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Jana Marguerite Bennett

University of Dayton, jbennett2@udayton.edu

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IMPOSTER HAPPINESS OR THE REAL THING? MARRIAGE, SINGLENES, AND THE BEATITUDES IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Jana Marguerite Bennett

When I, as a single woman, first began thinking about singleness,¹ I was thinking largely about the fact that marriage is so much the focus at many churches that singleness hardly ever enters the conversation. Churches direct so much energy and time and attention to helping form and foster good marriages and families. This is important work, but our focus on marriage and family has been to the detriment of good thinking about what it means to be single, to the point that singleness becomes maligned and that the church's ability to witness to Jesus suffers as a result. This view among Christians mirrors what we think in culture at large. According to research done at the Pew Research Forum in 2010 and confirmed in the latest study in 2011, the rates of marriage are declining. Just over half (51 percent) of all adult Americans are married compared with 72 percent in 1960; rates among the youngest adult generation (age 20–34) are declining even more rapidly, down from 59 percent in 1960 to 20 percent today. Many scholars give several reasons for the decline: economic factors, education (people with more degrees wait longer to get married), an increasing societal norm to wait to marry, and caution due to high divorce rates in previous generations. At the time the study was published, news outlets loudly vaunted the statistics about decline, as they should. These are important indicators of how Americans understand marriage and family, and they are important statistics to grapple with in thinking about Christian marriage and family, for Christians often (depending somewhat on denomination) have divorce rates that are equal to those of the general population.

What does such a view of marriage mean for the variety of single adults?² There are strong indications that it means marginalization of singleness in all its forms.

1. I first discussed marriage and singleness in my book *Water is Thicker than Blood: An Augustinian Theology of Marriage and Singleness* (New York: Oxford, 2008).

2. I am using “singleness” here to mean a variety of what my Catholic tradition calls “states of life”: monasticism, holy widowhood, vowed celibacy (which is distinct from monasticism because one is not necessarily living as a monk), never-married, divorced, and so on. When I presented this paper,

Marriage is presumed clearly better. One author writes: “The truth is celebrating singleness—i.e., celebrating ‘not doing something’—makes no sense. Loving is better than not loving.”³ Single parents get an added dose of guilt with their marginalization when they read headlines such as: “Children of Single Parents More at Risk, UVA Study Finds.”⁴ In yet another study several psychologists discuss the fact that their patients do not want to be single because it is perceived as very childish. *Adults* make choices for marriage.⁵ A University of Missouri and Texas Tech joint study that asked women in their thirties to discuss being married found similarly that they felt marginalized or rather like “losers.” One study author notes, “These were very successful women in their careers and their lives, yet almost all of them felt bad about not being married, like they were letting someone down.”⁶

Christians are as good at promoting such marginalization, which I think runs counter to the witness Scripture offers. While Christians rightly understand marriage as good, Scripture (e.g., Matt 19:10–12) also says clearly that singleness is good. For the past two thousand years we have been accustomed to separating these two forms of life and debating which one is superior. Monasticism reigned for a while; I would say that marriage reigns today. One piece of evidence for this might be in the sheer number of Christian dating sites available online or the fact that many church singles’ events are focused on fixing up single Christians. Singleness in all its varieties has been made to seem odd and strange. Celibate priests and nuns become suspicious characters in news media, and single pastors are often likely to be marginalized in the sense that something seems off if they are unmarried.

Given all this, in my earlier work I focused on this dichotomy and tried to find ways to think well about the importance of marriage and singleness in order to have a good understanding of what it means to be the church.

one of the questions was why I did not use the word “chastity,” but chastity, for Catholics, is what all Christians are called to: chaste marriages, chaste singleness. Chastity takes on different forms though. For some it is lifelong vowed celibacy, for some it is monogamous marriages that do not use artificial contraception where couples abstain for a period of time, for others it might be sexual abstinence that is more temporary than lifelong vowed celibacy would be.

3. Maggie Gallagher, “The New Singleness,” The Witherspoon Institute blog online (October 20, 2011) <http://www.thepublicdiscourse.com/2011/10/4164> (accessed Sept 2, 2012).

4. Samantha Koon, *Daily Progress* (August 11, 2012) <http://www2.dailyprogress.com/news/2012/aug/11/children-single-parents-more-risk-uva-study-finds-ar-2124656/> (accessed Sept 2, 2012).

5. Natalie Schwartzberg, et. al., *Single in a Married World: A Lifestyle Framework for Working With The Unmarried Adult* (New York: Norton, 1995).

6. Quoted in Tara Parker-Pope, “In a Married World, Singles Struggle for Attention,” *New York Times Online* (Sept 19, 2011) <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/19/the-plight-of-american-singles/> (accessed Sept 2, 2012).

The Pew Study mentioned above from 2010, however, suggests that there is another, perhaps more overlooked, point that needs addressing. While most news articles covered the decline in marriage rates, what they often omitted was that sixty-one percent of those who said they were *not* married *hoped* to be married someday.⁷ That point struck me as more interesting than the rest—that our desire for marriage remains quite strong even as we have all kinds of reasons for delaying marriage. A still-strong wedding industry perhaps reflects this intense desire. While wedding-related business fell during the economic downturn, it has picked up again in the past two years, so that it is growing at a rate of ten percent.⁸ Wedding industry experts are starting to argue that the people their businesses should attract are Millennials because that is where the data say the growth is, despite the Pew Forum statistics noting a decline in marriage in this age group.⁹ What we seem to have, then, is a situation where the number of adults living lives of singleness is on the rise, while at the same time a desire for marriage remains strong. In this contemporary situation where marriage is desired but about half the population remains single, it is imperative for people to think about marriage and singleness and what we expect from both these states of life. Studies from the National Marriage Project, for example, note that people expect marriage to be part of the reason for greater happiness,¹⁰ and they further rank marriage as highly important to having a successful life.

In this paper, therefore, I wish to focus particularly on questions of desire, choice, and whether and how we *choose* marriage or singleness. My ultimate aim is to offer some thoughts on how churches might best teach lay people about choice and desire in marriage and singleness. My focus on choice in relation to states of life is related to what I name as imposter happiness in the title (which I describe further below). I will suggest that we Christians tend to overemphasize the idea of choice in these states of life, but this emphasis on choice ultimately marginalizes both mar-

7. D’Vera Cohn, et. al., “Barely Half of US Adults are Married—A Record Low,” Pew Research Center (December 14, 2011) <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2011/12/14/barely-half-of-u-s-adults-are-married-a-record-low/> (accessed Aug 29, 2012).

8. <http://www.ibisworld.com/Common/MediaCenter/Wedding%20Industry.pdf>.

9. Part of the reason industry experts advocate focusing on this age group is that the 20–34 age group is comparatively a much larger proportion of the overall population than it was in the 1990s and early 2000s. They are beginning to see the effect of the second “baby boom” that happened in the late 1980s and 1990s.

10. Lois M. Collins, “Poor Value Marriage, are more Traditional in Some Ways than Wealthier Counterparts,” *Deseret News* (July 13, 2012) <http://www.deseretnews.com/article/765589735/Poor-value-marriage-are-more-traditional-in-some-ways-than-wealthier-counterparts.html?pg=all> (accessed September 2, 2012).

riage and singleness. While we make choices, choice is much less significant to either state of life that we often think. I will therefore offer a conclusion that suggests how we can understand singleness and marriage morally, even when choice is not the main focus. This is especially important in our contemporary society when so few singles actively choose to be single. (That is, we usually do not choose to remain never-married, or to get divorced, or become widowed. Vowed celibacy is a distinct rarity in Christianity these days.)

In order to do this, I will first treat briefly one prominent passage (1 Cor 7:1–11) that explicitly discusses the state of being unmarried in comparison with being married. While there are assuredly other passages that lend likewise to this kind of comparison (e.g., Matt 19:3–12), it is the 1 Corinthians passage that has shown up again and again in theological discussions about marriage and singleness, and so it is that passage that lends itself to further clarification and discussion.

What I will claim is that the focus we have had on this passage in both ancient and contemporary translation and theological discussion has been detrimental because of the way it has fed our view of choice about states of life. It is that dis-ease with scriptural focus on 1 Cor 7 that leads me to the passages mentioned in this essay's title, the Beatitudes (especially the Matthean version). My decision to use the Beatitudes as a focal point may seem unusual, but as I hope to show by the paper's conclusion, the Beatitudes provide a better entry into theological thought about choice, marriage, and singleness in the twenty-first century. In my brief conclusion I will suggest a few concrete responses Christians might make in relation to the contemporary scene on marriage and singleness with the hope that this provides a starting point toward some fruitful discussion.

“By Way of Concession”: Paul’s Discussion of Marriage and Singleness

When I read 1 Cor 7, it seems that Paul treads carefully between marriage and celibacy (which is one of the single states of life). He wants to highlight the particular single state of life of celibacy. But in what direction does he tend? Is he aiming more toward advocacy of singleness as the state Christians ought to embrace, or does he care *whether* people are married or single at all? Serious scholars have suggested both these answers: those who answer with the first option I name as taking an “ascetic view” while those who answer with the second option have a “moderate view.”

In v. 1 he writes, “Now concerning the matters about which you wrote it is well for a man not to touch a woman.” Immediately we are drawn into a theological argument driven by exegesis, and especially where to place colons, commas, and quota-

tion marks which were not in the Greek text. This is one of those prominent places in Scripture where the task of placing punctuation marks can drastically change the text's interpretation. Ascetic translators might see "It is well for a man not to touch a woman" as Paul's own directive to be celibate. On that reading Paul's words in the subsequent verses make it clear that marriage is a "concession" (v. 6) and being celibate as Paul is (v. 7) is clearly the best for Christians.

Moderate translators (probably a majority, these days),¹¹ however, read Paul's statement in v. 1 as quoting the Corinthians' own question back to them. The statement "It is well for a man not to touch a woman" should be in quotation marks in the text itself, following a colon or dash after "Now, concerning the matters about which you wrote:" On this view, the Corinthians themselves believe that celibacy is better than marriage, and sex and marriage are to be avoided at all costs. Paul's words to them admonish the Corinthians to take a much more moderate view. Marriage enables people to avoid sexual immorality and enables people with weak self-wills to live righteously before God. "Because of sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. The husband should give to his wife her conjugal rights, and likewise the wife to her husband" (vv. 2-3). On this view too Paul's repeated statement, "Remain as you are," stands as a directive not to be overly concerned about whether one is married or single but to focus instead on how faithfully one is living a life in Christ.

In the text we do not necessarily know what Paul thinks about choice in relation to states of life. Does he think that we ought to be able to control ourselves enough that we should not have to burn with desire for other people? Or does he suspect that our emotions can and do get the better of our will, such that choice is impossible, and "concession" is necessary? Either the moderate or the ascetic view could hold here.

Later in ch. 7 Paul discusses the advantages of a life of celibacy or virginity. Unmarried men and women can be dedicated to the Lord and remain free of the kinds of worries that having a spouse and children bring (vv. 32-34). In v. 35 Paul emphasizes: "I say this for your own benefit, not to put any restraint upon you, but to promote good order and unhindered devotion to the Lord." An ascetic view of these verses focuses on "devotion to the Lord" and the assumption that this makes a person's state of life much better. A moderate view, however, notes v. 36 where

11. See, for example, Will Deming's *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Some of the major Bible commentaries, like *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2002) also take this tack.

Paul writes that someone who marries commits no sin; indeed, “let him marry as he wishes.”

In both ways of reading the passage it is essential to remember Paul’s earlier discussion about sexual immorality in this letter. In ch. 5 he chastises the Corinthians because they have allowed one of their members to marry his father’s wife. He sees this as even worse than whatever immorality pagan people might dream up. In ch. 6 he commands, “Shun fornication!” (v. 18). These passages are understood by those who think Paul really promotes celibacy/asceticism as confirming that Paul is very concerned about the Corinthians’ lack of sexual propriety. Those who think Paul really promotes a moderate stance understand them as confirming that Paul makes a clear distinction between proper marriage and sex between people (Christian or not) and a variety of other, unchaste sex acts. In context with surrounding chapters it becomes a bit more evident that Paul thinks we do have a choice when it comes to sex and sexuality. We are able to avoid giving into sexual impulses (in order to shun fornication, for example) because we have a greater hope and call.

That greater hope and call becomes most evident at the end of the letter. In ch. 15 Paul deals with the resurrection of the dead and puts the letter into a clearly eschatological light. He describes the time when we will inherit the kingdom of God, when death has no victory over us. He concludes this chapter by saying, “Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (v. 58). On an ascetic reading this eschatological focus enables interpreters to think about singleness as better precisely because it leads us directly toward God, our final happiness. We can and should choose singleness because it is better; anything else is okay but not the fullness of what we can be. Yet, on a moderate reading this eschatological focus enables us to put our marriages or lives of singleness in context: we will be raised, and nothing else much matters (and especially *not* marriage or singleness) in light of that kind of happiness that we will have in God.

Thus, it seems that the main scriptural debate regarding Paul’s instructions in 1 Cor 7 is whether Paul pushes Christianity toward celibacy (and asceticism) or whether Paul advocates a moderate stance toward both marriage and singleness. The mainstream consensus these days seems to be that Paul is more moderate. As one commenter writes after exegesis of the passage, “The only thing of truly spiritual significance in life is whether a person is in Christ or not. Whether one is married, or

single, Jewish or Gentile, or male or female is utterly inconsequential in the kingdom of God.”¹²

Initially I rather liked this moderate reading of Paul because I thought that perhaps it could “solve” the concerns I raised earlier about marriage and singleness in our culture. Here was a way that single people could both faithfully desire marriage but yet be content with a life of singleness. Here was a way that perhaps marriage and singleness both could be intertwined in the church, and neither state of life would have to take precedence over the other. For example, Christians could use this kind of theological interpretation to suggest doing more “whole congregation” programming and to find ways of decreasing an emphasis on marriage.

On second thought though, I am not convinced. My concern is that a moderate view de-emphasizes marriage but also de-emphasizes singleness, and I am not quite willing to go quite so far as the moderates in saying that a life of singleness does not matter. Paul uses words like “concession” and “it is better to be as I am,” which should at least make us think twice about overly homogenizing states of life as though they were the same thing. Verse 38 solidifies this sense: “So then, he who marries his fiancée does well; and he who refrains from marriage will do better.” It is troubling indeed that the moderate view seems to ignore Paul’s words here. Taking singleness seriously (and especially taking seriously the plight of those singles who feel marginalized) requires not simply glossing over Paul’s words. At the same time, taking Paul’s words seriously need not mean denigrating marriage. I think that to date no group of Christians has been able to avoid one or the other of these pitfalls, and no group has consequently been able to use the word “choice” rightly in relation to these states of life.

To see this, it is important to note how this debate has played out historically in theological discussion. In the history of Christianity these kinds of dichotomies also persist, though in relation to how to interpret 1 Cor 7. This Scripture passage in particular has proved difficult for theologians seeking to figure out whether and how Christians ought to be married or whether and how Christians ought to remain single. In the fourth-century church Jerome (the person who translated Greek Scriptures into Latin) very nearly maintained that marriage was an evil, that Christians could not truly follow God unless they were single. His contemporary Jovinian, by contrast, discussed that marriage was a complete good, equivalent to singleness in terms of married peoples’ abilities to follow Christ. Those who sided

12. Nick Nowalk, “Rethinking Paul on Marriage and Singleness,” *The Strange Triumph of the Lamb* (April 12, 2012) <http://strangetriumph.wordpress.com/2012/04/09/rethinking-paul-on-marriage-and-singleness> (accessed Jan 30, 2013).

with Jerome on the matter wondered though why Jovinian would so freely reject or ignore Paul's words to us in 1 Corinthians.¹³

These two positions have been alternately embraced or caricatured in much of Christian history. One of Martin Luther's great concerns was that Catholics focused on monasticism at the expense of others' faith. Luther accordingly promoted marriage as a civil, earthly function that did not relate to one's status with God.¹⁴ Even centuries later Catholics seemed to validate Luther's concern. One vocation pamphlet from the 1930s depicted nuns as people who were choosing to follow Christ, as contrasted with married women, who were following their own desires and therefore seemed not to want to follow Christ.¹⁵ Married women had made a poor "choice" because they were not following Jesus.

I think the recent emphasis for both Protestants and Catholics has been on affirming *marriage* as almost the sole means and choice toward following Christ, precisely because it makes us happiest and leads us most closely to God. As I suggested in the introduction, marriage is often touted by Christians as the happiest state of life, the best way to follow Jesus. The Quiverfull Movement in some Protestant circles is likely the most energetic and vocal in espousing the view that marriage leads to fulfillment in God.¹⁶ However, Christians from a range of denominational backgrounds also tend to support this view,¹⁷ and it therefore seems almost to be a sin *not* to be married, even when circumstances do not allow for that kind of choice.

To be fair, this kind of one-sided focus on marriage is changing; there are more single Christians (across the range of Christian communities) writing books about single vocations. Nonetheless, it is striking that many of these books will begin with some kind of statement about how theirs now breaks ground, because singleness has been so long ignored in Christian life.¹⁸ Still, many books on singleness, such

13. For a more thorough discussion of early Christians and their readings of 1 Cor 7, see David G. Hunter, "The Reception and Interpretation of Paul in Late Antiquity: 1 Corinthians 7 and the Ascetic Debates," http://uky.academia.edu/DavidHunter/Papers/1484980/1_Corinthians_7_and_Asceticism (accessed Sept 2, 2012).

14. For Luther's writing on this, see his treatise titled "On Monastic Vows."

15. Florence Caffrey Bourg, *Where Two or Three Are Gathered: Christian Families as Domestic Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004) 6.

16. See Nancy Campbell, *Be Fruitful and Multiply: What the Bible Says About Having Children* (San Antonio: Vision Forum, 2003).

17. For example, Don Browning, *Equality and the Family: A Fundamental, Practical Theology of Children, Mothers and Fathers in Modern Societies* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2007).

18. Barry Danylak has written a book tellingly titled *Redeeming Singleness: How the Storyline of Singleness Affirms the Single Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010). That singleness needs to be redeemed already suggests the ways in which we Christians marginalize singleness.

as Carolyn Culley's book *Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye? Trusting God with a Hope Deferred*, speak about the need for Christians to hope continually for marriage because it is so integral to many Christians' sense about being able to follow Christ.¹⁹

The first part of my essay's title, "Imposter Happiness," is a nod to the ways we Christians speak about happiness in relation to marriage. What I mean in part by imposter happiness is the way we believe our happiness seems integrally connected to our state of life and particularly to being married. This focus on marriage does raise the same discrepancy that Jovinian's detractors noted: what about Paul's words in v. 38 that it is better to be single? How would we form churches that would acknowledge singleness as important, even as we acknowledge the good of marriage? I argue that Christians through the centuries have wrestled with this conundrum and have yet to find the kind of balance that I think is espoused in Paul's letter. Marriage as the sole, good choice is imposter happiness because it ignores key witnesses in Scripture and particularly makes marriage out to be our good eschatological aim, when, of course, God is our only eschatological aim.

On the flip side, we might say that the vacuum created by the church's nondiscussion of singleness has led to some very unhealthy but widely held views about singleness in the culture at large. "Hook up" culture, found on many college campuses, as well as the myth of the single woman as being more free, sexy, and interesting than married women, comes to the fore in popular culture.²⁰ This meme begins with *Sex and the City* in the late 1990s and early 2000s; it continues these days in MTV's *Jersey Shore* and HBO's *Girls*, which promote the idea of casual sex with no strings among twenty-something women.

While I think there are multiple reasons why singleness has been so marginalized and why a vacuum has been created, I think the almost continuous debate over the meaning of 1 Cor 7 has been present in the background, for this passage is listed in almost every book about singleness and in many books about marriage. The marriage and singleness debate is a difficult debate to have, exactly because there is a need for a kind of balance in thinking about choice, that is, not to overlook that making a choice for one or the other state of life can be important. But there is also a need not to overemphasize that choice, because of course, the moderates are right. Neither marriage nor virginity equals our eschatological happiness in God.

19. Carolyn McCully, *Did I Kiss Marriage Goodbye? Trusting God with a Hope Deferred* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004).

20. For some scary, yet important, reading on "hook up" cultures, read Donna Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sex, Spirituality, Romance and Religion on America's College Campuses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

The recent scholarly emphasis in Scripture studies on asceticism as bad (because it rejects the body), and on trying to make Paul not look like a curmudgeon who hates sex, has been harmful. Despite the fact that 1 Cor 7 seems promising on account of its subject matter, the predominant moderate view, which advocates making no choice at all because the choice does not matter, does not enable us to address peoples' desires for marriage or singles' sense of marginalization within the culture at large. The broader, centuries-old debate about the place of 1 Cor 7 also does not address these concerns. This is not to say that 1 Cor 7 is not important reading nor that we might have better ways of reading it than has been done. It is mainly to suggest that 1 Cor 7 has not served us well as a starting point for discussion about marriage and singleness.

The rest of this paper serves then to shift focus from 1 Cor 7 and from this dichotomous context in which we find ourselves, where marriage (especially for Christians) and singleness (especially in secular culture) are both pushed as happy, but imposter, endings that we get to choose.

Why the Beatitudes?

My focus on the Beatitudes may seem odd, but it is not arbitrary. I will suggest below that the Beatitudes, focused as they are on "happiness" or "blessedness," may provide a way forward in thinking beyond the kind of imposter happiness I note above. This is not my only reason for wanting to reflect further on the Beatitudes however.

At some point in the early stages of preparing for this paper, I was looking up some entries on singleness in the Catholic *Catechism*, so that I could get more of a sense of what my own tradition suggests. Curiously, the entry on singleness mentions the Beatitudes:

We must also remember the great number of *single persons* who, because of the particular circumstances in which they have to live—often not of their choosing—are especially close to Jesus' heart and therefore deserve the special affection and active solicitude of the Church, especially of pastors. Many remain *without a human family* often due to conditions of poverty. *Some live their situation in the spirit of the Beatitudes, serving God and neighbor in exemplary fashion.* The doors of homes, the "domestic churches," and of the great family which is the Church must be open to all of them. "No one is without a family in this world: the Church is a home

and family for everyone, especially those who ‘labor and are heavy laden’”
(emphasis added).²¹

I found the mention of the Beatitudes to be curious especially because I happen to know that the Beatitudes are also one of the recommended Gospel passages for Roman rite Catholic weddings. The text of the Beatitudes from Matthew’s Gospel was, in fact, the passage that my husband and I chose for our wedding. “Unusual,” remarked the priest who presided at our wedding. “Most couples don’t choose this one. They choose the wedding at Cana or some other more explicitly wedding-related Gospel.” Thus, across these states of life contemporary Catholicism connects marriage and singleness in a small way via the Beatitudes.

Accordingly, the Beatitudes became the text I wanted to reflect on theologically for this paper. In what follows I propose to think about the Beatitudes as a whole in order to see whether and how we might rethink the states of marriage and singleness. (I focus on the whole passage, particularly that in Matthew, rather than focusing on each of the Beatitudes. While I think it would be fruitful to reflect on individual Beatitudes, this is a task that could and should easily turn into a book.) My first reflection will be on the meaning of happiness as found in the Beatitudes, and my second reflection will be on the various ways theologians have understood the Beatitudes in relation to choosing Christian life. I claim that the Beatitudes offer a more balanced way to begin understanding choice in Christian life and therefore provide a good place for thinking about choice in terms of marriage and singleness.

Happiness

A first point about the Beatitudes is that they are recognized as a unique literary form, distinct from blessings. That is, there is a difference between the kind of blessing that God bestows on Abraham in Gen 12:3–4, where Abraham receives something directly from God, and the Beatitudes, which are statements of praise or congratulation—e.g., Ps 1:1: “Blessed is the one who walks not in the counsel of the wicked.” These statements, called *macarisms*, are present in both OT and NT, as well as in other ancient literature. It appears that the translators for the Septuagint were quite aware of this literary distinction because the verb they used for blessing was

21. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, section 1658. http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P56.HTM (accessed Sept 2, 2012). The final lines of this Catechism entry are from John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* 85, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html.

eulogemenos, but the word for a beatitude was *makarios*.²² Sometimes *macarisms* are written in contrary voice, called “woes,” as we see in Luke’s version of the Beatitudes. He begins with four blessings but contrasts them with four woes.

What purpose *macarisms* provide is a bit of a thornier question. Commenter Warren Carter suggests that *macarisms* may be liturgical in origin, for they often occur in connection with Israel’s worship of God. They are frequently found in the Psalms, for example, but Carter also suggests that they “provide a brief summary of essential doctrine. Often it assured and instructed about destiny in the afterlife or about divine justice, but in a way that has clear implications for present ethics and morality.”²³

The main point is that the “blessedness” of the Beatitudes relates in some way to fullness of life in God, an acknowledgement that we cannot be truly happy without finding and seeking the One who is the source and Savior of our being. Jesus’ words are quite clear on this point. Five of the eight Beatitudes in Matthew refer directly either to relationship with God or life in God’s kingdom: “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (vv. 3 and 10); “they will see God” (v. 8); “they will be called children of God” (v. 9); “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (v. 12). A common reading of the other three Beatitudes is to see those too in terms of relationship with God. For example, receiving mercy (v. 7) or being filled with righteousness and justice (v. 6) are seen as only properly bestowed by God. We humans could not really practice true mercy, justice, and righteousness.

This account of blessedness (or happiness, as another way in which *macarios* is translated) is distinct from the kind of imposter happiness associated with marriage and singleness in the discussion of 1 Cor 7. The happiness of fullness of life in God is noted, of course, by numerous theologians, in my tradition especially by Thomas Aquinas. In his most famous writing, the *Summa Theologica*, Thomas says, “Final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence.”²⁴ Any other kind of happiness that we seek is necessarily a secondary desire that cannot possibly measure up to life with God. These secondary desires are imperfect compared to God; imperfect happiness might be obtained through the “stuff” of this world, but it will only be imperfect. Still, these imperfect secondary desires relate very much to how we think through our *choices* in our daily lives. Thus,

22. Raymond Collins, “Beatitudes,” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 1:629.

23. Warren Carter, “Beatitudes,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 158.

24. *Summa Theologica*, II–I. q. 3. 8.

we will still be aware of a restlessness, to use the word that Saint Augustine mentions. We will want to find our completeness in God because our secondary desires and choices do not satisfy.

What is less clear in Jesus' words is how the activities or dispositions that appear in the first part of the Beatitudes (e.g., "Blessed are the peacemakers" in v. 9) relate to the happiness we find in God. Are these properly actions we can *choose* to do in order to see God's rewards? Are they primarily words of comfort for those who mourn or who find themselves persecuted through no choice of their own?

Part of the difficulty in making this determination is in the fact that the Beatitudes are not uniform in their relationship to human activity. Peacemaking might be considered something that we do partly by our own wills; persecution for Jesus' name's sake, however, is something that only results from others finding your life to be strange—whether it is strange because of belief in Jesus' name, or strange because of how you live, or some combination of the two is not clear. It is likewise unclear how we could will ourselves to become "poor in spirit" though there are ways we might be able to be "meek." Hungering for justice and righteousness might not necessarily entail anything other than praying for justice and righteousness, though I think "hungering" could be read in such a way as to require actively seeking justice and righteousness.

So, while the Beatitudes clearly denote our happiness in God as opposed to imposter happiness, they also plunge us directly into another age-old debate among Christians: the question of good works or faith and the related discussion of the degree to which we have free will and ability to choose to work toward good. While I will fully claim my Catholic background here, which, on my view, notes the necessity of faith and free will both and which professes the need for humans to submit their wills to God (and in doing so, make a "choice" for God), I do not think that such an answer still fully addresses the difficulty since so many of the Beatitudes would appear to have little to do with human action or will. Yet, some of them do. Furthermore, only a few verses later, we find Jesus saying: "Let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify the Father" (v. 16).

I will hope to address this point further in the next section. Here I note that the simple connection I made earlier about "real happiness" and "imposter happiness" goes much deeper precisely because of the presence and role of choice. Perhaps the Beatitudes stand not only to press us on our too-easy visions of human happiness but also stand to make a theological connection between our understanding of choices and how those choices link to "imposter happiness." So it would seem that

in addition to understanding happiness as complete fullness in God, the Beatitudes may also offer some wisdom on the state of marriage and singleness exactly because of questions they raise about will and choice.

Ways to Read the Beatitudes

In this section I discuss two of the ways that theologians have thought about the Beatitudes in relation to fostering Christian life. This section serves as a way to discuss vocation and Christian discipleship in relation to the Beatitudes but also to deepen reflection on the question of choice I raised above.

In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, one of the most prominent ways of reflecting on the Beatitudes has been by relating the verses to social justice for the poor, especially as a wake-up call for Western Christians. As one commenter writes in a book tellingly titled *Spirituality of the Beatitudes: Matthew's Challenge for First World Christians*, "Whoever follows these instructions for correct behavior, by good-doing, will be personally constituted with a further share in the goodness of God's blessed presence."²⁵ More than that, following the Beatitudes "may bring down society's yoke of oppression and rejection."²⁶ The Beatitudes offer a chance for disciples—from all walks of life, married and single—actively to follow Jesus.

Surely this is one of the reasons the Catholic Church includes direct mention of the Beatitudes in the *Catechism* entry on singleness and includes the Beatitudes as a Gospel reading for weddings. Discipleship and witness, in this case directed explicitly to the poor, come about via actions of people striving to be so like Christ in their lives that they become "like the master." Such a view emphasizes the vocation of all baptized Christians, regardless of whether they are married or not, to live as constant witnesses to Christ's good news. This view seems to undergird too the idea mentioned earlier that "the only thing of truly spiritual significance in life is whether a person is in Christ or not." Being in Christ necessarily involves participation in social justice in all the ways that has come to mean: working against unjust societal structures through protests, mission work, and creating new structures, questioning political ideologies, advocating non-violence, and so on.

This kind of reading necessitates a sense of willed, chosen action on the part of disciples, people who recognize that God himself makes a preferential choice for the

25. Michael H. Crosby, *Spirituality of the Beatitudes: Matthew's Challenge to First World Christians* (New York: Orbis, 1981) 23. See also Jim Langford, *Happy Are They: Living the Beatitudes in America* (Ligouri, MO: Triumph, 1997).

26. *Ibid.*, 217.

poor, and God's disciples are therefore asked to follow suit. A focus on making the right choices, choices directed toward God, are essential on this view. Thus, Mary E. Jensen examines the possible words Jesus might have used in his native tongue, rather than being content with the Greek of the NT authors: "When I look further back to Jesus' Aramaic, I find that the original word [*makarios*] was *ashray*, from the verb *yashar*. *Ashray* does not have this passive quality to it at all. Instead it means 'to set yourself on the right way for the right goal; to turn around, repent; to become straight or righteous.'"²⁷ The Greek is deficient because it is passive and suggests a lack of will for people. Megan McKenna uses this basis as a beginning for thinking through Luke's first Beatitude: "Blessed are you poor, the kingdom of God is yours." She argues that rightly seeing the four Beatitudes in Luke, and the eight Beatitudes in Matthew (which for her provide further development and reflection on Luke's four) requires reading all of the Beatitudes through this first Beatitude. On her view they all come back to blessing the poor and recognizing all the ways in which poverty affects hunger, weeping and mourning (a consequence of hunger), and persecution (since poverty involves persecution). Rightly living the Beatitudes requires making direct, concrete choices toward poverty at every possible turn.

Without denigrating or totally rejecting this view—for I think a social justice/discipleship view is an important one for Christians to wrestle with—I worry that such an emphasis is overly positive about human ability to enact justice in this world. I worry, moreover, that it is too positive about the kinds of choices that humans are able to make, especially in those organizations that we deem most social-justice oriented. Too often, the choices we have are poor ones; too often we can see that the action we do will be a mere trifle in relation to the very large problems that exist. I think of the sheer difficulty of dealing with mental illness. A friend of mine has a brother with schizophrenia; he has lived on the streets off and on and has no ability to hold down a job or take care of himself full time. He would be counted among "the poor" many times, having no regular access to food, shelter, or clothing. When he is on his own, he forgets to take his medications regularly, which induces schizophrenic episodes that land him in the emergency room. When he is at his sister's house, he might take his meds or he might not; his sheer size compared to hers means that she cannot compel him to do so. If he remains unmedicated for long, the possibility for serious injury to her or him or to property is high. While he is often admitted to a psychiatric hospital following such incidences, he is a high enough function-

27. Mary E. Jensen, *We Belong to the Land* (San Francisco: Harper 1990), cited in Megan McKenna, *Blessings and Woes: The Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke* (New York: Orbis, 2001) 23.

ing schizophrenic that once he is stabilized on medications enough, he is deemed “healthy” enough to be sent home, and the cycle repeats. In this situation—repeated all too often throughout the United States and elsewhere—the “good” choices or “actions” are not highly apparent. A reading of the Beatitudes that focuses so heavily on “right choice” as a means to obtain heaven is itself an injustice to those who face scenarios where there are few or no right choices.

Martin Luther provides an interesting contrast to the views suggested above, for as we might expect, Luther consistently highlights the need for grace over against whatever supposedly righteous works Christians think they can do. Luther’s account of the Beatitudes suggests that it is not “about how we become Christians, but only about the works and fruit that no one can do unless he is already a Christian and in a state of grace.”²⁸ Following the Beatitudes will not make a person righteous; rather, the Beatitudes can only be lived if one already has faith in God.

Particularly relevant to this essay on marriage and singleness is the fact that Luther thought that the Beatitudes had been co-opted by monks in previous centuries. According to Susan Schreiner, a popular view in Luther’s time was that living the Beatitudes was work that only the “spiritual elite” (monks and nuns) could do, but Luther insists that “the humble ordinary life in the world was not at all easy, and in fact was much more difficult than the strictest monastic rule.”²⁹ Luther was not confident in the goodness of the world but saw that evil lies at every turn. In this situation as we have it on earth, a life of perfection such as the blasphemous “holiness” of monks is impossible. What Jesus means when he preaches that we should be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect, and what Jesus means when he says we should be pure of heart is instead “that one is watching and pondering what God says and replacing its own ideas with the Word of God. This alone is pure before God.”³⁰ Luther contrasts the false purity of heart of monks with the image of a dirty shoemaker, married with children, who places the Word of God in his heart. The choice and action this married shoemaker has comes only because of his faith in God.

By the same token, it would not really matter whether that shoemaker was married or single; what matters is the shoemaker’s single-hearted faith in God. Marriage

28. Martin Luther, “Sermon on the Mount,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 21 (ed. Jaroslav Pelikan; St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), cited in Susan E. Schreiner, “Martin Luther,” *The Sermon on the Mount Through the Centuries: From the Early Church to John Paul II* (ed. Jeffery P. Greenman et al.; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007) 109–27, 110.

29. Schreiner, “Martin Luther,” 113.

30. *Luther’s Works* 21.34, cited in Schreiner, “Martin Luther,” 126.

is merely a means toward ordering secular society, but it is only in that secular society that we attempt to live the Beatitudes by faith. Thus, while Luther's approach to the Beatitudes is quite different from the twentieth century views described above, he supports a similar view of marriage and singleness. State of life does not matter at all, but this is a serious deficiency (as discussed earlier) if we are to take seriously both Paul's words about singleness as better and also the sheer difficulty of being single in contemporary Christian communities that remain overly focused on marriage.

Another approach, and one that I find most fruitful when it comes to specific questions about choice comes to us from the fourth century. John Chrysostom, a famous preacher in his own day (and influential still in ours), preached a series of sermons in which he focused on the political nature of the Sermon on the Mount. This political nature was not an earthly politics but a heavenly politics revealed on earth. In this context the Beatitudes become a description of the way a heavenly citizen sees the world and self:

For the one who is humble also will mourn over his own sins; and the one who mourns will also be meek and just and merciful; the one who is merciful and just and contrite is also pure of heart; and such a person is also a peacemaker; and the one who has succeeded in all these things will be well-positioned in the face of danger and will not be perturbed when they hear badly of themselves or suffer countless terrible things.³¹

The difference between Chrysostom's reading and some of the twentieth-century readings mentioned earlier is in its focus on humility rather than poverty. Being "poor in spirit" is not primarily about money, class, ability to work, and the other aspects that go into considering poverty; rather, it is a virtue. A virtue is a habit that aims us toward being good as opposed to a vice that aims us toward acting in evil ways. Humility is a curious virtue, however, because it involves putting God's will and desire or some relevant person's will and desire (like that of a spouse or children) ahead of your own. Once this step has been taken, the Christian is then able to mourn, be meek, and so on, but all of this comes only following the giving up of choice and will. In this way God's kingdom truly becomes present here and now for Chrysostom, but only because the heavenly citizens on earth have submitted themselves to God. These heavenly citizens will find themselves doing some of the

31. John Chrysostom, Homily 15.193 B-C, cited in Margaret Mitchell, "John Chrysostom," *The Sermon on the Mount Through the Centuries: From the Early Church to John Paul II* (ed. Jeffery P. Greenman, et al.; Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2007) 19-42, 35.

kinds of things McKenna would hope for (such as giving up all their possessions to aid the poor), but this comes first from being humble.

Chrysostom's view strikes me as being much more like a spiritual journey than the twentieth-century emphasis on exhorting acts of justice by which the kingdom comes. The kingdom is still partially present for Chrysostom, but it is not due to any choice of ours save the choice of submitting our will to God.

If Chrysostom is correct in his reading, then if we were to read the Beatitudes in the broader context of the Sermon on the Mount, we would find that Jesus calls us to citizenship in the heavenly city, but this means that we become more and more concerned for the welfare of our brothers and sisters on earth. The Beatitudes are followed directly by discussions of being salt and light for the earth (vv. 13–16). These in turn are followed by several of Jesus' statements about how to act in relation to other human beings.

In this broader context of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refers at least obliquely to issues relating to marriage several times. He advocates not committing adultery but not looking at a person with lust either (vv. 27–28). He admonishes the people not to be overly loving toward family, for Christ asks for even more: "If you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others?" (v. 47). Jesus does not negate the importance of marriage or family, but he puts it in the context of the Beatitudes, and especially of being humble before God.

Thus, while I am sure there are more theological accounts than this one that could adequately address the questions I have posed in this paper, I suggest that Chrysostom's kind of reading stands as one account that is able to address Paul's concern for making good choices in marriage and singleness but also his simultaneous concern that whichever choice we make for marriage and singleness is not the "ultimate" choice. Our choice for marriage and singleness matter, but only in proper relationship to the main choice we have. This main choice is the choice for humility that enables life in God and that hopefully yields the kinds of fruits that Jesus mentions in the Beatitudes.

Thoughts for Christian Practice

I offer these readings of the Beatitudes (and secondarily of 1 Cor 7) as correctives to the plight, as I described in the introduction, of choice and desire in relation to marriage and singleness. Both marriage and singleness lure us to the thought that we are making an adult choice, upon which all (or most) of our future happiness in God

relies. Indeed, for some groups of Christians a choice for marriage is the only way to follow Christ, while singleness often ends up being a default state of life.

In what follows I suggest some practical ways this impacts how we might preach and teach about both marriage and singleness. First, be very careful about the language of choice and in that context speak much more about marriage and singleness as part of Christian vocation. Vocation (in all senses of the word) is not always or usually a choice as in a “willed decision” we make. For example, most pastors I know describe their call to ministry as one where God kept dogging them until they finally said “Yes.” Marriage and singleness might be seen similarly. A couple’s decision to marry is never an individual choice but relies on the consent and mutual choice of the spouse.

De-emphasizing our spoken discussions of choice must go hand-in-hand with de-emphasizing dating programs or online dating websites that a church might use. Classes that specifically address the goodness of marriage might discuss marriage and singleness in the context of the whole church. In addition, emphasis might be made on serious adult formation that discusses vocations without reference to marriage and family.

I think it can be appropriate to mention choice in the proper context. When someone is about to make a lifelong vow to marry someone else (or in the Roman Catholic or Orthodox traditions makes a lifelong vow to singleness in community), it might be worth noting that this choice is possible only because God has first made an eternal choice for us. God always chooses us, and this is the key difference between our choices and God’s. What we do when we make a lifelong vow is hope to “become perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). We attempt to be heavenly citizens through those vows, but if John Chrysostom is right in his reading of the Beatitudes, those vows are themselves subordinated to the humility and submission to God that we seek in the Beatitudes.

Second, in backing away from the language of choice, we clear some space to think more deeply about singleness, especially for those who find themselves in the sixty-one percent of currently single adults who hope to be married someday. One possible way forward, especially for Protestants, might be to create prayers or blessing services for those who suspect they might have a call for lifelong celibacy. Single Protestants who find themselves with that kind of vocation should not have to feel caught between joining a tradition that offers that form of life or staying single in a congregation that privileges marriage. Like those who are married, the main choice must be emphasized as the one in which we choose humility. This should then enable

those who are single to consider and reflect on the ways in which their lives might mirror what Paul suggests in 1 Cor 7. *Are they freer than their married friends? If so, how? If not, how might they embrace singleness (whether it is temporary or not) so as to follow Christ more freely?*

Even more than this, reflection on unwanted or unchosen singleness as a *vocation* might prove fruitful. Roger Mehl writes in *Society and Love*, “The most reliable callings are born from reflecting on a situation that is more or less imposed on us. A vocation is nearly always a way of accepting a situation that was first of all considered a limitation.”³² We can consider all the people called in the Scriptures whose vocations sprung from limitations and imposed statuses in life (e.g., Moses, Mary, Jeremiah). Giving truthful accounts of limitations and impositions, but yet showing how grace and vocation can flow from those, provides a more positive witness.

In closing I recall a quote from my doctoral advisor, Stanley Hauerwas: “. . . we necessarily live out a story we have not chosen. To come to terms with our beginning requires a truthful story to acquire the skills to live in gratitude rather than resentment for the gift of life.”³³ In short, I think the task before us is to tell a more truthful story, one that reminds us again and again of our true happiness, our beginning and end in God, even as we choose (or fall into) vocations for marriage and singleness.

32. Roger Mehl, *Society and Love: Ethical Problems of Family Life* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), cited in Rodney Clapp, *Families at the Crossroads: Beyond Traditional and Modern Options* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993) 89.

33. Stanley Hauerwas, unpublished notes with his reflections on book reviews for *Hannah's Child: A Theologian's Memoir* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).