

Reflections of ethical church leadership through the Beatitudes in the Matthean vision: In conversation with Prof. Francois P. Viljoen



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This article examines the role of the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3–12) in constructing a framework for ethical church leadership, situating this inquiry within the broader trajectory of New Testament ethics and the scholarship of Professor Francois P. Viljoen. Through Viljoen's contribution of the Matthean ethical reflection, the argument is made that the Beatitudes provide an indispensable ethical paradigm for contemporary ecclesial leadership, particularly within contexts marked by corruption, exploitation and loss of credibility among church leaders.¹ Although a few articles from Viljoen's seminal work frame this discussion, two insightful pieces are significant. Firstly, in *Righteousness and identity formation in the Sermon on the Mount*, Viljoen (2013a) observes that 'Matthew intentionally uses the word "righteousness" in the Sermon on the Mount as an instrument to define the identity of his community ... mainly in an ethical sense' (Viljoen 2014). Secondly, in his study of Jesus' halakhic interpretation, he states that 'In this argument Jesus formulated the higher level of righteousness that is required of his followers'. These statements provide both exegetical depth and theological urgency.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: In dialogue with them, this article, therefore, explores how the Beatitudes can foster ethical identity formation among leaders, articulate a higher moral standard and inspire transformative leadership practice.

Keywords: beatitudes; ethical leadership; righteousness; identity formation; Matthew; church leadership; virtue; peace-making; halakhic antitheses.

Introduction

A Beaititudinal model of leadership

This article aims on honouring the scholarly contributions of a distinguished academic while simultaneously extending the intellectual conversations they have initiated with other New Testament colleagues (such as Van Aarde 2020a; Van Aarde 2020b). Thus, it is a privilege to contribute to the project of honouring the excellent scholarship of Professor Francois P. Viljoen. This article is written in recognition of his brilliant scholarship, whose exegetical precision and theological insight into Matthew's Gospel have illuminated the complex relationship between righteousness, law and identity, and the recognition of his leadership in modelling out these Beatitudes. His work has provided the hermeneutical tools to understand how Matthew's community was called to embody a distinctive ethic rooted in the teaching of Jesus, and his leadership has been a model which serve as an epitome of ethical leadership from the framework of the Beatitudes. The present inquiry aligns directly with that trajectory. As Viljoen demonstrates, Matthew's use of *δικαιοσύνη* [righteousness] (Viljoen 2013b) is not merely juridical or abstract but functions as an ethical marker of the community's identity (Viljoen 2013a). In other words, righteousness is lived; it is embodied in acts of humility, mercy, purity, peace and justice. Such an interpretation challenges church leadership today to rediscover its moral compass in the Beatitudes, which present both a counter-cultural ethic and a charter for authentic discipleship. On reflecting on the importance of *Leading from Within*, Shawchuck and Heuser (2010:17) aptly counsels that the care and feeding of the religious leader's interior life is not auxiliary to ministry – it is the very basis of ministry.

Therefore, without this foundation, all leadership efforts can eventually become sterile and ultimately lead to apathetic boredom and insipidness. Hence, neglecting the interior life reflects

1. The thought of understanding the Beatitudes as providing an indispensable ethical paradigm for contemporary ecclesial leadership is derived from Tsoai's dissertation. See the dissertation *Ethical Church Leadership: A Conversation with the Beatitudes* (Tsoai 2020). Tsoai's work is significant for this study in that it frames this investigation through Osmer's framework (2008 and 2011), and this is essential for bridging the New Testament world and the world of Practical Theology.

an identity that is often wrapped up in external accomplishments that are the hallmarks of an increasingly blind ambition. Eventually, pressures consume leaders to the extent they lose control over their lives and ministries.

Contextual rationale

The urgency of these reflections arises from the ongoing crisis of leadership in many South African ecclesial settings. The Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission 2017) has repeatedly intervened in cases of exploitation, manipulation and abuse within charismatic and independent churches.²

Reports of pastors instructing congregants to eat grass or drink petrol, as well as cases of sexual exploitation and financial fraud, have deeply eroded public trust in Christian leadership. Such scandals have generated public outcry and necessitated state involvement. Yet, at a deeper theological level, they signal the loss of ethical grounding among those called to shepherd God's people. It is here that the Beatitudes offer a corrective vision. They orient leadership towards humility, mercy, purity, peace-making and justice; virtues directly counter the pride, greed and violence which are so often associated with contemporary failures of leadership.

Research trajectory

This article is in conversation with Viljoen's work (2013a), and Tsoai's dissertation (2020), and it aims on answering the guiding question: *How might ethical leadership principles derived from the Beatitudes enhance mentorship and accountability within the church?* Thus, the approach is twofold. Firstly, an exegetical reading of Matthew 5:3–12 – particularly within the context of The Sermon on the Mount – situates the Beatitudes within Matthew's rhetorical and theological design. Secondly, in conversation with Viljoen's scholarship, the chapter draws out implications for the formation of ethical leaders whose identity is shaped by the call to righteousness, as part of the greater Matthean vision.

Festschrift framing

In honouring Prof. Viljoen, this article does not merely cite his work but actively extends it. Viljoen's insistence that Matthew's Gospel constructs identity through righteousness (Viljoen 2013b) and his analysis of Jesus' halakhic argumentation (Viljoen 2013a) resonate powerfully with the concern for ethical leadership in today's church. Moreover, Viljoen connects Matthew's portrayal of Jesus with the Matthean theme that authentic righteousness exceeds Pharisaic externalism and aligns with the deeper intention of the Torah, thus, reminding us that 'Jesus calls for greater righteousness than the Pharisees and teachers of the Law do' (Viljoen 2014).

By appropriating these New Testament insights into the domain of practical theology and ecclesiology, this article seeks to demonstrate how exegetical rigour translates into lived ethics, and how academic insight fuels ecclesial renewal. This article introduces the Beatitudes as an Ethical Vision, through providing a brief exegetical and theological analysis. Part of this theological analysis will reflect on Viljoen's Contributions of the concepts or themes of righteousness, law and identity within the Matthean Sermon on the Mount. Thus, discuss the virtues of Leadership in the Beatitudes. Moreover, reflect on the metaphors of leadership such as salt, light, city and lamp. Hence, these should provide a framework for ministerial ethics and mentorship, which should serve as the basis for the pragmatic task for church leader's training and contribute meaningfully to the urgent task of cultivating ethical leaders in the church (see this developmental vision in Osmer 2011).

Reflection 1: The Beatitudes as an ethical vision

The literary and theological setting

The Beatitudes (Mt 5:3–12) form the opening of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7), functioning as both a preamble and a theological charter for Jesus' teaching.³ Matthew deliberately situates this discourse immediately after Jesus' call of the first disciples (Mt 4:18–22) and his healing ministry (Mt 4:23–25). The disciples are thus introduced to Jesus' ministry through teaching that sets forth the ethical framework of the kingdom. The Beatitudes must be read within Matthew's broader narrative strategy. As Viljoen (2013) has shown that Matthew's emphasis on *righteousness* ties directly to the identity formation of the community. The Beatitudes are not abstract blessings but markers of who the disciples are called to be. They establish the ethos of discipleship that shapes both personal conduct and communal life.

Structure and paradox

Scholars such as Davies and Allison (1988:430–433) note that the chiasmic rhythm of the Beatitudes, with the first and last blessings, promises the 'kingdom of heaven' (Mt 5:3, 10). This *inclusio* frames the Beatitudes as eschatological promises rooted in present dispositions. These virtues are presented in paradoxical nuances, such as poverty of spirit, mourning, meekness, hunger and persecution, and those who possess these characteristics are declared 'blessed'. These paradoxes undermine worldly notions of success, authority and status – precisely the values often idolised in leadership contexts. Instead, in the context of Jesus' teaching and worldview, blessedness is found in humility, compassion, peace-making and justice-seeking. Such paradoxes mirrors what Bonhoeffer (1959:109) described as the 'costly grace' of discipleship, whereby the community lives counter-culturally in obedience to Christ.

2. Notwithstanding the ongoing debate across different Christian denominational persuasions about the relevance and effectiveness of the Commission for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Cultural, Religious and Linguistic Communities (CRL Rights Commission 2017).

3. Many New Testament scholars refer to this section of Matthew (Mt 5–7) as the first discourse, speech, or sermon, recorded by Matthew – with the four other discourses or sermons following in Matthew (For instance, see, Carson & Moo 2005:136; Köstenberger, Kellum & Quarles 2016:239; Pawson 2007:805–828; Powell 2018:115; Tenney 1985:158).

Individual Beatitudes as leadership virtues

The Beatitudes, when read as an ethical charter for discipleship, provide a virtue-based framework for Christian leadership. They do not prescribe external rules but cultivate inner dispositions that shape ethical conduct. In dialogue with Professor Viljoen's interpretation of Matthew, the Beatitudes can be read as defining the identity and ethos of leaders whose authority derives not from power but from embodied righteousness. A closer exegetical reading reveals how each Beatitude speaks directly to leadership ethics, as a manifestation of that embodied righteousness.

Poverty of spirit: Humility in leadership

Blessed are the poor in Spirit (Mt 5:3): Poverty of spirit implies humility, dependence on God, and freedom from arrogance. Leaders marked by this quality avoid authoritarianism and acknowledge their need for accountability. As Sanders (2007:62) observes, leaders who choose 'the hidden path of sacrificial service' inspire imitation through their example. Thus, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 5:3). Poverty of spirit points to humility, dependence on God and recognition of one's limitations.

Leaders shaped by this virtue resist authoritarianism and narcissism, choosing instead to model servant leadership (Greenleaf 1977). In contexts where leaders exploit power for personal gain, humility becomes counter-cultural. Viljoen's (2013) emphasis on righteousness as identity reminds us that leadership is not measured by titles or charisma but by humble authenticity. Poverty of spirit equips leaders to empower others rather than dominate them.

Mourning: Compassionate solidarity

Blessed are those who mourn (Mt 5:4): Mourning here refers to grief over sin, injustice and suffering. Ethical leaders are not indifferent to the pain of their communities but are moved by compassion. Such lament is the foundation for authentic pastoral care. Hence, 'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted' (Mt 5:4). Mourning in Matthew is not restricted to grief over personal loss but includes lament over injustice and brokenness in the world. Leaders marked by this virtue embody compassion, sharing in the suffering of their communities. Theologically, mourning aligns with prophetic lament (cf. Jr 8:21–9:1), which creates space for God's comfort and justice. Practically, compassionate leaders offer credibility, as they acknowledge wounds rather than ignore them. In societies scarred by poverty, inequality and violence, mourning is not weakness but a courageous act of solidarity.

Meekness: Strength under control

Blessed are the meek (Mt 5:5): Meekness [*πραΐς*] is not weakness but controlled strength, exercised with gentleness. In leadership, meekness resists domination and coercion, opting instead for persuasion and service. So, 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth' (Mt 5:5).

Meekness conveys controlled strength, not passivity. Leaders are often tempted to assert dominance, but meekness tempers authority with gentleness.

Viljoen's (2007) reading of Matthew's community as one under pressure suggests that leadership was to be exercised without retaliation, embodying trust in God's vindication. For modern leaders, meekness entails creating space for dialogue, listening before speaking and empowering others to flourish.

Hunger and thirst for righteousness: Pursuit of justice

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Mt 5:6): This longing reflects an active pursuit of justice. Viljoen (2013a) highlights that *righteousness* in Matthew is not merely forensic but ethical, embodied in conduct. Leaders must be animated by a relentless desire for justice in both church and society. Thus, 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled' (Mt 5:6). Hunger and thirst indicate urgent longing. Viljoen (2013a) emphasises that righteousness in Matthew is primarily ethical conduct rooted in God's will. Leaders are therefore called to pursue justice relentlessly, particularly within their congregations and in the broader society. The congregation leadership becomes a model of ethical leadership for the broader society. Therefore, this virtue has sharp implications for church leaders in South Africa, where corruption, inequality and gender-based violence are pervasive. A leader hungering for righteousness cannot remain neutral but advocates for systemic transformation and leads with integrity.

Mercy: Forgiveness and compassion

Blessed are the merciful (Mt 5:7): Mercy involves forgiveness, compassion and advocacy for the vulnerable. In leadership, mercy tempers discipline with pastoral care and builds trust within the community. Thus, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy' (Mt 5:7). Mercy in Matthew often reflects God's own compassion (cf. Mt 9:13). Leaders who embody mercy demonstrate forgiveness, pastoral care and advocacy for the marginalised.

Viljoen's (2013b) interpretation of Jesus' halakhic reasoning highlights that the law's deeper intention is mercy rather than legalistic observance. For leadership, this means balancing accountability with grace, ensuring discipline never becomes dehumanising. Mercy restores trust and fosters reconciliation.

Purity of heart: Integrity and transparency

Blessed are the pure in heart (Mt 5:8): Purity of heart signifies integrity and undivided devotion. Leaders must resist duplicity or hidden agendas, modelling transparent character. Viljoen (2012) notes that Matthew's emphasis on *the vision of God* (Mt 5:8) reflects a call to holiness that transcends external ritual. 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God' (Mt 5:8). Purity of heart indicates inner integrity, free from duplicity. Moreover, Viljoen (2012)

underscores that Matthew frames this purity as a condition for the *visio Dei* – which reflects the ultimate vision of God. For leaders, purity of heart translates into integrity in finances, relationships and ministry. In contexts where scandals undermine credibility, purity of heart restores confidence in leadership. Transparency in decision-making and consistency between public persona and private life are essential expressions of this virtue.

Peace-making: Reconciliation and mediation

Blessed are the peacemakers (Mt 5:9): Peace-making entails active reconciliation, not passive avoidance of conflict. Leaders are called to mediate disputes, foster unity and model non-violent engagement. This is especially urgent in fractured ecclesial and social contexts such as South Africa. Hence, 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God' (Mt 5:9). Peace-making [*εἰρηνοποιοί*] denotes active engagement in reconciliation, not passive avoidance of conflict.

Leaders are called to foster unity, mediate disputes and heal divisions within the church. Viljoen (2021) extends this insight by showing that Matthew's Sermon on the Mount presents peace-making as central to discipleship. In fractured communities – whether divided by race, ethnicity, sex, class, generation or denomination – leaders must act as agents of reconciliation, embodying God's shalom.

Persecution for righteousness: Courage in leadership

Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness' sake (Mt 5:10–12): Ethical leadership involves courage to stand for truth even at personal cost. In contexts where corruption or injustice prevail, leaders may face resistance. Yet, Jesus declares such suffering a sign of authentic discipleship. As a result, 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (Mt 5:10–12). Leadership often requires courage to resist injustice, even at personal cost. Persecution here is not suffering for wrongdoing but resistance encountered when embodying righteousness. In today's context, leaders who challenge corruption, advocate for justice or resist exploitative religious practices may face hostility. Yet Jesus declares them blessed. Leadership, then, is not measured by popularity but by fidelity to righteousness.

Ethical implications

The Beatitudes articulate a virtue-ethics framework for leadership. Rather than prescribing specific rules, they cultivate dispositions that shape how leaders act in diverse contexts. Driver (2007:4) notes that normative ethics asks not only *what we ought to do* but *what we ought to be like*. Character precedes action; virtues shape practices. When read in dialogue with Viljoen (2013a), the Beatitudes can be seen as Matthew's way of defining the identity of the community through righteousness.

Thus, leaders are not merely administrators or vision-casters but bearers of an ethic that embodies God's kingdom.

Reflection 2: Exegetical analysis of the Beatitudes

Righteousness as ethical identity

One of Professor Viljoen's most influential contributions is his reading of *δικαιοσύνη* [righteousness] in Matthew. In his article *Righteousness and identity formation in the Sermon on the Mount*, he argues that Matthew 'intentionally uses the word 'righteousness' in the Sermon on the Mount as an instrument to define the identity of his community ... mainly in an ethical sense' (Viljoen 2013a). This perspective shifts the interpretive lens away from purely juridical or theological categories (e.g. justification) and places the emphasis on lived ethics. For Matthew, righteousness is a marker of identity, shaping the way disciples embody their calling in the world. In this respect, the Beatitudes are not optional ideals but constitutive of what it means to belong to the kingdom community. For church leadership, this insight is pivotal. Leaders cannot rely solely on titles, institutional authority or charismatic influence. Their legitimacy is tested in the ethical sphere: whether they hunger for justice, exercise mercy or embody purity of heart. Leadership divorced from righteousness, in Matthew's terms, forfeits its claim to authenticity.

The halakhic antitheses: Law and fulfilment⁴

Another major contribution is Viljoen's study of Jesus' halakhic reasoning² in Matthew 5:21–48. In *Jesus' halakhic argumentation on the true intention of the law in Matthew 5:21–48*, he demonstrates that Jesus' so-called 'antitheses' are not abolitions of Torah but radical reinterpretations that disclose the law's true intention (Viljoen 2013b). Jesus deepens the law to address motives, intentions and relationships rather than mere external compliance. Viljoen (2013b) further on remarks that:

Matthew argued that Jesus did not come to abolish the Law and the Prophets but bring them to fulfilment. In this argument Jesus formulated the higher level of righteousness that is required of his followers. (n.p.)

This 'higher righteousness' (cf. Mt 5:20) complements the Beatitudes, which outline virtues that surpass the expectations of religious legalism. Leaders shaped by this vision are not content with minimal compliance (such as avoiding murder or adultery), but embody transformed dispositions: reconciliation rather than anger, purity rather than lust, integrity rather than oath-taking, love for enemies rather than retaliation. For church leadership, this halakhic radicalisation calls for interior transformation as the basis of exterior practice. Leaders who merely conform outwardly may gain institutional approval, but true Beatitudinal leadership arises from hearts aligned with God's purposes. Hence, 'Jesus replaces the Pharisean emphasis on cultic purity with moral purity ... concerned about keeping their

⁴'Halakhic Antitheses' refers to a literary and legal form found in Jewish texts, especially in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:21–48), where Jesus contrasts traditional Jewish law (halakha) with His interpretation or expansion of it (see Marcus 2023).

hearts clean' (Viljoen 2014). Therefore, this reflects Viljoen's core argument, which is that true purity in Matthew 15 is internal and ethical – rooted in the heart rather than ritual practices like hand-washing.

Matthew's community and contemporary ecclesial identity

Viljoen (2007) consistently interprets Matthew as addressing a community under pressure: defining its identity over against surrounding Judaism, Greco-Roman society and rival interpretations of Torah. In this process, Matthew uses righteousness as a unifying theme. The Sermon on the Mount functions as a catechetical tool, shaping disciples into a visible alternative community. This has strong implications for contemporary church leadership. Churches today also exist in contested moral landscapes, which are marked by secularism, pluralism, and in many contexts, corruption.

Leaders face pressures to conform to worldly patterns of success, wealth and dominance. By appropriating Viljoen's insights, leaders may recover Matthew's intent: to form communities distinguished by ethical righteousness, embodying the Beatitudes as their public witness.

Viljoen's contribution to Beatitudinal leadership

Viljoen's scholarship, therefore, helps to frame a hermeneutic of leadership grounded in Matthew. Beginning with identity formation, firstly, leaders must model and embody the values of the community. Secondly, leaders must align with the ethical centrality of righteousness – which is manifested through the practice of the beatitudes; thus, leadership must be judged by virtue, not performance metrics. Thirdly, leadership must pursue the fulfilment of the law; hence, Leaders interpret tradition and Scripture not legalistically but with transformative ethical depth. Ultimately, becoming examples of communal witness; as Jesus admonished that the church becomes a city on a hill (Mt 5:14), an alternative polis shaped by righteousness.

Therefore, Viljoen's contributions deepen the recognition that leadership in Matthew is not accidental but constitutive of the community's witness. Leaders who fail ethically do not simply discredit themselves; moreover, they undermine the very identity of the community as 'salt of the earth' and 'light of the world' (Mt 5:13–14).

Reflection 3: Practical implications for contemporary church leadership

Building on the exegetical and ethical frameworks established in the previous Beatitudinal reflections, this reflection explores the practical implications of Matthean ethics for contemporary church leadership. This section emphasises the translation of the Beatitudes into leadership praxis, highlighting how humility, mercy, peace-making and justice inform both personal conduct and communal governance in church contexts. Thus, these virtues of Leadership in the

Beatitudes provide a trajectory for ethical implications for church leadership.

The Beatitudes as ethical compass for leaders

The Beatitudes, as articulated in Matthew 5:3–12, offer a comprehensive ethical compass that challenges conventional notions of power and success. Viljoen (2018:45–52) emphasises that the Beatitudes promote a leadership ethic grounded not in authority or hierarchical status, but in character formation and relational integrity. For instance, the call to be 'poor in spirit' (Mt 5:3) invites leaders to adopt a posture of dependence on God, fostering humility that resists the temptation of autocracy. Similarly, 'those who mourn' (Mt 5:4) cultivate empathy, signalling attentiveness to congregational suffering and the pastoral responsibility to accompany others in their trials (Viljoen 2018:53–56).

By integrating these Beatitudes into leadership formation programmes, church leaders can cultivate virtues that prioritise ethical discernment, emotional intelligence and spiritual maturity. Viljoen's analysis demonstrates that these virtues are not merely aspirational but actionable, guiding leaders in navigating complex ethical dilemmas, conflict resolution and community building (Viljoen 2018:57–62).

Servant leadership and ecclesial governance

A central implication of the Matthean vision for church leadership is the adoption of a servant-leadership model. Drawing on both Matthew 20:25–28 and the Beatitudes, Viljoen (2019:120–138) articulates a framework, wherein authority is exercised in service to others rather than for personal gain or institutional prestige. This approach resonates with Pauline and Johannine models of leadership, which emphasise the reciprocal relationship between authority and responsibility, and between leadership and love.

In practical terms, servant leadership manifests in multiple dimensions: decision-making processes that prioritise collective discernment, pastoral care that foregrounds vulnerability and accompaniment and teaching that integrates ethical formation alongside doctrinal instruction. The ethical dimensions of servant leadership also entail accountability structures, transparent communication and commitment to justice; and these are principles underscored repeatedly in Matthean ethics (Viljoen 2018:63–70).

Conflict, reconciliation and ethical decision-making

The Beatitudes provide a robust theological foundation for addressing conflict within ecclesial communities. 'Blessed are the peacemakers' (Mt 5:9) signals that ethical leadership entails active engagement in reconciliation, promoting restorative practices that mend fractured relationships (Viljoen 2018:72–76). Viljoen (2019:130–133) observes that this principle requires leaders to navigate tension between truth

and grace, justice and mercy, demanding discernment rooted in prayer, Scripture and communal wisdom. Ethical decision-making in this context involves more than procedural adherence; it is fundamentally relational and spiritual. Leaders must cultivate the capacity to listen deeply, discern ethically complex situations and act with integrity even when outcomes are uncertain or unpopular. This relational orientation fosters trust and legitimacy within the church, reinforcing the ethical vision of leadership embedded in the Matthean text.

Challenges and opportunities for contemporary contexts

While the ethical vision of the Beatitudes offers profound guidance, contemporary church leaders encounter unique challenges in translating these ideals into practice. Cultural pressures, organisational demands and societal expectations can create tensions between ethical ideals and pragmatic realities.

Viljoen (2018:80–84) cautions against reducing Beatitudinal ethics to mere managerial strategies, emphasising instead the transformative potential of moral formation rooted in discipleship and spiritual practice. Nevertheless, these challenges present opportunities for innovation in leadership formation. For example, integrating reflective practices, mentorship programmes and theological ethics seminars can nurture leaders who embody humility, mercy and justice. Such initiatives align with Viljoen's overarching thesis that the Beatitudes function as a dynamic ethical paradigm, shaping both individual character and communal life within the church (Viljoen 2019:135–138).

Reflection 4: The Beatitudes and ethical formation: Training future leaders in the church

Building on the previous discussion of ethical leadership and the practical implications of the Beatitudes, reflection 4 focuses on the formation of future church leaders. Ethical formation, as grounded in the Matthean vision, extends beyond theoretical knowledge, encompassing character development, spiritual maturity and relational competence. Viljoen (2018:88–92) emphasises that the Beatitudes provide a pedagogical framework for cultivating virtues essential for responsible and transformative ecclesial leadership.

Formation through virtue and character development

Ethical formation is first and foremost a process of cultivating virtue. The Beatitudes, with their emphasis on humility, meekness, mercy and peace-making, function as guideposts for shaping the moral character of emerging leaders (Viljoen 2018:93–97). Viljoen argues that leadership formation programmes should integrate practices that foster self-reflection, accountability and the internalisation of these virtues. Such practices may include spiritual disciplines; these

will involve regular prayer, meditation on Scripture and devotional exercises which cultivate a sense of dependence on God and reinforce moral awareness⁵. Mentorship relationships, where experienced leaders can model Beatitudinal virtues, guiding younger leaders in ethical discernment and pastoral sensitivity. Experiential learning, where opportunities for service, conflict mediation and community engagement enable leaders to apply ethical principles in real-world contexts (Viljoen 2020:45–62). Hence, these formative strategies emphasise that leadership is as much about being as it is about doing; as a result, the ethical integrity of leaders shapes the witness and credibility of the church.

The pedagogical role of the Beatitudes

The Beatitudes serve not only as ethical ideals, but also as pedagogical tools for instruction in moral reasoning and decision-making. According to Viljoen (2020:50–55), each Beatitude offers a framework for analysing complex ethical scenarios, encouraging leaders to consider both divine imperatives and human relational dynamics. For example, 'Blessed are the merciful' (Mt 5:7) prompts leaders to evaluate the impact of their decisions on those they serve, cultivating empathy and justice-oriented thinking. Integrating the Beatitudes into leadership curricula also promotes reflective praxis, where theoretical knowledge, biblical exegesis and lived experience converge. This approach equips leaders to navigate moral ambiguity, discern ethically sound courses of action and respond to contemporary pastoral challenges with integrity and compassion.

Mentorship and community-based formation

Viljoen (2018:98–102) highlights the importance of mentorship and communal engagement in ethical formation. Ethical leadership cannot be developed in isolation; it requires immersion in a community where virtues can be modelled, observed and reinforced.

Mentorship relationships provide accountability and guidance, while community involvement allows leaders to test their skills in relational and organisational contexts. Programmes that foster peer learning, group reflection and service-oriented projects contribute to holistic development. By situating leadership formation within the rhythms of church life, emerging leaders learn to embody the Beatitudes not only as abstract ideals but as practical, relationally grounded principles (Viljoen 2018:103–106).

Challenges in ethical formation

Despite the potential of the Beatitudes as a framework for ethical formation, contemporary church leaders face significant challenges. Cultural pluralism, institutional pressures and the complexity of modern pastoral contexts may hinder the internalisation of Beatitudinal virtues (Viljoen 2020:58–63).

5. To read more on the importance of exercising spiritual disciplines for the ethical formation of leaders; please see: Adams (1972); Foster (1999); Gardner (1966); Ortberg (2002); Whitney (1991); Willard (1988).

Viljoen (2020:64–66) also warns against reductionist approaches that treat ethics as a checklist of behaviours rather than an ongoing process of character formation. Therefore, addressing these challenges requires intentional formation strategies, including spiritual accompaniment, ongoing theological education and reflective practices that foster resilience, moral discernment and ethical courage. The goal is to cultivate leaders whose actions are consistently aligned with the moral vision articulated in the Matthean text.

Integration into leadership programmes

Practical strategies for integrating Beatitudinal ethics into leadership formation include curriculum development; this foundational process involves incorporating courses on Matthean ethics, pastoral theology and moral formation. Reflective exercises, where the prospective leader is involved in Journaling, case studies and role-playing scenarios that engage ethical dilemmas. Service-learning initiatives, drawing on opportunities for ministry in marginalised communities to cultivate empathy, humility and social responsibility.

Finally, employing evaluation and feedback, which will involve Regular assessment of ethical development through mentoring, peer review and self-reflection. Through such integration, the Beatitudes function not merely as theological ideals but as actionable principles that shape leaders capable of guiding the church with integrity, compassion and moral clarity.

Conclusion

The Beatitudes, ethical leadership and the future of the church

This conclusion section serves as a synthesis of the preceding reflections and discussions, highlighting how the Beatitudes, when read through the Matthean lens, offer both a theological and ethical paradigm for contemporary church leadership. This conclusion reiterates the foundational argument: ethical leadership in the church is inseparable from spiritual formation, moral character and relational integrity.

The Beatitudes as a transformative ethical framework

Throughout this article, it has been demonstrated that the Beatitudes are more than moral aphorisms; they constitute a transformative framework for ethical formation and leadership praxis. Matthew's account emphasises virtues that counteract worldly definitions of power, success and authority. Humility, mercy, peace-making and righteousness emerge as central to the ethical formation of leaders who can shepherd communities faithfully (Viljoen 2018:110–115). Viljoen's scholarship underscores that these virtues are not only aspirational but practical. Leaders who embody the Beatitudes influence congregational life by fostering trust, reconciliation and moral accountability. As such, the Beatitudes offer a countercultural vision of leadership that prioritises service, relational sensitivity and spiritual discernment (Viljoen 2019:140–145).

Ethical formation as ongoing practice

Ethical leadership is a continuous process, shaped by both personal devotion and communal engagement. The integration of Beatitudinal virtues into mentorship, spiritual disciplines and experiential learning ensures that leaders develop both moral insight and pastoral competence. Hence, the reflection above highlighted concrete strategies for formation, emphasising reflective praxis, service-based learning and accountability structures. This ongoing formation is crucial in contemporary contexts where church leaders face complex ethical challenges. Whether navigating cultural pluralism, institutional pressures or relational conflicts, the ethical vision of the Beatitudes equips leaders to act with integrity, courage and discernment (Viljoen 2018:116–120).

Implications for church leadership and ecclesial witness

The article demonstrates that the ethical principles embedded in the Beatitudes have implications beyond individual leadership. They shape the very ethos of the church as a community. Leaders who internalise these virtues foster an ecclesial environment marked by compassion, justice and reconciliation. Such communities exemplify the kingdom of God, embodying Matthean ideals in tangible ways that resonate with both members and wider society (Viljoen 2018:121–125). Moreover, the ethical model advocated by Viljoen invites a rethinking of leadership evaluation metrics. Success is measured not merely by growth or efficiency but by fidelity to the moral and spiritual vision articulated in Scripture.

This perspective challenges churches to cultivate leaders who are morally exemplary, relationally sensitive and spiritually grounded, ensuring the long-term integrity and witness of the church (Viljoen 2019:147–150).

Future directions

Looking ahead, the intersection of Beatitudinal ethics and church leadership invites ongoing research and praxis-oriented initiatives. Future studies could examine contextual applications of the Beatitudes across diverse cultural settings, assess the effectiveness of ethical formation programmes and explore the integration of digital technologies in leadership development. Therefore, the enduring significance of the Matthean vision lies in its capacity to shape not only leaders, but also the communities they serve. By grounding leadership in the virtues of the Beatitudes, the church positions itself as a moral and spiritual beacon, capable of embodying the kingdom of God in a fractured world.

Therefore, the Beatitudinal Model of Leadership yields a holistic model of leadership. Integrating characteristics of: humility (poverty of spirit) which counters pride; compassion (mourning, mercy) which heals wounds; gentleness (meekness) which moderates power; justice (hunger for righteousness) which challenges corruption; integrity (purity of heart) which restores trust; reconciliation (peace-making)

which fosters unity; and courage (persecution), which sustains faithfulness. This model of ethical leadership offers a prophetic alternative to leadership models based on dominance, prosperity or celebrity. It embodies what Viljoen (2013a) identifies as the 'higher level of righteousness' and redefines leadership as ethical identity formation.

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Disclaimer

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