. No one paid attention. Not a single person seemed to be concerned that evidence had surfaced indicting an American president of an extramarital affair, with a Playmate, which he tried to cover up by paying her off. Irrespective of political affiliations, this news should grab our attention. Not a head turned.

Why? Perhaps it’s because we’ve become so accustomed to public crises. Just this week I came across the vicious ethnic cleansing of Myanmar’s Rohingya, the massacre of six American women and three children in Mexico, an impudent religious

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leader hurling racial insults, impeachment hearings in DC, and a college admission scandal. If I'm honest, I'm kind of overloaded, even numb to these atrocities.

Every time we pick up our phones, we're hit with another calamity or scandal. And just when we think we can't process any more, a personal crisis hits.

I picked up the phone and said hello.

"Jonathan, this is Amy."<sup>1</sup> I hadn't spoken to my old girlfriend since she'd moved to Alaska a decade ago.

"Oh, hey, it's great to hear from you. How are you doing?"

"Well, okay. I've been meaning to call you for a long time. I need to tell you something. When we were dating, I got pregnant and had an abortion. I'm sorry I didn't tell you about it. I just felt like it would send you on a different path, away from ministry, so I kept it to myself."

Dead silence.

How do you absorb something like that on the phone? It took me a while to process what her words meant: my sin had led to the end of a precious human life. It had also placed my girlfriend in an awful situation. Clearly it had taken a lot of courage on her part to make this call. Eventually I replied, "I'm so sorry. I wish I had known so we could have made the decision together."

*How would moral fortitude have changed that situation?*

More self-control on my part would have made her life radically different. I regret my youthful lust, lack of self-control, and that I wasn't part of the decision she made. I contributed to a situation that led to an abortion. I hate that she had to suffer such a painful decision, alone. She was torn between two acts of compassion—compassion for someone she knew and someone

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she did not yet know. In what must have been a heart-wrenching decision, she chose me.

If I had been more responsible, Amy wouldn't have had to endure such a tormenting decision and undergo what some women describe as a humiliating procedure. If I had been morally upright, she also wouldn't have dealt with the guilt and shame that followed. I have wept at the thought of this, more than once. I have prayed, and pray even now, she experiences the comfort and forgiveness that only "the Father of mercies and God of all comfort" can provide, who comforts us in *all* our afflictions (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).<sup>2</sup>

Although it is understandable she didn't consult me, more honesty on her part would have radically changed my life too. If I had been part of the decision on whether or not to keep the baby, I would have advocated we keep and raise that eternal soul to the best of our ability. We probably would have gotten married. We would have raised *that* child. It's very likely I wouldn't have my wonderful wife of twenty years and our three precious children. I might not even be writing this book.<sup>3</sup>

Moral decisions create fork-in-the-road moments in our lives every single day. Depending on the decision we make, our actions have a positive or negative effect on ourselves and others: whether or not we tell our boss the truth that we blew it, whether or not we envy someone else's success, whether we choose to be generous with those in need, whether we sleep with our girlfriend or boyfriend, or choose to have an abortion.

I write this book, not as a paragon of morality, or the fountain of ethical wisdom, but as a redeemed sinner who is learning to so cherish the Lord of the Beatitudes that moral change happens.

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If you can identify with a moral failure like mine, this book is for you. If you are currently struggling to live a life that pleases God, this book is for you. And even if you believe you've had only a few moral missteps, this book is for you. This book is for all who have failed to live up to the Beatitudes but want more. It is for those who want to mature, but aren't sure what next step to take. It is for those who recognize the moral chaos around them and want to do something about it. It is for anyone concerned about our *good* crisis.

### AN AGE OF CRISIS

A new crisis appears in our newsfeed just about every day: #MeToo, the Charleston shooting, California fires, a school shooting, a nuclear threat. Crises *ad nauseam*. At times these crises grab us by the collar. Riveted, we track their developments, weigh in on the debate, maybe fire off a social-media post. If we feel strongly about the crisis, we may sign a petition, attend a lecture, or even join a march.

Then another crisis hits.

Headlines change overnight. With our empathy divided, we try to stay informed by scanning feeds, watching clips, and reading articles. But tension mounts as we juggle work, relationships, responsibilities, and the latest headlines. Overwhelmed, we lash out, retreat, or slowly grow numb. With exposure to an unprecedented flow of news—global in scope, around-the-clock in length, and often tragic in nature—the sheer volume of crises can overwhelm us. How are we supposed to absorb, much less cope with, so many calamities?

What is a crisis?

A crisis is a time of intense difficulty or danger that often requires thoughtful yet swift decision-making. When my mother's

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heart rate spiked to more than 240 beats a minute, the doctors in the emergency room had to make a quick but informed decision to avert a catastrophe. They decided to stop her heart.

So they charged the paddles up and shouted, “Clear!” Bewildered, my father stood by and watched the light fade from his wife’s eyes. Her heart had stopped. Then the doctor hit her with the paddles again, this time restarting her heart. It worked. Her heart rate leveled out. Crisis averted.

In medical emergencies, we drop everything to attend to the person in need. The screams of a child cut through whatever we’re doing and send us in search of the crisis. When we hear the dreaded words “They’re going into surgery,” we jump into the car, leaving dinner on the table. Suddenly everything else can wait.

While perhaps not as visceral, a financial crisis also snatches our attention. When we hear about an impending round of layoffs, we start floating our résumés. If the economy takes a hit, we scramble to make financial adjustments so we feel more fiscally secure. Nuclear threat? Pins and needles.

But if a big red banner stretched across our screen announcing “Breaking News: Global Moral Crisis,” we’d keep on scrolling. That headline wouldn’t even register. We wouldn’t drop everything to solve the problem. Yet a moral crisis is more threatening than any other crisis. Why?

Because behind many crises is a moral crisis.

Behind the #MeToo movement is an insatiable lust for sex and control. Behind the financial crisis is an inordinate greed for more. Nuclear threat?—an unrestrained thirst for power. Moral calamity lurks behind most of the crises that solicit our attention, activating our thumbs to drive an opinion into our

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smartphones. Moral or ethical failure is often behind the crises that put us up in arms or down in the dumps. A failure of morals, not nerve, lurks behind scandal and injustice.

Just think what a little more self-control, honesty, and humility could do for the headlines. And what it could do for us. How would your story be different if, at certain points in your life, you chose the moral path, the right thing to do? Moral chaos exists in all of us, irrespective of political party, religious association, age, sex, gender, and race.

*We are the moral crisis.*

While some crises are moral in nature, others are natural, like my mother's medical crisis. Although it was very important to me, most of the world had no knowledge of it. My personal crisis wasn't a global crisis, and yet it demanded my attention. It's tempting to treat every personal crisis as a global crisis. When browsing social-media feeds, you'd think individual crises *are* universal crises. But a Facebook proclamation of a bad hair day is decidedly not a crisis.

So, what actually qualifies as a crisis?

## THE CURIOUS ORIGIN OF CRISIS

The word *krisis* was used by the Greeks to refer to “a legal process of judgment.” Aristotle used it to refer to a legal procedure that secured civic order.<sup>4</sup> In his case, it was a judgment that helped keep the city just and safe. A few hundred years later, Jesus used the same word to describe a coming day of judgment: “on the day of judgment [*krisis*]” (Matthew 10:15). He also used it to pronounce a future judgment that will separate the wicked from the righteous (John 5:22). But this judicial meaning of the word stretches back even further, past the Greeks to the Hebrews.



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God created the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and placed it in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2). The tree served as a kind of organic courthouse, reminding its observers of right and wrong. Trees frequently serve a judicial purpose in other places in Scripture. Deborah, a Hebrew judge, sat under a tree to pass her judgments (Judges 4:4-5). Absalom, the son of David, was caught in a tree and judged for sedition against his father (2 Samuel 18:9). Christ was judged on a tree for the sins of the world (Galatians 3:13). In the Semitic world, a tree often signified judgment. Similarly, when Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God judged them and banished them from the Garden. But if they had abstained from it, humanity would have enjoyed the blessing of God's presence and provision forever. The original moral judgment was a *crisis* planted firmly in the ground.

Aristotle, Jesus, and authors of the Old Testament all used *krisis* to convey judgment.<sup>5</sup> The apple has fallen far from the tree. In their fascinating study on the etymology of *crisis*, historians Reinhart Koselleck and Michaela Richter describe how the word evolved from its original meaning of “a judgment regarding right and wrong” to “a change in the course of things.” This change, they explain, is typically economic, medical, or historical in nature.<sup>6</sup> Over the centuries, *crisis* has been used to refer to matters that reach a boiling point, such as the coup of Napoleon III, German bankruptcies, English stock decline, and the American subprime housing crisis. This “boiling point” change in circumstances is often what comes to mind today when we hear the word *crisis*.

In the late twentieth century, *crisis* began to appear in news headlines frequently—in two hundred different contexts in 1980 alone. In 2019, we face an opioid crisis, a refugee crisis, a border

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crisis—and from a glance at my social media feed, a midlife crisis, a gaming crisis, a Captain Marvel crisis, and a bad hair day crisis.

Once a dense word referring to fixed moral judgments and powerful changes, *crisis* has devolved into a word that signifies momentary uncertainty. Will my hair turn out? Was Captain Marvel a good or bad movie? What will life be like after forty? We've relativized the meaning of *crisis* to such a degree that acceptable usage includes a tweet that reads "I'm in a parking spot crisis!"

How can this etymology of *crisis* help us better understand and address our chaotic times? Koselleck and Richter conclude, "The concept of crisis, which once had the power to pose unavoidable, harsh and non-negotiable alternatives, has been transformed to fit the uncertainties of whatever might be favored at a given moment."<sup>7</sup> The movement away from the original judicial sense of deciding between right and wrong—toward an individualistic, relativized meaning of *crisis*—reflects a broader philosophical shift. Subjective feeling is now more important than objective fact. A person's difficulty in finding a parking spot is a crisis, and it's more important than anything else going on at that moment. Individual perspective is what matters most.

The judicial meaning of *crisis* isn't the only thing that has changed. So has the judge. The locus of justice has shifted from the norm of "a tree" or courtroom to the whim of the individual. Individual comments on social media are frequently featured on cable news. Should personal opinion be given the same amount of weight as a subject-matter expert? Is there no moral standard to judge our opinions?

In this moral confusion, we're often tossed about in a sea of subjectivity, unable to address sudden changes in circumstances

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and society. Should I embrace transgenderism or insist on traditional gender categories? What should I do about the immigration crisis? Should I respond to that tweet or say nothing? We have lost the original idea of *krisis*.

Well, technically, *krisis* hasn't been lost; it has been replaced. We've replaced the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with a forest of individual opinion. One person cries, "Face the facts!" while another retorts, "Fake news!"

We need an arbiter of truth, a standard of justice to determine what is right and wrong. In the words of American diplomat and politician Daniel Patrick Moynihan, "Everyone is entitled to his own opinions, but not to his own facts."<sup>8</sup> If we're unable or unwilling to discern a norm to judge what is good and evil, the whole moral order will tumble into confusion. If we don't get the moral facts straight, a variety of "crises" will compound, and we'll sail into a very dark night.

We are in an age that desperately needs to know how to determine good from evil.<sup>9</sup> Without this moral discernment, we're unable to move toward human flourishing. How can this crisis be resolved? We must retrieve the ancient meaning of *krisis*—to go back to the Garden of Eden, so to speak, to rediscover what is good. This is urgent, not only because of the moral calamity "out there," but also because of the crisis "in here," in our hearts. Moral calamity respects no power. No person is off-limits. Just turn your finger around—look inward—and you'll find the crisis inside you. Lust, greed, power? Check, check, check. The seed of every crisis exists in every one of us. No one is immune. But if we can get a handle on our moral turbulence, we can contribute not only to our own good but also to the good around us.

## OUR GOOD CRISIS

### WHAT IS GOOD?

Despite the moral fissure in our society, we still recognize and admire virtues in those around us. In 2018, the world watched as Thai divers attempted a complicated rescue of a boys' soccer team. Trapped in a cave, with the only exit submerged in water, the boys needed expert help. The Seals risked their lives as they swam through the narrow passage to reach the boys. When the divers arrived, they gave them food and training in how to use scuba gear. Then, in an hours-long trip for each boy, two divers accompanied them out of the cave. Sgt. Saman Kunan, a former Thai navy Seal and triathlete, died when he ran out of air during his return from delivering oxygen tanks to the boys. He was hailed a hero.

All the rescuers displayed character traits like *humility*—thinking of others as more important than themselves. They also displayed *mercy*, giving up their own oxygen—and in one case, life itself—to enable the boys' survival. The divers received awards and were widely praised for their good character.

What makes their actions good? Where does our notion of good come from? Historically Western society has functioned with a sense of goodness grounded in Greco-Roman philosophy. Aristotle described virtue as the “mean” between two extremes. Courage is the mean between being cowardly and being foolish. Generosity is the mean between stinginess and lavishness. We pick up on this moral distinction when, wanting to promote generosity, we say, “Don't be so stingy! It's not like you have to empty your bank account.” We appeal to the mean. However, aiming for the mean isn't enough. For the Greeks, virtue ethics located “the good” not merely in moral action but also in the moral agent himself. What we do is *the fruit of who we are*. True goodness requires integrity.

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When goodness becomes who we are, not just what we occasionally do, we become virtuous. When I was a kid, I ate sticks of rock candy that had the word *Brighton* stamped on the end. No matter how much I licked, the word didn't disappear. The letters seeped all the way through.<sup>10</sup> Virtue is like that. No matter how far down you go, goodness still shows up.

As a young parent, I often got upset when one of our kids spilled something or refused to obey, but as I matured, the virtue of patience began to ripen in me. Now my reaction to a spill is to assure them they have done nothing wrong and to help them clean it up. Patience has become my kneejerk reaction, at least with spilled milk. Unfortunately it's not always present when they disobey. Patience hasn't seeped all the way through me yet.

Moral integrity requires significant seeping—that is, an alignment between our public and our private lives. What we do in the dark should stand up to the light. Failures in this alignment hit the headlines regularly. The “best-known, and perhaps best-liked” of the people exposed in the year of #MeToo was news anchor Matt Lauer, who confessed to “inappropriate sexual behavior.”<sup>11</sup> Aren't success and a great family enough? Not if *power* goes to the head. Beloved actors and musicians, such as Wesley Snipes and Willie Nelson, were prosecuted for tax evasion. Are the millions of dollars not enough? Not when *greed* gets into the heart.

But before lining up celebrities to judge, we should pause to consider what journalists would turn up in *our* lives if they went digging. The public/private division of ethics isn't restricted to public figures. We, too, harbor greed. One research group

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reported that evangelicals give about 4 percent of their income to churches, and Christians in general give only 2.43 percent—far less than the 10-percent tithe.<sup>12</sup>

In the wake of #MeToo, a string of high-profile ministry leaders were exposed for sexual misconduct, prompting yet another hashtag: #ChurchToo. This revealed a tendency among Christians to overlook sexual abuse within their own communities, often dismissing concerned parties as “overreacting.” The painful truth is that this kind of assault often begins when victims are young. Although Rachael Denhollander is known for her high-profile, eloquent witness against US Olympic gymnastics doctor, Larry Nassar, for his serial sexual abuse of gymnasts, this was not Denhollander’s first experience with sexual abuse. That occurred when she was seven, at the hands of a trusted Christian and family friend.<sup>13</sup>

Whatever happened to being salt and light in a bland, dark world? Perhaps Christians have settled for *appearing* good without *being* good. Sure, we *do* some good things. But unless we’re *intending* to do them, those actions are not virtuous; they’re just good luck, says Aristotle. Virtue is intentional, not accidental. Integrity works to hold our public and private life together. Character is stamped all the way through.

What matters most to you: how you are seen in public or what you actually do in private? Do you want people to *think* you’re a good person without doing the hard work of *being* a good person? When we become more concerned with keeping up appearances in public than cultivating virtue in private, we contribute to the crisis around us. We’re sitting ducks for the next scandal. No one is a passive observer in this crisis; all are participants.

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What role will you play? Will you settle for a veneer of goodness or dig deep to forge character that bleeds through?

### THE GREATEST MORAL DOCUMENT

If we want to make progress in virtue and to contribute to the greater good, we need training for goodness. Jesus is an excellent person to look to. His morality was contained not only in what he taught but also in how he lived. He incarnated the virtues. Jesus was *humbly* submissive to his heavenly Father and to Roman authorities in the most difficult of circumstances. Instead of swimming in the current of pharisaical first-century self-righteousness, he showed radical mercy toward social and religious outcasts. He risked *everything* for them.

Jesus was also righteous beyond any moral indictment, to the point of receiving the approbation of the Roman governor, Pontus Pilate, during his trial. Jesus persevered, not only through ridicule and abandonment, but also through unjust, harrowing torture. On top of that, he forgave his enemies while naked and hanging by iron spikes, which they drove into his hands and feet. Jesus is an example of virtue ethics par excellence. He embodied what he taught. There was no fissure between the public Jesus and the private Jesus; he was righteous all the way through. How can we embody the character of Christ and embed his virtue in our souls?

Jesus' most famous sermon is the Sermon on the Mount. Among other things, it lays out a guide to the virtuous life. In the first twelve verses alone, the sermon calls for humility, mercy, purity, righteousness, peacemaking, *and* endurance (Matthew 5:1-12). Even atheists admire Jesus' teaching. Evolutionary biologist and

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impassioned atheist Richard Dawkins wrote, “Jesus was surely one of the great ethical innovators of history. The Sermon on the Mount is way ahead of its time.”<sup>14</sup>

To solve the crisis of good, we need something ahead of our time. We need an objectively true guide that originates beyond us to redefine us. Historian Jaroslav Pelikan points us in the right direction when he writes, “The Sermon on the Mount remains the greatest moral document of all time.”<sup>15</sup> If this sermon is true and its author lived the teachings to a tee, then surely this is the place to start.

The Sermon on the Mount gets its name from where it was delivered. And it was probably delivered more than once—on a mount and on a plain (see Matthew 5–8; Luke 6:17-49). The location of its delivery also tells us something about the constitution of the preacher. Jesus delivered this sermon from an elevated and exposed place, enabling him to broadcast his message to many people but also allowing him to receive objections from his detractors. He challenged prevailing notions of the good without protecting himself.

Of course, just reading the greatest moral document or embracing moral philosophy is not enough to cultivate goodness. Like the Greeks, Jesus shared the conviction that goodness requires symmetry. His sermon calls for alignment between inner desire and outward action. Emphasizing purity, he said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8). But purity of heart is not enough; the heart must overflow. Jesus also said, “Out of the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks” (12:34), making a heart-and-speech connection. Purity of heart leads to purity of action. The Beatitudes challenge



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both the inner and the outer person, both act and being, making them an excellent guide to character formation.

While there is no doubt Jesus' sermon resonated culturally with Greco-Roman virtue ethics, his message was also informed by his Jewish tradition. As we will see, he repeatedly drew on words, concepts, and passages from the Old Testament to present the good life. In his book, New Testament professor Jonathan Pennington states the main thrust of the Sermon on the Mount: "[It] is offering Jesus' answer to the great question of human flourishing, the topic at the core of both the Jewish wisdom literature and that of the Greco-Roman virtue perspective, while presenting Jesus as the true Philosopher-King."<sup>16</sup> Indeed Jesus presented a convincing message on human flourishing not only as a sublime moral philosopher but also as the King of the world.

### THE BEATITUDES

The sermon opens with a series of declarations—beatitudes—that call for goodness. *Beatitude* is a strange but compelling word. It comes from the Latin word *beatitudo*, which is a translation of the Greek word *makarios*, meaning blessed, favored, or flourishing. The Beatitudes show us eight ways to live a blessed life (or nine, depending how you read Matthew 5:10-12).

What exactly is the blessing in these one-liners? One way to read them is as if-then promises of the future. If you keep the *if*, then in the future you will get the blessing. If you are “poor in spirit,” then you will get the blessing of “the kingdom of heaven.” If this is the correct way to read the Beatitudes, it means we can secure future blessing in heaven by living a moral life now. The

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challenge, of course, is in determining whether or not we have been “poor in spirit” or “pure in heart” enough?

Another way to read the Beatitudes is as a promise of future blessings *for the present*. Live poor in spirit now, and you’ll benefit immediately—get a foot in the kingdom, so to speak. Hunger and thirst for righteousness now, and you will get a taste of eternal satisfaction. This certainly fits with the “future logic” of the New Testament, in which there are frequent exhortations to do something in the present based on future realities: “For this perishable body must put on the imperishable. . . . Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:53, 58).<sup>17</sup> Paul argues that the promise of the resurrection of the body should improve the quality of one’s work now. Or consider, “You may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again . . . God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep” (1 Thessalonians 4:13-14). The promise of Christ’s return provides hope in present grief. When we trust in these “heavenly” truths, they stamp goodness into our souls. Some suggest that the best way to read the Beatitudes is with both of these approaches in view.<sup>18</sup> I agree.

Jesus’ sermon casts a vision for how we’re meant to flourish in this world. Pull on the heavenly promises, and you find character is attached in the present. The Sermon on the Mount provides a guide to the good life in both its everyday ethics and its eschatological promises. Like a pitchfork, it goads us to good action, but it also dangles a carrot: heavenly promises for present times. The sermon addresses habit by luring us with a glorious vision of existence: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the

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kingdom of heaven. . . . The meek . . . shall inherit the earth. . . . Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness . . . shall be satisfied” (Matthew 5:3, 5-6). In other words, be poor in spirit because you are a citizen of the kingdom of heaven. Be meek because you are someone who, only in Christ, deserves to inherit the world. Be righteous because you’re so satisfied in God you need not stoop for anything less. In this way, the Beatitudes present a guide and a pledge for human flourishing.

Wouldn’t it be nice to live on an earth filled with humble, virtuous people? Just think of the impact on traffic, conflict, and the headlines! Who doesn’t want to live satisfied *forever*? In the Beatitudes, Jesus promises the world we all want, where the just, the true, and the good saturate everyone and everything. He offers a vision of true and total human flourishing. So each time you read the word *blessed* at the beginning of a Beatitude, think of the glorious possibilities of living the way Christ taught.

### SECULAR BEATITUDES

Of course, the good life doesn’t come without hard work. The requirements are steep: a modest life, a humble heart, and righteous character—not exactly a piece of cake. Although the sermon inspires with a glorious vision of reality, it also intimidates with real-life expectations. Quite honestly, the Beatitudes can seem otherworldly—not merely because of where they originate, but also because of how we operate down here on earth. I mean, how would the Beatitudes read if we rewrote them to reflect the way we *really* live? What would a brutally honest list of “secularized” beatitudes look like?

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If you could cut one or two Beatitudes, which would you drop from the list? Perhaps the ones about the righteous or the persecuted or those who mourn? What might you add? “Blessed are the driven, for theirs is the kingdom”? “Blessed are those who are true to themselves, for they will be happy”? I like “blessed are the comfortable, for they will never have to sacrifice.” And to borrow a line from rapper Kendrick Lamar, “Blessed are the liars, / For the truth can be awkward.”<sup>19</sup>

Before we can leap into the Beatitudes’ promise, we have to evaluate our functional beatitudes—how we really think and live. To do this, let’s consider each beatitude in its secular context—a way of living that functionally removes belief in God from everyday actions and replaces it with ingrained cultural patterns of thinking and behaving.<sup>20</sup> For instance, in the secular context, *mourning* is an unwelcome but unavoidable part of life. How do we handle that sadness? When faced with disappointment, heartache, or suffering, we often opt for escape—take a trip, go to a movie, train for a marathon, or binge Netflix. But when we choose to escape, we don’t cease to believe. We simply believe as though God has nothing to offer us, and in his place, our chosen escape does. *We mourn in an age of distraction.*

This secularizing impulse removes God from his place of power and substitutes the self. When the self is center stage—even if it’s poor old me—*meekness* becomes just about impossible. It’s hard to be humble when no one stands taller in our thoughts than ourselves. In the Age of the Big Me, righteousness is an off-putting word because it suggests narrow, dogmatic thinking.<sup>21</sup> We prefer to sort things out for ourselves, to be

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open-minded. As a result, our functional belief is that we're satisfied, not by being righteous, but by being ourselves.

We tend to prefer tolerance over mercy and self-expression over purity. In theory, we all like the peacemakers, except when we're called on to make the peace. Most of us would rather avoid conflict or escalate it.

Then there's persecution. Not a lot of volunteers for this one! But Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:10). How do we embrace persecution when what we love is ease?

Virtue is an uphill battle in the age of the big comfortable Me. It's easy to see how individualistic, self-centered, secular beatitudes could lead to a moral unraveling, a crisis of the good. If everyone is out for themselves, who helps the marginalized? If we're true only to our desires, how do we build and maintain a just society? Jesus guarantees the kingdom of heaven: the just, true, good world we all want, where beauty saturates everyone and everything. Of course, it won't fully arrive until the King returns, but it can begin with being poor in spirit.

Is it possible to avert a moral crisis in a secular age? Can we reap the benefit of Jesus' stirring promises now? I believe so. If not, Jesus is a fraud. This single sermon, admired by secular humanists and Christians alike, is central to averting catastrophic and moral failure. It's also the key to human flourishing. So let's get to work in making good out of our crisis.

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