

The Beatitudes, Merit, and the Pursuit of Happiness in the *Prima Secundae*: The Action of the Holy Spirit at the Heart of Moral Theology

ANTON M. TEN KLOOSTER
Tilburg School of Catholic Theology
Utrecht, The Netherlands

THE QUESTION OF HAPPINESS as the final end of the human person is sufficiently answered by Christ in the Beatitudes, according to Thomas Aquinas.¹ Although some have enthusiastically adopted this insight from Servais Pinckaers, the Beatitudes continue to be ignored in many discussions of moral theology—be they specifically Thomist or of a more general nature. In this contribution I will argue that they are in fact the key to a proper understanding of the entire *prima secundae* of the *Summa theologiae* as a discussion of the pursuit of happiness. In order to do so, we need to consider them in relation to the infused virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the fruits of the Holy Spirit. First, I will briefly argue why it is important to have discussions about the structure of the *Summa* at all. Second, I will present a number of valuable interpretations of the place of the Beatitudes in the *prima secundae*. These works of Eleonore Stump, Andrew Pinsent, Pinckaers, and William Mattison contribute to our understanding of the matter, but I believe they still fall short in important aspects. Third, I will offer my own interpretation of the structure, which is a development of the proposals of Pinckaers and Mattison.² In my proposal the notion of merit is key to reading the *prima secundae* as a unified discus-

¹ Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 183.

² An earlier and less developed version of this proposal can be found in Anton ten Klooster, *Thomas Aquinas on the Beatitudes: Reading Matthew, Disputing Grace and Virtue, Preaching Happiness* (Leuven: Peeters, 2018), 147–54.

sion. Merit is a term that describes acting toward the final end with the help of grace, as I will argue with reference to Aquinas's commentary on Matthew. When we follow this understanding of merit we find a way of speaking of the value of human action without diminishing the necessity of God's grace for the attainment of the final end. Fourth and finally I will provide a brief sketch of the implications of my proposal for our understanding of *prima secundae* and thus for the moral life of the Christian.

Why Continue Discussing the Structure of the *Summa Theologiae*?

The most influential proposal to date on the structure of the *Summa* is Marie-Dominique Chenu's suggestion of an *exitus–reditus* structure. Its merit is that it considers the *Summa* as an integrated work with an underlying pedagogy, rather than as a collection of interconnected treatises. For some, the problem with proposals such as that of Chenu is that they suggest that the *Summa* is a perfect and flawlessly ordered work.³ Although there is no need to argue for this type of perfection, we cannot but emphasize that the *Summa* is a work that is driven by Aquinas's desire to order the discussion of theology in a manner that he thought was helpful to the student. He abandoned the creedal pattern of Peter Lombard's *Sentences* and began composing his own introduction to Christian doctrine.⁴ The *Summa* was born out of a pedagogical concern, and we can therefore safely assume that its structure is characterized by a very high degree of intentionality. Still, I will not argue that my own proposal for reading the *Summa* exactly matches Aquinas's plan. What I do believe is that it is able to address a number of issues with other proposals and can thus provide us with a fruitful way of reading the *secunda pars* as an integrated discussion of Christian morality.

Since Chenu's proposal is widely acclaimed as providing us with an interpretative key of the *Summa*, I will address this proposal of the entire *Summa* first, before moving on to a discussion of the structure of the *prima secundae* in particular. The *exitus–reditus* scheme suggests a Neoplatonic order of emanation and return. Rudi te Velde argued that "in spite of its initial plausibility. . . the scheme does not appear to fit in with how, in the prologues, Thomas himself accounts for the divisions and transitions in the text. Instead of clarifying the underlying structure and movement, the

³ I thank Prof. Stephan van Erp (KU Leuven) for confronting me with this criticism after I presented a paper given in preparation of this article.

⁴ For a discussion of the origin and pedagogy of the *Summa*, see Mark Jordan, *Teaching Bodies: Moral Formation in the Summa of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 1–16.

scheme rather obscures and conceals some methodical and compositional peculiarities.⁵ To this criticism I would add that while the *exitus–reditus* scheme focuses on the human person’s journey to God, it does not bring to the fore that this journey is in fact the pursuit of happiness. Recent studies of Aquinas, my own included, suggest this motive is key to understanding the *Summa* in general and the *secunda pars* in particular.⁶ The intended final questions of the *Summa* were about the “last things,” the eternal happiness of heaven. Since Aquinas understands action in light of its end, it seems plausible that this direction to the end of eternal happiness is what guides the pedagogy of the *Summa*. Some scholars have suggested readings of the *Summa* that focus on its finality, a back-to-front reading if you will. This approach fits in well with a greater emphasis on happiness.⁷ This is what God created us for and it is what we act for. In light of this end we can understand everything else.

The importance of discussions on the structure of the *Summa* is therefore that they can provide us with an impression of Aquinas’s pedagogy, of the objective of his teaching. Rather than ordering the known treatises in a more accessible fashion he seeks to organize theology in such a way that its discussion is directed toward the final end of the Christian life: eternal happiness with God. Of course, this has repercussions for how we understand the respective sections of the *Summa*. And it almost immediately raises the question of how grace features in the discussion. True happiness is had in the vision of God, and to attain the vision of God grace is required. Therefore, grace needs to be more than an afterthought or an ornamental element of the book. In the *prima secundae*, there are two parts that deal explicitly with the theology of grace. Best known are questions 109–14. However, the questions on the infused virtues, the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the Beatitudes, and the fruits of the Holy Spirit also deal with the dispositions and acts that spring forth from God’s gracious working in the human soul. The present article considers the relation between God’s grace and human action by studying the notion of merit (q. 114) and the Beatitudes (q. 69).

⁵ Rudi te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The “Divine Science” of the Summa Theologiae* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006), 10.

⁶ Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 128–33; Sheryl Overmyer, “Three More Jigs in the Puzzle: The Unity of Analogy, Beatitude and Virtue in Thomas’ *Summa Theologiae*,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15 (2003): 374–93; ten Klooster, *Thomas Aquinas on the Beatitudes*, 144–45.

⁷ Harm Goris, “Acquired and Infused Moral Virtues in Wounded Nature,” in *The Virtuous Life: Thomas Aquinas on the Theological Nature of the Moral Virtues*, ed. H. Goris and H. Schoot (Leuven: Peeters, 2017), 21–46; Jordan, *Teaching Bodies*.

Discussions on the Gifts, Beatitudes, and Fruits in the *Prima Secundae*

Present scholarship of the structure of the *prima secundae* agrees on a number of divisions of the work. The first five questions discuss happiness as the final end of the human person; from there the discussion moves on to passions, habits, and virtues in questions 6–67. Questions 68–70 discuss three notions Aquinas derived from Scripture: the gifts of the Holy Spirit (Isa 11:2–3), the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3–9), and the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22). Unlike the preceding sixty-one questions, there apparently is no larger scheme that these topics are a part of. There seems to be no gradual development of a deeper insight into the complex matter of the principle of human actions, which we do see in the discussion of habituation and virtue. The questions that follow can also be grouped in larger sections: sin and its effects (qq. 71–89), law (qq. 90–108), and grace and merit (qq. 109–14).

Accounting for the questions on the gifts, Beatitudes, and fruits is a technical debate about the structure of a work of medieval theology. But there is more at stake. These questions pertain to Biblical notions. Therefore, they inform our understanding of how Thomas Aquinas interpreted Sacred Scripture. In the course of the last decades, scholarship has increasingly acknowledged that in order to understand Aquinas we should understand him as a scholar of Scripture.⁸ This means not only that we should study his Biblical commentaries but also that we should study his use of notions he derived from Scripture. And with regard to these notions, we know that Aquinas studied all three of them before or during the time he wrote the *prima secundae*. The commentary on Isaiah, with remarks on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, was one of his earliest works. It was probably written between 1252 and 1253.⁹ Aquinas's commentary on Galatians is harder to date, but the text can be dated to the period 1261–1265.¹⁰ Recent

⁸ For a brief overview of this development, see ten Klooster, *Thomas Aquinas on the Beatitudes*, 3–8.

⁹ *Super Isa*, introduction to the Leonine edition, 19*–20*; Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Initiation à Saint Thomas d'Aquin: Sa Personne et Son Oeuvre*, rev. ed. (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 2015), 51–54, 65–66, 432–34.

¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Commentaire de l'Épître aux Galates*, trans. Jean-Éric Stroobant de Saint-Éloy (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 2008), 9; Torrell, *Initiation à l'Étude de Saint Thomas d'Aquin*, 327, 450; Robert Wielockx, "Au Sujet du Commentaire de Saint Thomas sur le 'Corpus Paulinum': Critique Littéraire," in *Saint Thomas' Interpretation of Saint Paul's Doctrines, Proceedings of the IX Plenary Session*, ed. Pontifical Academy of Saint Thomas Aquinas (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009), 176–77.

scholarship on the commentary on Matthew dates it to 1270–1271, contemporaneous with the composition of the *prima secundae*.¹¹ In all of these works Aquinas connects virtues, gifts, Beatitudes, and fruits, with the exception of the commentary on Matthew, which lacks an explicit discussion of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. So Aquinas does not simply take up these notions on a whim, nor is their connection to each other an innovation or a haphazard alignment in the *Summa*. He has thought about them, and in all of these works he consistently discusses them in relation to each other. At the medieval university there was an organic relation between reading Scripture and theological discussions: they were two of the three tasks of the master. These tasks are *legere*, *disputare*, and *praedicare*. First the master reads Scripture attentively and develops a grasp of the text at hand. He then goes on to dispute the questions that arise from it, first with his students and then with other masters. The final step of preaching is the result of this study and discussion of Scripture.¹² Considering that Aquinas held three different *lectiones* involving the gifts, Beatitudes, and fruits makes the question of their place in the structure of the *Summa* even more pressing.

There are two major issues with the present scholarship with regard to the place of questions 68–70 in the structure of the *prima secundae*. One group of scholars simply ignores the issue while another makes valuable suggestions but does not buttress them properly. The first group includes both those scholars who solve the issue by considering these questions as part of the discussion of the virtues and those who gloss over these questions altogether. This group includes, among others, Brian Davies, Bonnie Kent, Gilles Mongeau, Pasquale Porro, Jean Porter, and Jean-Pierre Torrell.¹³ In my opinion, these approaches impede a proper understanding

¹¹ Tomasz Gałuszka, *Tomasza z Akwinu—Lectura super Matheum cap. I–II: Studium Historyczno-Krytyczne i Edycja Tekstu* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Esprit SC, 2011), 78–95, 302–03. Torrell argues for 1269–1270 (*Initiation*, 90).

¹² Ten Klooster, *Thomas Aquinas on the Beatitudes*, 1–3.

¹³ Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Guide & Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 359; Bonnie Kent, "Habits and Virtues," in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. S. J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 116–30; Gilles Mongeau, *Embracing Wisdom: The Summa Theologiae as Spiritual Pedagogy* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2015), 132; Pasquale Porro, *Thomas Aquinas: A Historical and Philosophical Profile* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 281–22; Torrell, *Initiation*, 198. In a remarkable contribution, Jean Porter includes the gifts but ignores the Beatitudes and fruits ("Right Reason and the Love of God," in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. R. van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005], 171).

of the *prima secundae*. Furthermore, failure to account for the place of the gifts, Beatitudes and fruits in the *prima secundae* also means that one will have difficulty accounting for their place in the *secunda secundae*, of which they are constitutive elements. Unfortunately, there is a long tradition of glossing over these questions. Pinckaers noted that gifts, Beatitudes, and fruits were often “relegated to the field of asceticism and mysticism, as to a subordinate, optional science.”¹⁴ It seems that this has left its mark on some of the present-day scholarship of Aquinas.

Stump and Pinsent: The Non-Aristotelian Reading of Aquinas

Other scholars do offer an account of the place of the gifts, Beatitudes, and fruits in the *Summa* and in the moral theology of Aquinas. Of these I will highlight the contributions of Stump and Pinsent, on the one hand, and Pinckaers and Mattison, on the other.¹⁵ In her acclaimed study of Aquinas, Stump acknowledges what she refers to as a “web of Aquinas’s moral categories,” consisting of the deadly sins, principal virtues, gifts, Beatitudes, and fruits of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ There are, however, two issues with her presentation: the lack of an argument about Aquinas’s reason to interweave these topics, and the underlying assumptions about the Beatitudes and fruits in particular. Stump speaks of an “association.” This means, for example, that a certain fruit and Beatitude occur together. But this does not explain *why* they occur together. What are the threads connecting virtues, gifts, Beatitudes, and fruits in the texture of Aquinas’s moral theology? This question remains unanswered. What further complicates the matter are the assumptions Stump has about what Beatitudes and fruits are. She speaks of the fruits as “either acts—acts of self-discipline with regard to kicking the dog, for example—or else as mental states resulting from such actions.”¹⁷ Although the latter is not entirely incorrect, this description is ambiguous.

¹⁴ Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P., from the 3rd ed. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1995), 231. Romanus Cessario and Cajetan Cuddy argue that this development marked the shift toward moral casuistry (*Thomas and the Thomists: The Achievement of Thomas Aquinas and His Interpreters* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2017], 96).

¹⁵ The reflections of Rebecca Konyndyk DeYoung are also pertinent but fragmentary, and sometimes imprecise—for example when she refers to the fruits as dispositions, as well as when, in spite of Aquinas’s introduction to the article, she considers “fear” a passion rather than a gift in *Summa theologiae* [ST] II-II, q. 123, a. 3 (“Power Made Perfect in Weakness: Aquinas’s Transformation of the Virtue of Courage,” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 11 [2003]: 147–80).

¹⁶ Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), 360.

¹⁷ Stump, *Aquinas*, 351.

Aquinas explicitly considers the fruits of the Holy Spirit as actions, yet Stump takes them into the domain of the passions through casual remarks on a “passion for goodness,” for example.¹⁸ There is a similar problem in her description of the Beatitudes as “moral states.”¹⁹ The Beatitudes, too, are explicitly actions to Aquinas. So rather than to consistently speak of both the Beatitudes and fruits as actions, Stump speaks of them as moral states and concomitant emotions.²⁰ The reader of her work cannot but appreciate her splendid discussion of the complexities of human psychology and morality in light of recent history, literature, and modern philosophy. But it seems that Stump considers the discussion of the Beatitudes and fruits as a continuation of the treatise on passions, habits, and virtues.²¹ It then becomes part of the description of human psychology, without stressing enough that Beatitudes and fruits are acts that spring forth from divinely infused dispositions. This is what one can derive from Stump’s scattered remarks. Her work, and in similar vein that of Rebecca Konyn-dyk DeYoung, understands the gifts, Beatitudes, and fruits in light of the preceding questions on the virtues. This is a valid approach, but when speaking of Beatitudes and fruits it is essential that we begin with their definition and their place in the structure before trying to understand how they are related to the virtues.

Pinsent, a student of Stump, develops this approach when he presents a more elaborate theory of what he refers to as the “VGBF structure of moral perfection.”²² One of the key concerns of his discussion of questions 68–70, following Porter, is to establish that Aquinas is “non-Aristotelian,” and radically so.²³ The merit of Pinsent’s work is that it seeks to understand the discussion of virtues, gifts, Beatitudes, and fruits in the *prima secundae* as the foundation for the structure of the *secunda secundae*. He suggests that the lack of attention to this structure is due to the fact that many inquiries into Aquinas’s ethics were guided by questions raised

¹⁸ Stump, *Aquinas*, 353.

¹⁹ Stump, *Aquinas*, 353.

²⁰ See her claim that “the passions also have analogues in the *fruits* of the Holy Spirit” (Eleonore Stump, “The Non-Aristotelian Character of Aquinas’s Ethics: Aquinas on the Passions,” *Faith and Philosophy* 28, no. 1 [2011]: 42).

²¹ She categorizes questions 49–89 as a treatise on the intrinsic sources of human acts (Stump, *Aquinas*, 9).

²² Andrew Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas’s Ethics: Virtues and Gifts* (London: Routledge, 2012), 23. Note the discussion of “the second-personal in Aquinas” in Stump, “Non-Aristotelian Character,” 36–39.

²³ Pinsent, *Second-Person Perspective*, 22–23, 84, 104–5.

by Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.²⁴ In his discussion of the Beatitudes and fruits, Pinsent takes a different trajectory and begins by observing Aquinas's description of them as the "actualizations of the virtues and the gifts."²⁵ In his interpretation, the Beatitudes are "promissory narratives," which means that he underscores the fact that the fulfillment of the promises they contain is yet to be realized, hence his emphasis on hope.²⁶ The Beatitudes "act as a kind of bridge to a state of completeness."²⁷ He then goes on to suggest that the fruits are at least part of the fulfillment of the promises given in the Beatitudes. The fruits, according to Pinsent, are "the terminating characteristics of the VGBF network, and the very names of some of the fruits, especially love, joy, and peace, convey a sense of finality in an account of human perfection oriented toward a final state of happiness."²⁸ He acknowledges that the fruits do not mean that human activity ends and that they are not merely the enjoyment of activities well achieved.

This proposal is an important step forward in the discussion. Pinsent acknowledges the importance of the connections between virtues, gifts, Beatitudes, and fruits for Aquinas's theology of human action. He is right in stressing that Aquinas's ethics cannot be equated with those of Aristotle, nor are we merely reading a baptized version of Aristotle. It is something else. But the issue with Pinsent is that, from the onset, he wishes to move beyond Aquinas. He writes: "In order to show why the beatitudes and fruits form an organic whole, together with the virtues and gifts, a metaphoric understanding is required that can unify Aquinas's claims and relate them to experience."²⁹ Pinsent claims that without such a metaphoric understanding, any discussion of the virtues, gifts, Beatitudes, and fruits will remain dry and lifeless. Although he wishes to understand Aquinas, and indeed makes great progress, his project is a push to present a new framework which he finds in the "second-person perspective." I disagree with Pinsent's assumption that new metaphors are needed in order to understand the framework of Aquinas's theory of human flourishing. It leads to a lack of attention to certain important details of Aquinas's interpretation. Pinsent notes that the Beatitudes and fruits are actions, but with regard to the Beatitudes his discussion is shaped by

²⁴ Pinsent, *Second-Person Perspective*, 26. This is also one of Stump's concerns ("The Non-Aristotelian Character," 29–43).

²⁵ Pinsent, *Second-Person Perspective*, 84; see also 86.

²⁶ Pinsent, *Second-Person Perspective*, 86–91.

²⁷ Pinsent, *Second-Person Perspective*, 91.

²⁸ Pinsent, *Second-Person Perspective*, 92.

²⁹ Pinsent, *Second-Person Perspective*, 85.

their definition as promissory narratives. In the fruits he recognizes that they are delightful but does not take it up as the key to their definition. It seems that he takes a somewhat sequential approach to the Beatitudes and fruits: their relation is that one follows the other. There is some textual evidence to back up this claim, but we will see that there is more to it.³⁰

Pinckaers and Mattison: Happiness as Key to the Structure

It will be clear to the reader that Servais Pinckaers did not claim that Aquinas's moral theology can be qualified as simply "Aristotelian," and the same is true for his student William Mattison. But their discussions of the *prima secundae* are less driven by the desire to make this specific point. Instead, Pinckaers proposed a reading of the book based on understanding it as geared toward happiness. Mattison explicitly presents his proposal as a further development of that of Pinckaers.³¹ Both seek to establish the relation between questions 1–5 on the nature of happiness (*beatitudo*) and the question on the Beatitudes (*beatitudines*). One would expect some sort of relation between them. Pinckaers and Mattison's proposal, as I summarized elsewhere, comes down to resolving "this issue by taking away some of the subdivisions that we usually make when discussing the *Summa*. Rather than separating the first five questions from what follows, Pinckaers suggests that Aquinas perceived of questions 1 to 70 as a single treatise on happiness. In this scheme, the questions 68 to 70 are the culmination of the discussions that precede them, rather than an odd addition."³²

The proposals of Pinckaers and Mattison allow for a reading of the *prima secundae* that is dynamic, doing justice to the pedagogical concerns of Aquinas and his unceasing attention to the question of the nature of human happiness and its attainment. Still, there are two major issues. First, neither accounts for the place of questions 71–114. Second, both of them mention the fruits of the Holy Spirit but do so only in passing. Addressing the former I will propose a rough draft of the structure of the *prima secundae* to resolve the former issue. As for the latter: I have discussed them at length in my study of the Beatitudes and have

³⁰ *ST* II-II, q. 139, a. 2, ad 3.

³¹ Servais Pinckaers, "Beatitude and the Beatitudes in Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*," in *The Pinckaers Reader: Renewing Thomistic Moral Theology*, ed. John Berkman and Craig Steven Titus (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 115–29; William Mattison, "Beatitude and the Beatitudes in the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 17, no. 1 (2010): 233–49.

³² Ten Klooster, *Thomas Aquinas on the Beatitudes*, 146–48.

addressed them further in another publication.³³

Merit, Reward, and Happiness

In order to account for questions 71–114, we need to return to the opening discussion of the *prima secundae*, in questions 1–5.³⁴ This provides us with important clarifications about the nature of happiness and the way it can be pursued. The notions from these questions are further developed in what follows. The first thing Aquinas establishes is that people all act for an end, and that there can only be one ultimate end (q. 1). Happiness is sought in many things but it cannot be had “save in the vision of God” (qq. 2–3).³⁵ In these questions it also becomes clear that happiness must be an activity or operation (q. 3, a. 2). This point is crucial to everything that follows. It begs the question of what type of activity this entails, and under what conditions it can be performed (qq. 3–4). Finally and most importantly: how can we gain happiness (q. 5)? In the latter discussion Aquinas raises two issues that will be answered in questions 109–14 on grace and merit: whether the human person reaches happiness by being acted on by some higher creature (q. 5, a. 6) and whether something must be done in order to attain happiness (q. 5, a. 7). Aquinas responds affirmatively to both questions. This means he speaks of the pursuit of happiness by affirming the necessity of both divine and human agency. My theory is that the rest of the *prima secundae* can be read as an effort to clarify the relation between these two. And it is in the question on the Beatitudes and fruits of the Holy Spirit (qq. 69–70) that we can best see how the two come together and the human person is acting toward the final end aided by grace. This is obscured in many interpretations, due in part to the fact that the gifts are often taken for things they are not, such as dispositions and passions.

The main arch connecting the beginning and end of the *prima secundae* is the notion of merit. We will see that merit is also an important aspect of Aquinas’s interpretation of the Beatitudes. A hot-button issue in ecumenical debates, merit is often misrepresented as a sort of *quid pro quo* approach to the Christian life.³⁶ The conception of merit that Lutheran theologians objected to can be referred to as *mechanical*: a certain action necessarily

³³ Anton ten Klooster, “Aquinas on the Fruits of the Holy Spirit as the Delight of the Christian life,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 8, no. 2 (2019): 80–94.

³⁴ One of the initial inspirations for this approach was Thomas O’Meara, “Grace as a Theological Structure in the *Summa Theologiae* of Thomas Aquinas,” *Recherches de théologie ancienne et médiévale* 55 (1988): 130–53.

³⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 3, a. 8, resp.

³⁶ Michael Root, “Aquinas, Merit and Reformation Theology after the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” *Modern Theology* 20, no. 4 (2004): 15–16.

leads to a given reward. Such an idea would indeed be a violation of the theological concept of divine freedom, leaving God no choice but to pay due wages. Aquinas's mature position on merit is deeply influenced by his concern to avoid (semi-)Pelagian theological positions.³⁷ The problem with the Pelagian position is that, by overemphasizing free will, it fails to establish a balance between divine and human agency. One thing that is clear to Aquinas is that it is not possible to merit initial justification through any form of human action. This would undermine the fundamental principle that God freely gives, to whom he chooses to give. In his mature work, Aquinas develops his own understanding of the subject, as we can learn from the lucid study on merit done by Joseph Wawrykow.³⁸ His argument comes down to this: merit does not place God in debt to the human person. Instead, God by promising certain rewards places himself in debt to himself; God owes God. Wawrykow's study need not be criticized, but it is possible to add to it. The problem with its description is that merit is still only discussed in terms of divine justice. This definition still comes down to what God owes, even if it be to himself rather than to someone else. In such a definition, merit is considered as a net result, the sum of human action, sin, and grace. Such a presentation suggests that merit is like money in the bank which will be paid out in due time. Wawrykow has correctly presented Aquinas's position in the relevant question of the *Summa*. However, it is possible to consider the questions on merit differently. Rather than studying these questions as an isolated treatise, they can be understood as part of the architecture of the *Summa*. Such an approach takes the topic of merit out of its isolation, and relates it to the discussion of human happiness which forms the starting point for the *prima secundae*. It is becoming increasingly clear that Aquinas's theological positions developed as a result of his lectures on Scripture. Therefore, I will first touch upon the discussion of merit in Aquinas's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. Although this is far from the only source that can inform the present discussion, it is a useful case study that demonstrates how understanding Aquinas through the lens of his biblical commentaries may inform a theological debate. It is also the commentary that Pinckaers referred to in support of his argument for the structure of the *prima secundae*.

Merit and the Beatitudes in the Commentary on Matthew

Aquinas's commentary on Matthew provides us with an integrated discus-

³⁷ Ten Klooster, *Thomas Aquinas on the Beatitudes*, 136–40.

³⁸ Joseph Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

sion of topics which are divided into different articles in his systematic works.³⁹ It is therefore a useful source in our effort to understand the *prima secundae* as a unified discussion. We already noted that the discussion of the Beatitudes in the *Summa* seems to be separated from other questions, the questions on merit included. It is by reading the Matthew commentary that we can see the *Summa* with fresh eyes and that we can see the relation between these two topics. Keeping that in mind, we will take a closer look at the two more extensive discussions on merit that can be found in the commentary on Matthew. Merit is discussed in the context of two questions: human happiness and divine judgment. The first of these discussions is the commentary on the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3–10, and the second is part of Aquinas's comments on the last judgment on the basis of Matthew 25:31–46.

What is noteworthy about the commentary on the Beatitudes is that it is preceded by a thematic prologue. The first subject is the question of happiness: what do people say it is, and how are the Beatitudes the Lord's answer to this question? People may seek happiness in an abundance of riches, but Christ says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." In this way, Aquinas describes each beatitude as a statement that precludes a certain conception of happiness. Having established the Beatitudes as the key Christian text on happiness, he then goes on to describe the structure of each Beatitude. It is here that he presents a more extensive discussion of merit. He believes that each begins with a description of a *meritum*. This *meritum* refers to a meritorious action that follows the words "blessed are." It is through this type of action that a person acts toward the end of happiness promised by Christ. This promise is given in the *praemium*, the reward: "for they . . ." In the first Beatitude, poverty in spirit is the *meritum*, and the kingdom of heaven the *praemium*. When we follow Aquinas's interpretation of the Beatitudes, we see that he describes the relation between merit and reward as a relation of promise and fulfillment. The poor in spirit receive the kingdom, because Christ promises it to them. Those who mourn will be consoled, because Christ promises it to them. And so on for the other Beatitudes.

³⁹ For the text of the commentary on Matt 5:1–10, see Anton ten Klooster, "Thomas Aquinas on the Beatitudes: Edition of the Basel Manuscript," *Jaarboek Thomas Instituut Utrecht* 36 (2017): 41–87. Many scholars have raised important questions with regard to the reliability of the text. Most of these are addressed in Anton ten Klooster, "The Two Hands of Thomas Aquinas: The *Reportationes* of the Commentary on Matthew," *Angelicum* 91, no. 4 (2014): 855–79. All other quotations from *Super Matt* below are from the Marietti edition and citations use the Marietti numbers. All translations are my own.

But how does the *meritum* come about? In the prologue, Aquinas answers this question in detail.⁴⁰ He begins by describing Aristotle's concept of heroic virtue. Such a form of action "above the human manner" is also designated by the merit of the Beatitudes. Yet, in the Beatitudes this is a graced form of action, for the merits are "either acts of the gifts, or acts of the virtues according as they are perfected by the gifts."⁴¹ Although the connection of virtue to the gifts of the Holy Spirit may be unsurprising to those familiar with the *Summa*, it appears rather abruptly in the Matthew commentary. Merit is presented here as a form of virtuous action, performed under the impulse of the Holy Spirit. One of the reasons to perform these actions is that they are part of the new law. To Aquinas everything that is said in the Sermon on the Mount is a concrete application of the merits described in the Beatitudes: "Just as Moses first set down the commandments, and afterwards said many things which were all referred back to the commandments given, so Christ in his teaching first sets forth these Beatitudes, to which all the other things are reduced."⁴²

To merit means more than obeying the law. The orientation of meritorious action becomes clear in Aquinas's remarks on each individual Beatitude. To merit means to act toward the final end: happiness. In moving toward this final end, the subject already begins to participate in the happiness that is strived for. The reward will be had fully in the next life, but in this life it is possible to have it "as a beginning and imperfectly [*secundum inchoationem et imperfecte*]."⁴³ To use the example of the beatitude of the merciful: those who show mercy are promised that mercy will be given to them. Being merciful is a way of acting toward the final end of attaining God's mercy, which is found in its fullest form in heaven. Yet, divine mercy already begins in this life, in the loosening of one's sins, and by the removal of temporal defects.⁴⁴ The further we progress in the commentary on the Beatitudes, the clearer the connection between merit and reward becomes. At the summit, we arrive at the beatitude of the peacemakers. They have established a "tranquility of order" in their life, where they are subject to

⁴⁰ *Super Matt*, no. 409–10.

⁴¹ *Super Matt*, no. 410. Cf. *Super Matt*, no. 416.

⁴² *Super Matt*, no. 411.

⁴³ *Super Matt*, no. 413.

⁴⁴ *Super Matt*, no. 431: "This mercy is begun in this life in two ways. First, because sins are loosed: *who forgives all your iniquities* (Ps 103:3). Second, because he removes temporal defects, such that he makes his sun to rise (Matt 5:45); yet it will be perfected in the future, when every misery, both of guilt and of punishment, will be taken away. *O Lord, your mercy is in heaven* (Ps 36:6). And this is for they will obtain mercy."

God, their lower motions are subject to reason, and animals are subject to man. Such an exceptional order is the beginning of heavenly peace and is found only in holy people, yet true peace still awaits in heaven. In meritorious action, the person is acting toward the happiness promised by Christ in the Beatitudes and begins to share in it.

In the prologue Aquinas spoke of merit as a form of action that is perfected by the gifts of the Holy Spirit. This theme recurs in the commentary on each Beatitude, as each one is connected to one of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit. In this connection, and in relating the Beatitudes to specific parts of the Sermon on the Mount, Aquinas's dependence on Augustine's commentary on the Sermon comes to the fore. When both of them speak of the Christian life in terms of living the Beatitudes, with the help of the Holy Spirit, they present an understanding of the Christian life as a life of grace. Because when we speak of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, we are speaking of grace itself. To realize this is vital for a proper understanding of merit. Merit does not come about without divine action; it requires God's freely given grace. But at the same time merit is described in terms of human action. Although the form of virtue described in the Beatitudes may be heroic, even above the human manner, it is performed by humans. So there is also no merit without human action. In this way, the commentary on the Beatitudes presents us with a discourse on merit in which God's grace and human action are intertwined, with the latter depending on the former.

But how does merit lead to reward? We saw that Aquinas believes that an inchoate form of this reward can be had in this life, and that its perfection is only given in the next. Still, he is careful to avoid the impression that there is a sort of mechanical relation between them, as if one could set the parameters of life in such a way that a heavenly reward is inevitable. The movement from merit to the eventual reward goes by way of divine judgment. Commenting on Matthew 25:31–46, a passage famous for its presentation of the corporal works of mercy, Aquinas again takes up the terms "merit" and "reward." In the Beatitudes, the reward of the kingdom of heaven was promised. Here we are at the point where the reward of the kingdom is given: "Come, you who are blessed by my Father. Inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matt 25:34). To Aquinas, the last judgment is a judgment of our merits. And the reward of eternal happiness that is given for it finds its cause in two things: "One on God's part, i.e., God's blessing, another on our part, i.e., the merit which is from free will. For men should not be idle, but should cooperate with God's grace."⁴⁵ Again, Aquinas ties in merit as an exercise of free will

⁴⁵ *Super Matt*, no. 2096.

with the gratuity of God's gift of the kingdom. Although the treatment of merit in this section is less systematic than it is in the comments on the Beatitudes, it leaves us with a number of relevant insights. It underscores the fact that Aquinas considers merit as a cause for the attainment of the kingdom, and thus meritorious action as a form of action which is principally directed toward eternal happiness. This is an important remark vis-à-vis conceptions of merits which restrict themselves to considering merit as an answer to the question "who gets into heaven?" Heaven is indeed the reward, the end toward which meritorious action is directed. But merit is not left at the door of heaven, having secured a person's entrance into eternal glory. Rather, the person begins to receive the fullness of that which is had in part in this life: participation in the eternal happiness of God. What is also stressed is that grace is the principle of both merit and reward. Human action is considered, but insofar as it depends on grace. Happiness is achieved, but only through grace. By making divine judgment the "bridge" from merit to reward, Aquinas avoids presenting merit as something that leaves God in debt to a human being. Reward is not something which is the sum of one's actions, but rather that which is granted to a person by God, recognizing what his grace has realized in that person.

We began our discussion of the commentary with the Beatitudes. They are given at the onset of the ministry of Christ. There, he promises true happiness to all those who listen to his words and act upon them. The Beatitudes contain the promise of happiness, and by instructing about meritorious action they also describe the way toward happiness. In the last judgment, we have arrived at the last step on the way. All actions are subject to the judgment of God. It is then that each accounts for his merits, or lack thereof. In these two sections of the commentary we have discovered that Aquinas makes use of the term merit to describe actions that are directed toward the final end of happiness. The commentary offers us a fresh perspective on human action and its final end. There, "merit" is a dynamic reality, rather than a mechanical concept. It is the term to describe the form of human action that is properly ordered toward the final end. As we will see, such an understanding of acting toward the final end is also helpful in recognizing the structure of the *Summa*.

The Pursuit of Happiness and the *Prima Secundae*

The opening questions of the *prima secundae* stress the importance of both human action and the grace of God in the human person's pursuit of the final end of eternal happiness. In what follows we will speak of the Christian life in light of the *prima secundae*, without intending to conflate this with the Christian life itself. What relation between human

action and the grace of God do we find in the *Summa*? The answer can be found in a proper understanding of the term “merit.” In this notion, God’s grace and human action are both present and directed toward the final end. Merit, more specifically congruent merit, comes down to the human person making the best use of his powers and being compensated by God according to the abundance of God’s powers.⁴⁶ It is by making use of his powers—by virtuous action—that a person merits. This orders him to eternal happiness, and constitutes the motion toward his eventual enjoyment of the divine goodness.⁴⁷ Merit thus describes the human person in motion toward the final end, thrust forward by infused charity. Reward is not merely a wage for the laborer; “the recompense [*praemium*] is the end-term of merit.”⁴⁸ The two terms used by Aquinas, *motus* and *terminus*, are important to our understanding of merit and reward. These terms underline that merit and reward are not the same, since nothing can be at the same time the movement toward an end (*motus*) and the end itself (*terminus*). Merit is the *motus*, a form of graced action, and the end of this movement is achieved in eternal life.⁴⁹ The reward of eternal happiness is then the *terminus ad quem* of meritorious action.

In the closing lines of the *prima secundae* Aquinas says: “[The good] are guided by such temporal benefits and misfortunes to blessedness. And let this suffice for what we have to say about the moral life in general.”⁵⁰ These concluding remarks are a response to the question of happiness. As such, they form a beautiful *inclusio* with the opening questions of the *prima secundae*. There, Aquinas famously states that the end of all human action is happiness as it is found in God. He also posits that the moral quality of an action is related to its end.⁵¹ In our discussion, it means that an action can be called good, and meritorious, insofar as it is directed toward the final end of happiness. But if we want to consider the question of merit in light of the end of happiness, we should move from the level of individual questions and articles to that of the books of the *Summa*. Therefore, we will first look at the *imago Dei* as a structuring element for the *Summa* as a whole.⁵² Then we will look at how happiness is the key word to under-

⁴⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 114, a. 3, resp.

⁴⁷ *ST* I-II, q. 114, a. 2, resp.; a. 4, resp.

⁴⁸ *ST* I-II, q. 114, a. 8, ad 1; cf. *In III sent.*, d. 30, q. 1, a. 5.

⁴⁹ *ST* I-II q. 114 a. 8, resp.

⁵⁰ *ST* I-II, q. 114, a. 10, ad 4.

⁵¹ *ST* I-II, q. 1, a. 3, ad 3.

⁵² I am indebted to Prof. Henk Schoot (Tilburg University) for pointing out the relevance of the larger structure of the *Summa* to my efforts to understand the topic of merit.

standing the design of the *prima secundae*. This will help us to see that the topic of merit plays a role in other questions as well.

At the beginning of the *Summa*, Aquinas announces that he will speak of God “as the beginning and end of all things and of reasoning creatures especially.”⁵³ The beginning of the *secunda pars* specifies what this means: the human person is made in the image of God.⁵⁴ After having treated of God as the exemplar of this image in the *prima pars*, in the *secunda* “we go on to look at this image, that is to say, at man as the source of actions which are his own and fall under his responsibility and control.”⁵⁵ Although this image may be tarnished by sin, through grace it can be restored. The trajectory of restoration is understood in light of the life of Christ, considered in the *tertia pars*, who “showed in his person that path of truth which, in rising again, we can follow to the blessedness of eternal life.”⁵⁶ In the prologues, we find words that indicate movement. Human beings are brought forth by God, and try to proceed through this life on the path of virtue, aided by grace, but also stumbling through vice and sin. Through the *acta et passa* of Christ, and in his sacraments, the completion of this earthly journey is indicated and made possible.⁵⁷ The way of the restoration of the *imago Dei* is synchronous with the way toward happiness. Human beings are masters of their own action because they are made in the image of God, and human beings strive toward happiness. These two realities are considered together because they have the same end: God himself. The restoration of the human person to the image of God “by likeness of glory” is achieved *in patria*: true and full happiness is achieved *in patria*.⁵⁸ Human action is directed toward the happiness of eternal life, where the earthly journey to restore the broken *imago Dei* is completed. As we saw, the order of the *imago Dei* is most closely mirrored by the life of the peace-makers, which forms the summit of the Beatitudes.⁵⁹ Because they are so close to the divine ordering of things, they are the closest to true happiness.

The *prima secundae* has the question of happiness at its heart. Traditionally, it is therefore considered as the presentation of Aquinas’s moral theology. But we do well to bear in mind that distinctions between dogmatic theology,

⁵³ *ST* I, q. 2, prol.

⁵⁴ See *ST* I, q. 93, aa. 1, 4.

⁵⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 1, prol.

⁵⁶ *ST* III, q. 1, prol.

⁵⁷ For the importance of the expression “*acta et passa* of Christ,” see Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Le Christ En Ses Mystères: La Vie Et L’Oeuvre De Jésus Selon Saint Thomas D’Aquin*, vol. 1 (Paris: Desclée, 1999), 20–27.

⁵⁸ *ST* I, q. 93, a. 4, resp.

⁵⁹ *Super Matt*, no. 438; cf. *ST* I, q. 95, a. 1, resp.

moral theology, and spirituality were made after Aquinas's time. To him, *sacra doctrina* encompassed speech about the immanent Trinity, the quality of human action, prayer, Christ, and all other topics that are now categorized in different fields of theology. So it is perfectly natural to consider questions of merit and divine justice, usually relegated to the domain of dogmatic theology, in close relation to what we now call moral theology. In order to do so, we will first discuss the place of the question of happiness in the *prima secundae*, and we will then expand on how this affects our understanding of merit. It is usually assumed that the discussion of happiness is limited to the first five questions of the *prima secundae*. There Aquinas posits that all human beings act toward a final end, that the final end is happiness, and that true happiness is found in God. However, as Pinckaers noted, it is rather odd that Aquinas seems to leave the Beatitudes out of his discussion of happiness.⁶⁰ In light of what we learned from the commentary on Matthew, this is indeed startling. Pinckaers therefore argued that the first five questions laid out the framework for a treatise on happiness that spanned across the first seventy questions of the *prima secundae*. I would argue that this framework may even overarch the entire volume. As we saw, the *prima secundae* ends with questions on grace and merit. In similar fashion, Aquinas completes his discussion on happiness at the beginning of the *prima secundae* by positing the necessity of grace and merit.⁶¹ Having established that happiness consists in a perfect operation of the speculative intellect, he asks whether a person reaches happiness by being acted upon by a higher creature. The answer to this question is that indeed he does, because "the Lord will give grace and glory."⁶² Although creatures are bound by the laws of nature, grace makes it possible to achieve those things that lie beyond their natural abilities. This section would then correspond to questions 109–13 of the *prima secundae*. Before moving to the final question—"does every human being desire happiness?"—Aquinas first asks whether good deeds are required in order to gain happiness from God. The terminology of his reply is the same as that of question 114: a human being "reaches [happiness] through many motions of activity, which are called merits."⁶³

First comes grace, then comes merit. Aquinas's discussion of the gifts and the Beatitudes follows this principle. He begins by discussing the gifts, which create in the person the dispositions to act according to the

⁶⁰ Pinckaers, "Beatitude and the Beatitudes," 123.

⁶¹ *ST* I-II, q. 5, aa. 6–7.

⁶² *ST* I-II, q. 5, a. 6, sc.

⁶³ *ST* I-II, q. 5, a. 7, resp. The Blackfriars translation reads "which are called his merits," but I find this translation both inaccurate and confusing.

prompting of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁴ Then he expounds on the Beatitudes. This discussion in the *Summa* presupposes the distinction between merit and reward as it is found in the commentary on Matthew. In the first part of each Beatitude, its merit, we find a description of a meritorious form of action as it is perfected by the gift of the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵ What is interesting about the questions is that Aquinas presents these actions as preparations for happiness: “Those things which are proposed in the beatitudes in the role of merit are preparations or dispositions for beatitude”; the reward is the attainment of this happiness.⁶⁶ New perspectives open up when we consider the discussion of merit in the commentary and the use of merit as the main arch connecting the beginning and end of the *prima secundae*. These insights allow us to speak in a more unified way of the relation between God’s grace and human action. In fact, they allow us to consider the entire *prima secundae* as a long discussion on the pursuit of happiness. The following is my proposal to do so.

The End of Human Action: Happiness

Happiness is the final end, the nature of happiness. qq. 1–5

- It is an *activity* of the human person.
- The pursuit of happiness requires *grace*.
- One *merits* the final end—human cooperation with grace.

The Human Person on the Way toward Happiness

Human Action

The nature and quality of human action qq. 6–21
 Impulses on the acting person, the passions qq. 22–48
 Formation of the acting person, habituation and acquisition of virtue qq. 49–61

The Transformation of Human Action by Grace

Union of the soul with God, infusion of virtues qq. 62–67
 Infusion of habitual gifts: the gifts of the Holy Spirit q. 68

⁶⁴ *ST* I-II, q. 68, a. 1, resp.

⁶⁵ *ST* I-II, q. 69, a. 2–3.

⁶⁶ *ST* I-II, q. 69, a. 2, resp.

Human Action Formed by Grace

Exterior actions: the Beatitudes q. 69

Interior actions: the fruits of the Holy Spirit q. 70

The Pursuit of Happiness throughout Life*Human Frailty and Acquired Vices Distort the Pursuit of Happiness*

Sin and vice qq. 71–89

Reorientation of Human Action by Divine Law

The old law qq. 90–105

The new law of the Gospel qq. 106–8

Attaining Happiness

The necessity of grace for attaining happiness qq. 109–13

Cooperation with grace, meriting eternal happiness q. 114

As I have underscored elsewhere in this article, this is a proposal and not a claim to a definitive interpretation of the *Summa*. It is an effort to do justice to the centrality of question of happiness in Aquinas's work, a sample of which we saw in the reflections on the commentary on Matthew. My own work has focused on the opening questions, those on the infused virtues, gifts, Beatitudes, and fruits, and the final questions on grace. I hope this will prove a sufficient starting point.

Life in the Spirit

We have moved from the level of single questions to that of the structure of an entire book of the *Summa*. Now I will move back to the place of the Beatitudes and fruits in the *prima secundae*. Earlier we saw that many scholars struggle to account for them. Yet they are far from ornamental. There are literally dozens of questions on the things that influence and form human action: passions, habits and virtues. They are followed by merely two questions in which Aquinas speaks of *actus*. We should therefore read consider them attentively. Due to constraints of space I cannot discuss the questions on the Beatitudes and fruits in great detail.⁶⁷ What

⁶⁷ For a detailed discussion see ten Klooster, *Thomas Aquinas on the Beatitudes*, 162–81.

I will do is clarify a number of things about them that I feel are either ignored or misrepresented, before briefly touching upon the repercussions of my proposal for understanding the moral life of the Christian.

As for the major misrepresentation, I hope to have already shown that the Beatitudes are not an ornamental part of the *prima secundae*. They are the key to understanding Aquinas's theology of happiness, especially when we consider their discussion throughout his works. Pinckaers has done groundbreaking work bringing this insight to the fore, but there is still a lot of work to be done. The emphasis on the Beatitudes also helps to rebuke criticism that Aquinas's moral theology is merely a baptized version of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. There is no doubt about the high esteem in which Aquinas holds the philosopher. But when he speaks of the pursuit of happiness he first establishes the absolute necessity of grace, and speaks of the *actus* in pursuit of that end by drawing from Scripture. When we use "happiness" as the interpretative key to the *prima secundae* there is no need to introduce metaphors that were unknown to Aquinas. This approach, as well as some others, also runs the risk of reducing moral theology to a discussion of human psychology. But it is in the concrete actions of human life, in all its messiness, that a person pursues happiness with the aid of grace and instructed and formed by divine law.

The actions on the way toward happiness are the Beatitudes. These actions are meritorious: it is through them that a person can merit eternal life. But the perfection of these actions does not depend on human capacities: it depends on the soul's connection to God through the infusion of the theological virtues. These actions must be formed by the higher *habitus* of the gifts of the Holy Spirit. And it is thus that they are the fruit of the work of the Holy Spirit, even when they are actions of the human person.

In an article published shortly after his death in 2008, Pinckaers reflected on Augustine's commentary on the Sermon on the Mount and its influence on Aquinas's moral theology. He restated his conviction that to Aquinas the Christian life is primarily a life in the Spirit.⁶⁸ The questions at the center of the *prima secundae* affirm this by directing the attention to the infused virtues, the gifts, the Beatitudes, and the fruits. Our reading of the commentary on Matthew clarifies notions from the *Summa* and corroborates the theory that the *prima secundae* can be read as a theological reflection on the pursuit of happiness. The movement toward this final end takes place through meritorious actions. To attain happiness

⁶⁸ Servais Pinckaers, "Le Commentaire du Sermon sur la Montagne par Saint Augustin et la Morale de Saint Thomas," *Revue d'éthique et de théologie morale* 253, no. 1 (2009): 20.

is to merit it, and the Beatitudes are the words from Scripture that best describe the types of action that lead us toward happiness and give us an initial share in it. N.V.