

Blessed Are the Image-Bearers: Gregory of Nyssa and the Beatitudes

REBEKAH EKLUND*

Gregory of Nyssa as Conversation Partner

Stephen Fowl offers a succinct definition of the theological interpretation of scripture: “that practice whereby theological concerns and interests inform and are informed by a reading of scripture.”¹ This includes both premodern approaches to scripture and more recent attempts to revive the practice of reading scripture theologically with attention to the flourishing of the church. As Fowl notes, “Christians have generally read their scripture to guide, correct, and edify their faith, worship, and practice as part of their ongoing struggle to live faithfully before the triune God.”²

In 2007, in the inaugural essay of the newly launched *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, Richard Hays likewise defines modern-day theological exegesis as a practice, “a way of approaching Scripture with eyes of faith and seeking to understand it within the community of faith.”³ He goes on to give a more complex discussion of this practice, including twelve identifying marks.⁴ Hays’s definition limits itself to contemporary practice, which brings to the surface some key differences with premodern approaches—for example, attention to historical setting and to the Old Testament. Yet the similarities with Fowl’s definition are also telling; both agree that theological interpretation is oriented toward the community of faith, and toward a similar end: a more faithful life before God. Likewise both Hays and Fowl assume that we should learn from but not identically repeat the past.

* Rebekah Eklund teaches scripture and Christian theology at Loyola University Maryland in Baltimore, Maryland. She is the author of *Jesus Wept: The Significance of Jesus’ Laments in the New Testament* and is an ordained minister in the Evangelical Covenant Church.

¹ Stephen Fowl, “Introduction,” in Stephen Fowl, ed., *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997), xiii.

² Fowl, “Introduction,” xiii.

³ Richard B. Hays, “Reading the Bible with Eyes of Faith: The Practice of Theological Exegesis,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1, no. 1 (2007): 11.

⁴ Hays, “Reading,” 11–15.

Rather, as Fowl writes, “premodern scriptural interpretation should be seen as a conversation partner providing insights and resources for reading scripture theologically in the present.”⁵

I propose that Gregory of Nyssa is an insightful theological reader of scripture in general and of the beatitudes in particular, and is therefore an exemplary conversation partner who provides rich resources for reading the beatitudes theologically in the present. Reading the beatitudes in conversation with Gregory—looking over his shoulder, as it were—can inform our understanding and application of the beatitudes today. His interpretation of the beatitudes models the fruitful interplay between theological reflection—in his case, around the themes of the *imago Dei*, the fall, and eschatological redemption—and scriptural exegesis. Yet Gregory also provides a good example of an interpretation that cannot simply be repeated without modification, given his Neoplatonic commitments. We can retrieve and be nourished by Gregory’s reflections on the beatitudes in light of the fall and the *imago Dei* while placing them within a theological framework that has a more positive view of the role of the body and its desires.⁶

The Beatitudes and the Restoration of the Image of God

In 371, Gregory’s older brother Basil appointed him bishop of Nyssa. Gregory’s meditations on the beatitudes were likely preached a few years later, in the mid- to late 370s.⁷ Scholars often credit Gregory, along with Ambrose of Milan, with an innovative approach to the beatitudes that understands them as sequential and ascending stages of virtue. This view quickly came to dominate patristic and medieval exegesis and is an approach that endures even into the present day. In and of itself, this is an interesting example of a theological interpretation of the beatitudes, and a well-studied one. Yet Gregory’s approach has one more element that is even more particular to him: reading

⁵ Fowl, “Introduction,” xvii.

⁶ See Hans Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), who makes the case that Gregory is not exclusively antimaterial but instead positively values “embodied existence in time and space” (see pp. 6–10 for a summary). Nonetheless, Boersma also cautions that Gregory’s theology has a “profoundly otherworldly cast” that consistently turns away from the material in favor of the spiritual (9).

⁷ Hans Boersma, “Becoming Human in the Face of God: Gregory of Nyssa’s Unending Search for the Beatific Vision,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 17, no. 2 (2015): 133.

the beatitudes through the lens of the fall and the restoration of the *imago Dei*.

In his first meditation on the Matthean beatitudes, Gregory introduces the key themes that will guide him throughout the rest of the sermons. The beatitudes represent spiritual wealth, or beatitude (blessedness) in general, which he defines as “a possession of all things held to be good.” Since God is “the one thing truly blessed” and is “the fount of all goodness,” it follows that the perfect expression of the beatitudes is God.⁸ The ultimate end of participation in the beatitudes, then, is nothing less than “communion with the Godhead.”⁹ Gregory uses the metaphor of Jacob’s ladder (Gen. 28:10–19) to describe the beatitudes as steps that facilitate the soul’s ascent toward its goal of union with God.¹⁰ He describes the eighth and final beatitude as their “summit” and links it to the reversal of the fall: “the eighth Beatitude contains the re-instatement in heaven of those who had fallen into servitude and who are now from their slavery recalled to the Kingdom.”¹¹

For Gregory, the virtues likewise have God-likeness as their true goal: “the end of the life of virtue is to become like to God.”¹² Thus the telos (or end) of the virtues and of the beatitudes is one and the same: in short, God-likeness, or the believer’s increasing participation “in the heavenly or eschatological reality of the divine life.”¹³ Gregory understands the virtues themselves (like the beatitudes) as divine characteristics, to which people should seek to conform, and in which people are formed by God.

Human beings have the ability or capacity to take on divine characteristics because they already bear the image of the divine, the *imago Dei*. Yet human beings have fallen away from their original created glory. While human nature bears the image of God and thus “the beauty of goodness,” this beauty is disfigured by the stain of sin. The “filth” of sin, acquired through the fall, must be washed away to reveal the glory of the *imago Dei* present in human nature—and Gregory associates the beatitudes with this very process.

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Lord’s Prayer; The Beatitudes*, Ancient Christian Writers 18, trans. Hilda C. Graef (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1954), 87.

⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 130.

¹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 97.

¹¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 166.

¹² Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 89.

¹³ Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 3.

For example, in his meditation on the beatitude “Blessed are those who mourn,” Gregory follows a common pattern in patristic interpretation by first describing the mourning blessed by Christ as sorrow over sin or godly repentance. But he goes on to argue that Christ is also referring to “something deeper,” which is weeping over the fall itself, or the sorrow that arises from recognizing the loss of the true good in human nature.¹⁴ For Gregory, the more we recognize our tragic separation from the goodness and beauty in whose likeness we were fashioned, the more sorrow we should feel, “because we are separated from a good so great that we cannot even attain to its knowledge.”¹⁵ Made in the image of God, we are now distanced from our source of joy. For Gregory, one must awaken, or become sensible, to the truth of this condition; mourning is thus a kind of sorrowful awareness, the opposite of which is *analgesia* (absence of pain).¹⁶

Jesus’ blessing of the mourners is thus read theologically through the lens of the tragic loss of the fall and our human destiny to be reunited with God. Mourning is primarily sorrow at the loss of the original beauty and goodness of creation and our separation from God. What greater grief have we than this in the present age? On this point, Gregory has a fruitful conversation partner in Nicholas Wolterstorff, who meditates on the same beatitude. Wolterstorff interprets the beatitude in light of the brokenness of the present age and the “not yet” element of the coming kingdom of God. The mourners, he writes, “are those who have caught a glimpse of God’s new day, who ache with all their being for that day’s coming, and who break into tears when confronted with its absence.”¹⁷ Both interpreters locate the beatitude in the “time between the times” and in a space of deep yearning for the full arrival of the kingdom of God.

For Gregory, the restoration of the image of God and humanity’s union (or reunion) with God is not restricted to the age to come

¹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 107, 108.

¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 112.

¹⁶ Françoise Vinel, “Grégoire de Nyse, *De Beatitudinibus*, Oratio III: ‘Bienheureux les affligés, parce qu’ils seront consolés,’ (Mt 5,5),” in Hubertus R. Drobner and Albert Viciano, ed., *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Beatitudes; An English Version with Commentary and Supporting Studies. Proceedings of the Eighth International Colloquium on Gregory of Nyssa (Paderborn, 14–18 September 1998)* (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2000), 142–143.

¹⁷ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 85. See also Allen Verhey, *The Christian Art of Dying: Learning from Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 336–337.

but begins to occur in this life. On the one hand, Gregory sometimes writes that God has already restored the image of God in the Christian person through the incarnation of Christ and through that person's baptism.¹⁸ But Gregory also seems to believe that Christians have the responsibility to strive toward the virtues and resist the vices as an ongoing effort to cleanse the image of God from being further stained by sin and to burnish it to its former glory: "when we have put off the shame of sin, we shall be restored once more to the blessed form."¹⁹ Restraining the passions and resisting the desires of the flesh constitute human efforts to cleanse the image of God from the sin (and sinful desires) that stain it and mar its perfection.

For Gregory, striving to ascend the "ladder" of the beatitudes assists in the process of restoring the full glory of the *imago Dei*. For example, in his homily on the blessing for the merciful, Gregory claims that "participation in the Beatitudes means nothing else but to have communion with the Godhead."²⁰ In other words, he continues, God "divinizes" (*theopoieō*) the person who practices the beatitude. In this specific case, through practicing mercy, a person takes on a trait of God because God is likewise merciful.²¹ For Gregory this imitation is not merely a similarity but effects an actual change in that person's nature—taking on the likeness of God.

Is there something about the beatitudes in particular that led Gregory to link them to the image of God? According to Warren Smith, the human soul bears the image of God in two senses for Gregory: first, the soul has a "structural or formal similarity to the divine nature" and faculties, especially in relation to rationality and free will.²² Second, the soul "is capable of bearing the *moral likeness* to the beauty of God's perfection" in terms of virtue.²³ Therefore, by taking on the virtues represented by the beatitude (mercy, humility, purity of heart, and so on), the soul takes on the moral likeness of God.

When is this process completed? Did Gregory believe that the beatitudes could be fully achieved and the height of virtue (union

¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *Lord's Prayer*, 26; Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 88.

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 88.

²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 130.

²¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 131.

²² J. Warren Smith, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), 22.

²³ Smith, *Passion and Paradise*, 25–26.

with God) reached in the present life? On the one hand, when Gregory discusses the “rewards” of the beatitudes, he sometimes treats them as eschatological promises to be fulfilled in the world to come. In his meditation on Christ’s promise to the mourners, “they shall be comforted,” Gregory assumes (like Wolsterstorff) that this comfort will occur in the age to come, in “the unending and everlasting joy in eternity.”²⁴

On the other hand, when discussing the beatitude “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,” Gregory wrestles with the twofold problem of whether it is possible to become pure in heart in this life, and how an invisible God may be seen at all, and he concludes that the Lord would never command something that “completely surpasses our nature and the limits of its power.”²⁵ Instead, since the Lord commanded it, it must be possible to cleanse the heart in order to achieve the promised blessing.²⁶ Thus he concludes that God can be seen in three ways, the third of which is the purified image of God that is revealed in those who have become pure in heart. For Gregory, purity of heart means cleansing the soul from the dirt of sin that has accrued over it, and therefore revealing the “Divine Beauty” that lies underneath. In other words, the person who achieves purity of heart “will see the Image of the Divine Nature in his [or her] own beauty.”²⁷ Unlike the promise to comfort the mourners, the promise of this beatitude is realized—at least in part—not in the eschaton but in the present.

In later writings, Gregory appears to have what we might today call an inaugurated eschatology. In Rowan Greer’s analysis of Gregory’s *On the Making of Humankind* (*De hominis opificio*), Greer concludes that the image of God has a twofold role for Gregory: “[The image] possesses moral, intellectual, and spiritual characteristics that not only constitute it as God’s image but also act as final causes for the Christian life as a growth toward human destiny.”²⁸ The creation of

²⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 116.

²⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 145.

²⁶ Boersma, “Becoming Human,” 139.

²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 145–149. See also Boersma, “Becoming Human,” 137.

²⁸ Rowan A. Greer, “The Leaven and the Lamb: Christ and Gregory of Nyssa’s Vision of Human Destiny,” in R. Joseph Hoffmann and Gerald A. Larue, ed., *Jesus in History and Myth* (Buffalo, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1986), 175, citing *Life of Moses* 7.1.

humanity in the image of God points to the *intention* of God, which is realized not immediately at the creation itself in Genesis 1, but throughout “the course of human history. . . . Creation is not so much an event that took place at the beginning as a process initiated then and completed by the age to come.”²⁹ In this sense, then, the image of God describes human destiny, “since only in the age to come will God’s purpose be realized.”³⁰ Monique Alexandre argues that Gregory interprets the beatitudes likewise within the framework of an inaugurated eschatology, reading them in the time between the old age and the new, in the tension between the “already” and the “not yet.”³¹

Human and Divine Agency

Gregory has sometimes been accused of lacking a theology of grace, or even of flirting with a sort of proto-Pelagianism (prior, of course, to the writings of Pelagius himself), due to his apparent confidence in human capacities to achieve the good. He writes, for example, that people are perfectly capable of practicing the virtues represented by the beatitudes: “So it depends on us and is in the power of our free will to receive what we desire, to find what we seek, and to enter where we wish to be.”³² On the other hand, we should remember that Gregory also claims that the image of God is restored in humanity through God’s work in Christ (the incarnation) and through the grace of baptism. God’s saving action is therefore prior to human efforts: for Gregory, “the work of Christ has enabled us fully to reject sin and restore the divine image.”³³ Furthermore, in his meditation on the first beatitude, Gregory exhorts his audience to seek the great spiritual treasure of the beatitudes through the labor of prayer, indicating that human efforts to achieve the beatitudes are not wholly unaided.³⁴

²⁹ Greer, “The Leaven and the Lamb,” 175. Greer cites *On the Making of Humankind* 16.5–8, 17.2, 22.3.

³⁰ Greer, “The Leaven and the Lamb,” 175, citing *On the Making of Humankind* 16.12.

³¹ Monique Alexandre, “Perspectives Eschatologiques dans les Homélie sur les Béatitudes de Grégoire de Nyssa,” in Drobner and Viciano, *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies*, 257–291; see especially 279–291.

³² Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 135. He cites Luke 17:21 and Matthew 7:8 as support.

³³ Elizabeth Agnew Cochran, “The *Imago Dei* and Human Perfection: The Significance of Christology for Gregory of Nyssa’s Understanding of the Human Person,” *The Heythrop Journal* 50, no. 3 (2009): 406.

³⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 86, 87.

Scholars have noted a similar interplay between divine and human agency elsewhere in Gregory's writings as well. In *On Perfection* (*De perfectione*), Gregory's words indicate that the restoration of the image of God in humanity is both God's work and ours: it is first God's work in Christ through the incarnation, but it is also *our* work to imitate the incarnate Christ.³⁵

Imitation of Christ

Gregory, as we have seen, links the practice of the beatitudes to increased *God*-likeness, but he makes relatively little mention of *Christ*-likeness in his meditations on the beatitudes. By contrast, for many of the patristic writers, Jesus demonstrates and models what the beatitudes look like in practice. For John Chrysostom, for example, Jesus taught the beatitudes both by speaking them and performing them in his deeds; to show how the virtues of poverty of spirit and meekness should be practiced, he washed his disciples' feet.³⁶ The beatitudes are thus part of the *imitatio Christi*, the imitation of Christ—the way of discipleship and the bearing of the cross.

Gregory, however, does not make these kinds of connections in his meditation on the beatitudes. He sees the beatitudes as assisting in the process by which we attain God-likeness (reflecting more clearly the image of God already in us), while it is in later writings that he argues we are remade in God's image through imitating Christ.³⁷ According to Elizabeth Cochran, Gregory elsewhere describes Christ as the "Prototype" of the image of God, such that "our perfection . . . lies in assimilating ourselves to the archetypal image of God, and we accomplish this by imitating Christ."³⁸ It would seem a final logical step, then, to suggest that one imitates Christ precisely by taking up the beatitudes into one's own life. And for Gregory, imitating Christ is not merely playacting, as it were, but it effects a real transformation. Gregory appeals to the example of the apostle Paul to make this case: "Christ has actually transformed Paul; Paul's imitation of Christ led

³⁵ Greer, "The Leaven and the Lamb," 178.

³⁶ John Chrysostom, "Homily on the Passage (Matt. xxvi.29), 'Father If It Be Possible Let This Cup Pass from Me,' etc., and against Marcionists and Manichaeans," trans. W. R. W. Stephens, *NPWF*, First Series, no. 9 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 205–206.

³⁷ Cochran, "The *Imago Dei*," 409.

³⁸ Cochran, "The *Imago Dei*," 409.

to the transformation of his soul in Christ's image."³⁹ We might offer this as a friendly amendment to Gregory's interpretation and wonder how putting the beatitudes into practice today functions as an *imitatio Christi*—a participation in Christ that has the power to transform us from one likeness to another.

The Body and the Passions

As a Neoplatonic thinker, Gregory must navigate the tension between Christian affirmation of the goodness of the material world (as seen especially in the doctrines of the incarnation and the resurrection of the body), and the Platonist tendency to view the body as "an encumbrance to be endured until we are finally freed from it."⁴⁰ In his homilies on the beatitudes, he often leans toward the latter. In one homily, for example, he writes that in order to restore the image of God one must purify the heart "from every creature and all unruly affections."⁴¹ In the third homily, he describes the fall as a removal from "the delights of Paradise . . . into this unhealthy and wearisome place, where [human] life, once accustomed to impassibility, became instead subject to passion and corruption."⁴² Gregory describes the passions ("wrath and fear, cowardice and impudence, depression as well as pleasure, hatred, strife and merciless cruelty, envy as well as flattery, brutality together with brooding over injuries") as "despotic masters who make the soul a slave."⁴³

It might seem, then, that Gregory views the beatitudes as entailing a recovery of impassibility or the absence altogether of the powerful, enslaving passions. Judith Kovacs, however, insists that Gregory views the beatitudes as teaching not *apatheia* (freedom from emotion) but rather the restraint of the passions.⁴⁴ And while Gregory is

³⁹ Cochran, "The *Imago Dei*," 410.

⁴⁰ Peter C. Bouteneff, "Essential or Existential: The Problem of the Body in the Anthropology of St Gregory of Nyssa," in Drobner and Viciano, *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies*, 410.

⁴¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 148.

⁴² Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 113.

⁴³ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 113–114.

⁴⁴ Judith L. Kovacs, "Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nyssa on the Beatitudes," in Drobner and Viciano, *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies*, 327. See also Martin Laird, "Under Solomon's Tutelage: The Education of Desire in the *Homilies on the Song of Songs*," *Modern Theology* 18, no. 4 (2002): 507–525, for a similar argument regarding Gregory's homilies on the Song of Songs.

suspicious toward the power of material things to hinder our participation in God, he does not entirely overlook the needs of embodied life or the way that the beatitudes address those needs. In his homily on the first beatitude, for example, Gregory describes earthly riches as a burden that the soul must shake off in order to ascend to God (“Gold is a heavy thing . . . but virtue is light and bears souls upwards”).⁴⁵ In the meditation on hungering and thirsting for righteousness, he understands thirst and hunger as primarily desire for spiritual food, but doesn’t rule out that it means hunger for actual food as well. He makes allowances for this bodily desire, “since it is needed to preserve our life,” so long as the desire for food is pure and is separated from desire for superfluous things like fancy silverware.⁴⁶

The platonic notion that our unruly passions might need to be tamed and directed is not entirely alien to our experience. When I ask students in my ethics courses whether their emotions are helpful or harmful for living an ethical life, they often identify them as more harmful because of the way they can obscure judgment or lead to impulsive (and therefore bad) decisions, but they also point to positive desires such as a passion for justice (as in Matt. 5:6). Augustine of Hippo would agree. Not so long after Gregory, Augustine writes that the passions, given the proper restraint, “may be turned into the instruments of justice. In fact . . . the question is not *whether* the devout soul is angry, but *why*; not whether it is sad, but what causes its sadness.”⁴⁷ Thomas Aquinas’s discussion of the passions in the *Summa Theologiae* (Ia IIae, qq. 22–48) allows for both inherently good passions (such as compassion and shame) and inherently evil ones (such as envy), as well as for the concept that most passions are morally neutral and might be shaped to orient us either toward or away from God.⁴⁸

Likewise, later Christian thinkers have imagined a more positive role for the embodied life, which might allow us to adopt Gregory’s view of the restoration of the *imago Dei* while simultaneously understanding the beatitudes as *embodied* practices that involve the goodness of bodies in community: making peace among each other,

⁴⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 95.

⁴⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Beatitudes*, 123.

⁴⁷ Augustine, *City of God* 9.5 (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 349.

⁴⁸ Kevin White, “The Passions of the Soul (Ia IIae, qq. 22–48),” in Stephen J. Pope, ed., *The Ethics of Aquinas* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 106.

mourning with those who mourn, showing mercy in all the material and tangible ways imagined by Matthew (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, visiting the prisoners), and so on. Emanuel Katongole, for example, imagines worship as a set of embodied practices that teach Christians to unlearn race and resist racism, not least because of the way the greeting and passing of the peace makes Christians physically present to each other in their bodily differences as they clasp hands and embrace.⁴⁹

Seeing God in One Another

Finally, Gregory's insights about seeing the beauty of God in our own souls, in the restored image of God that resides there, might fruitfully be extended and applied to seeing God in one another. Surely Gregory would not object to this second friendly amendment to his thought. After all, Gregory rejected the practice of slavery, and his reasons for doing so were deeply rooted in his theological understanding of the *imago Dei* present in every human being, with no exceptions.⁵⁰

The promise "you will see God" is then understood as a promise that we will truly see one another—that we will see the beauty of God when we look into the face of another human being. Martin Luther King Jr. once exhorted a congregation to obey Jesus' command to love their enemies by finding the element of good in them—that is, by discovering the image of God even in their hated adversaries.⁵¹ It does not take too much imagination to apply the promise that we will see God to beholding the divine beauty in all kinds of hated and feared others, if we only have eyes to see.

⁴⁹ Emmanuel Katongole, "Greeting: Beyond Racial Reconciliation," in Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, ed., *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*, 2nd ed. (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 70–83.

⁵⁰ See Boersma, *Embodiment and Virtue*, 152–157. See also J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 229–251; Carter argues that it is the christological shape of Gregory's doctrine of the *imago Dei* that allows him to become an "abolitionist intellectual" while the other Cappadocians were not.

⁵¹ Martin Luther King Jr., "Loving Your Enemies," in *Strength to Love* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 2010), 43–52.

Conclusion

I have sought to illustrate that reading the beatitudes in conversation with Gregory offers us one interesting way to read them theologically, in relation to Christian understandings of our creation in God's image, our present participation in and imitation of Christ, and our ultimate destiny to unite with God in a world in which we will no longer need the beatitudes to point us to the shape of God's kingdom. This is not the only way to read the beatitudes theologically, but it is one that I (for one) would not have thought of without Gregory's help, and for that I am grateful. I have also sought to show that this reading need not be adopted wholesale, along with its Neoplatonic underpinnings, in order to be useful.

A final unexplored question in relation to Gregory's interpretation has to do with Hays's marks of modern theological interpretation, especially those that commend attention to historical context and to intertextuality with respect to the Old Testament. Would greater attention to the beatitudes' interplay with Isaiah 61 further enrich Gregory's theological lens? For example, can we properly read the beatitudes in light of creation and new creation without reading them also in light of God's promises to restore Israel? This question is of vital importance if we are to avoid the error of detaching the story of the church from the story of Israel, but it is a question that I will hand over to future conversation partners who may someday want to sit down with Gregory and the Gospel of Matthew and have a chat.