

Matthew 5:1-12 Sermons by Brian Bill

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NEXT

Developing a Disciple's Attitude

Matthew 5:1-2

1/4/04

In a classic comic, Calvin and Hobbes are talking about the New Year when Calvin says, "I'm getting disillusioned with these new years. They don't seem very new at all. Each New Year is just like the old year. Here another year has gone by and everything's still the same. There's still pollution and war and stupidity and greed...I thought things were supposed to improve. I thought the future was supposed to be better." After listening to this skeptical soliloquy, Hobbes replies, "The problem with the future is that it keeps turning into the present."

Do you ever feel that way? While it's difficult to put the past behind us, it's even more challenging to be proactive in the present so that we're transformed tomorrow. And some of us make resolutions in the New Year in the hopes that the future won't turn into the present. I came across a website this week that listed the "Top Ten New Year's Resolutions" (<http://rats2u.com/christmas/newyear>). Not surprisingly, the top four are health-related but two of the ten deal with the health of the soul:

- Become a better person
- Become more spiritual

We want things to be different in a new year but we quickly find out how elusive real change can be. We wish each other "Happy New Year" without really thinking through what that means. Is there a way to be happy, or is there more to life than the pursuit of happiness? How can we become better people? I'd like to suggest that we must develop a disciple's attitude in order to have a happy New Year and to live a holy life.

In the most famous sermon ever preached, Jesus sets forth eight statements that provide the best definition of a disciple ever delineated. Please follow along as I read from Matthew 5:1-12. These opening words from the premier preacher of all time are known as "The Beatitudes" and we'll be taking a look at each one in the next two months. As we go through these life-changing words, could I encourage you to memorize these verses? As we allow the Scripture to sink down into our souls, its power to transform us will be unleashed:

"Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.'"

Let me make some preliminary comments that will help us interpret, understand, and apply this sermon to our lives.

1. These eight qualities can only be lived out by Christians. These spiritual standards come about only through surrender to the Savior. Jesus is not saying, "Live like this in order to be saved." He's saying, "Live like this because you are saved." Conduct must flow out of character. A Christian is one who embraces and embodies the Beatitudes. Another way to say it is that if you want to spot a Christ-follower in a crowd, look for these eight character qualities.

2. The Beatitudes are a package deal, not something to pick and choose from. Along with the Fruit of the Spirit that is to ripen in every believer, a Christian should, and must, display each of these character traits. They are not just for the "spiritual elite," but are for every believer. In addition, these are not eight separate groups of disciples, some who are meek and others who hunger for God. It's easy to make the mistake of saying, "I'm just not merciful" or "I'm just not a peacemaker." Oswald Chambers refers to these words as lovely and poetic, yet their impact is that of "spiritual torpedoes."

We can't pick the easy ones and ignore the difficult ones like being pure and being prepared for persecution. Incidentally, many of the Beatitudes are the exact opposite of what we want to do. While easy to appreciate, they are difficult to apply. John Stott writes: "The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly the least obeyed" ("The Message of the Sermon on the Mount," Page 15).

3. Behavior must flow out of belief. Correct doctrine must always lead to Christlike behavior. We must not only know what to believe;

we must understand how to behave. While Jesus teaches content throughout the Sermon on the Mount, these opening words deal with character. Jesus is emphasizing throughout this sermon that His disciples are to be different. John Stott suggests that Matthew 6:8 is the key text: "Do not be like them..." as he writes: "They were not to take their cue from the people around them, but from Him, and so prove to be genuine children of their heavenly Father" (Stott, Page 18). As Christians, we are to be stamped by Christ, not by the culture around us, or by our tendencies within us.

A.W. Tozer once wrote: "There is an evil...glaring disparity between theology and practice among professing Christians...An intelligent observer of our human scene who heard the Sunday morning message and later watched the Sunday afternoon conduct of those who heard it would conclude he had been examining two distinct and contrary religions. It appears to me that too many Christians want to enjoy the thrill of feeling right but are not willing to endure the inconvenience of being right" (As quoted in a sermon by David Hoke called "Hearing His Voice Today," www.sermoncentral.com).

4. Jesus wants us to seek the applause of heaven. Some translations have utilized the word "happy" instead of "blessed" to describe those who exhibit these expressions of discipleship. One author even refers to them as the "Be-happy-tudes." This doesn't do justice to the Greek word. While there is a close connection between holiness and happiness, this phrase conveys how God views people who live in a certain way.

Warren Wiersbe points out that "blessed" is "an inner satisfaction and sufficiency that does not depend on outward circumstances for happiness." Those who are "blessed" have inner lives that are rightly aligned. The root idea is "approval." When we bless God, we are approving and praising Him; when He blesses us, He is expressing approval of us. In the sight of heaven, those who live out what Jesus is spelling out are "superlatively blessed" because the Almighty is extending His endorsement. Note that this term is used at the beginning of each sentence as if to emphasize its exuberant exclamation of joy.

Max Lucado captures this idea in his book called "The Applause of Heaven" (As quoted by Ray Pritchard in a sermon called, "The Making of a Disciple").

God applauds the poor in spirit.
He cheers the mourners.
He favors the meek.
He smiles upon the hungry.
He honors the merciful.
He welcomes the pure in heart.
He claps for the peacemakers.
He rises to greet the persecuted.

How much do you crave God clapping for you? Do you want His smile more than your self-centered aspirations? Do you desire His applause more than the approval of your friends? If you want God's blessing more than anything else, you can have it. But first you must want to please Him above everything else. How badly do you want His blessing?

Chuck Swindoll, in commenting on the beauty of the Beatitudes, writes this: "Most sermons are more negative than positive, more like scathing rebukes than affirmation. Not this one. With beautiful simplicity, using terms any age could understand, Jesus brought blessing rather than condemnation... Having endured a lifetime of verbal assaults by the scribes and Pharisees, the multitude on the mount must have thought they had died and gone to heaven."

5. God wants to do a new thing in this New Year. No matter how messed up last year was for you, God loves to bring good out of bad. Isaiah 43:18-19: "Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing!" Friend, I believe that God wants to use the Beatitudes in this body in order to extend His approval on each one of us. It's not enough for us to make some lofty resolutions and then try to make changes by our own willpower. We need a transformation that only Jesus can provide. During His life on earth He never left people the same. Individuals either became fully devoted disciples or enraged enemies. It's my prayer that you and I will never be the same after coming face-to-face with these Beatitude blessings.

Setting the Context

Before we take a brief look at Matthew 5:1-2, let's place this preaching in context. Chapters 1-2 contain the Christmas story, the escape to Egypt and then the return of Jesus to Nazareth. We're introduced to John the Baptist who baptizes Jesus in chapter 3. Chapter 4 begins with the temptation of Jesus in the desert and then concludes with a summary of His three main activities.

- Preaching. His first sermon is very short and to the point in verse 17: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." Some of you wish my sermons were that short!
- Calling. As Jesus builds his team, we read that two sets of brothers dropped everything and "followed Him" (20, 22).
- Healing. As Jesus preached the good news, He also healed the hurting. Verse 24 tells us that news about Him "spread all over

Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them.”

As a result, verse 25 paints the picture of large crowds from all over the region that followed Him wherever He went. Let’s look at the first two verses from chapter 5 as Jesus prepares to preach.

Preparing to Preach

“Now when he saw the crowds...” We see two concentric circles here in this passage: The inner ring of the committed disciples, and the outer loop, composed of the curious crowd. While Jesus pulls back from the multitudes on occasion, He also loved to minister to the masses. Matthew 9:37: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.”

The crowds were intrigued by the sermon, as more and more people joined the class of the Master Teacher, much like people are joining our IMPACT classes each week because of the great teaching of David Wong and Ken Marley! Look at Matthew 7:28: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching.” It’s clear that while this sermon is primarily addressed to the committed, the crowd was also listening in. Mark 12:37 says that when the throngs paid attention to Jesus, they did so with “great delight.”

Actually, that’s the way our Sunday services are designed at PBC. We want believers to grow through our praise and preaching but we also want those who are curious, and even skeptical, to be awakened to the truth and beauty of Christ. We shouldn’t focus just on the crowd, nor should we speak only to the convinced. Those of us who are followers must be challenged to become more committed; those in the crowd need to hear about Jesus in a setting where they can believe. It’s a both/and, not an either/or situation.

“...He went up on a mountainside...” While Jesus communicated to the crowds, He was not swayed by the accolades they heaped upon Him. His mission involved pouring His life into His disciples and so He went up on a mountainside instead of just being with the multitudes. Jesus is making it a bit more challenging for the crowd to follow Him as He hiked up into the hills. Tradition says that this was a small mountain near Capernaum called the “Horns of Hattin.” This area had a natural amphitheater so people would have been able to hear everything Jesus said.

When we lived in Mexico, we would go up a mountain to get our Christmas tree each year. As we looked at those above us who were searching for the perfect tree, we could hear everything they said (though I couldn’t understand what they were saying). Their voices boomed down the mountain, echoing off the surrounding slopes. When Jesus spoke, the people did not have a hard time hearing.

While Jesus had no permanent place to preach from like the scribes and Pharisees did, He made use of a common mountain. Commentators have suggested that Jesus deliberately used this mountain to draw a parallel between the message given to Moses and the one coming from the Messiah. But there are also some contrasts between the barren mountain Moses was on and the grassy hillside in Galilee that served as the pulpit for the great preacher.

- When the Law was given, God came down (see Exodus 19:9). Jesus “went up” to spell out His sermon.
- When the Commandments were dictated, thunder and lightning crashed through the stillness (see Exodus 19:18). When Jesus spoke, people listened without fear or trembling, as grace and truth penetrated their lives.
- When the Law came, the people were told to keep their distance (see Exodus 19:12). Now they are invited to draw near.

“...and sat down.” It was very common for teachers back then to sit when they taught. This is reminiscent of what Jesus did when the crowds pressed in on Him so much that He had to get into a boat in order to speak to them in Luke 5:3: “Then he sat down and taught the people from the boat.” We see this also in John 8:2: “At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them.” This makes me think of a king sitting on his throne, or a judge sitting on a bench. When Jesus spoke, people were moved because they had never heard anyone speak with such clarity and conviction. This is evident in their response to the Sermon on the Mount in the last two verses of chapter 7: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.”

“His disciples came to Him...” The word “disciple” literally means a “student” or “learner.” In the time of Jesus, people didn’t go to college but instead became apprentices of those they wanted to learn from. If someone wanted to be a lawyer, they studied under an experienced lawyer. A shepherd hung out with shepherds. If you wanted to catch fish, you listened to fish stories from seasoned fishermen. The basic point was to hang out with the teacher you wanted to be like. Interestingly, they were so drawn to Jesus that they left their careers in order to study under the Savior. For three and a half years they watched, listened, observed, and asked questions.

Loving, Learning and Living

I see three attitudes exhibited in these first Christ followers that should be evident in our lives as well.

1. Love Jesus. At the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus asks Peter a question three different times: "Do you love me?" This is really the ultimate question, isn't it? Because the disciples were developing a love for their Master, they came near to Him. They didn't want to miss anything He said, so they hung on His every word. If you and I say that we love Jesus, we will get as close to Him as we can. Let's flesh this out a bit.

- Meet with Him every day. This may mean that you will have to break away from the crowd, or free yourself from your crowded schedule. If this is going to happen, you're going to have to make it happen. Remember one of the things we learned during the 40 Days of Purpose? You're as close to God as you want to be. If you want to be close to Christ, then set up a time and a place to read your Bible and pray every day.

- Love Him more in 2004 by serving those around you. How we treat others reflects how much we love Jesus. Matthew 25:40: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me."

2. Learn from Jesus. We see this in verse 2: "And he began to teach them..." Jesus is known as the Master Teacher. He understood that the only way people could learn was if He taught them. And, according to Matthew 11:1, He continually looked for more opportunities: "After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee." Here are two action steps.

- Recognize that we have more to learn. Some of us think we know everything we need to know. There's probably more pride in us than we're willing to admit. We hear references to Scripture verses and inside we say, "I know that one already." Friends, be open to the spiritual torpedoes that God wants to send your way.

- Study the Gospels like you've never studied them before. Maybe you could start the New Year by reading each of the four gospels. As we go through the Beatitudes each week, allow them to penetrate your head, your heart, and then your hands. I recommend that you join one of the women's Bible studies, attend an IMPACT class on Sunday morning, or plug into one of our small groups during the week. By the way, we as believers need to be aware of a coming cultural event that almost everyone will be talking about beginning in late February. Perhaps you've heard a little about Mel Gibson's new film called, "The Passion of the Christ." Pastor Jeff and I have been invited to a special screening in a couple weeks, so I can't recommend the movie yet, except to say that we need to be ready to help people understand why Jesus had to die. This only makes sense as we grapple with the Gospel accounts.

3. Live out what you learn. If we say we love Jesus, we will do whatever it takes to get close to Him so that we can learn from Him. Our learning must be more than just listening, however. It must be lived out. Jesus put it this way in Luke 6:40: "A student is not above his teacher, but everyone who is fully trained will be like his teacher."

In the conclusion to His preaching, Jesus contrasted those who heard his words and put them into practice with those who just soaked up a sermon without any life change. Those who live out what they learn are like a house built on the rock, while those who simply listen to His words are like the foolish man who built his house on sand: "The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash" (Matthew 7:24-27). Here are a couple ways to live out what you've learned.

- Cultivate an obedient heart. The true test of whether we love Jesus and that we're learning from Him is when we put into practice what we hear. We really can't say we've learned something until we're living it out. Jesus said it strongly in John 14:15: "If you love me, you will obey what I command." He then turns this around just to make sure we don't have any "wiggle room" in John 14:24: "He who does not love me will not obey my teaching."

- Live out one of the Beatitudes each day. Ask God for the grace to apply individually what we're going to learn together in these next weeks. Let's not be hearers only, but doers of the Word.

Conclusion

Jesus is calling us today to love Him more by getting close to Him, He longs for us to learn from Him, and He is pleased when we live like we're supposed to live. I'm told that the number one reason we wreck our resolutions is because we don't have a plan. And the best advice I can give you is this: Do it now! Don't procrastinate. While Hobbes didn't like how easily the future turns into the present, we actually must make changes in the present in order to have the future we desire.

Imagine that you have a bank account that receives a deposit of \$86,400 every morning. You're told that you can spend this money any way you want, but at the end of the day, whatever you don't spend will be lost. What do you think you'd do? You'd try to spend it all wouldn't you? Listen. You have 86,400 seconds every day! And you've got to use them or they're lost. Make this year count by

loving Jesus, by learning from Him, and by living out the Beatitudes. Let me close with a couple challenges.

- If you're in the crowd right now, instead of wishing you a happy new year, I'd like to offer you a holy new you! You can have a fresh start because Jesus is extending an invitation to you. Will you respond to Him? Will you take the next step? I received an email this past week from someone who has just started coming to PBC. I cried as I read the last sentence: "I am ready to follow his teachings." The only way to follow His teachings is to first put your faith in Him. He must become your Savior before He can be your Teacher. Are you ready to be born again? Jesus put it this way in John 3:3: "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." It's time to move from the company of the crowd to the comfort of the committed.
- If you're already committed to Christ, He is offering transformation to you. Perhaps you've become a bit sloppy spiritually. Maybe you've been sliding, or backsliding. It's time to come home. Allow the beauty of the Beatitudes to penetrate your hard heart. Make this a year of loving, learning and living!

We want to begin this New Year with a time of reflection on what Jesus accomplished when He died for us. The birth of Christ brought God to us, but it took the cross of Christ to bring us to God. As the men come forward to distribute the bread and the cup, I want us to focus on the fact that just as Jesus sat down when He taught the disciples, He is sitting down right now. He's seated because His work of redemption is finished.

Let's meditate on this passage from Hebrews 10:11-14 as we get ready to commemorate what Christ did for us: "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when this priest [Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."

MATTHEW 5:3

The Poverty of Self-Sufficiency

Matthew 5:3

1/11/04

I've received some wonderful green and gold gifts recently. This Packer headband keeps my ears warm, and this cap announces my allegiance for all to see. This Packer Christmas stocking came filled with Snicker bars; and I even received some "Lambeau loafers" as slippers. These socks keep my feet warm; and this touchdown tape measure reminds me that the Pack is back. I even received a green and gold key, which I assume is to the Packer Hall of Fame, but I misplaced it somewhere. From head to toe, I can be decked out in the colors of heaven.

After being here for more than four years, I've come to the conclusion that some of you don't understand "cheddar-speak." And, since the Packers are doing well in the playoffs so far, I thought I would share with you some phrases from the "Cheesehead Dictionary" so that you will not only be able to comprehend this sermon, but also understand the post-game interviews this afternoon.

- Brat – a Wisconsin tailgate special; has nothing to do with a spoiled kid.
- Cheese curds – small pieces of fresh cheese that squeak when you bite into them.
- Coupla-two-three – more than one; as in "Delmer and I ate a coupla-two-three brats."
- Hey – placed at the beginning or end of phrases for emphasis, as in, "Hey, how 'bout them Bears?"
- M'wakee – Wisconsin's largest city, just down the lake from Mant'woc.
- Stop-and-go-lights – What everyone else calls traffic signals.
- Bubbler – What everyone else calls a drinking fountain.
- Yah-hey – an affirmative response.
- The Polka – How da angels dance in heaven.

As we look at the first Beatitude this morning, I wonder if those listening to Jesus wished they had a dictionary with them because it must have seemed like He was speaking a different language. While the words themselves weren't difficult to understand, the message from the mount was extremely radical. Let me summarize what we learned last week.

- Only believers can live out these Beatitudes.
- They are a package deal – we can't pick and choose the ones we like.
- Belief must lead to behavior.
- Jesus wants us to seek the applause of heaven. To be "blessed" means to be congratulated by Christ and applauded by the Almighty.
- God wants to do a new thing in this New Year.

We also established that if we're serious about being a committed Christian, we will strive to follow the example of the disciples by

loving Jesus, learning from Him, and living out what He teaches us. I'd like to mention three additional points that will help us understand the language of the Savior's sermon.

1. His message is positive. All eight characteristics that we should display in our lives are introduced with the word, "blessed." God wants to give His approval to those who put Him first. I heard of a family that went to the state park for the day to enjoy the great outdoors. When they arrived they saw a whole row of signs that said, "No hunting, no fishing, no camping, no picnicking, no trespassing, no hiking!" At the bottom of another sign, in small print, they read, "This is your state park; enjoy it." In this sermon, Jesus is giving us not a list of "don'ts" but a list of "do's." They are really "Be-attitudes" because this is how we should be in our attitudes and actions. When we exhibit these expressions of discipleship, we'll hear the applause of heaven.

2. His teaching is filled with paradoxes. A paradox is something that is contradictory to what we'd normally expect. According to Jesus the way up is down in Luke 22:26: "The greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves." In Luke 17:33, He says, "Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it." In Matthew 11:25, He turns everything upside down when He says that little children can understand more than the wise and learned.

Nowhere is His preaching more filled with paradoxes than in the Beatitudes.

- Only those who acknowledge their spiritual poverty can go to heaven.
- God comforts those who cry, not those who are tough.
- The meek will inherit the earth.

The way in which Jesus taught is also filled with paradoxes as He used the most common realities to explain the most profound truths: a mustard seed, a lost coin, and the work of a sower. Fernando Cascante writes: "Those who come to him for answers, He sends away with questions. Those who just want to have theological discussions, He brings down to earth." He also points out that Jesus' own life is one amazing paradox: "He is the king born in a manger; the righteous one who dies as a criminal; the Lord who came to serve; the sinless one who eats and drinks with sinners" (www.union-psce.edu/news/Publications/archive/jesus_teacher.shtml).

3. The Beatitudes are progressive. As the Master Teacher, Jesus did not just start anywhere in His explanation of God's expectations. They are like a ladder that must be climbed, one step at a time. It's not random that Jesus begins by saying that those who recognize their own spiritual bankruptcy will be blessed: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." We must first become humble in order to have any chance of living out the other seven. The foundation of all other graces is laid in humility. The door into the kingdom of Christ is low, and you can't stand tall if you want to enter. We must be humble in order to have God's approval because when there is less of us, we can experience more of Him. We will only be filled when we own our emptiness, we cannot be made worthy until we recognize our unworthiness, and as someone has said, "We can't live until we admit we're dead." Or, as another person put it: "Those who get too big for their britches will be exposed in the end."

In order to help us savor the flavor of this first Beatitude, here is Matthew 5:3 in several different translations and paraphrases.

The NIV, King James, New King James, and the New American Standard all render it this way: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The New English Bible says, "How blest are those who know they are poor; the kingdom of heaven is theirs."

The Living Bible reads, "Humble men are very fortunate...for the Kingdom of Heaven is given to them."

The New Living Translation puts it this way: "God blesses those who realize their need for Him, for the kingdom of heaven is given to them."

The Amplified Bible expands this to read: "Blessed – happy, to be envied, and spiritually prosperous – are the poor in spirit (the humble, rating themselves insignificant), for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The Message captures the meaning well: "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and His rule."

What It Means

In the minds of most of the listeners, verse 3 should read, "Blessed are the movers and the shakers, the successful, the famous, the powerful, and the self-confident." But God's wisdom is much different from the conduct of our culture. Last Sunday when the Packers and Seahawks went into overtime, there was a coin toss to see who would get the ball first. The Seahawks won the toss and Matt Hasselback, the quarterback, responded with great confidence by saying, "We want the ball, and we're going to score." Their first possession ended in a punt and the next time they had the ball, Hasselback threw an interception that was returned for the game-winning touchdown. I think he probably felt poor in spirit after the game!

One of the best ways to understand what it means to be "poor in spirit" is to look at what it doesn't mean.

1. It does not refer to material poverty.
2. It does not mean false humility.
3. It does not indicate that we should have an inferiority complex.

In the Old Testament, several words are translated “poor” and they all refer to those who recognize their neediness, and as a result, are desperate for God. Psalm 40:17: “Yet I am poor and needy; may the Lord think of me. You are my help and my deliverer; O my God, do not delay.” Psalm 69:32: “The poor will see and be glad--you who seek God, may your hearts live! The LORD hears the needy...”

There are two primary words for “poor” in the New Testament. One refers to having just enough to get by, like the widow who put her last two coins in the offering plate. The other word means having nothing at all and was used in Luke 16 when Jesus related the story of the beggar, named Lazarus, who sat at the gate of the rich man. The Bible tells us that the dogs came and licked his sores and that he ate the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. He was absolutely, totally, completely impoverished.

This is the word that Jesus uses in Matthew 5:3. In the verb form it means, “to crouch” or “to beg.” A person who is poor in spirit is someone who is undeniably destitute and dependent on someone else. It’s the exact opposite of being rich in pride. Goodspeed translates it this way: “Blessed are they who feel their spiritual need.” Jesus is really saying, “Blessed are the beggars.”

To be “poor in spirit” is to recognize our abject spiritual poverty before a holy God. As someone has said, “We may be well educated, but we are spiritually ignorant; we may be financially secure but we are spiritually bankrupt.” It’s the idea of coming before God with empty hands. The second verse of that great hymn, “Rock of Ages,” says this, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.” Isaiah 66:2 describes the kind of person God favors: “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.” God honors the humble and as James 4:6 says, “He opposes the proud.” Are you humble before God’s holiness? Are you broken in spirit? And do you tremble at His word? If so, God is applauding you today.

The Bible is very clear about the indispensable element of humility and brokenness.

Psalm 18:27: “You save the humble but bring low those whose eyes are haughty.”

Psalm 149:4: “For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation.”

Proverbs 16:19: “Better to be lowly in spirit and among the oppressed than to share plunder with the proud.”

Proverbs 22:4: “Humility and the fear of the LORD bring wealth and honor and life.”

Proverbs 29:23: “A man’s pride brings him low, but a man of lowly spirit gains honor.”

Isaiah 57:15: “For this is what the high and lofty One says--he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.’”

It’s convicting to read verses like this, isn’t it? Since God opposes the proud, He often has to break individuals before He can use them. Some people don’t come to God with a broken heart, but they can come to Him for a broken heart. As I survey Scripture, some characters come to mind that embraced what it means to be poor in spirit.

- Moses. He often admitted that in his own strength, he was unable to do what God was asking of him. Numbers 12:3 states that “Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.”
- Gideon. While it seems like Gideon was making up excuses when God called him into service, he was also admitting his inadequacy in Judges 6:15: “But Lord, how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my family.”
- David. After sinning in a big way, David confessed how he had messed up. Through this soul-searching time, he recognized what it is that God really wants in Psalm 51:17: “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” In 2 Samuel 7:18, we read that David went in and sat before the Lord. Instead of asking God for something, he immediately owned up for his own inadequacy: “Who am I, O Sovereign LORD, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?”
- Daniel. One reason Daniel was used greatly was because he was poor in spirit. In fact, his prayers were answered in part because of his humility. Daniel 10:12: “Do not be afraid, Daniel. Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them.”
- Job. After experiencing unbelievable tragedy and after asking questions, when Job saw God for who He really is, he viewed himself in a whole new light. Job 42:5-6: “My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes.”
- Isaiah. When this man of God encountered the absolute holiness of God, he was absolutely humbled in Isaiah 6:5: “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips!”
- Micah. This prophet figured out what it is that God desires from us when he wrote in Micah 6:8: “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.”
- Peter. Proudful Peter learned things the hard way throughout his life as God continued to chip away at the spiritual chip on his shoulder. I picture Peter walking with a swagger and feeling rather important, that is, until he came face to face with the majesty of the Messiah. After witnessing the miracle of a large catch of fish, Luke 5:8 reads, “When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’

knees and said, 'Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!'"

Some of us are missing out on God's blessing and His applause because we have yet to be humbled. I'd like to suggest that there are two arenas in which we need to become beggars that God can bless.

1. Admit our individual arrogance. In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus tells a parable "to some who were confident in their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else..." The Message paraphrase reads this way: "He told his next story to some who were complacently pleased with themselves over their moral performance and looked down their noses at the common people." Jesus then explains how two men went into the temple to pray, one was a Pharisee, the other a despised tax collector. The Pharisee, feeling good about all of his accomplishments, basically recited his religious resume to God. In fact, verse 11 says that "he prayed about himself." His first statement was filled with pride: "I thank you that I'm not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector." In verse 12, he boasts about how much he has done for God: "I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get."

The tax collector, on the other hand, demonstrates what it means to be "poor in spirit." He wouldn't even look up and he beat his breast as he cried out, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The Message puts it this way: "Meanwhile, the tax man, slumped in the shadows, his face in his hands, not daring to look up, said, 'God give mercy. Forgive me, a sinner.'" Both men prayed, but only one was heard. Why? Because one prayed out of his spiritual poverty, while the other bragged about his deeds. The tax collector "went home justified before God." Eugene Peterson adds, "If you walk around with your nose in the air, you're going to end up flat on your face, but if you're content to be simply yourself, you will become more than yourself."

One man gushed with pride, the other oozed poverty. One felt religiously rich, the other knew he was spiritually bankrupt. One man was impressed with his own accomplishments; the other was depressed by his failures. One boasted, the other begged.

I want you to know that I am more like the self-righteous Pharisee than I am the broken and tender tax collector. I've confessed my pride to the Lord throughout this past week, and now I confess it before you. Charles Spurgeon once said, "Our imaginary goodness is more hard to conquer than our actual sin." I fall into the thinking that I can do things on my own when I can't do anything apart from Christ. I trust my heart more than I should and discover pride and ugliness when I look inside. Jeremiah 17:9: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" What about you? Can you admit your individual arrogance before the Almighty?

2. Confess our collective conceit. While we must start by admitting our arrogance individually, as your pastor I want to confess some collective pride. As much as we have witnessed God do some amazing things during the 40 Days of Purpose, I sense within my spirit, that our celebration at times bordered on some church conceit. God has assembled some gifted people here, and we have experienced some extraordinary blessings, but we are, and will always be totally dependent on God for everything. 1 Corinthians 4:7 in the New Living Translation reminds us that everything we have is a gift: "What do you have that God hasn't given you? And if all you have is from God, why boast as though you have accomplished something on your own?"

When Jesus addressed 7 churches in Revelation 2-3, he had some pretty strong words for an assembly that had become arrogant. They had experienced many blessings, had wonderful resources, and felt like they could just keep rolling on like they had been. But they had become lukewarm, neither hot nor cold. They were no longer on fire but they weren't iced over either. They were just right in the middle. Things were safe. And yet, Jesus said, in some of the strongest words ever recorded, that He wanted to vomit them out of his mouth. Conceited Christians make Jesus want to barf! This image denotes deep disgust. They had become halfhearted because they felt like they didn't need anything anymore. Revelation 3:17: "You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.'"

Instead of being poor in spirit, they were full of themselves. They boasted about what they had and no longer lived as beggars who know that they had nothing. Jesus put it this way: "But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." This was the true state of their spiritual portfolio.

Verse 19 reveals how badly Jesus wants us to burn hot for Him. As Max Lucado says, He loves us too much to let us stay the way we are: "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent." His love is seen in verse 20, where we see Jesus, while indignant with our iniquities, wanting to have fellowship with us. This verse is often used to help explain the necessity of a non-Christian opening their life to Christ but it is actually directed to a church that had become conceited: "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me." Jesus longs for us to love Him with everything we have and He is quick to forgive and give His grace. He waits for us to admit the poverty of self-sufficiency.

I would like to lead us in a prayer of confession right now using the words of Daniel 9 as an outline: "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with all who love him and obey his commands, we have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and have rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws...Lord, you are righteous, but this day we are

covered with shame...you are merciful and forgiving, even though we have rebelled against you...we do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy. O Lord, listen! O Lord, forgive! O Lord, hear and act! For your sake, O my God, do not delay, because...your people bear your Name.”

2 Requirements

If we're serious about living out this first Beatitude, we must admit individual arrogance and confess our collective conceit. In an article in the recent issue of Discipleship Journal (Issue 138, 2003, Page 46), David Henderson suggests that accepting Jesus' teaching requires at least two things of us:

1. Acknowledge our impoverished condition. To be spiritually poor means that we come up short and we know it. I'd put it this way: we must file for spiritual bankruptcy. It's only as we admit our desperation that we will see our need for God. In order to inherit God's kingdom, you must give up your kingdom. Are you ready to admit that before God, you are a beggar? Until we see ourselves as crouching in the corner, begging for God's blessings, we will remain wrapped up in ourselves and deceived by our own proud accomplishments.

Ken Blanchard once said that EGO stands for “edging God out.” Ezekiel 28:2 reveals that for some of us, our problem is that we think we are God: “In the pride of your heart you say, ‘I am a god; I sit on the throne of a god.’ But you are a man and not a god, though you think you are as wise as a god.”

2. Depend upon God's plentiful provision. We must see our poverty against His plenty. The quickest way to become poor in spirit is to look at God. When we're in the presence of the One who is perfect, how can we boast about how good we are? God loves to bring us to the end of ourselves, to expose our deficiency so that we can see His sufficiency. We must be empty before we can be filled; and unless God fills us, we will forever remain empty. Henderson writes: “His grace is sufficient for our every frailty (2 Corinthians 12:9); His wisdom adequate for our every perplexity (James 1:5); His peace ample for our every anxiety (Philippians 4:6-7); His forgiveness equal to every iniquity (1 John 1:9). God is enough.”

Two Promises

This Beatitude comes with two promises. First, we will be blessed, or approved by God when we become poor in spirit. God is waiting to applaud those that admit their emptiness. I guess that means I have to confess my Packer pride. Actually, it means that I must confess all my pride. And so must you.

Second, the kingdom of heaven is ours. I want you to notice that both the first and last Beatitude are in the present tense: “For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” When we declare spiritual bankruptcy and depend on the provision of God's Son, He gives heaven to us as a gift. And we can experience a full and abundant life right now, with the assurance that we will spend eternity with Him when we die.

Are you ready to admit your sinfulness and accept Jesus as your substitute right now? If so, please pray this prayer from your heart.

“Lord Jesus, for too long I've kept you out of my life. I admit that I am a sinner and that I cannot save myself. Please empty me of my arrogance. I repent of my sins by changing my mind about the way I've been living. By faith I gratefully receive your gift of salvation. Thank you, Lord Jesus, for coming to earth. With all my heart I believe you are the Son of God who died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead on the third day. Thank you for bearing my sins and giving me the gift of eternal life. I believe your words are true. I accept you into my heart. Be my Savior and Lord. I surrender to your leadership in my life. Make me into the person you want me to be. Amen.”

MATTHEW 5:4

The Gladness of Sadness

Matthew 5:4

1/18/04

I like to begin my messages with something that makes us laugh when I can (though some of you probably wouldn't necessarily call it humor). As we approach the second Beatitude however, I realize that frivolity isn't called for today. In fact, this character quality is no laughing matter. In Luke's reporting on the Messiah's message from the mount in Luke 6:25, Jesus says: “Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.”

Have you noticed that our culture embraces entertainment and pursues pleasure at all costs? Most of life is spent avoiding sorrow and pain. Even when we get bad news on TV, the newscasts often conclude with a funny story or something designed to make us smile. The mantra of many today is something like this: “Blessed are those who laugh their way through life.” Some of us will do almost anything to stifle our sadness and turn away from tears. And yet, if we were honest we'd have to admit that we sometimes

feel like Proverbs 14:13: "Even in laughter the heart may ache, and joy may end in grief."

I walked a mile with Pleasure, she chatted all the way
But left me none the wiser for all she had to say
I walked a mile with Sorrow and not a word said she
But oh, the things I learned when sorrow walked with me

In one of the most profound, and paradoxical texts in the Bible, Jesus declares in Matthew 5:4: "Blessed are those who mourn; for they will be comforted." This startling paradox could be put this way: "Happy are the unhappy" or "The gladness of sadness" or "God applauds you when you're in agony." As we've been learning, God is much more concerned with our character than He is with our temporary conditions. This Beatitude flows from the first one: "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" because spiritual bankruptcy should always lead to spiritual brokenness. As John Stott says, "It is one thing to be spiritually poor and acknowledge it; it is another to grieve and to mourn over it...confession is one thing, contrition is another" ("The Message of the Sermon on the Mount," Inter Varsity Press, Page 41). The haughty heart and the tearless eye should be foreign to the Christ follower.

Of the different words that can be translated, "mourn," Jesus is using the strongest one available. It means, "to grieve or wail" as when a loved one dies. It is deep sorrow that causes the soul to ache and the heart to break. Jesus is not talking about complainers or moaners, but about those who are gripped by grief as seen in Psalm 34:18: "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

I'd like to suggest that there are four arenas in which this Beatitude can be lived out.

1. Lament the losses in your life. This first area might be the easiest in the sense that we all have experienced excruciating pain at some point in our lives, and if we haven't, we know its coming. 1 Peter 4:12: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you." Some of you have gone through, or are going through right now, some health issues that make you afraid about the future. Perhaps you've experienced a relational rupture with someone and it's eating your heart out. Can you relate with the words in Psalm 6:6? "I am worn out from groaning; all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears."

Maybe you've lost a loved one through death and you still cry yourself to sleep at night. You can relate to how David felt when his son Absalom died in 2 Samuel 18:33: "The king was shaken. He went up to the room over the gateway and wept..." When Abraham's wife Sarah died, we read in Genesis 23:2 that he "came to mourn...and to weep for her."

Remember, that since Jesus wept when His friend Lazarus died, its OK for you to cry as well. Ecclesiastes 7:2-4 says, "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, for death is the destiny of every man; the living should take this to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, because a sad face is good for the heart. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of pleasure." It's better to go to a funeral than to a party because sadness is actually good for us, especially if it helps get us ready for our own death and enables us to live like we should now.

Or, maybe you're weeping because you want to have a child and you're still waiting. Your heart is breaking just like Hannah's was in 1 Samuel 1:10, 16: "In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and prayed to the LORD...I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

Friend, did you know that God collects every tear you shed? Listen to Psalm 56:8 in the New King James Version: "You number my wanderings; Put my tears into your bottle;

Are they not in your book?" Christianity is the only religion that allows you to be real. When you're hurting, let it out. When you feel like crying, let the tears fall. God understands. He cares. And He will provide you with comfort. Hebrews 4:15 says that Jesus sympathizes with our weaknesses and Isaiah 53:3-4 characterizes Christ as one "despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering...surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows."

2. Be sorrowful about your sins. While we should lament our various losses, the primary emphasis of this Beatitude is that you and I are to be sorrowful about our sinfulness. We would do well to echo Paul's agony when he summed up his struggle against sin by crying out in Romans 7:24: "What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" Over 250 years ago, David Brainerd, a missionary to the American Indians, wrote this in his journal: "In my morning devotions my soul was exceedingly melted, and I bitterly mourned over my exceeding sinfulness and vileness."

My guess is that most of us today don't use language like that to describe the state of our souls. But sorrow we must if we want to truly turn from our exceeding sinfulness. We must weep over what we have become, and we will, when we recognize that our sin is not just unfortunate, but horrendous before a holy God. James 4:9: "Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom."

Rick Warren suggests that we need to understand three words in this process.

- Regret. This is when we remember stuff that we're sorry about. I certainly have some regret about some things I did growing up, especially when my parents found out about it.
- Remorse. While regret is primarily in the mind, remorse comes from the heart. Instead of trying to make things right, a remorseful person often just stays stuck. A person with remorse focuses on sin and its consequences, he may even love the sin but hate himself for doing it.
- Repentance. When someone repents, they are serious about changing what they've been doing. The word literally means to change one's mind, and is often accompanied with tears.

When Peter recognized what he had done by denying Jesus three times, Matthew 26:75 says, "he wept bitterly." This is what Paul means when he writes in 2 Corinthians 7:10, "Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death." As someone has said, "Sin will take you farther than you want to go and keep you longer than you want to stay...and its going to cost you more than you want to pay."

In Luke 15, the prodigal son experienced godly sorrow. When he finally looked at what he was doing, and how he was living, he regretted ever leaving his father. Then he felt guilt and remorse as he tried to panhandle food from the pigs. When he recognized that he had sinned against both his heavenly Father and his earthly father, he repented and went home in search of forgiveness. He was met with love and grace even before he could make it up the driveway.

David committed adultery and murder. It wasn't until he saw his sins as an affront to the Almighty that he could be restored. Listen to what he writes in Psalm 51:3-4: "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight..." Jesus is really saying something like this: "Blessed is the one who mourns over his sin like one mourning for the dead." We see this kind of grief in Ezra 10:1: "While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites-men, women and children-gathered around him. They too wept bitterly."

Are you sorry for your sins? Or, do you have deep sorrow about your sinfulness? There's a difference between the two. Until we understand "our exceeding sinfulness and vileness," we won't mourn like we should. And if we don't grieve over our guilt, we won't really understand grace and fully appreciate forgiveness.

Let's just pause right here and allow the Holy Spirit to prod us to see our sins as God does.

3. Cry over the condition of others. After looking at our losses, and then looking within, Jesus also wants us to look around and cry about the condition of Christians, and the state of those who don't yet know Christ.

- Christians. Do you know that you and I are responsible to help other believers and to look for ways to keep them encouraged? Hebrews 3:13 challenges us to "encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness." If we're not encouraging others, we may actually be causing them to become hardened. We also need to be teaching with tears and exhorting our brothers and sisters with emotion to become what God wants them to be. Paul demonstrated his passion for people to live out their purpose when we read in Acts 20:31: "So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears."

- Non-Christians. In Luke 19, on what we know as Palm Sunday, Jesus sees the entire city of Jerusalem in a panoramic view. It was stunning in its beauty with shiny white buildings and the gleaming gold of Herod's temple. But Jesus saw something different. Everyone was thrilled and happy, with the exception of Him. Look at verse 41: "As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it."

The word "wept" means "to burst into tears, to weep out loud, to sob deeply." This was more than just a tear streaming down His cheek. This same word is used in Mark 5:38 to describe how family members were crying over the death of a young daughter when it says they were "crying and wailing loudly." While everyone else was shouting joyfully, Jesus was crying because of the hard hearts of people. Jesus was not weeping because He was going to suffer and die. No, He was wailing loudly for the lost.

John Knox constantly carried the burden of the lost people in Scotland. Night after night, he prayed on the wooden floor of his house. When his wife pleaded with him to get some sleep, he answered, "How can I sleep when my land is not saved?" He also would say repeatedly, "Give me Scotland or I die!" David Brainerd wrote another entry in his journal: "I set apart this day for fasting and prayer to prepare me for ministry. In the forenoon, I felt a power of intercession for immortal souls. In the afternoon, God enabled me so to agonize in prayer that I was quite wet with sweat, though in the shade and cool wind. My soul was drawn out very much for the world: I gasped for multitudes of souls. I think I had more enlargement for sinners than for the children of God, though I felt as if I could spend my life in cries for both."

What about you? Do the things that break the heart of Jesus break your heart? When's the last time you cried for Christians and wailed for the wayward?

4. Weep over our world. There's one last arena in which we should grieve. As we look at our culture, and the world at large, we have ample reason to be in agony. On September 11th, 2001 terrorists extinguished over 3500 lives. On September 12th, 4000 lives were wiped out. On September 13th, another 4000 people were killed. On September 14th, and every day since then, and actually since 1973, over 4000 babies a day have been aborted.

Today, along with thousands of churches in America, we are honoring the sanctity and beauty of God's greatest creative act. We affirm that every individual, from conception on, is an image bearer of God, stamped with divine dignity and worthy of protection. Genesis 1:27: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female He created them." Much can be said on this topic, but let me just make a few summary points this morning.

- God is the creator of life. David, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is allowed to take a peek into God's prenatal care unit, and writes in Psalm 139:13: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb." The "you" is emphatic – You created. God is the creator and He is intimately involved with us because He made us. It's that simple. His constant interest in us is simply the natural interest that a maker would have in a very special product. He is the owner of the preborn – they belong to Him.

I want you to notice how David uses personal pronouns in this verse – "my inmost being...knit me together in my mother's womb." There is no doubt that David believed that he was a real person long before he was born. When David says that God "created his inmost being," he is recognizing God's creative power and personal involvement in those things that are truly personal. In other words, he acknowledges the fact that God created his spiritual personhood. In addition to this, David declares that God created his physical personhood. We see this in the phrase, "you knit me together." The picture here is that our bones, arteries, muscles, and everything else is all woven together into a beautiful tapestry. This word in Hebrew carries with it the idea of protection, which shows how precious the preborn is to God.

In verse 15 and the first part of verse 16, we see that God was there when we were being formed in utter seclusion: "My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place. When I was woven together in the depths of the earth, your eyes saw my unformed body..." Nothing is hidden from God. He personally creates all the delicate parts of our bodies, weaving them together to form His living masterpiece. The word "woven" here is the word for "embroider." God makes us according to a plan. He makes all the parts fit together just right so they support one another. The word for "unformed body" in verse 16 is the Hebrew word for embryo.

David then recounts the fact that God created him with purpose: "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be." God didn't just ordain our DNA; he ordained our days. It's as if He has a divine Daytimer, into which He pre-recorded each day of our life – before we began to breathe!

- We must protect the preborn. Since God is the Creator of life, and life begins at conception, we're called to be advocates for those voices that can't be heard. Proverbs 31:8-9: "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy." As we remember Martin Luther King's impact on human rights tomorrow, let's also recognize that we still have a long way to go to protect the greatest of all human rights – the right to life for the preborn. At its heart, this issue is not political; it's moral because abortion stops a beating heart.

- Attitudes on abortion are changing. A recent Gallup survey shows that teenagers today are more pro-life than the general adult population. 72% of teens said they believe abortion is "morally wrong" while just 26% of adults agree with this statement. Focus on the Family reports that there is a clear trend among both men and women toward restricting abortion. In an article in this month's issue of their magazine, the author suggests that there are a number of reasons that abortion rates are declining (January 2004, Page 20):

1. The influence of Caring Pregnancy Centers. We are very blessed to have the Caring Pregnancy Center here in Pontiac, and to have one of our members, Beth Albrecht, providing leadership for this strategic ministry. We also have several members who helped start this ministry over 20 years ago and a number who volunteer right now. Would you please stand if you are, or have been, involved with the CPC?

2. Improved ultrasound expertise. This technology reveals the humanity of preborn children more graphically than ever.

3. Testimonies from those who've had abortions. Carrie Earll, bioethics analyst for Focus on the Family, says, "It's not natural to kill our children, and all of us, women especially, know that intimately." Did you know that Norma McCorvey, the "Roe" of Roe v. Wade, has since become a born again believer who now loves to tell the truth about abortion?

I think there are at least two other reasons for the attitude shift and the declining numbers of abortions. First, the media attention on the gruesome practices of partial-birth abortion has caught the attention of the public, and people are repulsed by what they've heard.

Second, the influence of Christians like you cannot be minimized as you interject God's views on life into conversations, and as you provide counsel to people who are in crisis. One of our students who attends Cross Training, decided to write a paper on abortion for one of her classes, in which she stated: "Babies can certainly feel the abortion; it is an extremely painful procedure...a fetus will attempt to move from the tools used in abortion...as soon as the baby is trapped, it stretches its mouth as if trying to cry." I applaud each you for your boldness on a controversial topic and as your pastor, I will do all I can to keep you encouraged and informed.

Now, since God is the creator of life, how can we not weep about what is happening in our world today? As evangelicals, we're pretty good at taking aim at those who sin differently than we do. We speak up and sometimes we shout, but I wonder how many times we cry. In Ezekiel 9:4, God sets apart "those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done" in Israel. I pray that I would become more like those described in Psalm 119:136: "Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed." We can protest, and sometimes we should. Or we can weep because God's laws are not followed. Friends, when we think about the over 40 million people that have been aborted in the last 31 years, we should sorrow like the prophet in Jeremiah 9:1: "Oh, that my head were a spring of water and my eyes a fountain of tears! I would weep day and night for the slain of my people."

It's time for us to wake up and weep, church.

Song: "Please Wake Up O' Church of God"

Do you want to be blessed? Then get ready to weep. Do you want to experience the comfort that only Christ can give? Then move toward mourning. Some of you may be grieving because the topic of abortion brings about feelings of guilt and shame. I want you to know that when you confess your sins, you are completely forgiven. If you are weary from carrying this secret burden, there's some information in your bulletin about a Bible study and support group starting soon.

No matter if you're weeping over the state of our world, crying over the condition of others, sorrowing about your own sins, or lamenting a loss, remember this: Comfort is coming! Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." This means, "to come alongside" as an "advocate" and is used of the Holy Spirit in John 14:26 when Jesus says, "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

Here are four truths to remember when you're filled with grief (adapted from a sermon by Ray Pritchard):

1. God draws near to those who cry. Psalm 34:18 says that God is close to us when we cry. Even when things seem overwhelming and impossible to you, comfort is coming.
2. God uses suffering and sorrow to draw us to himself. In Psalm 34:4, we read that David's fears caused him to seek the Lord. Someone put it this way: "You'll never know if Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you have." Comfort is coming.
3. We grow faster in hard times than we do in good times. Romans 5 reminds us that suffering leads to perseverance, which leads to character growth, which produces hope. Comfort is coming.
4. Our pain helps us minister to others. When we're at a loss because of our losses, when we cry over the condition of others, when our own sins give us exceeding sorrow, and when we weep over the condition of our world, according to 2 Corinthians 1:4, God will comfort us "so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God." This is the same word that is used in Matthew 5:4. Comfort is coming.

Hold on to the promises of Scripture. Here are a few passages that provide hope and comfort. Close your eyes as I read them and allow God's Word to go down deep into your soul.

Job 16:19-20: "Even now my witness is in heaven; my advocate is on high. My intercessor is my friend as my eyes pour out tears to God."

Isaiah 25:8: "The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken."

Psalm 10:14: "But you, O God, do see trouble and grief; you consider it to take it in hand. The victim commits himself to you; you are the helper of the fatherless."

Psalm 30:5: "For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favor lasts a lifetime; weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning."

Lamentations 3:32-33: "Though he brings grief, he will show compassion, so great is his unending love. For he does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men."

Revelation 21:4: "He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

Larry Libby, whose wife of 25 years died recently, explains what he hears in the words of Jesus: "If you are filled with grief today, don't give in to black despair. Cling to my promise: It will be better. The worst is here now, having its day. But the better is coming. Comfort is coming. I tell you, it's almost here" (Discipleship Journal, January 2004).

Comfort is coming, fellow Christian. If you aren't sure whether you're a Christian or not, put your faith and trust in the One who died as your substitute and offers eternal life to you today.

MATTHEW 5:5

Meek Does Not Mean Weak

Matthew 5:5

1/25/04

This past Tuesday Pastor Jeff and I had had the opportunity to view a screening of the film called, "The Passion of the Christ" with about 4,000 other pastors. We should have known we were in for an unforgettable experience when we saw boxes of Kleenex arrayed on tables scattered throughout the auditorium. The movie focuses on the last hours of the life of Jesus, with the opening scene taking place in the Garden of Gethsemane. The film, produced by Mel Gibson, is both beautiful and bold as it captures the cost that Christ paid for our sins. I found the portrayal to be biblically accurate, emotionally gripping, and spiritually moving. As someone has said, "This is not simply a movie; it's an encounter."

The film opens in theaters around the country one month from today on February 25th. I hope you'll see it and bring a seeking friend with you. Actually, I don't recommend this movie for children, or even for teenagers, as it will be rated "R" for violence. I believe the "R" rating in this case stands for "reality." There are parts of this movie that will make you want to turn away, especially during the interminable scourging scenes, the walk to Golgotha with the cross, and the crucifixion. I was talking to a student from Pontiac Christian School this week about the movie. He asked me what it was about and I told him that it was graphic and disturbing. Very perceptively, he added, "Well, then it must be accurate because that's how it really was." I continue to be thankful for the impact that our excellent teachers and staff are having on the students at PCS.

This movie was a vivid reminder that it was my sins that put Jesus through what He went through. I think this will be the reaction of many who see it. During the Q & A after the showing, Mel Gibson mentioned that an agnostic from the Hollywood community sat in stunned silence following a screening of the film. After a few minutes, he said just four words: "I'm sorry. I forgot." Gibson was also asked if the movie was "over the top" since there is so much blood. His answer was very interesting. He said something like this: "The Old Covenant demanded a blood sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. I guess Jesus could have just pricked his finger to get some blood but He didn't. He went all the way...and I wanted to show that."

As I watched and wept during much of the movie (I think I had tears streaming down my face for at least 30 of the 90 minutes), I was struck with how "in control" Jesus was, even when events were transpiring around him and people were doing disturbing things to Him. The religious leaders and stonehearted soldiers played their part, looking confused, angry, and even disillusioned, but Jesus never lost His cool. At one point, after Judas had betrayed Jesus, and the soldiers got into a scuffle with the disciples, Peter whacked off the ear of one of those sent to arrest his leader. Amazingly, in the midst of this conflict Jesus demonstrates grace and compassion by miraculously reattaching the man's ear, showing again what it means to have power under control.

Matthew 26:53 tells us what Jesus said: "Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?" A legion was 6,000 angels, so Jesus was talking about 72,000 angelic warriors! All He had to do was say the word and the soldiers would be incinerated, but He held back. Later, when He's face-to-face with Pilate, Jesus continues to show that He's in control by remaining quiet.

In John 19:9-10, Pilate is disarmed by His demeanor: "Where do you come from?" he asked Jesus, but Jesus gave him no answer. "Do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you realize I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answers in verse 11: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above." Then, for much of the rest of the time, as Jesus is bounced between Herod and Pilate, Jesus chooses to be silent in the face of accusations. This is a clear fulfillment of Isaiah 53:7: "He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth."

As I watched the action on the screen, and was reminded of how Jesus was quiet when He could have rightfully complained, or even extinguished the evildoers, I immediately thought of the third Beatitude: "Blessed are the meek for they will inherit the earth." Jesus modeled meekness and now establishes this trait as a defining characteristic for the Christian.

As we've been learning in this series, these eight statements spoken by the Savior describe what it means to be a Christian. Jesus does not focus on outward performance like going to church, or giving, or even serving. His concern is much deeper as He delineates how a disciple should be on the inside. A Christian is someone who is poor in spirit by recognizing their own spiritual bankruptcy; who laments the losses of life, sorrows over sin, cries over the condition of others, and weeps for the world. A Christ-follower is one who is meek; is hungry for the right things; is merciful to others; pursues purity; works to make peace in the midst of conflict; and is persecuted for trying to do what is right.

Defining Meekness

This Beatitude is difficult for us to grasp because some of us equate meekness with weakness. In fact, if you were to go up and tell someone that they were meek, I'm not sure it would be received as a compliment. The thesaurus lists some synonyms that aren't very flattering: docile, mild, tame, soft, passive and spineless. It's no wonder we don't want to be called meek, if that's what the word means. But since this characteristic is part of the definition of a disciple, we need to understand what Jesus meant when He said it.

The word "meek" was used in at least four different contexts that taken together will help us understand how we can demonstrate meekness in our lives.

- In the Greek culture, meekness was considered a virtue that was balanced between too much and too little anger. The meek man was neither timid nor given to fits of rage.
- Greek physicians used the word "meek" to describe a soothing medicine. If too little medicine is given, it won't work; if too much is prescribed, it can hurt instead of heal. The proper amount can work wonders.
- "Meek" was also used to describe a gentle breeze that blew in from the ocean. Wind can rage and do great damage but when it blows gently, it brings soothing comfort.
- This word was commonly used to describe a wild stallion that had been tamed. A broken horse is still very powerful, but his power is now under the control of the bridle.

The common thread in these descriptions is that meekness represents different forms of power that can be used for positive purposes or for evil intentions. The commentator Barclay refers to the meek man as one "who has every instinct under control. Every impulse, every passion, every ounce of strength has been harnessed." Even with this helpful background information, those who heard these words must have scratched their heads. Didn't Jesus just mention that the "kingdom of heaven is near" in Matthew 4:17? If the kingdom were coming, wouldn't they have to get ready to rumble with the Romans?

John Piper believes the most significant question we can ask of each beatitude is: What does this have to do with God? This is important because we're called to display the goodness and glory of God to a watching world. When we live out the beatitudes, people can't help but see that God is at work in our lives because these character qualities are not natural, but supernatural. Piper writes: "Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount so that his Father would get the glory for the way the disciples lived." We see the heart of Jesus in Matthew 5:16: "In the same way, let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." These character qualities are not strictly for our benefit or even for our blessing, but so that others may be attracted to the Almighty and begin to praise Him for who He is.

Meekness Illustrated Toward God

In order to fully understand and embrace this Beatitude, let's look at Psalm 37, because this beatitude is either a direct quotation from this psalm, or at least an allusion to it. Notice verse 11: "But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace." In the Greek Old Testament, these words are almost identical with Matthew 5:5. Let's see if we can create a composite picture of meekness.

1. Meek people don't worry about what people may do to them. Instead of being afraid of others, or envying what others may have, verses 1-2 challenge us to "not fret because of evil men...like the grass they will soon wither..."
2. Meek people trust God. Verse 3 summarizes the meek person's focus. First, in his vertical relationship, he or she "trusts in the Lord" and then in relationships with others, he or she strives to "do good." Verse 5b describes those who believe that God will work for them: "trust in him and he will do this."
3. Meek people delight in God. According to verse 4, those who "delight in the Lord" are those who find their ultimate pleasure in pleasing God. Brennan Manning tells the story of a man named Ed Farrell, who traveled to Ireland to celebrate his uncle's eightieth birthday. Early one morning as they were walking along the shores of a beautiful lake, they watched the sun come up, and were silent for about 20 minutes. Then his uncle did a very unusual thing. He began to skip along the shore of the lake, smiling like a schoolboy in love. As Ed struggled to catch up, he asked his uncle why he was so happy. The old man responded, with tears running down his face, "You see, the Father is very fond of me. Ah, me Father is so very fond of me" (John Ortberg, "Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them," page 41). We can dance with delight because the Father is fond of us!
4. Meek people commit their way to the Lord. The Hebrew word for "commit" means, "to roll" in verse 5: "Commit your way to the LORD." It has the idea of something so heavy that one cannot lift it to God but it can be rolled to Him. The other day I watched Pastor Jeff move the basketball hoop. As he struggled to position it just right, I noticed that when he tipped it down, he was able to roll it where he wanted it because the base is on wheels. He couldn't pick it up but he could roll it. I guess I should have helped him but it looked like he was doing fine! We're the same way. We can't lift the load off of us, but we can roll it to God. When we commit our ways to the Lord we give Him what we're concerned about – our relationships, our jobs, our health, our problems, our fears, and our frustrations.

5. Meek people are quiet before God. Verse 7: "Be still before the Lord..." When we're still, we cease striving as we let go and let God.

6. Meek people are able to wait patiently for God to work. We see this in the last half of verse 7: "Wait patiently for him; do not fret when men...carry out their wicked schemes." The student ministry team is challenging students to wait on the Lord in the area of relationships.

7. Meek people avoid anger. Verse 8 is very poignant: "Refrain from anger and turn from wrath; do not fret—it leads only to evil." Since they have rolled everything to the Lord, instead of lashing out, a meek man or woman can trust that God will work everything out.

8. Meek people hope in the Lord. We see this in verse 9: "Those who hope in the Lord will inherit the land."

In our preliminary sketch, meekness must of necessity come from our relationship with God.

Meekness Illustrated Toward Others

But meekness must also be exhibited in our relationships with others. Did you know that only two people in the Bible were ever called meek? First, Jesus describes Himself that way in Matthew 11:29. Second, Numbers 12:3 identifies Moses as being "more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth." This word means "meek." I don't know about you, but I wouldn't automatically put Moses in the "meek man" category. Several years earlier, he became incensed with rage and murdered an Egyptian. He stood up to Pharaoh, led the Israelites across the Red Sea, and climbed Mount Sinai where he met with a holy God.

Moses had married a Cushite woman and was openly criticized by Aaron and Miriam in verse 1 for doing so. In verse 2, they challenge Moses' leadership qualifications by saying, "Has the Lord spoken only through Moses? Hasn't He also spoken through us?" I want you to notice the phrase at the end of verse 2: "And the Lord heard this." Now drop down to verse 4: "At once the Lord said to Moses, Aaron and Miriam, 'Come out to the Tent of Meeting, all three of you.'" God then vindicated Moses and turned Miriam white with leprosy.

Now, with all that is going on, what is Moses doing? Nothing. Verse 3 says he is humble and meek. His first recorded words are in verse 13 when he cries out for God to heal Miriam. This is amazing to me. He didn't fight back. He didn't seek revenge. He didn't argue. Instead, he kept quiet and let the Lord take up his cause. When he opened his mouth it was to intercede for the one who had challenged and chastised him. We can add to our montage of meekness by saying that a meek man or woman refrains from revenge and leaves vindication with God. Piper states: "Meekness is the power to absorb adversity and criticism without lashing back."

As a church staff, along with the "dynamic duo" PCS leadership team of Susan Carrion and Sue Brakeville, we've been studying a very helpful book by John Ortberg called, "Everybody's Normal Till You Get to Know Them." He makes the point that we're all weird and pretend to be healthier and holier than we really are. He says that we're a lot like the porcupine, with over 30,000 quills attached to our bodies. Each quill can be driven deeply into an enemy. As a general rule, porcupines have two methods for handling relationships: withdrawal and attack. They either head for the hills or lock and load. Ortberg says that each of us carry our own little arsenal of quills. Our barbs have names like rejection, condemnation, judgment, resentment, arrogance, selfishness, envy and contempt. A meek person will not only avoid flinging quills at others, when barbs come his way, he will absorb them without lashing back.

Abraham exhibited meekness when he gave his nephew Lot the option to choose the best. He had received the promise of a blessing from God, he was older, and the leader of the expedition but he didn't want the quills to fly. Genesis 13:8: "So Abram said to Lot, 'Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers.'" Abraham trusted God instead of laying into Lot. We can see then that meekness is a controlled desire to put the interests of another ahead of our own.

David exhibited meekness when he could have slaughtered King Saul and claimed the kingdom for himself. He was powerful but kept his ambitions bridled when he said in 1 Samuel 24:6 "The LORD forbid that I should do such a thing to my master, the LORD's anointed, or lift my hand against him; for he is the anointed of the LORD." Because he delighted in the Lord, and trusted His timing, he could wait patiently for God to work everything out. By the way, I find it very interesting that David never bragged in the Psalms about killing Goliath. He was meek and humble because He trusted God. I like how the Nelson's Bible Dictionary defines meekness: "An attitude of humility toward God and gentleness toward men, springing from a recognition that God is in control." David certainly modeled meekness.

A Meekness Makeover

I've never watched one of those "extreme makeover" shows but it strikes me that God wants to give each of us a meekness

makeover. Let's take a peek at how we can become more meek.

1. Study under the Son of God. Though Jesus gave Himself a number of figurative titles such as the Good Shepherd, and the Light of the World, when it comes to actually describing His character with specific virtues, there are very few self-portraits. Listen to how Jesus describes Himself in Matthew 11:28-30: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." In the King James Version, we read, "For I am meek and lowly in heart..."

We must first come to Christ and roll our burdens on Him. Then we yield to Him by taking His yoke upon ourselves. When an ox accepted the yoke, it modeled meekness. It was still very powerful, but its power was under the control of another. Jesus is saying, "I want you to hook up with me so that we can walk side-by-side. We will work together and walk through the trials of life as though one. As you yield to my yoke, you will learn from me and discover that I am meek, and you will gradually become more gentle yourself. You'll also discover that what I offer you is a perfect fit for who you are. My teachings are not heavy but easy, and my burden is light. Give me your burdens and I will give you rest."

Jesus invites us to study under Him. A.W. Tozer once said, "Jesus calls us to His rest, and meekness is his method. The meek man cares not at all who is greater than he, for he has long ago decided that the esteem of the world is not worth the effort. The rest Christ offers is the rest of meekness, the blessed relief that comes when we accept ourselves for what we are and cease to pretend" ("The Pursuit of God").

2. Welcome the Word of God. If you want to be meek, then it's essential that you cultivate a submission to God's Word. In fact, the Bible is the bit and bridle that controls our wild spirits. James 1:21 in the New King James Version challenges us to receive God's revelation with an openness to let it change us: "Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls."

There are two Greek words translated "receive." One has the idea of grasping and reaching out. It's what some of us do with the Bible as we study the facts and put them in our heads. The other word means to "welcome with humility" and has the idea not of taking, but welcoming. Have you ever welcomed the Word, regardless of what it says? If we want to grow in meekness we must yield to Scripture.

3. Submit to the Spirit of God. If we want to be meek, we must first learn from the Master who is meek, we must welcome the Word, and we must submit to the Spirit of God. Galatians 5:21-22 mentions meekness, or gentleness, as a fruit of the Spirit, which can only come from the Holy Spirit. Fruit is not something we do; it's what we display. Our responsibility is clear from Galatians 5:25: "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit." The key is not to work harder, but to worship more fully; not to try more, but to trust more.

When's the last time you prayed to be filled with the Spirit? Have you ever asked Him to make you more meek? Meekness comes about when we surrender to the Spirit and manifests itself in a gentle spirit based on an unshakeable confidence in God. Someone has said, "Meekness is not merely the absence of pride and arrogance, so much as it is the fullness of the presence of God, where pride and arrogance cannot abide."

4. Put up with the people of God. While it's certainly true that it's easier to get close to someone when they have no quills, the truth of the matter is that we all have the capacity to attack others. In Scripture, meekness is frequently contrasted with words like harsh, violent, unrelenting, strict, and severe. A meek person seeks to give grace to others, and puts up with imperfect people. Ephesians 4:2 says, "Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love."

I went back this week and reread a sermon I preached two-and-a-half years ago. What I said then bears repeating now: "We need to be reminded that no one is perfect, except God alone. Your spouse will disappoint you. Your kids will fail you. Your friends will let you down. Your church will drop the ball at times. Your pastor won't meet all your expectations. The time will come when you will have a legitimate gripe. You will be right and they will be wrong. This is the crossroads of meekness. Which path will you take? Will you launch some quills of condemnation or give the cold shoulder? Or will you grant grace and gentleness? Before you make that decision, remind yourself how gentle Jesus is toward imperfect people just like you. We can choose to live our lives disappointed and angry with everyone around us, or we can be armed with the virtue of meekness and enter into the blessing of authentic community" (From a sermon called, "Germinating Gentleness," 7/29/01, www.pontiacbible.org).

Ephesians 4:2-3: "Be completely humble and gentle [this is the word "meek"]; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

5. Mobilize for the mission of God. When people today see believers living lives of meekness, they will wonder what's going on. Some of us are pretty harsh with those who don't know Jesus and so 1 Peter 3:15 challenges us to be ready to let people know why

we have so much hope, but we're to do so with "meekness and fear." A non-Christian once wrote:

Do you know, do you understand,
That you represent Jesus to me?
Do you know, do you understand?
That when you treat me with gentleness
It raises the question in my mind
That maybe He is gentle too?

Inheriting the Earth

It's no accident that meekness follows being poor in spirit and being blessed when we mourn. It's at this point that we realize that we have nothing with which to fight, and that the power that God does give us, must be harnessed for His holy purposes. Meekness is not a sign of weakness, but of great strength.

This Beatitude contains a surprising promise. The meek shall "inherit the earth." It's those that have their spirits bridled by Christ who will land the land. I heard of a man who was sitting on a curb crying. When he was asked what was wrong, he said, "I just found out that Rockefeller, the richest man in the world has died." The person then asked, "Why are you crying? You're not a relative of his, are you?" To which the man replied, "No! That's why I'm crying!"

Friend, if you know Christ, you are an heir of everything that He has. You'll get some of it now and more of it later. There will be an inheritance for the meek in the sweet by and by and in the nasty now and now. The word, "inherit" means to "possess." Right now it seems like the sinners reign and the meek take a back seat. But Jesus said that one day the meek will come marching in. Believers who live out this beatitude have nothing, yet possess everything. It's only the meek that will seek the Savior. Are you ready to do that right now?

MATTHEW 5:6

The Happiness of a Hungry Heart

Matthew 5:6

2/1/04

As Jesus continues to communicate the blessings that come from beatitude living, let's summarize what we've learned so far.

- Matthew 5:3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The Almighty applauds us when we see our condition as spiritually and morally bankrupt before Him.
- Matthew 5:4: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted." We're blessed when we're broken, when we exhibit contrition.
- Matthew 5:5: "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth." Last week we established the necessity of our compliance as we yield our power to the One who alone is meek and lowly of heart.

In the fourth beatitude, Jesus uses a metaphor that we can all relate to because the desire for food and water are the strongest cravings that we have. Look at Matthew 5:6: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." The Message paraphrase puts it this way: "You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat."

Did you know that Super Bowl Sunday is the second-largest food consumption day of the year? Here's a breakdown of what we'll consume today (from www.nacsonline.com):

- 4 million pounds of popcorn
- 9 million pounds of tortilla chips
- 12 million pounds of potato chips
- 13 million pounds of guacamole dip
- And sales of antacid will increase 20%!

All that junk food will make us thirsty as well. That reminds me of the man who is crawling through the Sahara desert when another man riding on a camel approaches him: "Water...please...can you give me...some water?" The man on the camel replies, "I'm sorry.

I don't have any water with me. But I'd be delighted to sell you a necktie." The man responds, "I don't need a necktie. I need water." By now the man has lost all track of time, and crawls through the desert for what seems like days. Finally, parched with thirst, his skin peeling under the relentless sun, he happens upon a restaurant. With his last bit of strength he staggers to the door and grabs on to the headwaiter: "Water...can I get...water?" The waiter smiles and says, "I'm sorry, sir. Neckties required."

Have you ever been so famished and so parched that all you could think about was food and water?

There are three parts to this beatitude and we'll look at each one separately.

- The Requirement "hunger and thirst"
- The Reason "for righteousness"
- The Reward "for they will be filled"

The Requirement

The word Jesus uses for "hunger" refers to the desperate craving that a starving person has for food. He is so famished that he becomes desperate for a dinner. The word "thirst" means to painfully feel the need for water. This is more than just needing a sip, it means to be parched and dehydrated to the point of pain.

To hunger and thirst means to be dissatisfied with our present situation. In essence, in order for our lives to change so that we can experience the spiritual satisfaction that only the Savior can provide, we must first admit that we are starving and thirsting. We all need to change. The reminds me of the guy who pleaded with his psychiatrist for help: "Doc, you've got to help me! I can't stop believing that I'm a dog." The psychiatrist followed up with a question: "How long have you had this problem?" To which the man replied, "Ever since I was a puppy." While that might not be our problem today, my guess is that this series has messed with each of us. We know we're not who we're supposed to be, and we realize that there's more to life than this world can offer.

Do you want to change? If so, then it's time to develop an appetite for the Almighty. I'm no expert on developing a good diet because I'm sure I'll have my fair share of chips and guacamole tonight, but let me offer three guidelines that will help us design a diet that will cause us to hunger and thirst for the right things. After all, we are what we eat.

1. Watch what you eat. Some of us have been consuming things that will not satisfy because they were never designed by the Creator to bring us fulfillment. One reason you may not be hungering for holiness today is because frankly you feel pretty full. Proverbs 27:7: "He who is full loathes honey, but to the hungry even what is bitter tastes sweet." Maybe its time to admit that some of us are spiritual junk food addicts.

Have you heard about the guy who made a documentary in which he ate at a fast food restaurant three times a day for 30 days? In his film called, "Super Size Me," Morgan Spurlock, a formerly fit filmmaker, packed on 25 pounds. When asked what happened to his body over the course of the 30 days, Spurlock responds, "My body just basically falls apart...I start to get tired; I start to get headaches...my blood sugar skyrockets, my cholesterol goes up off the charts...the doctors were like, 'you have to stop.'" When he was asked how he felt at the end of the month, he shouts out, "I felt terrible...I would eat and I would feel so good because I would get all that sugar and caffeine and fat...and an hour later I would just crash – I would hit the wall and be angry and depressed and upset. I was a disaster to live with" (www.msnbc.msn.com/id/4078903).

Friend, what have you been eating? Perhaps you're ingesting things that feel good at first, but later on they leave you disillusioned and depressed. Or, maybe you feel pretty full today, but it may be because you're just feeding your appetite with things that will never satisfy. The sooner we realize that our longings can only be filled by the Lover of our souls, the sooner we will be motivated to change.

Listen to these words from Isaiah 55:2-3 as God wonders why we fill our lives with things that were never designed to be fulfilling: "Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live." And in Jeremiah 2:12-13, the Holy One is not pleased when He observes people looking to other sources for refreshment: "Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror," declares the LORD. "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water."

Are you munching on material things in the hopes that they will fill you up? Are you snacking on a sexual sin thinking that this will satisfy? Are you consuming your career as if that will meet your needs? Do you salivate over sports more than you should? (That's easy for me to say since the Packers aren't in the Super Bowl). Are you drinking to dull the despair you are feeling? If so, it's time to eat what is good so that your soul may live. Gorge yourself on God and turn away from food and drink that will never satisfy. John Piper writes: "The hunger and thirst of your life that cannot be satisfied by anything in this world is the constant beckoning of God to

remember that we were made for another world, we were made for God”.

If we want to grow spiritually, we must crave the milk and the meat of God’s Word, like a famished man seeks food and water. 1 Peter 2:2-3: “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation, now that you have tasted that the Lord is good.”

2. Weigh what you eat. I’m told that one of the best ways to improve one’s diet is to weigh your portions before eating. I don’t know much about this because I’m on a “see-food” diet, where I eat whatever I see! Not only must we watch what we eat, we must also make sure that we’re eating the right amount of what is best for us. Unfortunately, most of us don’t “super-size” our spiritual meals. Our problem may be that we don’t take enough food in as we just nibble and snack on spiritual appetizers. Franky Schaeffer identified this in his book called, “Addicted to Mediocrity.” Too often we’re willing to settle for far too less. Some of us might be apathetic toward God because we’re spiritually anemic.

Do you feel spiritually hungry today? If so, allow these desires to drive you to God. Proverbs 16:26: “The laborer’s appetite works for him; his hunger drives him on.” In God’s diet plan for us, He wants us to take the whole portion, not just the part. In fact, that’s the sense in the Greek as we’re to hunger for the whole and thirst for a bucket of water.

Interestingly, if we continue to starve ourselves spiritually by refusing the food that God lays out for us, He may send a famine our way. This happened to God’s people in Amos 8:11-12: “The days are coming,’ declares the Sovereign LORD, ‘when I will send a famine through the land- not a famine of food or a thirst for water, but a famine of hearing the words of the LORD. Men will stagger from sea to sea and wander from north to east, searching for the word of the LORD, but they will not find it. In that day the lovely young women and strong young men will faint because of thirst.” Some have suggested that this is what happened during the 400-year period of time between the end of the Old Testament and the beginning of the New Testament. As far as we know, God was silent until He spoke to Zechariah, and then to Mary and Joseph. Beth Moore writes that God invoked a famine in order to provoke a hunger. He used the withholding of His words to prepare for the revealing of His Word (from “Jesus, the One and Only”). Do you feel like God is far away right now? Maybe He is allowing this time of barrenness so that you will hunger and ache for Him like you once did.

3. Welcome what you eat. The third element of the divine diet plan is the best of all – eat and drink when you’re hungry, and enjoy it. In the Greek grammar this is in the present tense, meaning that we should continuously hunger and thirst. This is not something we just do once and then we’re satisfied. Ruth Barton relays her experience of growing up in a Christian home: “I was taught that once Jesus comes into your heart, He will satisfy everything—once and for all. This has not been my experience. So I am grateful for this beatitude...to seekers, people like me who are baffled by the ongoing presence of hunger and thirst in their spiritual pilgrimage” (“Discipleship Journal,” Issue 138, page 57).

We must continually crave God, every day, at all times during the day. Listen to the desperate sense of longing in these verses:

Psalms 42:1-2: “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?”

Psalms 63:1: “O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you.”

Psalms 84:2: “My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the LORD; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God.”

Psalms 143:6: “I spread out my hands to you; my soul thirsts for you like a parched land.”

Just as we need to eat several times a day in order to stay physically healthy, so too, we need to consume spiritual food on a regular basis if we are to grow spiritually. God never promises to give us all the food we need for the entire year so we can fill our fridges and then forget about Him. Matthew 6:11 tells us to pray, “Give us this day our daily bread.” The Israelites received manna every morning so that they would learn that God meets needs on a daily basis. And, when God provided the manna, He was actually using this as an object lesson that represented a much deeper truth. Deuteronomy 8:3: “He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your fathers had known, to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.”

Have you ever had a big meal and felt like you never needed to eat again? This happened to me recently when our family went to the Olive Garden. We arrived about 2:00 in the afternoon and placed our orders. I got the all-you-can-eat salad, bread sticks, and soup. I had three big plates of salad, three large bowls of soup, and several bread sticks. When we were done eating at about 3:00 p.m., I told my family that I wasn’t going to eat dinner because I was so full. When we got home about 6:00, I immediately went to the cupboard to find some chips. Here’s the principle: no matter how much you feed on God today, you’re going to need more of Him tomorrow.

Hebrews 5:12-14 reminds us that we need to eat solid food continuously, not just once in awhile, if we’re going to grow up in our

faith: "Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

The Reason

Our appetites should ache and our thirst should be all consuming for righteousness. One commentator put it this way: "Righteousness...must be the object of intense desire, earnest yearning and relentless pursuit" (Hendriksen, "Gospel of Matthew," page 273). Now, let's admit that this term "righteousness" is a bit of a mystery to us. We know it has something to do with being right before God and before others, but it's still difficult to understand. Whenever we come across something in Scripture that's confusing, it's always helpful to look at other passages that use the same word. Ray Pritchard points out that there are four other uses of this word in the Sermon on Mount (adapted from the sermon, "Full Stomachs and Empty Hearts," 1/28/96).

- Matthew 5:10: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness..." This is the eighth beatitude, and taken together with the fourth, we get something like this: righteousness is a lifestyle that distinguishes us as true Christians and invites opposition from the world.
- Matthew 5:20: "For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." The religious leaders of the day concocted a religious system built on intricate rules and regulations. True righteousness starts in the heart and changes a person from the inside out.
- Matthew 6:1: "Be careful not to do your 'acts of righteousness' before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven." The Pharisees loved to be noticed by others, either by praying out loud or rattling their coins in the offering plate. True disciples seek a righteousness that doesn't need to be seen by others, but only by God.
- Matthew 6:33: "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Seeking God's righteousness should come before anything else.

Now, let's put these four passages together. We are to hunger and thirst after...

A truly Christian lifestyle

That changes us from the inside out

So that we no longer seek the praise of others

But seek God's approval above everything else.

More specifically, to hunger and thirst after righteousness is to do whatever it takes to be in a right relationship with Jesus. 1 Corinthians 1:30 refers to Jesus Christ as our righteousness. Theologians make the distinction between imputed righteousness and imparted righteousness.

- Imputed Righteousness. This is what is given to the unbeliever when they are converted. The focus here is on being hungry and thirsty for salvation. When you put your faith in what Christ did for you on the Cross, His righteousness is credited to your account. This imputation of righteousness is always by faith, not by our deeds or actions. We see this way back in Genesis 15:6 where we read that Abraham "...believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness." The Apostle Paul builds on this truth in Romans 4:22 and Galatians 3:6 to show that we are saved by faith, not by deeds. This is amazing to me. When we receive Jesus into our lives, His righteousness is reckoned to us! Romans 10:10 in the New American Standard says this: "For with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation." Has your hunger for something beyond yourself led you yet to the only One who can satisfy your cravings? Are you ready right now to receive the righteousness of Christ? 2 Corinthians 5:21 says that because Jesus died as our substitute, He will take our sin and in exchange, will give us His righteousness: "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."
- Imparted Righteousness. This is what believers are to live out in their lives. If imputed righteousness comes as a result of salvation, the focus of imparted righteousness is hungering and thirsting for sanctification. We could say it this way: Because I am righteous in position, I must now live righteously in practice. We must not just "be right" with God, we must "do right" in our lives. In fact, when we're right with God, we will hunger to live rightly. Hendriksen writes, "Though it is impossible for good works to justify anybody, it is just as impossible for a justified person to live without doing good works." Romans 6:18: "You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness." Fellow believer, do you have an insatiable hunger and a relentless thirst to do what is right? Do you have a genuine continual craving in your soul for that which honors holiness? Do you have a passionate concern for God's purposes to prevail? On a scale of 1 to 10, how hungry and thirsty for righteousness are you? In contrast to the self-righteousness of the religious leaders, Jesus wants us to live rightly, not as our duty, but as an outflow of a deep desire and an inconsolable longing. I love the old Scottish prayer: "O God, make just as holy as a pardoned sinner can be."

The Reward

Our requirement is to “hunger and thirst.” The reason we do this is for the sake of “righteousness.” The last part of this verse contains the reward: “for they will be filled.” The word “filled” was originally used to describe the feeding of animals until they were so full they could eat no more. It has the idea of being completely satiated. Here are a few verses that describe the satisfaction that comes when we seek God with all our hearts.

Psalm 23:1: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.”

Psalm 34:10: “The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the LORD lack no good thing.”

Psalm 107:9: “For he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.”

Jeremiah 31:14, 25: “I will satisfy the priests with abundance, and my people will be filled with my bounty...I will refresh the weary and satisfy the faint.”

Here’s the key. Until we come to the place where we are single-minded in our pursuit of God, we will never be satisfied. We need to be so famished and so parched that we will become relentlessly passionate about seeking the Savior. When the Prodigal Son was hungry he turned to the food the pigs were eating; when he was starving he turned to his father. It’s only when we come to the end of ourselves that will allow God to have His way.

If you want righteousness, you can have it. And for the most part, you are where you are right now because that’s where you want to be. Rick Warren puts it this way in the Purpose Driven Life, “The truth is—you are as close to God as you choose to be. Intimate friendship with God is a choice, not an accident You must intentionally seek it. Do you really want it—more than anything? What is it worth to you? Is it worth giving up other things?” (Page 98). I like how the Message paraphrase renders Jeremiah 29:13: “When you get serious about finding me and want it more than anything else, I’ll make sure you won’t be disappointed.”

Remember the Cost

I’m convinced that one of the reasons we are addicted to mediocrity, and not famished or parched like we should be, is because we’ve forgotten how much Jesus has done for us. As we prepare to celebrate communion, let’s remember what Jesus went through when He died as our substitute in order to give us His righteousness.

As we contemplate the Cross, let’s admit that we’ve really cleaned up the crucifixion. It was more horrific than we can imagine. And because it is so dreadful and shocking, some of us would rather not think about it. But think of it we must, for it’s at the Cross that we’re reminded of the passion of Jesus and as Walter Wangerin writes, “We see the mirror of dangerous grace, purging more purely than any other” (“Reliving the Passion,” Page 25).

This past Monday, the Today Show did a segment on Mel Gibson’s upcoming movie called, “The Passion of the Christ.” As you may know, there’s a lot of controversy about the film even before it opens on February 25th as some are saying that it is anti-Semitic. Gibson’s response to this charge has been something like this: “After seeing this movie, you won’t take your sins lightly. We’re all culpable.” Having viewed a screening of the film, I would agree with that.

There’s an obscure detail in the crucifixion scene that most critics don’t know about. When Jesus is placed on the cross, the camera closes in as a large spike is positioned on the palm of Jesus. Then a mallet comes into focus, and a rugged hand swings the hammer down hard. Interestingly, you never see the face of the one who drives the nail through the flesh of Jesus and through the wood of the cross. Do you know who it was? It was Mel Gibson, even though he didn’t act in any other part of the movie. He wanted to identify himself of being guilty of putting Jesus on the cross. He never shows his face because we’re all guilty of putting Him there. It wasn’t just the Romans. It wasn’t just the Jewish leaders. It wasn’t just Pilate. It was my sin that drove the spikes into the Savior.

When his body is thrown on the rough timber, there is a flashback to the Last Supper as Jesus holds up the bread and says, “Take and eat. This is my body.” And, as the spikes pierce His flesh, and the blood is dripping onto the ground, another flashback shows Jesus offering the cup saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”

MATTHEW 5:7

The Benefits of Showing Mercy

Matthew 5:7

2/8/04

One day, a woman who occasionally walked through the park after work, stopped to have her picture taken by a photographer. She was very excited to get the Polaroid print but when she looked at it, her face dropped. She turned to the photographer and stated rather sharply, "This is not right! This is not right! You have done me no justice!" The man looked at the picture and then looked at her and said, "Miss, you don't need justice...what you need is mercy!"

That leads us to the fifth beatitude found in Matthew 5:7: "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." The word "blessed" as used in the Messiah's message means much more than "happy." It has the idea of being "congratulated" or "completed" or "fulfilled." If we listen carefully, we can hear the applause of heaven when we put into practice these eight character qualities, or "be-attitudes." As we look at what it means to be merciful, we come to a transition from the first four, which focus on our need – we are bankrupt in spirit, and broken with grief, which leads to meekness and an insatiable hunger for righteousness. We now move from our need, to what we need to do; from belief to behavior; from our situation to our responsibility.

The Meaning of Mercy

The principal Hebrew word for mercy speaks of an emotional response to the needs of others. It means to feel the pain of another so deeply that we're compelled to do something about it. In fact, people in Bible times believed that the seat of emotions was found in the intestinal area. That's why the King James Version uses the phrase, "bowels of mercy." William Barclay defines mercy this way: "To get inside someone's skin until we can see things with his eyes, think things with his mind, and feel things with his feelings; to move in and act on behalf of those who are hurting." Mercy can be defined as: "good will toward the afflicted, joined with a desire to relieve them."

This idea is captured in Matthew 14:14: "When Jesus landed and saw a large crowd, he had compassion on them and healed their sick." The word "compassion" means that Jesus was so moved that His stomach churned, or literally, "his bowels yearned" for the crowd. Notice that this churning led Him to do something about it. He saw the need and then He went into action. Mercy in theory is absolutely meaningless. Mercy must move us. In addition, the emphasis in this beatitude is on those who are inclined to show mercy as a lifestyle, not those who are merciful on an occasional basis. I like Chuck Swindoll's definition: "Mercy is God's ministry to the miserable."

We often use the words "grace" and "mercy" interchangeably, but they actually have different meanings.

Grace - Undeserved and unmerited favor, Gives us what we don't deserve

Mercy - Compassionate action, Withholds what we do deserve

The opposite of mercy is hostility and aggressiveness that expresses itself in an unforgiving and faultfinding spirit.

Master of Mercy

In one of his books, Bill Bright wrote this, "God is the grand master of mercy. His very nature desires to relieve us of the self-imposed misery and distress we experience because of our sin" ("God," New Life Publications, 1999, page 232). Mercy is a God-like characteristic and Scripture is filled with references to this part of His innate nature:

Deuteronomy 4:31: "For the LORD your God is a merciful God..."

Nehemiah 9:31: "But in your great mercy you did not put an end to them or abandon them, for you are a gracious and merciful God."

Psalms 119:132: "Turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name."

Daniel 9:18: "We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy."

Micah 7:18-19: "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy. You will again have compassion on us; you will tread our sins underfoot and hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea."

Romans 9:16: "It does not, therefore, depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy."

Ephesians 2:4: "...God, who is rich in mercy."

James 5:11: "The Lord is full of compassion and mercy."

There is no doubt that God is merciful toward each one of us, as He not only withholds what we deserve, but He also turns toward us and meets our deepest needs. While we can't always count on a man or woman's mercy, we can rely on the compassion of God. After spending over nine months taking a census of the people in his kingdom in 2 Samuel 24, David became "conscience-stricken," and confessed what he did to the Lord. Interestingly, God gave David three options for his punishment. He didn't have to think about

it long, because he realized that it would be much better to throw himself on the mercy of the Majesty than to allow men to do what they wanted to him. We see this in verse 14: "I am in deep distress. Let us fall into the hands of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but do not let me fall into the hands of men."

Friends, nowhere do we imitate God more than when we show mercy because we are never more like Him when our compassion goes into action. Luke 6:36 links our mandate to extend mercy with the model that God sets for us: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

Creating a Community of Compassion

Chrysostom, an early church leader, stated that mercy imitates God and disappoints the devil. The message of the Bible is clear – if we say that we follow the Almighty, we must emulate Him. Here are six ways that God wants to create a community of compassion.

- Fall in love with mercy. Micah 6:8 makes clear that one of God's requirements is that we are "to love mercy" and to lose ourselves in its exquisite beauty. The Hebrew word is used of a husband's love for his wife and appears frequently in the Song of Solomon.
- Demonstrate mercy. Zechariah 7:9: "...Show mercy and compassion to one another."
- Respond to mercy. Romans 12:1 states that because of God's mercy, we are to "offer our bodies as living sacrifices."
- Put mercy on. Just as we get dressed each day, so too, Colossians 3:12 says that we are to "clothe ourselves with compassion."
- Ministry must flow from mercy. In 2 Corinthians 4:1, Paul links the mercy he has received to the ministry he has been given: "... since through God's mercy we have this ministry."
- Default to mercy. In a very strong passage, James 2:13 reminds us that we are to grant mercy to others instead of judgment: "... judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment!"

Jesus certainly demonstrated mercy and He expected His followers to exhibit it as well. As I've said before, some of us are pretty merciless toward people who sin differently than we do. Unfortunately, those who are the most religious are often those who are the most rigid and unmerciful. On two different occasions in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus quoted Hosea 6:6 to show that mercy is a mandate, not an option.

In the first instance found in Matthew 9:13, Jesus confronts those who were judging Him for spending time with sinners: "But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'" In Matthew 12, the Pharisees play "gotcha" with Jesus when they supposedly catch the disciples doing something wrong by picking some grain on the Sabbath. Jesus takes these religious experts back to Hosea in order to show that they are missing the magnificence of mercy. Look at verse 7: "If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent."

If the religious people back then needed to learn that God desires mercy above any sacrifice that can be made, then I suspect that you and I need to be taught how to be merciful as well. You see, it's our nature to criticize and withhold forgiveness. It's also way too natural for us to ignore real needs when we see them because we're wrapped up in our world.

Jesus told two parables to help us understand the two sides of mercy. The first one is found in Matthew 18 and emphasizes the need to extend forgiveness because in God's mercy, He has forgiven us. Mercy releases the debt. The second narrative is found in Luke 10 and is known as the story of the Good Samaritan. In this account, Jesus establishes that our feelings of compassion must be fleshed out in action. Mercy also restores the downtrodden. We could say it this way: Mercy embraces both forgiveness for the guilty and compassion for the suffering.

Releasing the Debt

Please turn to Matthew 18. One day Peter came up to Jesus and asked him a question in Matthew 18:21, "Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother when he sins against me? Up to seven times?" Before Jesus could answer, Peter responded to his own question by suggesting that seven times would be a good limit. The rabbis back then taught that you had to forgive someone three times and then you could retaliate. Peter doubled that and added one for good measure. As Jesus often does, his answer to Peter was unexpected and disarming. Take a look at verse 22: "I tell you, not seven times, but seventy times seven times." Seventy times seven means there is no limit to the number of times we are to forgive someone because we can't keep score when it comes to forgiveness. Mercy has about it a maddening quality because by definition it is undeserved, unmerited, and unfair.

Since the truth of forgiveness without limits is hard for us to grasp, Jesus told a story to help illustrate what He meant. "Therefore the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. As he began the settlement, a man who owed him 10,000 talents was brought to him." The king sent out his collection agents and they came back with a man who owed the equivalent of about \$25 million. Since he couldn't pay the debt, verse 25 says that, "the master ordered that he and his wife and his children

and all that he had be sold to repay the debt.”

At this point, the servant did what most of us would have done. He fell on his knees and said, “Be patient with me, and I will pay back everything.” The king was moved. The Bible says that he was filled with compassion (that’s another word for “mercy”). The king not only sets him free, he also releases the debt. Friend, this is exactly what mercy is all about. To extend mercy is to cancel the debt. The servant did not deserve this forgiveness; it was purely an act of mercy on the part of the king.

As this humbled man walked away with this wonderful gift of forgiveness, he ran into a buddy who owed him about 10 bucks. Instead of canceling the debt, verse 28 says that he grabbed him and began to choke him saying, “Pay back what you owe me!” Jesus continues by telling us that the forgiven man’s friend fell to his knees and asked for some mercy. In fact, his plea was almost identical to the other man’s when he was before the king: “Be patient with me, and I will pay you back.” But, there’s one big difference. Instead of forgiving the wrong out of gratitude for the forgiveness he had received, verse 30 says, “he went off and had the man thrown in prison until he could pay the debt.”

Let me pause here in the story to make an application. We’re a lot like this man when we don’t forgive others. We enjoy putting people in prison when they wrong us because we want them to suffer and to hurt as bad as they hurt us. Word got around and soon everyone was talking about it. It wasn’t the fact that the man would not forgive his friend that shocked them. It was that he was so unforgiving after having found such mercy and grace himself. The king is really mad now. He sends his soldiers to bring the man before him. Notice verses 32-34: “You wicked servant. I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you? In anger his master turned him over to the torturers until he paid back all he owed.”

Let me say this strongly. What happened to that man will happen to each of us unless we learn to give mercy and forgive wrongs. The hidden torturers of anger and bitterness will eat your insides out, as you lie awake at night stewing over every wrong that someone has done to you. When we chose to not forgive, we are imprisoned in the past and locked out of all potential for change. Have you ever noticed that some of the most miserable people in the world are those who are unwilling to be merciful? Lewis Smedes has said, “When I genuinely forgive, I set a prisoner free and then discover that the prisoner I set free was me.”

Restoring the Downtrodden

The first half of showing mercy is to release the debts of those who have done wrong. The second part has to do with restoring those who are downtrodden. In Luke 10:25-37, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan in response to a lawyer’s question in which he was looking for a love loophole, a legal limit so he would know who he had to help and who he could ignore: “And who is my neighbor?”

Jesus answers by saying that a man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, a distance of 22 miles. This road winds through the mountains and was known as the “bloody way” because thieves and terrorists used it to ambush unsuspecting travelers. That’s exactly what happened one day as robbers attacked a man, stripped him of his clothes and left him half dead. This story gives us a very vivid picture of the four dimensions of mercy.

1. Notion. This is always the first step. We must notice someone in need before we will do anything about meeting that need. The priest, the Levite, and the Samaritan all “saw” the man, but only one perceived a person in trouble: “A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.” Both of these religious men had come from God’s presence but somehow God’s presence never got through to them. “But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him...” This is an interesting twist because the Jews and the Samaritans hated each other. The Samaritans were considered racial and religious heretics. But the Samaritan had a notion that something was wrong and slowed down.

Erma Bombeck shares an interesting story about a time that she was waiting for a flight in an airport. She was reading a book in an effort to shut out the commotion around her:

A voice next to me belonging to an elderly woman said, “I’ll bet it’s cold in Chicago.” Stone-faced, I replied, “It’s likely.” “I haven’t been to Chicago in three years,” she persisted. “My son lives there.” “That’s nice,” I said, my eyes intent on my book. “My husband’s body is on this plane. We’ve been married 53 years...” Bombeck continues, “I don’t think I ever detested myself more than I did at that moment. Another human being was screaming to be heard, and in desperation, had turned to a cold stranger who was more interested in a novel than in the real-life drama at her elbow. She talked numbly and steadily until we boarded the plane, then found her seat in another section. As I hung up my coat, I heard her plaintive voice say to her seat companion, ‘I’ll bet it’s cold in Chicago.’” (“Please, Listen,” Chicago Sun Times, February 26, 1977).

Friend, do you have any notion of the needs around you? Here’s a simple prayer that will help each of us, “Lord, let me see people through your eyes.”

2. Emotion. All three saw the need but only the Samaritan felt the need: "he took pity on him." This word "pity" is the word that means to have intensity in the intestines. Someone put it this way: "Mercy begins when your hurt comes into my heart." He was shaken up when he saw the man who was beaten down. I want to say that I marvel at the amount of mercy in this church. This was reinforced this week when I received a phone call from someone who works at one of the restaurants across the street from PBC. She started off by saying that she and her coworkers are really impressed with how nice the people from this church are when they come over after services. She then said that because there are so many people who care at PBC, she wanted me to know that one of her managers is grieving the death of her 17-month-old son this week. She thought we would want to know. I immediately called this mother and expressed my sorrow and offered to do anything we could to help. I also called a sister from this church that can understand and she has already made a contact. If you'd like to respond more specifically, please come up to me after the service and I can give you more details.

If anyone should care in this world, it should be Christians. Thank you for having that kind of reputation in this community!

3. Motion. The Samaritan saw the need, felt for the man, and then went into action. We see this in verse 34: "he went to him..." True mercy always involves motion. One pastor wrote, "I was walking down the streets of a town, and as I looked over toward a doorway, I noticed a derelict lying on the ground. Sand and old newspapers were blowing up around his body. He had passed out. He was just lying there. All up and down that busy street, well-dressed people were walking, going about their business. Many of them looked down at that piece of humanity on the ground, but nobody stopped to help. Nobody did anything." And then he said, "After we had gone to dinner and come back that man was still lying there. I could not believe that nobody had done anything." Some of us see needs and shake our heads. Others of us feel bad for those in pain. And those who move to meet needs are demonstrating mercy.

4. Devotion. When the Samaritan had a notion that something was wrong, he was moved in his emotions, he went into motion, and then he demonstrated devotion as he bandaged the man's wounds, put him on his own donkey (which meant he had to walk), took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day, he gave the innkeeper two silver coins, which represented two days' wages in the first century. He even promised to come back and take care of any extra expenses. Ray Pritchard writes, "His help was prompt, thorough, generous, self-denying, to his own discomfort, and at his own expense."

Jesus changes the question from "Who is my neighbor?" to, "Whose neighbor am I?" The first question focuses on the claim that others have on my time and resources. The second question reframes reality to what I owe to the suffering people all around me. The issue is one of character, not of criteria; about being a neighbor, not defining a neighbor. The answer comes in verse 37: "The one who had mercy on him." Jesus then tells him, and us, "Go, and do likewise." Friend, your neighbor is anyone in need. And, you are a neighbor when you minister mercy to the downtrodden. Will you walk on by? Start with the need that is near you and you'll be reminded of the nearness of Jesus in your own life. Mercy always demands that we do something.

Adrian Rogers says there are three classes of people in every community (from "The Magnificence of Mercy," Pulpit Ministries of Bellevue Baptist Church, Houston, TX).

- The beater-uppers. Those who steal kill and destroy. These people say, "What's yours is mine, and I'm going to get it."
- The passer-uppers. Those who see the need but walk on by, "What's mine is mine and I'm going to keep it."
- The picker-uppers. Those who move from notion to emotion to motion to devotion, "What's mine is yours and I'm going to help you."

The Law of Reciprocity

Jesus declares that those who are merciful "will be shown mercy." This is the only Beatitude where the promise is the same as the condition. The more we understand how much mercy we've received, the more we'll give to others; and the more mercy we show, the more mercy we get. The reason the merciful will receive mercy is that they have already received mercy, and that is the very thing that makes them merciful. Instead of judging others, we can offer people something they don't deserve: unqualified mercy. We give them what we have obtained and in so doing, as Gary Thomas states, "We complete the circle, applying mercy to those who need it as desperately as we do" (Discipleship Journal, Issue 138, 2003, page 61).

Warren Wiersbe writes: "Mercy cannot be earned any more than grace can be earned. When you experience mercy and share mercy, then your heart is in such a condition that you can receive more mercy to share with others...how thrilling it is to go through life sharing God's mercy and not having to judge people to see if they are 'worthy' of what we have to offer. We stop looking at externals and begin to see people through the merciful eyes of Christ" ("Live Like a King," pages 105-106).

Let me mention just two action steps.

1. Who do you need to release from debt today? Forgiveness is the virtue we most enjoy but least employ. Nothing proves more

clearly that we have been recipients of mercy than our own readiness to forgive.

2. What downtrodden person can you restore this week? You don't necessarily have to go looking for someone because God will bring people along your path. What will you do? Will you be a taker, a keeper, or a giver? Determine right now to move from notion to emotion to motion to devotion.

When Frederick II, an 18th Century King of Prussia, went on an inspection tour of a prison, he was greeted with the cries of prisoners, who fell on their knees and protested their unjust punishment. While listening to these pleas of innocence, the King's eye was caught by a solitary figure in the corner, a prisoner seemingly unconcerned with all the commotion. King Frederick called out to him, "Why are you here?" The prisoner replied, "Armed robbery, your Majesty." The king then asked, "Were you guilty?" To which the prisoner answered, "Oh yes, indeed, your Majesty. I entirely deserve my punishment." At that, the King commanded the jailer: "Release this guilty man at once. I will not have him kept in this prison where he will corrupt all the fine innocent people who occupy it."

Friends, we're all guilty. And the sooner we admit it, the better off we'll be. When God snaps our picture, we don't want justice. What we should cry out for is mercy.

I'd like to invite you right now to close your eyes as I read some cries for mercy found in the Gospel of Matthew.

Mt 9:27: "As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, calling out, 'Have mercy on us, Son of David!'"

Mt 15:22: "A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly...'"

Mt 17:14-15: "When they came to the crowd, a man approached Jesus and knelt before him. 'Lord, have mercy on my son...'"

Mt 20:29-34: "Two blind men were sitting by the roadside, and when they heard that Jesus was going by, they shouted, 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!' The crowd rebuked them and told them to be quiet, but they shouted all the louder, 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on us!' Jesus stopped and called them. 'What do you want me to do for you?' he asked. 'Lord,' they answered, 'we want our sight.' Jesus had compassion on them and touched their eyes. Immediately they received their sight and followed him."

Closing song: [Lord, have mercy](#)

MATTHEW 5:8

Pursuing Purity in an Impure World

Matthew 5:8

2/15/04

I remember seeing a cartoon that shows a pastor and his wife deep in conversation. The wife says, "Today let's do something different. Why don't you be charming at home and grouchy at church?" Ouch. That really doesn't apply to me...because I'm often grouchy in both places! I think I've used this one before but it reminds me of the wife who said, "Sometimes I wake up grumpy...and other times I let him sleep in."

We all wear masks, don't we? As believers, many of us have learned how to behave in such a way that people don't really see what's taking place on the inside. We can con our coworkers, fool our friends and family, play charades with church members, and even deceive ourselves, but we can't masquerade before the Lord because He sees right through our masks. I want to confess this morning that just because I'm preaching on the Beatitudes doesn't mean that I'm managing to perfectly live them out. Unfortunately, I wear a mask. Do you find yourself behind a mask, too?

Last Sunday we learned about the two sides of mercy. One half involves releasing people from debt through forgiveness and the second part challenges us to restore the downtrodden through acts of compassion. Immediately after the second service, a gentleman came into our building from his travels on I-55 and wanted some help with gas money. I asked Pastor Jeff to talk to him and then Jeff came back and asked if we had any gasoline gift certificates. I told him we were out, but in my heart I thought something like this, "People can't just come and expect us to meet all their needs. Can't he see that we're having church here?" I'm thankful that Jeff had compassion because I sure lacked love for that man in need. I can't believe what was in my heart so soon after speaking about the Good Samaritan! I feel like Paul did in Romans 7:21, 24: "When I want to do good, evil is right there with me... what a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"

In his book called, "Rumors of Another World," Philip Yancey concludes one of his chapters with a quote from Malcolm Muggeridge to show the subtleness of sin: "It is precisely when you consider the best in man that you see there is in each of us a hard core of

pride or self-centeredness which corrupts our best achievements and blights our best experiences. It comes out in all sorts of ways – in the jealousy which spoils our friendships, in the vanity we feel when we have done something pretty good, in the easy conversion of love into lust, in the meanness which makes us depreciate the efforts of other people, in the distortion of our own judgment by our own self-interest, in our fondness for flattery and our resentment of blame, and in our self-assertive profession of fine ideals which we never begin to practice” (Pages 123-24). That last line really rings true, doesn't it? As Christians we do a pretty good job of “mask management,” but if the truth were known, we often make “self-assertive professions of fine ideals which we never begin to practice.” Can you relate? I sure can. I want you to know that I make mistakes on a regular basis, my wisdom is at times suspect, and my heart is often unholy.

The bottom line is that the Lord can see our hearts; and when our hearts are pure, we can see Him. That's what the sixth Beatitude teaches in Matthew 5:8: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” After manifesting mercy to my neighbor, the attention moves from my neighbor to me, from charity to purity, from external compassion to internal holiness. I like the Message paraphrase: “You're blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.” The emphasis here is on what's inside us.

A Passion for Purity

The term “pure” is the Greek word from which we get “catharsis,” which means a cleansing of the mind or emotions. Scholars suggest that the word basically has two meanings. First, it means “to make pure by cleansing from dirt, filth, or contamination” and was most often used to describe metals that had been refined by fire until they were free from impurities. It was also used for soiled clothes that had been washed clean, and of grain that had been carefully sifted to remove all impurities.

Second, it refers to being “unmixed, as having no double allegiance.” In his commentary on this passage, Warren Wiersbe writes that the “basic idea is that of integrity, singleness of heart, as opposed to duplicity, or a divided heart.” Jesus said it this way in Matthew 6:33: “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” Jesus wants us to be single-minded in the depth of our being. James 1:8 teaches that the double-minded person is unstable in all his ways.

Let's put these two definitions together. A person with a passion for purity is one who has been cleansed in character so that the way he or she looks in public is the way he or she is in private. As someone has said, “character is what you are when no one is looking.” The one who is single-minded in his commitment to Christ will also be inwardly pure. We see this in Psalm 24:3-4: “Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false.”

Coy Wylie suggests that there are at least 5 kinds of purity taught in God's Word (www.cornerstonebc.com).

1. **DIVINE Purity.** This is the holiness that belongs only to God and is intrinsic in His nature. Isaiah 6:3: “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty...”
2. **CREATED Purity.** When God first created the world, everything was pure. Genesis 1:31: “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”
3. **POSITIONAL Purity.** The moment we are saved, the purity of Jesus is imputed to us, and God sees us as robed with the righteousness of Christ according to 2 Corinthians 5:21: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”
4. **PRACTICAL Purity.** This is the challenging part – and we'll spend more time on this later in the message. It's at this point that we must live out our position in practical ways. 2 Corinthians 7:1: “Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God.”
5. **ULTIMATE Purity.** There's a day coming when Christians will be totally cleansed and purified. 1 John 3:2: “Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”

A Heart Unlike His

Let's go back to our beatitude. If Jesus would have just said, “Blessed are the pure, for they will see God,” the religious people back then would have been very happy because they were experts at outward purity. They had all sorts of rules on what to eat, what to wear, how far you could walk on the Sabbath, and so on. They spent all their time trying to make the outside look good, but they were really masking what was on the inside. Actually, you can never fix the inside by just trying to clean up some activity or change a habit.

Jesus reserved some of his harshest words for those involved in religious “mask management.” Matthew 23:25-28: “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.”

They mistakenly thought their religious acts made them pure but it was really just a show. Jesus saw through all their prettiness and their pretense and looked right into their hearts as He quoted Isaiah in Matthew 15:8: “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” Holiness must come from the heart because it’s from the heart that everything else flows. Proverbs 4:23, in the New Living Translation, provides a challenge to those of us who are prone to pretend: “Above all else, guard your heart, for it affects everything you do.” The heart represents our invisible innermost being as that which shapes our lives.

Jesus is not just interested in reforming our manners, but in changing the hearts of sinners like you and me. Purity cannot come from cleaning up our conduct, or even as a result of rigorous rule keeping. Jesus said it strongly in Matthew 15:18-19: “But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.”

Did you know that when God looks at you He pays little attention to your outward appearance? That might be hard to hear because some of us spend a lot of time on what we look like. Ultimately, this doesn’t really matter. As we remembered Abraham Lincoln’s birthday this week, I like what he once said, “If I were two-faced, would I be wearing this one?” God looks past what we look like and even how we behave because He hones in on the heart. 1 Samuel 16:7: “The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.” Proverbs 21:2: “All a man’s ways seem right to him, but the LORD weighs the heart.”

God longs to locate people who have undivided hearts. 2 Chronicles 16:9: “For the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.” Notice that He’s not looking for believers who are busy in ministry, or for those who are focused on externals; He is searching for sold-out followers who have fully committed their hearts to Him. When David prayed for his son Solomon in 1 Chronicles 29:19, his request was for God to give him “wholehearted devotion to keep your commands.” On the other hand, in 2 Chronicles 12:14, it was said of King Rehoboam that, “he did evil because he had not set his heart on seeking the LORD.”

In the Bible, the heart represents the deepest emotions and also the mind and the will. It is a comprehensive term that refers to the whole person. Proverbs 23:7 in the New American Standard teaches that what’s on the inside of each of us determines who we really are: “For as he thinks within himself, so he is...” Proverbs 27:19 says something similar: “As water reflects a face, so a man’s heart reflects the man.” Max Lucado refers to the heart as the “totality of the inner person...the seat of character...a freeway cloverleaf where all emotions and prejudices and wisdom converge. It is a switch house that receives freight cars loaded with moods, emotions, and convictions and puts them on the right track...the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart” (“The Applause of Heaven,” Page 120).

Heart Problems

Let’s look now at the problem of the heart. Billy Graham once said, “We’re suffering from only one disease in the world. Our basic problem is not a race problem. Our basic problem is not a poverty problem. Our basic problem is not a war problem. Our basic problem is a heart problem.” Please turn to Jeremiah 17:9-10: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.” I’m thankful to Rodney Castleberry for his insights into this passage.

1. The Deceitfulness of the Heart. The word deceitful comes from the same root word as the name Jacob, which means “supplanter.” Jacob was a con artist and a deceiver until God got hold of him and changed his name, and his heart. I like what Augustine said about the solution to living a sham: “Before God can deliver us from ourselves we must undeceive ourselves.”

2. The Disease of the Heart. Jeremiah refers to our hearts as “beyond cure” because they are terminally diseased. The King James refers to the heart as “desperately wicked.” This same phrase is used in Jeremiah 15:18 when the prophet cries out, “Why is my pain unending and my wound grievous and incurable?” The heart is so sick that no medication can heal it. The Reformers called this disease total depravity because it affects every part of us – what we think, how we feel, and how we behave. John Ortberg writes: “We have fallen, and we can’t get up. And the consequences are horrific” (“Everybody’s Normal Till You Get to Know Them,” Page 71).

We don’t sin because of our surroundings; we sin because of what’s in our heart. Adam was in a perfect environment and he still

sinned because sin comes from within. You only have to read the first six chapters of the Bible before coming to a statement about our insidious sinfulness. Genesis 6:5: "The LORD saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time."

3. The Diagnosis of the Heart. Because the heart is deceitful and diseased, we desperately need God to search us out and tell us what's wrong. Notice verse 10: "I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind." The King James uses an interesting phrase, "I try the reins." God makes an intensive review of what's really inside us. We can attempt to mask our heart, or even hide it, but that doesn't change it. That reminds me of the little girl who started crying when she heard a dog barking. The owner scolded his dog and it immediately settled down. The mother tried to comfort her daughter and said, "You don't have to cry, honey. He stopped barking." The little girl continued to whimper and said, "Yes, but his bark is still in him." We might be able to control ourselves for a while, but sooner or later, our bark will come out.

4. The Doctor of the Heart. If we drop down a few more verses to verse 14, we hear the prophet call out, "Heal me, O LORD, and I will be healed; save me and I will be saved, for you are the one I praise." Only the Holy One can heal your heart. Actually, the Bible says that our condition is so grave that we are in desperate need of a transplant. In Jeremiah 24:7, God says, "I will give them a heart to know me..." Friend, listen carefully. You will never be pure in heart until God gives you a new heart. Ezekiel 36:26: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."

The Pursuit of Purity

Before we look at some practical steps in the pursuit of purity, let me mention some ways that have been tried historically, and are still practiced today (adapted from Coy Wylie).

- Legalism. This can be defined as a harsh set of rules that one must follow in order to gain favor with God and impress people. An example of this was the PHARISEES. This system doesn't work because it doesn't deal with the heart.
- Modernism. This is the opposite end of the spectrum as some people have thrown off Scriptural standards and beliefs. The SADDUCEES rejected key doctrinal truths during the time of Jesus, as they just picked and chose what they wanted. This is very popular today.
- Activism. Some people believe that the only way to bring purity into our world is through political change. While we certainly need to participate in the democratic process by voting, only a change of heart will bring about a change in our society. The ZEALOTS of the first century believed a political change was needed and were willing to do anything to bring it about.
- Monasticism. Some individuals believe that they must totally disengage from society in order to be pure. The problem with this is that sin lurks in the heart, not just in the world. The ESSENES practiced this withdrawal from the world and gained popularity about 150 B.C.

Well, if these methods don't work well in the promotion of purity, what does? Is there hope for holy living in our impure culture? Friends, listen. God always provides a way to do what He commands. Philippians 2:12-13 gives us both God's part and our part. We're to "work out our salvation with fear and trembling" and God promises to "work in you to will and to act according to His good purpose." The pursuit of purity is a joint venture. We must participate in our sanctification as God works in us according to His good pleasure. We can't sit back and do nothing, nor can we clean ourselves up on our own. Proverbs 23:19 challenges us to keep our heart on the "right path."

The Bible gives us at least 10 pathways to purity.

1. Admit our sinful impurity. The first step is to acknowledge that we can't change on our own. Jeremiah 13:23: "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard its spots? Neither can you do good who are accustomed to doing evil." Proverbs 20:9: "Who can say, 'I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?'" Have you ever admitted to God and to others how unholy your heart really is?
2. Ask God for a new heart. After admitting that you have a deceitful and diseased heart, agree with God's diagnosis and ask Him for a new one. This is what happens at salvation. Acts 15:9 teaches that our hearts are purified "through faith." If you haven't put your faith and trust in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sin, it's time to do so right now.
3. Pray for purity. David knew how impure his own heart was as he thought back to his moral mess-ups and sexual sins. After confessing to the Lord, he prayed for a holy heart in Psalm 51:10: "Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me." John Piper writes: "Jesus did not come into the world simply because we had some bad habits that needed to be broken. He came into the world because we have dirty hearts that need to be purified." When's the last time you prayed for purity? Because our hearts are so unholy, it's also helpful to follow another of David's prayers from Psalm 139:23-24: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

4. Draw close to God. When we come close to God, His very holiness will have a purifying effect in our lives. Proverbs 8:13: "To fear the LORD is to hate evil..." James 4:8: "Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded." There is no way to be pure without cultivating the IMPACT priorities into your life: Instruction in God's Word, Mobilizing for Ministry, Praying with Faith, Adoring God in Worship, Caring for One Another, and Telling others the Gospel.

5. Memorize and meditate on the Word of God. If you are serious about seeking purity in your life, one of the best ways to have victory is through memorizing Scripture. In Psalm 119:9, the psalmist asks a question, "How can a young man keep his way pure?" The answer comes in the second part of this verse and in verse 11: "By living according to your word...I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you."

6. Avoid complaining and arguing. This one may surprise you but when we grumble, we are really exhibiting a lack of faith and when we argue with others, we are allowing unholiness to settle in our hearts. Philippians 2:14-15: "Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure..."

7. Watch what we watch. While our hearts harbor unholiness, we must also steer clear of impure images because what comes in through the eyes often settles into the heart. James 1:27 tells us that part of pure religion is to "keep oneself from being polluted by the world." This is not easy to do, when even the Super Bowl halftime show celebrates sinfulness. I heard this week that a higher percentage of Christian teenagers watch MTV than non-Christians do. One of the best ways to keep our hearts pure is to make a covenant to not allow polluted pictures into your mind. That's exactly what Job did in Job 31:1: "I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl." It matters what we look at, whether that's a book, a magazine, a TV show, a movie, or the Internet. (See <http://www.covenanteyes.com/>)

8. Waiting is wonderful. On Friday night when I was driving back from Bloomington, I was listening to talk radio when I heard the host interview Rebecca St. James, a contemporary Christian musician. They were talking about saving sex for marriage. On this nationally syndicated radio show, she made this statement: "Waiting is wonderful!" This message needs to be stated strongly. True love waits. Hebrews 13:4: "Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral." If you feel like it's too late, it's not. From this point on, with God's help and your determination, you can be pure.

9. Find a faithful friend. Some of us might need to find different friends because of the influence they are having on our lives. Maybe you're dating someone who is not right for you. Proverbs 13:20: "He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm." If you need some help in the area of purity, find a faithful friend who can hold you accountable. Proverbs 27:9: "...the pleasantness of one's friend springs from his earnest counsel."

10. Focus on our future hope. If you're serious about pursuing purity, you'll quickly discover that this is a lifelong battle. Don't despair. Don't bail. Keep your eyes focused on what's to come for the believer. Longing for Christ's return will purify our hearts because we become what we love. 1 John 3:3: "Everyone who has this hope in him purifies himself, just as He is pure."

Seeing God

The last part of this Beatitude contains the promise: "for they will see God." God reserves intimate fellowship with Himself to those who are unmixed in their devotion, and unmasked in their relationship with Him. The nearer we approach to purity of heart, the surer we become of God; and the closer we get to God, the more pure we will become. In our heart of hearts, above all things, we want to see Him. Ecclesiastes 3:11 says that God has put eternity in the human heart. Pascal wrote about the "God-shaped vacuum" inside each of us. Augustine said that our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God.

Paul Thigpen writes: "Unfortunately sin has blinded us, leaving our spiritual eyes swollen shut. Unable to see God, we grope in the darkness, searching desperately for someone or something to make us happy...our heart is splintered and scattered. We run to and fro, gathering first this trinket, then that one, dropping both for the next shiny one we spy...the result is a civil war of the soul. All the while our Father stands close by, waiting for us to turn around and run into His arms...if our vision of God is to grow wider, clearer, and brighter, our will must be united in a single focus on Him and an overriding desire to know and love Him" (Discipleship Journal, Issue 138, Pages 64-65).

Friend, are you ready to see God like you never have before? Is your desire to know Him as intense as David's was when he wrote in Psalm 119:58: "I have sought your face with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise?" If so, then it's time to cut loose anything that is keeping you from moving forward.

I read this week about a couple from Bakersfield, California who had just purchased a new boat, but were having some serious problems. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't get their 22-foot boat going. It was very sluggish no matter which way they

turned, no matter how much power was applied. After about an hour of trying to make it go, they putted to a nearby marina, hoping someone there could tell them what was wrong. A thorough check on the topside of the boat revealed that everything was in perfect working condition. The engine ran fine, the out drive went up and down, and the propeller was the correct size and pitch. Then, one of the marina guys jumped in the water to check underneath. He came up choking on the water because he was laughing so hard. As far as I know, this is a true story....under the boat, still strapped securely in place, was the trailer!

When God looks underneath your life, what does He see? When He looks behind your mask, what does He discover? Is your heart undivided? Or, are you strapped to some sin that is slowly pulling you under?

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

MATTHEW 5:9

Making Peace in the Midst of Conflict

Matthew 5:9

2/22/04

Conflict is everywhere, isn't it? In a classic Winston Churchill comeback, Lady Astor once said, "If you were my husband, I'd put poison in your coffee." Churchill responded with his cutting wit: "If you were my wife, I'd drink it." We laugh at this sarcasm, but it reveals that all of us are predisposed to conflict. In fact, some of us have clashed with so many people, that we don't really know how to live peaceably with others. I've known some individuals over the years that never seem happy unless they are fighting with someone.

A young daughter was working so diligently on her homework that her father became curious and asked her what she was doing. She looked up at her dad and replied, "I'm writing a report on how to bring peace to the world." The father smiled and said, "Isn't that a pretty big order for a little girl?" The girl continued writing as she answered, "Oh, no. Don't worry. There are three of us in the class working on it."

It's easy to be naïve about peace, because it is in fact, very elusive in our church, in our relationships, in our culture, and in the world today. I recently heard about a group of people who were walking across America on a mission of peace. Unfortunately, they couldn't get along and divided into two groups in Arkansas! That reminds me of what one person said about Christians who quarrel: "Where two or three come together in Jesus' name...there will eventually be conflict."

The fact that the lack of peace is so pervasive is really nothing new. We can trace it all the way back to the book of Genesis. Humans have been at war with God ever since Adam and Eve sinned. And, beginning with the conflict between Cain and Abel, which eventually led to one brother killing the other, we have been in a bombastic battle with our brothers and sisters up till now.

In the midst of this continuous conflict and incessant strife, Jesus speaks some stunning words in Matthew 5:9: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God." The Message paraphrase puts it this way: "You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family." We are to be pure before God, as we learned last week, and this beatitude challenges us to be at peace with others. Let me remind you that Jesus is not listing some optional ideas or preaching a sermon with some suggestions we might want to consider. These eight beatitudes are meant to describe the disciple of Christ and set forth the blessings that come to those who follow Him wholeheartedly.

The Bible is a book of peace as the word "peace" appears over 400 times in Scripture, with many other indirect references. Hebrews 13:20 refers to God as the "God of peace" and because this is part of His very character, He wants His people to be marked by peace as well. Isaiah 9:6 describes Jesus as the "Prince of peace."

Before we go much further, let's describe what biblical peace is not:

- Peace is not merely the absence of activity. We often use the phrase "peace and quiet" to refer to our need to slow down.
- Peace is more than the absence of hostility. The biblical concept is much deeper than just not having conflict.
- Peace is not just getting away from reality. While we go on vacation to get away from it all, the Bible offers peace right where we are.

Peace is not the absence of something bad; rather it is the presence of something good. In the Old Testament, the word peace is shalom and is a state of wholeness and harmony that is intended to resonate in all relationships. When used as a greeting, shalom was a wish for outward freedom from disturbance as well as an inward sense of well-being. To a people constantly harassed by

enemies, peace was the premiere blessing. In Numbers 6:24-26, God gave Moses these words to use when blessing His people: "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace." Every one of Paul's thirteen letters begins with a greeting of peace. Some of them end with it as well.

3 Types of People

As we consider this beatitude of peace, Phil Morgan suggests that there are three types of people (www.sermoncentral.com):

- Peace-breakers
- Peace-fakers
- Peace-makers

1. Peace-breakers. We live in a world of peace-breakers. Did you know that in all the years of recorded history, the world has been at peace just 8% of the time? Over that period, 8000 treaties have been made and broken (www.cornerstonbc.com). Someone perceptively quipped, "Peace is that glorious moment in history when everyone stops to reload."

Those who break peace in the church often cause trouble and division. The Bible has strong words in Romans 16:17-18: "I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them. For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people." God's heart is revealed in Psalm 133:1: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity." Now, before you start pointing your finger at someone else, each of us needs to examine our own hearts. It's certainly possible to be a peace-breaker without even knowing it.

One area we all need to consider is the use of our tongues. Ephesians 4:29-31: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice." When Paul is writing to the church at Corinth, he expresses his concern about what he may find when he comes for a visit in 2 Corinthians 12:20: "I fear that there may be quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, factions, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder."

Many years ago, Psychology Today (October, 1983) posed an intriguing question: "If you could push a button and thereby eliminate any person with no repercussions to yourself, would you do it?" Sixty percent of those responding answered yes. One man posed an even better question, "If such a device were invented, would anyone live to tell about it?"

Friend, have you been pushing any buttons lately? Are you a peace-breaker? Do you bring people together or pull them apart? It's always easier to create conflict than it is to promote peace.

2. Peace-faker. It's interesting that Jesus is not calling us to be peace-keepers, but peace-makers. Some of us are predisposed to have peace at any cost in an effort to avoid conflict with someone. Often this is just pretend peace, as tensions go underground and come back again because they were never dealt with. Phil Morgan writes, "If things are not resolved, then that peace you're trying so very hard to maintain by avoiding the issues will get harder and harder to keep. Eventually there will come a total breakdown in the relationship...it can die while everything on the surface looks peaceful." Ephesians 4:25 challenges the peace-fakers among us, "Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbor, for we are all members of one body."

3. Peace-maker. It's much easier to either break the peace or fake the peace than it is to make peace in the midst of conflict. When Jesus pronounced a blessing upon peacemakers, He used a very strong word for "maker." It literally means "to do" or "to create." Friends, peace must be actively made because it never happens by chance. Left to ourselves, we drift toward divisiveness. Peacemaking is messy work and is often resented. Peace must be pursued until we have it, and then guarded so we don't lose it. A peacemaker does what it takes to establish and maintain peace. Instead of escalating conflict, this person works to extinguish tension and usher in peace. Warren Wiersbe has said, "Hatred looks for a victim, while love seeks a victory. The man of war throws stones, and the peacemaker builds a bridge out of those stones."

Peace Principles

A brief biblical survey helps us see that there are at least 12 principles that describe both the importance of harmony and the hard work involved in promoting peace.

- Peace must be pursued. Psalm 34:14: "Turn from evil and do good; seek peace and pursue it." Romans 14:19: "Let us therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification." Ephesians 4:3: "Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace." 1 Thessalonians 5:13: "...Live in peace with one another."

- Being a peacemaker can be lonely. Psalm 120:6-7: “Too long have I lived among those who hate peace. I am a man of peace; but when I speak, they are for war.”
- Peace must be prayed for. Psalm 122:6-8: “Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: ‘May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels.’ For the sake of my brothers and friends, I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’”
- The promoter of peace finds joy. Proverbs 12:20: “There is deceit in the hearts of those who plot evil, but joy for those who promote peace.”
- Pleasing God is a prerequisite for peace. Proverbs 16:7: “When a man’s ways are pleasing to the LORD, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him.”
- Those who bring peace have beautiful feet. Isaiah 52:7: “How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace...”
- Jesus gives peace unlike any other. John 14:27: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives...”
- Churches grow during times of peace. Acts 9:31: “Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace. It was strengthened; and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it grew in numbers, living in the fear of the Lord.”
- We must do everything possible to live at peace. Romans 12:18: “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.”
- Peace is a directive from the God of peace. 1 Corinthians 7:15: “God has called us to live in peace.” 2 Corinthians 13:11: “...be of one mind, live in peace. And the God of love and peace will be with you.” Colossians 3:15: “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace...”
- Righteousness is rewarded to peacemakers. James 3:18: “Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.”
- Jesus is the model for peace. Ephesians 2:14-17: “For He himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility...His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace... He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.” Interestingly, the phrase “making peace” is also found in our beatitude for today.

Rewards for Peacemakers

In 1781, Benjamin Franklin wrote to John Adams, “‘Blessed are the peacemakers’ is, I suppose, for another world. In this world they are frequently cursed.” While it’s extremely difficult to be a peacemaker, there are at least two rewards.

First, we are blessed when we make peace. God applauds and approves those who do what it takes to make peace where there are problems. Martin Lloyd Jones asks the question, “Why are peacemakers blessed? The answer is...because they are so unlike everyone else...they are the people who stand out as being different from the rest of the world.”

Second, this beatitude ends with an intriguing phrase, “...for they will be called sons of God.” The word “called” means to be officially designated as holding a particular rank or office like when a chairman is named, or a captain is chosen, or a spokesman is designated. It also means, “to become” or “owned.” “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be owned as the children of God.” What Jesus is saying here is that peacemakers will be known and recognized as what they really are – children of God. A peacemaker has the bestowed title of being a child of the Prince of Peace. The phrase, “sons of God,” refers to a family relationship in which the son takes his father’s name and becomes heir to the father’s fortune. When the Bible uses the term, “son of” someone, that person is “of” their father, and therefore resemble him. It often bears the meaning, “partaker of the character of.”

Growing up I loved it when people would say, “You’re just like your dad.” In fact, that’s one of the biggest compliments I can receive to this day, because I love my dad and have always wanted to be as kind, considerate, gentle, and giving as he is. One of my best experiences was when I worked in the factory where my dad worked during a couple summers when I was in college. Employees would come up to me and ask, “You’re John Bill’s kid, right?” I’d always smile and say, “Yep, he’s my dad.” That was a tremendous tribute because evidently people saw something in me that reminded them of my father. Likewise, when you practice and promote peace, a watching world will come up to you and ask, “Are you a son of God? Are you a daughter of God?” Peacemakers bear a family resemblance and reflect something of the Heavenly Father’s character.

In his commentary on this passage, Hendriksen writes, “It’s a designation of high honor and dignity, showing that by promoting peace, they have entered into the very sphere of the Father’s own activity. They are his co-workers” (“The Gospel of Matthew,” page

279). Friend, when you make peace, you partner with God in spreading peace, and you demonstrate to a watching world that you are a son or a daughter of the King. In addition, you enjoy the full benefits of being in His family. If you want to resemble God, be a peacemaker.

Action Steps

We can talk a lot about the importance of peacemaking, but until we put peace into practice, it's just words. Let me list 4 action steps.

1. Make sure you're at peace with God. If you have not yet put your faith in Christ, the Bible says that you are at war with God (Ephesians 2:3). It's time to have a peace conference with the Prince of Peace. There is no way to have the peace of God until you know the God of peace.

Years ago, Admiral Nelson won a battle at sea against the French. The French Admiral came before him to surrender. He was dressed in his full regalia, with medals pinned to his shoulder, and his sword hanging by his side. He reached out his hand to Lord Nelson as if they were now friends. Lord Nelson just stepped back and said, "Your sword first." Friend, you can't just come up and shake Jesus' hand without laying down your sword. You must surrender.

I like what Haddon Robinson said, "No peace will exist between nations until peace reigns in each country. And no country will have peace unless peace resides in each community. And no community will have peace unless peace dwells within its people. And no people will have peace unless they surrender to the Prince of Peace."

2. Lead others to be at peace with God. Ephesians 6:15 refers to believers having their feet fitted with "the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace." 2 Corinthians 5:18 says that we have been given the ministry of reconciliation as if God were making His appeal through us to others. As a way to help your friends understand what Jesus did for them, I encourage you to begin thinking about whom to invite to "The Passion of the Christ" movie.

3. Be at peace with those around you. Do you need to make things right with someone today? Anyone you need to forgive? Do you need to ask for forgiveness from someone? Don't be like Lucy who said to Charlie Brown, "I hate everything and I hate everybody and I hate the whole wide world." Charlie says, "I thought you had inner peace." To which Lucy replies, "I do, but I have outer obnoxiousness."

4. Help others who are in conflict. How can God use you to build bridges between people who are in conflict? Peace is hard to make and even harder to keep. It's usually easier to walk away from a problem instead of getting involved in someone else's difficulty. Be like Francis of Assisi, who prayed, "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love. Where there is injury, pardon."

Will you say a good word when you hear juicy gossip? Will you work for peace when there is conflict? Will you seek a solution when you come across an argument? Will you calm the waters instead of stirring them up? Chuck Swindoll writes, "Peacemakers release tension, they don't intensify it...they strive for resolution."

The Peacemaker's Pledge

It's a pretty big order to bring peace to the world, but each of us can make a difference if we will pledge to be peacemakers right where we are. I wonder what would happen if an entire church would make a public commitment to Biblical Conflict Resolution? This pledge is adapted from Ken Sande's very helpful book entitled, "The Peacemaker" (2003 Peacemaker Ministries. Used by permission, www.hispeace.org). Please follow along as I read.

As people reconciled to God by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we believe that we are called to respond to conflict in a way that is remarkably different from the way the world deals with conflict (Matthew 5:9; Luke 6:27-36; Galatians 5:19-26). We also believe that conflict provides opportunities to glorify God, serve other people, and grow to be like Christ (Romans 8:28-29; 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1; James 1:2-4). Therefore, in response to God's love and in reliance on his grace, we commit ourselves to respond to conflict according to the following principles:

Glorify God — Instead of focusing on our own desires or dwelling on what others may do, we will rejoice in the Lord and bring him praise by depending on his forgiveness, wisdom, power, and love, as we seek to faithfully obey his commands and maintain a loving, merciful, and forgiving attitude (Psalm 37:1-6; Mark 11:25; John 14:15; Romans 12:17-21; 1 Corinthians 10:31; Philippians 4:2-9; Colossians 3:1-4; James 3:17-18, 4:1-3; 1 Peter 2:12).

Get the Log out of Your Own Eye — Instead of blaming others for a conflict or resisting correction, we will trust in God's mercy and take responsibility for our own contribution to conflicts—confessing our sins to those we have wronged, asking God to help us change any attitudes and habits that lead to conflict, and seeking to repair any harm we have caused (Proverbs 28:13; Matthew 7:3-

5; Luke 19:8; Colossians 3:5-14; 1 John 1:8-9).

Gently Restore — Instead of pretending that conflict doesn't exist or talking about others behind their backs, we will overlook minor offenses or we will talk personally and graciously with those whose offenses seem too serious to overlook, seeking to restore them rather than condemn them. When a conflict with a Christian brother or sister cannot be resolved in private, we will ask others in the body of Christ to help us settle the matter in a biblical manner (Proverbs 19:11; Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 6:1-8; Galatians 6:1-2; Ephesians 4:29; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; James 5:9).

Go and be reconciled — Instead of accepting premature compromise or allowing relationships to wither, we will actively pursue genuine peace and reconciliation—forgiving others as God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven us, and seeking just and mutually beneficial solutions to our differences (Matthew 5:23-24, 6:12, 7:12; Ephesians 4:1-3, 32; Philippians 2:3-4)

By God's grace, we will apply these principles as a matter of stewardship, realizing that conflict is an assignment, not an accident. We will remember that success in God's eyes is not a matter of specific results, but of faithful, dependent obedience. And we will pray that our service as peacemakers will bring praise to our Lord and lead others to know His infinite love (Matthew 25:14-21; John 13:34-35; Romans 12:18; 1 Peter 2:19, 4:19).

We have printed copies of this available (See "Peacemakers" directly below). Please study the Scripture passages, pray through the pledge, and then I hope you will commit yourself to be a peacemaker.

Having Faith to Forbear - Telemachus was a monk who lived in the 4th century who sensed that God wanted him to go to Rome. When he arrived in the city, people were thronging in the streets. He asked why everyone was so excited and was told that this was the day that the gladiators would be fighting and killing each other in the coliseum. He thought to himself, "Four centuries after Christ and they are still killing each other, for enjoyment?"

He ran to the coliseum and heard the gladiators shouting, "Hail to Caesar, we die for Caesar" and he thought, "this isn't right." He jumped over the railing and went out into the middle of the field, got between two gladiators, held up his hands and said, "In the name of Christ, forbear." The crowd protested and began to shout, "Run him through. Run him through."

A gladiator came over and hit him in the stomach with the back of his sword. It sent him sprawling in the sand. He got up and ran back and again said, "In the name of Christ, forbear." The crowd continued to chant, "Run him through." One gladiator came over and plunged his sword through the little monk's stomach and he fell into the sand, which began to turn crimson with his blood. One last time he gasped out, "In the name of Christ forbear."

A hush came over the 80,000 people in the coliseum. Soon a man stood and left, then another and then more, and within minutes all 80,000 had emptied out of the arena. It was the last known gladiatorial contest in the history of Rome.

Jesus died on a cruel rugged cross to make peace for us. His blood was shed so that we might know the meaning of eternal peace. In order to be identified as a child of God, we should be willing to do no less.

Closing Benediction: 2 Thessalonians 3:16: "Now may the God of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you."

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MATTHEW 5:10-12

The Blessing No One Wants

Matthew 5:10-12

Rev. Brian Bill

2/29/04

How many of you have seen The Passion of the Christ movie? As the “national conversation” continues, I hope you’re taking advantage of the opportunity to tell people why Jesus died. I’ve had a number of discussions this week about the topic with people I don’t even know. Next week we’re going to begin a new sermon series called, “Experience the Passion” as we focus on the last three chapters of the Gospel of Matthew. It’s my hope that you’ll invite your friends, family members, and co-workers so that they can more fully understand how passionate the Savior is about them.

I was intrigued with the front-page story in the Pantagraph this past Thursday. At the end of the article, one person who saw the movie on opening day said this, “It deepens my faith.” Another moviegoer responded, “I felt like I need to go to church more. I will moan and groan less” (www.pantagraph.com). I was also thrilled to receive a phone call from a church member on Thursday who told me about someone from another state who prayed to receive Christ after watching the movie. I pray that many more will come to saving faith as a result.

Many people have commented about how graphic and violent the movie is. I agree, and would advise parents that those 12 and under should probably not see it. It received an “R” rating because crucifixion is an “R-rated” event. Not surprisingly, some reviewers, in typical Hollywood hypocrisy, have castigated the movie because of the violence, while embracing the gore of other films that are bereft of spiritual value. Unbelievably, Merrisa Marr from the Wall Street Journal cited some critics that have referred to it as “emotionally void” (Wall Street Journal, 2/27/04, Section B, Page 5). Having seen it, I don’t know how anyone could make a statement like that. Those who criticize the movie probably didn’t like the Book either! The title of this film comes from the old English word “passion” which literally means, “suffering” and focuses on the final twelve hours of the Savior’s life.

As Jesus contemplates His upcoming death, He says in John 12:27: “Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour.” Simply put, Jesus came to earth to die as our sin substitute. We see this in John 12:47: “For I did not come to judge the world, but to save it.” And, in His final hours, He suffered horribly. In rapid sequence, the Bible says that Jesus was arrested and faced a number of illegal trials. He was punched in the face, spit upon, ridiculed, taunted, insulted, and then mocked as a king when a crown of sharp thorns was crammed down on His head.

Jesus was then led out to be scourged. This part of the movie is almost unbearable to watch. A scourge was a vicious whip and was called a cat-of-nine-tails because there were nine pieces of leather to which bits of bone were tied to rip a person’s flesh and bruise the body. Every time the whip came down on Jesus, it left nine bloody marks, often pulling out the skin as it recoiled.

In a sermon that he preached last week, Rick Warren adds, “This torture was so painful that there was a Roman law that said you could never give more than forty strikes because forty would usually kill a man from blood loss. It said, ‘If you give more than forty strikes then the person who administered the punishment will be given the same punishment.’ So they always...only gave 39 strips, just in case they miscounted. Think about this – 39 times 9. That’s nearly 400 marks on the body of Christ...His back, His stomach, His legs were one bloody pulp long before He even went to the cross” (“What the Passion of Jesus Tells Us About God,” downloaded from www.pastors.com).

When the Messiah preached His message on the mountainside at the beginning of His ministry, He knew what awaited Him, and He knew what was in store for His faithful followers. As we come to the eighth and final beatitude, many of us would like to take a pass on persecution and suffering, me included. Follow along as I read from Matthew 5:10-12: “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

pastor friend suggests that there are at least six reasons why we can’t ignore this instruction

- It’s the last beatitude and serves as a test of all the others. Persecution is as much a normal mark of discipleship as being merciful is.
- It’s the longest one because it’s the hardest to embrace.
- It’s the only beatitude with a command: “Rejoice and be glad.”
- It’s the only one with an explanation.
- It’s the only one repeated twice. The word “blessed” is used two times as though Jesus is saying, “You are doubly blessed when you are persecuted.”
- It’s the only beatitude addressed directly to us. The tense changes from “blessed are those” in verse 10 to “blessed are you” in verse 11.

Last week we focused on the applause that comes from heaven when we do the hard work of making peace in the midst of conflict.

It may seem out of place that Jesus would move from peacemaking to persecution, from harmony to hostility. But not all attempts at reconciliation succeed, and no matter how hard we try to make peace with some people, they refuse to live at peace with us.

Actually, if we live according to the first seven Beatitudes, we will automatically experience the eighth. It's like an equation. If you are the person of verses 3-9, you will get the persecution of verses 10-12. If you are "poor in spirit," some will think you are self-righteous. When you "mourn" over sin, others will feel convicted and not want you around. The "meek" person might be run over. When you break out of the spiritual status quo and "hunger and thirst" for God, some will label you a religious fanatic. Be "merciful" and people will call you gullible. Strive to be "pure in heart" and feel the tension of a world that lives on lust. And strive to be a "peacemaker" and get ready for war.

Our faith begins, develops, and matures as we live out the first seven. Our faith is then tested when we come to the last one. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote the book called, "The Cost of Discipleship," referred to the "extra-ordinariness" of the Christian life: "With every beatitude the gulf is widened between the disciples and the people, and their call to come forth from the people becomes increasingly manifest" (As quoted by John Stott, "The Message of the Sermon on the Mount," Page 55).

What's hard about this beatitude is that we all like to be liked. Once again, we see that following Jesus is often a paradox. He applauds us when we are in agony and sees great purpose in our persecution. As an interesting side note, those who were listening to Jesus probably had a real difficult time with this one. It was a common idea back then that all suffering, including persecution, was an indication that God was not pleased and that the one who was suffering was somehow to blame for what was happening. This is particularly evident in the Book of Job. Jesus reverses this view, and as we take a look at the blessing no one wants, I see three paradoxes related to persecution.

- Persecution is a Given
- Persecution is a Gift
- Persecution Brings Gladness

Paradox #1: Persecution is a Given

Some of us have bought into the belief that once we have Jesus in our life, everything will go great. Maybe we've even thought that we should be successful and financially well off. Actually, the Bible says that the exact opposite will happen for those who honor and obey Christ. Jesus never taught the "prosperity gospel," but He did preach the "persecution gospel." Let's look again at Matthew 5:10: "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The word "righteousness" refers to living the "straight" way, of following Jesus.

John Stott suggests that we should not be surprised if anti-Christian hostility increases, but rather be surprised if it does not. In John 15:20, Jesus said, "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also." In John 16:33 He adds, "...In this world you will have trouble..." The Augsburg Confession defines the church as the community of those "who are persecuted and martyred for the gospel's sake." Speaking of their futures, in Matthew 24:9, Jesus told the disciples that they would face incredible struggles: "Then you will be handed over to be persecuted and put to death, and you will be hated by all nations because of me."

While we can't verify all the facts, church history and tradition tells us that the disciples fared no better than their leader (compiled from Fox's "Book of Martyrs." This book can be read online at: <http://bible.crosswalk.com/History/AD/FoxsBookofMartyrs/>).

- James was beheaded. It is said that on his way to be martyred, his accuser was so impressed by his courage and conviction that he repented of his sin, committed himself to Christ, and was then beheaded along with James.
- Phillip was scourged, thrown into prison, and then crucified.
- Matthew was slain with a sword.
- James the Less was stoned to death.
- Matthias was stoned and then beheaded.
- Andrew was crucified and then left hanging on the cross for three days.
- Peter was crucified upside down at his own request because he did not feel worthy enough to be crucified in the same manner as the Lord.
- Jude (Thaddeus) was crucified.
- Bartholomew was beaten with clubs and then crucified.

- Thomas was speared to death.
- Simon the Zealot was crucified.
- John was exiled to an island called Patmos where he died as a prisoner.

2 Timothy 3:12 says, "In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." This is echoed in Philippians 1:29: "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him." When Paul wrote to the young church in Thessalonica, he reminded them that Timothy was sent to them, "so that no one would be unsettled by these trials. You know quite well that we were destined for them. In fact, when we were with you, we kept telling you that we would be persecuted. And it turned out that way, as you well know" (1 Thessalonians 3:3-4). Peter, after witnessing all that Jesus went through, wrote in 1 Peter 4:12: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you."

Why is persecution so pervasive? Simply put, according to John Piper, it's due to the nature of Christianity and the sinfulness of human beings. There is such a tension between the message and way of life of Christians and the mindset and way of the world, that conflict is inevitable.

This Beatitude tells us that there are two reasons why we will be persecuted.

1. Because of the life we live. Verse 10: "those who are persecuted because of righteousness." Some of us might feel mistreated but it may have nothing do with righteousness. Ray Pritchard writes, "If you don't use deodorant, don't claim persecution because no one wants to sit next to you at work. If you're rude to your employees or disrespectful of your boss, don't be surprised to find yourself ostracized." Some of us believe we're being persecuted for righteous reasons but it may be because we are self-righteous and are therefore repelling people. Chuck Swindoll writes, "There are certain reactions we can arouse simply because we adhere to some fanatical extreme that is based on personal or private opinion" ("Simple Faith," page 35). Sooner or later, a sold-out Christ follower will be persecuted somehow.

2. Because of the Lord we love. In Verse 11 Jesus says that people will insult, persecute, and say false things, "because of me." This helps us define the word "righteous." To be righteous simply means being like the Lord Jesus Christ. For one reason or another, some people are so upset with Jesus that they take it out on those who love Him. Warren Wiersbe writes, "Jesus was different, and a world that thrives on conformity cannot tolerate differences." The early Christians were confronted with a choice, "Caesar or Christ?" They chose Christ, and with that choice they were automatically outlawed and branded as disloyal citizens.

We will be persecuted because of the life we live and because of the Lord we love. According to verse 11, this harassment takes three forms. Notice the change of tense from the third person to the second. We move from "those" who are persecuted to the much more personal "you" are persecuted. God congratulates you, and applauds from heaven, when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Christ.

- Verbal Insults. The word "insult" means to chide, taunt, or defame. Luke 6:22: "Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you, and insult you, and reject your name as evil, because of the son of man." Biblically speaking, to be insulted speaks of misrepresentations that degrade another's reputation and is closely related to slander. This often takes the form of verbal abuse and insulting language. As an example, the early church was accused of cannibalism as it gathered to observe the Lord's Supper. Matthew 27:39 tells us that people "hurled insults" at Jesus, "shaking their heads" as they passed by the cross. Friend, when you are insulted for what you believe, you're on the right track!

- Physical Attack. The word, "persecute" means, "to chase away or pursue with hostile intent, to be hunted down as an animal." The tense of the verb suggests those "who have allowed themselves to be persecuted" or "have endured it." It can be defined as repeatedly raiding another, or as continually annoying someone. One of the most famous martyrs was Polycarp. When he was dragged before the Roman authorities and given the ultimate choice to sacrifice to Caesar or be burned to death, he replied: "Eighty and six years have I served Christ, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" He was then brought to the stake where he prayed his final prayer: "Oh, Lord God Almighty, the Father of thy well beloved and ever blessed Son, by whom we have received the knowledge of thee...I thank thee that thou has graciously thought me worthy of this day and of this hour."

One writer described the persecutions that Christians have faced in these words: "All the world knows of the Christians who were flung to the lions or burned at the stake; but these were kindly deaths. Nero wrapped the Christians in pitch and set them alight, and used them as living torches to light his gardens. He sewed them into skins of wild animals and set his hunting dogs upon them to tear them to death. They were tortured on the rack; they were scraped with pincers; molten lead was poured hissing upon them... eyes were torn out, parts of their bodies were cut off and roasted before their eyes; their hands and feet were burned while cold water was poured over them to lengthen the agony. These things are not pleasant to think about, but these are the things a man had

to be prepared for, if he took his stand with Christ" (From a sermon by Bill Prater, www.sermoncentral.com).

Intense persecution still takes place in our world today. This past Wednesday, 48 people, including women and children, attempted to take refuge in a church in Nigeria and were shot to death by militants (www.christianitytoday.com). According to an article that just appeared in Christianity Today, more than 50 house church leaders have been arrested in China, following the release of a DVD and book about the stunning growth and vibrancy of Christianity in that country. Amazingly, these believers ask not for release, but for strength. One mission agency asked believers in America to pray this way: "Please pray that they will be strengthened by the Holy Spirit to withstand whatever pressure and pain inflicted on them. Pray God would empower them to witness for Jesus Christ to the authorities, other prisoners, and whomever they come into contact with. Fervently pray that this present crisis will cause the house churches of China to grow in grace and in number" (www.asiaharvest.org).

- False Accusations. After verbal assaults and physical pursuit, followers of Christ will also face those who "falsely say all kinds of evil...." I don't know if you've ever been on the receiving end of someone saying something false and hurtful, but it doesn't feel good. The psalmist cried out in Psalm 35:11: "False witnesses did rise up; they laid to my charge things that I knew not." Jesus faced false charges as well, and according to 1 Peter 2:23, "He did not retaliate." Some people like to say things behind our backs, but remember they did the same to Jesus as His enemies tried to destroy his good name.

Paradox #2: Persecution is a Gift

Most of us can agree that persecution is a given, but to say that it is a gift is a stretch for us. We are blessed when people mess with us for our faith. And, what we receive is the kingdom of heaven. No one can take this away from us. Before Stephen was stoned to death, Acts 7:55 says that he "looked up to heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand..."

Hebrews 11:36-38 describes what happened to a number of the heroes of the faith: "Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated." Verse 39 contains a very curious phrase: "The world was not worthy of them." This world was not their home and in some mysterious way, they saw persecution as a gift that brought them to their heavenly home. When Dietrich Bonhoeffer left prison on the way to the gallows, he reportedly said, "This is the end—for me, the beginning of life."

God congratulates those who face persecution and He gives the kingdom of heaven as a gift to those who absorb the anger and ambushes of others. God approves those who face the antagonism of those opposed to His Son. Persecution is the trigger that causes God to pour out His blessings on your life. I'll never forget the martyred missionary Jim Eliot's famous quote when he said, "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Paradox #3: Persecution Brings Gladness

The third paradox is really mind-boggling and is found in verse 14: "Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." We generally rejoice when we get good news. The phrase, "be glad" is a command and means to "leap forth with exuberant gladness, to jump with exceeding excitement." That's how Jesus put it in Luke 6:23: "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy..." Jesus is not implying that we should be happy about persecution itself. We are to leap for joy for what it represents. Bill Prater suggests that there are four reasons why we should rejoice when persecuted (www.sermoncentral.com).

1. Persecution confirms our relationship. Someone has said that persecution is a certificate of Christian authenticity. We should rejoice that people see Jesus in us. 1 Peter 4:16: "If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear his name." Jesus thinks enough of you to let you share in some of what He went through. After the apostles were put in jail for preaching the gospel, and then having to face charges, Acts 5:41 says, "The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name." Suffering is the badge of our discipleship.

2. Persecution causes reliance. When we suffer we are more prone to do some self-examination and we are forced to lean on God in ways that we have never done before. And, when we do, we see God's power. Paul experienced this in 2 Corinthians 12:9-10: "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

3. Persecution cultivates righteousness. One of the best ways to grow is to go through some grief. 1 Peter 5:10: "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." That's why Jesus mentions the persecution the prophets faced before us. They serve as models because their rejection was the rule, not the exception. To suffer for what is right is to be part of a great succession of godly men and women. John Piper encourages us to "go often to these great men and women of old and get inside their hearts. Put yourself on the rack with them and learn how to love heaven with them."

4. Persecution confers a reward. Sometimes when we're suffering, all we can do is focus on what's to come in heaven. We can jump for joy because of what's ahead. We may lose everything on earth, but we shall inherit everything in heaven. Towards the end of his life, the apostle Paul had every confidence that God would release him from his difficulties. Listen to what he said in 2 Timothy 4:18: "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack..." But recognizing that God may have other plans, this verse concludes: "...and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom." This promise gave Rowland Taylor and Bishop Ridley and John Bradford the impulse to kiss the stakes at which they were burned. After receiving countless lashes that turned his back to jelly for Jesus, Obadiah Holmes said, "You have struck me with roses."

Friends, the Beatitudes are not easy to live. Perhaps that's our problem. We've made the Christian life way too painless. We've gone along and gotten along. Let me ask you a few questions: What have you done in the last month that has caused anyone to challenge your faith? When have you risked speaking out for Jesus? How have you defended the cause of Christ? Have you identified yourself as a Christ follower? Maybe you've not said anything against Jesus...you really haven't said anything at all. Perhaps you're not persecuted because people don't see the Savior in your life.

Every Christian who puts Christ first will face flack somehow, somewhere, at some time.

- Have you been made fun of for your faith?
- Perhaps you're just ignored because someone thinks you're too religious.
- That promotion at work may be elusive because of your principles.
- Some of you may feel judged and condemned by fellow Christians.
- A number of you face sarcasm from a spouse that does not share your faith.

Remember, persecution is a given. It's a gift that comes with blessings. And, it should bring us gladness because the rewards are worth the risk.

In the early days of the church, a Christian offended the king and was threatened with banishment because of his preaching. He replied, "Sire, you cannot banish me, for the world is my Father's house." The king then said he would confiscate all his possessions. The Christian answered, "Sire, you cannot confiscate my possessions because my treasures are laid up in heaven." The king was starting to get furious and told him that he would make him live in isolation away from all his friends. The believer stated, "Sire, you cannot remove me from my greatest friend, because He lives within me." Finally the king shouted out, "Then I'll have you killed!" To which the Christian calmly replied, "You can take my breath, but you can never take my life for it is hid with God in Christ" (as quoted by Coy Wylie).

Invitation

Please stand as I read Romans 8:35-39: "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord."