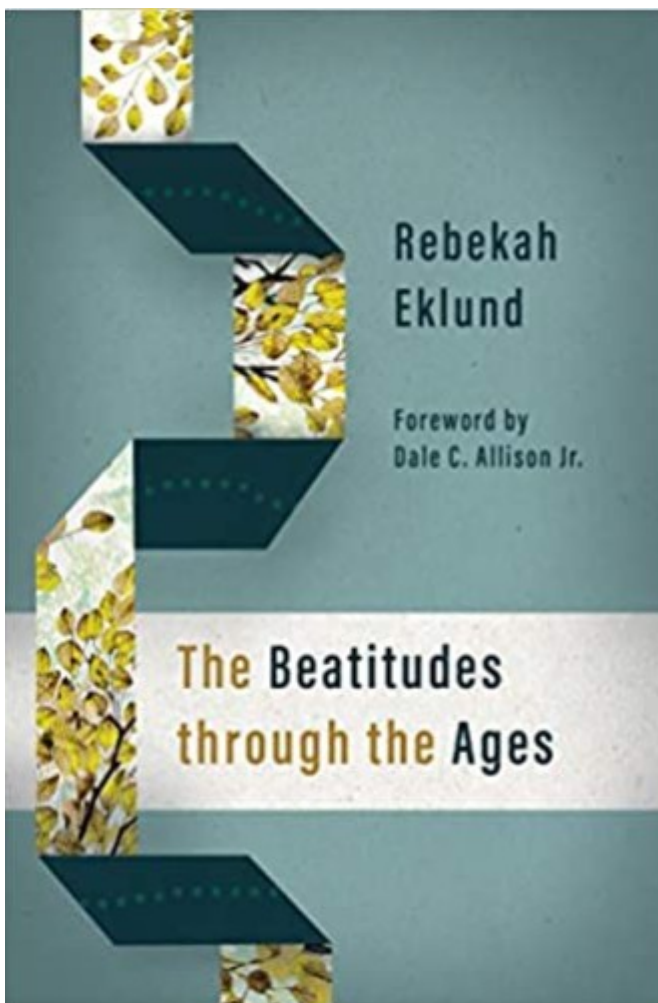


From Dante to Tina Fey, a romp through history with Jesus' Beatitudes

Blessed are those who read this wise and lovely book.

by [James C. Howell](#) in the [August 25, 2021](#) issue

In Review



The Beatitudes through the Ages

By Rebekah Eklund
Eerdmans

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When I was a graduate student at Duke, my professors David Steinmetz and Roland Murphy were blazing a new trail into the history of the interpretation of scripture, hacking away at the conceit that today's scholars have finally cornered things, and discovering the riches and depth of what the titans of history have had to say. Who wouldn't pay any sum to open a text at a festive banquet table, shoulder to shoulder with luminaries and saints?

Rebekah Eklund has favored us with an engaging and profound journey through Jesus' Beatitudes that gives us a seat at that table. Her range of learning, which she employs with a light touch, is downright impressive, although "grateful" more accurately describes my feeling. She not only touches down on Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther, we're treated to her descriptions of obscure paintings, novels, biographies, and sculpture.

Eklund can pair Dante and Tina Fey in a single sentence. Origen and Billy Graham agree on a few things. Her clarification of how the Beatitudes are utterly countercultural, after deep insights from Chrysostom and Bonhoeffer, is clinched by cheeky words from Kurt Vonnegut. She shows how the Ghent Altarpiece depicts "the merciful" as, of all things, crusading knights. The mercy they are credited with is their conversion of the heathen by force—a humbling reminder of how we often naively value what isn't of God.

Matthew 5:1-12 appears in the lectionary on All Saints' Day, and Eklund interprets each Beatitude in the context of the lives of saints, telling stories of those who intentionally embody what Jesus had to say. A Romanian princess becomes an abbess, poor in spirit and things. Frederick Douglass embodies a muscular form of meekness. Brother Lawrence lives with those who hunger for food, for justice, and for God. A Franciscan sister finds her ministry in Las Vegas. Preachers can mine months' worth of illustrative material here, although they would be wiser simply to read and be moved.

Some common threads through history are especially revealing. Augustine clamped the Beatitudes tightly to the Lord's Prayer, as well as to the gifts of the Spirit in Isaiah 11:2 and Galatians 5:22. You can't unsee that. History's great interpreters understood the Beatitudes to portray Jesus perfectly. They ascend and circle back on one another, each one contextualizing and clarifying the others. Eklund illustrates this with Vladimir Martynov's musical setting of the text. I Googled and listened, and

I will listen again.

Eklund's romp through history reveals how inadequate our simple reading can be. There's so much complexity in Jesus' pithy sayings, so many subtle nuances. Poor in spirit: Is this humility, dependence upon God, experiencing oppression, the perils of wealth, voluntary poverty, or simple detachment?

Those who mourn? Most Christian preachers have presumed this means grieving our sins, or feeling the sorrow of living in a fallen world. But nowadays it might as easily imply mourning injustice.

Meekness? After a sidebar discussion of the perils of reading "meek" as "effeminate," Eklund explores how the word has long referred to the restraint of anger. She then helps us find our way to meekness as a peculiar kind of power, rooted in the wisdom to know what to get angry about, how to be angry, and for how long.

Peacemakers have often been thought of as evangelists, those who show people how to make peace with God. Other interpreters think of the peacemakers as those who devise ways to explain superficially conflicting texts of scripture. Still others believe that we make peace by being reconciled to God. There's also the labor of world peace, and of resisting denominational splits.

Sacred texts have the capacity to generate multiple meanings in differing and emerging social settings. The most fruitful meanings are those that sync with the rest of scripture, mirror the heart of Jesus, and build up the unity and mission of the church. The great interpreters help us find guardrails to prevent flying off into self-indulgent or heretical readings. Eklund points to Perpetua and Felicity, two canonized martyrs who stood their ground, refusing to knuckle under and abandon their belief.

If I had to stretch to find fault with this book, I might point to the way Eklund's investigation of a single line from the Beatitudes can morph into an essay on a broad topic: war and Christianity, or merit and grace, or fasting, or church division. These essays are marvelous, but sometimes they distract from the interpretive, exegetical thread. Also, the book can feel a bit encyclopedic. Chapter by chapter, verse by verse, Eklund plows through history, eliciting in me the question: Do I really want to know what Origen, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Wesley, etc., have to say about each Beatitude? If I am curious one day, though, I'll know where to look.

The Beatitudes through the Ages is a rich read, regardless. I love it when I finish a book and wonder, Was that exegesis? Or theology? Or church history? In this case, the answer is yes, and more. Blessed are those who read this lovely and wise book.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Dante, Tina Fey, and Jesus."