

# BLESSED ARE THE STRESSED

*Secrets to a Happy Heart*  
from a CRABBY MYSTIC

SR. MARY JEA HILL, FSP



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**Pauline**  
BOOKS & MEDIA  
Boston

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hill, Mary Lea.

Blessed are the stressed : secrets to a happy heart from a crabby mystic /  
Mary Lea Hill, FSP.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-8198-1229-2 (pbk.) -- ISBN 0-8198-1229-3 (pbk.)

1. Beatitudes--Meditations. I. Title.

BT382.H55 2016

226.9'306--dc23

2015015614

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Published by Pauline Books & Media, 50 Saint Pauls Avenue, Boston, MA 02130-3491

Printed in the U.S.A.

[www.pauline.org](http://www.pauline.org)

Pauline Books & Media is the publishing house of the Daughters of St. Paul, an international congregation of women religious serving the Church with the communications media.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

20 19 18 17 16

*In memory of my parents, Lee and Alvada,  
and my brother and sister,  
Lawrence and Marjorie,  
who even now enjoy eternal happiness.*

# Contents



Acknowledgments . . . . .	xiii
Introduction . . . . .	1

## THE BEATITUDES IN MATTHEW 5:1–12 AND LUKE 6:20–26

1. Coming to Terms . . . . .	5
2. Whoa Is Me! . . . . .	7
3. Taffy Pull . . . . .	9
4. Tips . . . . .	11
5. The Pursuit . . . . .	13
6. What Are Beatitudes For? . . . . .	15
7. Beauty-tudes . . . . .	17
8. The Eternal Award . . . . .	19
9. Doing Poorly . . . . .	21
10. Poverty Is Like Fishing . . . . .	23
11. Abandon . . . . .	25
12. Don't Cry Foul . . . . .	27

13. Selfies . . . . .	29
14. Unrepeatable . . . . .	31
15. "I'm Not a Mourning Person" . . . . .	33
16. Mourning Star . . . . .	35
17. Motherhood . . . . .	37
18. For What Else Shall We Mourn? . . . . .	39
19. Let Them Eat Cake . . . . .	41
20. Sick and Tired . . . . .	43
21. Crank It Up! . . . . .	45
22. Thin Ice . . . . .	47
23. Porpoise's Purpose . . . . .	49
24. meekest Man . . . . .	51
25. Landowner . . . . .	53
26. Getting a Handle . . . . .	55
27. In Flight . . . . .	57
28. Mighty Waters . . . . .	59
29. Without a Paddle . . . . .	61
30. Queen of Burgers . . . . .	63
31. Eau du Sheep . . . . .	65
32. All's Fair . . . . .	67
33. Mercy Now Playing . . . . .	69
34. Knock, Knock . . . . .	71

35. The Gift of Mercy . . . . .	73
36. Mercy Mindset . . . . .	75
37. I Owe You . . . . .	77
38. Merci Me . . . . .	79
39. Driven Snow . . . . .	81
40. Face to Face . . . . .	83
41. Unsightly . . . . .	85
42. Hippopotamouse . . . . .	87
43. Chocolate Wars . . . . .	89
44. Stringed Instrument . . . . .	91
45. Imperfect Perfection . . . . .	93
46. Amateur Thief . . . . .	95
47. The Power of One . . . . .	97
48. Nuttier Than . . . . .	99
49. The Good Will Peace . . . . .	101
50. Harmony . . . . .	103
51. Worms . . . . .	105
52. Singing in the Reign . . . . .	107
53. Wrestling . . . . .	109
54. Age-Appropriate . . . . .	111
55. Cunning . . . . .	113
56. Minor Prophets . . . . .	115

57. But What About Suffering? . . . . .	117
58. Happily Ever After . . . . .	119

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT CONTINUES  
IN MATTHEW 5:13-7:29

59. 2B or Not 2B . . . . .	123
60. "You da Man!" . . . . .	125
61. The Saline Solution . . . . .	127
62. Weathering Heights . . . . .	129
63. Up the Ante . . . . .	131
64. Packing Heat . . . . .	133
65. From This Day Froth . . . . .	135
66. Sense and Sensibility . . . . .	137
67. Dreaded Dust Bunnies . . . . .	139
68. Golden Eggs . . . . .	141
69. The Stick Figure . . . . .	143
70. Scribbles . . . . .	145
71. Look the Part . . . . .	147
72. Fringe Benefits . . . . .	149
73. Betwixt and Between . . . . .	151
74. The Inner Court . . . . .	153
75. Hunters and Gatherers . . . . .	155



76. The Squeeze . . . . .	157
77. John the Who? . . . . .	159
78. Heavy-Duty Concentrate . . . . .	161
79. Happy Feat . . . . .	163
80. Pin the Tail on the Donkey . . . . .	165
Notes . . . . .	167

# Acknowledgments

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# Introduction

The beatitudes are arguably the best known part of the Gospel. I suspect that they are, on that evidence alone, among the most important words in the New Testament. Because they are familiar to us, they easily roll off the tongue as we read them, almost as easily as the words of a well-known song repeated unconsciously. Generally it is said that familiarity breeds contempt, but I would say that with the beatitudes familiarity breeds comfort.

And so a question arises here: Is this sense of comfort a good or bad thing? Was comfort actually the motivation of Jesus when he proclaimed the beatitudes? A question also arises about the word *blessed* itself. What does it imply? Sometimes it is translated simply as *happy*. The secret to understanding the beatitudes lies in understanding these words.

As an introduction, let us just say that the difference between happiness and beatitude is easy to see in our culture. How many people do we know who are happy with how things are in their lives? How many are totally content with who they are and with what they have achieved, and wouldn't change a thing? They are happy as far as this world's happiness goes!

Our culture, however, tells us we are not happy and certainly not satisfied. We actually deserve more and better. Advertising has become the new asceticism, and it is dictating the parameters of our earthly paradise. These advertisers are, in fact, not wrong in prompting us toward more and better, because we are always in search of something beyond what we have. We know this *more* and this *better* to be the ultimate good, beauty, and truth whom we call God. Saint Augustine could offer his famous quotation as a good advertising slogan for eternal happiness: “Our hearts are restless, O Lord, until they rest in you.”

*Blessed Are the Stressed* is not a scholarly treatment of the beatitudes; rather, it is a friendly stroll through them. We will stop to regard this aspect and that meaning in an attempt to get a better idea of how Jesus defines holiness. Together let us look at the beatitudes, savoring the words, mulling over the promises, but, most importantly, making them the hallmark of our lives.

## *THE BEATITUDES*

*When he saw the crowds he went up the mountain. After  
he sat down his disciples came to him, and he opened  
his mouth and taught them, saying,*

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*

*Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they shall be comforted.*

*Blessed are the meek,  
for they shall inherit the earth.*

*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst to do God’s will,  
for they shall have their fill.*

*Blessed are the merciful,  
for they shall receive mercy.*

*Blessed are the pure of heart,  
for they shall see God.*

*Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they shall be called sons of God.*

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for doing God’s will,  
for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.*

*Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you  
and say every sort of evil thing against you on account  
of me; rejoice and be glad, because your reward will be  
great in Heaven—they persecuted the prophets before  
you in the same way.” (Mt 5:1–12)*



*Then he raised his eyes to his disciples and said,  
“Blessed are you poor,  
    for yours is the Kingdom of God.  
Blessed are you who hunger now,  
    for you shall have your fill.  
Blessed are you who weep now,  
    for you shall laugh.  
Blessed are you when men hate you and exclude you and  
    insult you and reject your name as evil on account of  
    the Son of Man; rejoice on that day and leap for joy—  
    behold, your reward will be great in Heaven,  
    because their fathers did the same to the prophets.  
But woe to you rich,  
    for you have your delights!  
Woe to you who are full now,  
    for you shall be hungry!  
Woe, you who laugh now,  
    for you shall mourn and wail!  
Woe, when all men speak well of you,  
for their fathers did the same to the false prophets!”  
(Lk 6:20–26)*



*“The beatitudes are the final crowning of the divine action in a soul. They are the efficacious means to attaining absolute happiness. They are an invitation to practice the virtues, even the most difficult ones.”*

—BLESSED JAMES ALBERIONE<sup>1</sup>

## Coming to Terms

## Some concepts

We used to have a convent in a very interesting part of New York City—somewhere between dangerous and not-so-much. Ambitious would-be criminals occasionally hoisted themselves up the side of the building, seeking access through the roof; all manner of grates and bars kept us in, and guard dogs kept others out. So, it was hardly surprising when a visiting Italian sister, on her way out for the day, reported to the superior what she thought was a bomb at the front gate. Sister superior quickly mustered the troops. Several sisters jumped into gear and summoned New York's Finest, who came immediately with a full bomb squad. They briskly shepherded all the sisters to safety in the back yard. Moments later, from several big, burly cops came New York's finest laughter. They announced to the twittering flock of nuns that the threat was only a sleeping vagrant. When the original herald of the news came home was and told what happened, she just rolled her eyes and said in her distinctive accent,



“That’s what I said: there’s a *bom* out front!” She had probably hoped we would make him lunch; instead we made a scene!

Terms are interesting and important, but very often lead to confusion because they can so easily be misunderstood or misused. Before wading into the accounts of the beatitudes we need to check out a term. What exactly does *blessed* mean?

Our first time being blessed probably took place in this context: “*Achoo!*” “Bless you!”

We take this exchange for granted, but how did it begin? We are told that blessing the sneezer began during one of the influenza attacks of the past. It was hoped that the one who sneezed would not be headed to the sick bed. Now it’s like an automatic reflex. Even if it’s muttered mindlessly, I prefer it to alternative responses like “*Ewww!*” or “Just use your sleeve, will you?”

“God bless” is exactly what it says, while the less committed “Bless you” implies at least best wishes. Every attempt to live out one of the beatitudes invokes God’s care and kindness. God’s special grace lands on us. What could be better? That’s top-tier!

*... Respond with blessings, for this is your calling and in this way you will obtain a blessing. (1 Pt 3:9)*

## *And you*

Are you in the habit of freely bestowing blessings? What about being a blessing to someone?

## Whoa Is Me!

### *Luke's Version*

Horses are so beautiful and powerful! It is always a thrill to see them running wild and free across sunlit hillsides, manes and tails flying. Of course, horses are very big animals. I used to dream of riding. I have a photo from the good old days of pre-school me looking petrified sitting atop a rather short horse, with Dad protectively alongside. I don't remember this first ride, but I shudder at the thought of my second meeting with a member of that species at a county fair. The only problem for me was having to actually stay on top of the noble steed. I clambered up one side and promptly slid off the other. Even the horse looked back at me with disdain. I've sworn off riding since that day. Years later at the Grand Canyon, a guide suggested that we travel down the side trails on horseback. It was tempting until I glanced across at the riders coming down one narrow, rocky trail. The horses delicately sashayed along, swinging their riders

way over the edge of the trail. *No thanks*, I thought. *I don't want a constant bird's-eye view of where I'll end up if I slip off this time.*

I'm certain had I ever made it to ride atop a horse, even at a steady clop, the first thing out of my mouth would have been, "Whoa, Nelly, or whoever you are!" Yes, I'm skittish, but also cautious.

This is how it is with half of the beatitudes as Luke recalls them. Midway in the account, he switches from *blessed* to *woe*. These woes serve to stop us in our tracks like a big old "Whoa!" *Hold up a minute and consider this. Danger ahead, watch your step. Woe* is a note of warning. It's as if, in this version of the beatitudes, Jesus is saying, "Whoa to you rich, for you have your delights! Whoa to you who are full now . . . , whoa, you who laugh now . . . , whoa when all speak well of you. . . ."

*If only my people would listen to me,  
if only Israel would live up to my ways,  
in an instant would I subdue their enemies  
and extend my hands against their oppressors.  
(Ps 81:14–15)*

## *And you*

Looking at your own way of discipleship, can you imagine the Lord whispering a "Whoa!" to you? Pray about it.



with a bag of salt water taffy. I admired it all the way home and set my heart on the chocolate one. My mother wisely put the bag in a jar on the bookcase. “After supper,” she promised. Meanwhile, my sister spied the jar and helped herself. After supper I found my anticipated treasure gone. Oh, the early-onset angst! My little self reprimanded my honesty, obedience, and lack of alertness. Why didn’t I remove that piece on the way home? Why did my sister have to take the very piece I wanted? Of course, the better me knew the bag of candy was for the whole family; I should generously offer the others first dibs.

You may be thinking: “Relax. You were just a little girl.” True, but I was a little girl who spent a lot of time mulling over “good, better, best,” *and* bad.

The pull of the capital sins is constant in life, but Jesus has given us a game plan for overriding these tendencies: the beatitudes.

*Incline my heart to your testimonies  
rather than toward selfish gain.*

*Restrain my heart from giving attention to empty things;  
let me live in your way. (Ps 119:36–37)*

## *And you*

As an adult you will find you desire many things from life: good, better, best, *and* bad. How do you stir yourself toward the way of Christian discipleship? Which beatitude do you find most helpful?

## *Tips*

### *Happiness*

As far as happiness goes, the beatitudes seem unrealistic, exaggerated, and obscure. Although we usually set them aside as a poetic manifesto of the Messiah, we are about to venture into them on a quest for meaning. And when we say we seek meaning, we really ask for relevance. What are these statements to you and me?

We know the Gospel is not just an historical document to be read as the heritage of Christians. No, the Gospel is the living Word of God—it speaks to us today. Ideally, it will be a conversation between Jesus and us.

There are four Gospels—four distinct accounts of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ—written at different times, in different places, for different audiences, with different emphases. We should totally get this if we watch weekend sporting events where questionable calls are reviewed from several angles on instant replay. In the Gospel accounts of

Matthew and Luke we can see the eight beatitudes from different angles.

The beatitudes are a central part of the great spiritual quest we are on in this life. You may recall the quest of Ulysses, the famous Greek hero who went off to war but found himself on an extended journey as he tried to return home to his wife and family. His quest seems quite exaggerated, whereas ours, though not as harrowing, is no less heroic. Jesus offers us the eight beatitudes as tips to measure our Christian heroics. The quest for Christian holiness laid out in the beatitudes has no ceiling, no upper limit. For example, has anyone ever been too poor in spirit, too meek, or too pure of heart? And neither does God run a one-size-fits-all establishment; he is the Master tailor. Clothe yourselves with Christ, advises Saint Paul. To do this we need to become familiar with the beatitudes, trying them on so we can better see what we look like in Christ.

*Through faith you are all sons of God in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. (Gal 3:27)*

## *And you*

Read over the two accounts of the beatitudes (see pp. 3–4). Try them on one by one. How do you “look” in them? Can you see how they will help you on your great quest?

## Thompson's clas

rights include the pursuit of happiness. We could say that this



dispute. The Founders didn't tempt King George's wrath in order to chance favorable circumstances. They meant to break off from his constraints and create for themselves a life not necessarily easy, but one where they could freely pursue contentment. In our day, we seek abiding happiness generally found in a lifetime pursuit of our goals, culminating in a secure retirement. As Christians, this is identical to what the beatitudes mean in our spiritual quest for heaven. The beatitudes are attitudes refined over a lifetime, culminating in an eternal enjoyment of perfect happiness.

*If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at God's right hand; think about the things that are above, not about things on earth, for you have died and your life is hidden with Christ in God.  
(Col 3:1-3)*

## *And you*

*Mother, the flag, and apple pie* are down-home symbols of *life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness*, don't you think? We proudly proclaim these values as our inalienable rights. Are they also bedrock values of your personal journey? Being respected, honored, and protected because of who you are; being free and responsible for your own thoughts and decisions; being able to pursue those desires and dreams that give you joy and fulfillment—what's not to love about that? These inalienable rights are also your unavoidable duties as citizens of God's Kingdom. How is your dual citizenship coming along?

# Happiness

When do we begin our natural obsession about our looks? Young children are fascinated with mirrors and delighted with photos of themselves, but they're just curious. Grown-ups, instead, are quite concerned about the image they present to others. Just sit for an hour or two in the Los Angeles airport if you don't believe me. A lot of folks passing through give the impression that they're being followed by movie cameras. *Hope I'm coming across well. Got to give them my best!*

When it comes to best image, there must be millions of images of Christ, representing everyone's idea of his perfect manhood. For centuries artists have attempted to portray the Lord, from sketches in the catacombs, icons from the East, classic works from the likes of El Greco and Caravaggio, right up to the work of today's graffiti artists.

Personally, I would eliminate those masters who give Jesus an effeminate look. Jesus was a Mideastern Jew, so I

expect he had a darker complexion and hair. His eyes would have been dark and lively, his smile quick and manly, his build that of a man used to manual labor. That's just my expectation, but we really don't know what Jesus looked like. Not even the Shroud of Turin, said to bear the impression of his dead body, gives us a good image. That we have no authentic depiction is a wise move on God's part, for without an actual image of Jesus, we can envision him as we like.

God himself did leave us an important impression of his Son, however, and it is found in the two Gospel accounts of the beatitudes. In Matthew 5 and Luke 6, Jesus offers us his self-portrait. His image is found in the beatitudes. To share in his mission, his hearers would have to become like him. The beatitudes are not exactly a "to-do list" but attitudes or ways of carrying out discipleship. Love, of course, is the goal of discipleship, but the beatitudes are what discipleship "looks" like.

*"All will know by this that you are my disciples,  
If you have love for one another." (Jn 13:35)*

## *And you*

Spend some time reading the beatitudes. Ask yourself: What did Jesus intend for me in speaking these words? Am I convinced that true beauty lies in the beatitudes?