

(((PREACHING *the* WORD)))

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The MESSAGE
of the KINGDOM



R. KENT HUGHES

The Sermon on the Mount

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Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jon McGrath, Simplificated Studio

Cover image: Adam Greene, illustrator

First printing 2001

First printing redesign 2013

Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN-13: 978-1-4335-3621-2

ISBN-10: 1-4335-3621-8

PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-3622-9

Mobipocket ISBN: 978-1-4335-3623-6

ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-3624-3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hughes, R. Kent.

The sermon on the mount : the message of the kingdom / R. Kent Hughes.

p. cm.—(Preaching the Word)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 13: 978-1-58134-063-1 (alk. paper)

ISBN 10: 1-58134-063-X

I. Sermon on the mount. I. Title. II. Series.

BT380.2.H83

2001

226.9'06—dc21

2001000453

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

TS 22 21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A Word to Those Who Preach the Word

There are times when I am preaching that I have especially sensed the pleasure of God. I usually become aware of it through the unnatural silence. The ever-present coughing ceases and the pews stop creaking, bringing an almost physical quiet to the sanctuary—through which my words sail like arrows. I experience a heightened eloquence, so that the cadence and volume of my voice intensify the truth I am preaching.

There is nothing quite like it—the Holy Spirit filling one’s sails, the sense of his pleasure, and the awareness that something is happening among one’s hearers. This experience is, of course, not unique, for thousands of preachers have similar experiences, even greater ones.

What has happened when this takes place? How do we account for this sense of his smile? The answer for me has come from the ancient rhetorical categories of *logos*, *ethos*, and *pathos*.

The first reason for his smile is the *logos*—in terms of preaching, God’s Word. This means that as we stand before God’s people to proclaim his Word, we have done our homework. We have exegeted the passage, mined the significance of its words in their context, and applied sound hermeneutical principles in interpreting the text so that we understand what its words meant to its hearers. And it means that we have labored long until we can express in a sentence what the theme of the text is—so that our outline springs from the text. Then our preparation will be such that as we preach, we will not be preaching our own thoughts about God’s Word, but God’s actual Word, his *logos*. This is fundamental to pleasing him in preaching.

The second element in knowing God’s smile in preaching is *ethos*—what you are as a person. There is a danger endemic to preaching, which is having your hands and heart cauterized by holy things. Phillips Brooks illustrated it by the analogy of a train conductor who comes to believe that he has been to the places he announces because of his long and loud heralding of them. And that is why Brooks insisted that preaching must be “the bringing of truth through personality.” Though we can never *perfectly* embody the truth we preach, we must be subject to it, long for it, and make it as much a part of our ethos as possible. As the Puritan William Ames said, “Next to the Scriptures, nothing makes a sermon more to pierce, than when it comes out of the inward

affection of the heart without any affectation.” When a preacher’s *ethos* backs up his *logos*, there will be the pleasure of God.

Last, there is *pathos*—personal passion and conviction. David Hume, the Scottish philosopher and skeptic, was once challenged as he was seen going to hear George Whitefield preach: “I thought you do not believe in the gospel.” Hume replied, “I don’t, but *he does*.” Just so! When a preacher believes what he preaches, there will be passion. And this belief and requisite passion will know the smile of God.

The pleasure of God is a matter of *logos* (the Word), *ethos* (what you are), and *pathos* (your passion). As you *preach the Word* may you experience his smile—the Holy Spirit in your sails!

R. Kent Hughes
Wheaton, Illinois

1

The Riches of Poverty

MATTHEW 5:1–3

*Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

5:3



JESUS' SERMON ON THE MOUNT is so famous and powerful that we can hardly overstate its influence. St. Augustine, for example, described it as “a perfect standard of the Christian life.” The great preacher-poet John Donne spoke of it in the most ornate terms:

As nature hath given us certain elements, and all our bodies are composed of them; and art hath given us a certain alphabet of letters, and all words are composed of them; so, our blessed Saviour, in these three chapters of this Gospel, hath given us a sermon of texts, of which, all our sermons may be composed. All the articles of our religion, all the canons of our Church, all the injunctions of our princes, all the homilies of our fathers, all the body of divinity, is in these three chapters, in this one sermon in the Mount.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer based his classic *The Cost of Discipleship* upon its exposition. The influence of the Sermon on the Mount is truly past reckoning.

The Sermon on the Mount has even exerted a great influence on those outside the Christian faith. Its influence upon Gandhi's political approach is a matter of common knowledge. Those who hate Christianity and its ethics likewise have made it an object of contempt. It is seen as the source of the “slave morality” that Nietzsche so hated. When Nietzsche's teaching bore its terrible fruit during the ascendancy of National Socialism in Germany,

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the Sermon was vigorously attacked by men like Alfred Rosenberg, and a modified version was produced for those who wanted to remain within the Christian tradition and accommodate themselves to Hitler's philosophy. So like it or not, everyone in Western civilization has been touched in some way by the Sermon on the Mount. No one can legitimately minimize its influence.

For the Christian believer, it is simply the greatest sermon ever preached. Why is this? To begin with, it came from the lips of Jesus. The original sermon was probably quite long, possibly even several hours, and what we have in Matthew 5—7 (which takes about ten minutes to read) is a distillation of his teaching. The Sermon on the Mount is the compacted, congealed theology of Christ and as such is perhaps the most profound section of the entire New Testament and the whole Bible. Every phrase can bear exhaustive exposition and yet never be completely plumbed. Along with this, it is the most penetrating section of God's Word. Because the theme is entering the kingdom of heaven, it shows us exactly where we stand in relation to the kingdom and eternal life (see 5:3; 7:21). As we expose ourselves to the X-rays of Christ's words, we see whether we truly are believers, and if believers, the degree of the authenticity of our lives. No other section of Scripture makes us face ourselves like the Sermon on the Mount. It is violent, but its violence can be our ongoing liberation! It is the antidote to the pretense and sham that plagues Christianity.

For me personally, the Sermon has been the most important factor in my spiritual life. Every time I return to it, especially the Beatitudes, I am brought up short as I face the bedrock reality of this amazing revelation. My dream and prayer is that somehow the spirituality of the Sermon on the Mount will penetrate our hearts, lifting us from the mediocrity that characterizes our society.

We will begin with the Beatitudes, which someone has, not inaccurately, called the "Beautiful Attitudes" of the kingdom, for they give us the character of those who are true children of God. Many suggested titles say essentially the same thing: "The Character of the Kingdom," "The Manifesto of the Kingdom," "The Norms of the Kingdom." The first four Beatitudes focus on our relationship to God, and the second four on our relationship to our fellowman. Each of the eight builds upon the other, so that there is an amazingly beautiful and compelling progression. At the same time there is a profound unity. The first Beatitude (v. 3) and the last Beatitude (v. 10) end with the same reward, "the kingdom of heaven," which according to Hebrew style means that the Beatitudes between them all deal with that very same theme.

As we begin our study, we must envision the snowballing of interest in

Jesus' ministry leading up to this event. He has been traveling around Galilee teaching in the synagogues, and people are coming to him by the droves for healing. News has spread all the way to Syria, and every kind of case imaginable is coming to him. Great multitudes were following him clear out into the wilderness beyond the Jordan. Matthew 5:1, 2 tells us: "Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying, . . ."

In the midst of his escalating ministry, Jesus chose a prominent rise or hill, sat down in the customary teaching posture of a rabbi, surrounded by many disciples (that is, those who were at that time interested in learning), and began to teach them.

Those of us who grew up in the fifties are quite familiar with the name Mickey Cohen because he was the most flamboyant criminal of the day. Perhaps some have even heard of Cohen's becoming a "Christian."

The story goes like this: At the height of his career, Cohen was persuaded to attend an evangelistic service at which he showed a surprising interest in Christianity. Hearing of this, and realizing what a great influence a converted Mickey Cohen could have for the Lord, some prominent Christian leaders began visiting him in an effort to convince him to accept Christ. Late one night, after repeatedly being encouraged to open the door of his life on the basis of Revelation 3:20 ("Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me"), Cohen prayed.

Hopes ran high among his believing acquaintances. But with the passing of time no one could detect any change in Cohen's life. Finally they confronted him with the reality that being a Christian meant he would have to give up his friends and his profession. Cohen demurred. His logic? There are "Christian football players, Christian cowboys, Christian politicians; why not a Christian gangster?"¹

The absurdity of what happened to Mickey Cohen dramatically underscores what is happening to untold numbers today. Though many ostensibly have "accepted Christ," they continue life as they always have. There is no repentance. They remain self-sufficient, even puffed up. Indeed, they are nowhere near the kingdom because they have not experienced the poverty of spirit that the first Beatitude insists is the initial ground of the kingdom of heaven.

What evangelical Christianity needs is an exposure to the life-giving logic of the Beatitudes and the blessedness of their fearsome surgery.

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Blessedness: The Approval of God

Each of the eight Beatitudes opens with the word “blessed.” So it is essential that we understand here in the beginning what this word means, because it bears on everything that will be said in the remainder of this book.

Contrary to popular opinion, *blessed* does not mean “happy,” even though some translations have rendered it this way. Happiness is a subjective state, a feeling. But Jesus is not declaring how people feel; rather, he is making an objective statement about what God thinks of them.² *Blessed* is a positive judgment by God on the individual that means “to be approved” or “to find approval.” *So when God blesses us, he approves us.*³

Of course, there is no doubt that such blessing will bring feelings of happiness and that blessed people are generally happy. But we must remember that the root idea of “blessed” is an awareness of approval by God. Blessedness is not simply a nice wish from God; it is a pronouncement of what we actually are—*approved*. Blessedness indicates the smile of God or, as Max Lucado has so beautifully put it, *The Applause of Heaven*.

As we begin this study of the Beatitudes, let us realize that if God’s blessing/approval means more to us than anything else—even the approval of our friends, business acquaintances, and colleagues—then the Beatitudes are going to penetrate our hearts, speaking to us in the deepest ways.

The question is, do we really want his approval more than anything else? Not, do we want to be happy (as proper as that desire is) but, do we truly want God’s approval above all else?

If so, then we must heed every word of the first Beatitude, for it gives us the condition of blessing in just three words: “poor in spirit.” “Blessed/ approved are the poor in spirit.”

It is so essential that we get off to a good start with the first Beatitude if we are to understand them all that I would like to encourage the following prayer.

Dear Lord,

I long for your smile upon my life. So please open my heart to the meaning of the Beatitudes.

I open myself to their light. Shine their rays into the deepest part of my life. Sear my soul. Heal me.

Build the character of the kingdom in me so that you can call me blessed.
Amen.

Understanding Poverty of Spirit

Let us understand what poverty of spirit is not. It is not the conviction that one is of no value whatsoever. It does not mean the absence of self-worth or,

as one theologian put it, “ontological insignificance.” It does not require that we believe ourselves to be zeros. Such an attitude is simply not Scriptural, for Christ’s death on our behalf teaches us that we are of great value (1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23).

Neither does “poor in spirit” mean shyness. Many people who are naturally shy and introverted are extremely proud. Nor does “poor in spirit” mean lacking in vitality, spiritually anemic, or gutless.

Certainly, “poor in spirit” also does not refer to showy humility like that of Uriah Heep in Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, who kept reminding people that he was a “very humble person.”

The great British preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones tells of meeting such a man on one of his preaching missions. When Dr. Lloyd-Jones arrived at the train station, the man asked for the minister’s suitcase and in fact almost ripped it from his hand saying, “I am a deacon in the church where you are preaching tomorrow. . . . You know, I am a mere nobody, a very unimportant man. Really. I do not count; I am not a great man in the church; I am just one of those men who carry the bag for the minister.”

Lloyd-Jones observes, “He was anxious that I should know what a humble man he was, how ‘poor in spirit.’ Yet by his anxiety to make it known, he was denying the very thing he was trying to establish. Uriah Heep—the man who thus, as it were, glories in his poverty of spirit and thereby proves he is not humble.”⁴ We all have met this kind of person, who by his own self-conscious diffidence is begging for us to say that he is not really nothing but actually quite wonderful. When this attitude is present, there is an absence of poverty of spirit.

What, then, does “poor in spirit” mean? The history of the Greek word for “poor,” *ptochos*, provides some insight. It comes from a verbal root that denotes “to cower and cringe like a beggar.” In classical Greek *ptochos* came to mean “someone who crouches about, wretchedly begging.” In the New Testament it bears something of this idea because it denotes a poverty so deep that the person must obtain his living by begging. He is fully dependent on the giving of others. He cannot survive without help from the outside. Thus an excellent translation is “beggarly poor.”

Now, if we take this meaning and combine it with the following words (“in spirit”) we have the idea, “Blessed are the *beggarly* poor in spirit.” The sense is: “Blessed are those who are so desperately poor in their spiritual resources that they realize they must have help from outside sources.”

“Poverty of Spirit, then, is the personal acknowledgment of spiritual bankruptcy.”⁵ It is the awareness and admission that we are utterly sinful and

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without the moral virtues adequate to commend us to God. John Wesley said of the poor in spirit, “He has a deep sense of the loathsome leprosy of sin which he brought with him from his mother’s womb, which overspreads his whole soul, and totally corrupts every power and faculty thereof.”⁶

It is the recognition of our personal moral unworthiness. The “poor in spirit” see themselves as spiritually needy. My favorite rendering of the verse is:

Blessed are those who realize that they have nothing within themselves to commend them to God, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The World Rejects Poverty of Spirit

Poverty of spirit is the antithesis of the proud selfishness and self-sufficiency of today’s world. The world has its own ideas of blessedness. “Blessed is the man who is always right.” “Blessed is the man who is strong.” “Blessed is the man who rules.” “Blessed is the man who is satisfied with himself.” “Blessed is the man who is rich.” “Blessed is the man who is popular.”

Today’s men and women think that the answer to life is found in self. Actress Shirley MacLaine is not alone in her journey into self. Many in the church travel with her. Karl Jung is their Virgil, and the subterranean god of self is their Inferno. Christian narcissism is promoted as Biblical self-love. King Jesus becomes the imperial self. When this happens, Christianity suffers a massive shrinkage, as David Wells explains:

Theology becomes therapy. . . . The biblical interest in righteousness is replaced by a search for happiness, holiness by wholeness, truth by feeling, ethics by feeling good about one’s self. . . . The past recedes. The Church recedes. The world recedes. All that remains is self.⁷

Someday, if history is allowed to continue, a perceptive artist may sculpt a statue of twentieth-century man with his arms wrapped around himself in loving embrace, kissing his image in a mirror.

To this, Jesus answers, “Blessed [approved of God] are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Poverty of Spirit Is Essential for Knowing God’s Approval

We must understand and embrace a true poverty of spirit, for that is the only way we can ever know God’s smile. David became the greatest king of Israel, and the key to his rise to greatness was his poverty of spirit. Listen to his words when it all began: “Who am I, and who are my relatives, my father’s

clan in Israel, that I should be son-in-law to the king?” (1 Samuel 18:18). Later in life, before his fall, he said, “Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far?” (2 Samuel 7:18).

Similarly, Gideon, whom we celebrate for his amazing deliverance of Israel with just 300 men, began with these words: “Please, Lord, how can I save Israel? Behold, my clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father’s house” (Judges 6:15).

Significantly, when Jesus began his public ministry he opened the scroll to Isaiah 61:1 and began with this opening line: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor” (see Luke 4:18). In Isaiah’s context the poor were the exiled people of Israel who had not compromised and who looked to God alone to save them and establish his kingdom. These are always the people to whom he comes. The incarnate Son of God was born of a woman who sang, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked upon the humble estate of his servant” (Luke 1:46–48). When Christ was born, the angels announced it to humble shepherds, not to the Establishment (Luke 2:8–15). And when Jesus was presented in the temple, aged Simeon and Anna, representatives of the poor of Isaiah’s prophecy, exalted God because of him (Luke 2:25–38). These are the people *to* whom Christ is born and *in* whom he is born. Lay this to heart: “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (Psalm 34:18). This is the way it will always be.

Poverty of Spirit Is Essential for Salvation

Poverty of spirit is an indispensable sign of grace. No one can truly know Christ without it. There are most likely scores of evangelicals in your own community, prominent “Christians,” who do not know Christ. They are tares amidst wheat who perhaps do not even know it (Matthew 13:24–30). They have never come to a blessed emptiness, to the very end of themselves. They have never confessed, “There is nothing in me to commend me to God”; and thus they are lost.

The changeless truth is, no one can come to Christ without poverty of spirit. This is not to say that one must have a *perfect* sense of one’s spiritual insufficiency to be saved. Very few, if any, come to this. Rather, it means that the spiritually proud and self-sufficient, those who actually think there is something within them that will make God accept them—these people are lost.

Positively stated, “Those who acknowledge themselves as spiritually bankrupt enter the kingdom of heaven.” No one enters God’s kingdom without such an acknowledgment, regardless of how many times he or she has

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walked the aisle, raised a hand, signed a decision card, prayed “the sinner’s prayer,” or given his or her testimony.

Salvation is by faith alone, *sola fide* (Ephesians 2:8, 9; Romans 11:6);⁸ but poverty of spirit is the posture of faith. God pours out his grace to the spiritually bankrupt, for only they are open to believe and receive his grace and salvation. He does this with no one else. No one can enter the kingdom without poverty of spirit.

Poverty of Spirit Is Essential for Spiritual Growth

We never outgrow the first Beatitude, even though it is the basis by which we ascend to the others. In fact, if we outgrow it, we have outgrown our Christianity—we are post-Christian.

That is what was happening in the Laodicean church. Christ rebuked that failing church with these stern words:

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. (Revelation 3:17, 18)

Just as no one can come to Christ without poverty of spirit, no one can continue to grow apart from an ongoing poverty of spirit.

Poverty of spirit is foundational because a continual sense of spiritual need is the basis for ongoing spiritual blessing. A perpetual awareness of our spiritual insufficiency opens us to continually receiving spiritual riches. Poverty of spirit is something we never outgrow. In fact, the more spiritually mature we become, the more profound will be our sense of poverty.

It is because of this that every believer should commit the Beatitudes to memory and make the first Beatitude, especially, his or her conscious refrain: “Blessed are the beggarly poor in spirit”; “blessed are the spiritually bankrupt, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The Riches of Poverty

Now we turn to the statement of the reward: “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “Theirs” is emphatic. It means theirs in the sense of *theirs alone*, barring all others who approach God with a different spirit than that of beggarliness.⁹ Again, none but those who are “poor in spirit” will enter the kingdom of heaven.

The reward of the kingdom is both now and future. It is present because

all who have life are in the kingdom now. We are seated with Christ in the heavenly places *now* (Ephesians 2:6). We are subjects of Christ *now*. We are overcomers *now*. We are a kingdom of priests *now*. This means we are kings and queens and that we reign in life and exercise vast authority and power. It means that our poverty of spirit, our weakness, is a reservoir of authority and power. Our weakness is the occasion for his power, our inadequacy for his adequacy, our poverty for his riches, our inarticulation for his articulation, our tentativeness for his confidence (see 2 Corinthians 12:9, 10; Colossians 2:9, 10).

As kings and queens, we are also free. Pride makes slaves out of all whom it possesses; not so with poverty of spirit. We are free to be full of God, free to be all that he would have us to be, free to be ourselves. We reign now and for all eternity. The kingdom is ours—ours alone!

Crucial Teaching

The supreme lesson of this Beatitude is that without poverty of spirit no one enters the kingdom of heaven. Its prominent position—as the opening sentence of the Sermon on the Mount—declares for all time that no one is saved who believes there is something within him that will make God prefer or accept him.

Self-righteousness, moral pride, vain presumption will damn the soul! Jesus made this crystal-clear with the account of the tax-gatherer and the Pharisee who went up to the temple to pray:

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 18:10–14)

We must realize that:

The first link between
my soul and Christ is
not my goodness
but my badness;
not my merit
but my misery;

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not my standing
but my falling.

Fortunately, this truth can penetrate the most privileged of hearts, as it did to one of England's distinguished judges. The church he attended had three mission churches under its care. On the first Sunday of the new year all the members of the missions came to the big city church for a combined Communion service. In those mission churches, which were located in the slums of the city, were some outstanding cases of conversions—thieves, burglars, and so on—but all knelt side by side at the Communion rail.

On one such occasion the pastor saw a former thief kneeling beside the aforementioned jurist, a judge of the High Court of England. After his release the thief had been converted and became a Christian worker. Yet, as the judge and the former thief knelt together, neither seemed to be aware of the other.

After the service, the judge happened to walk out with the pastor and said, "Did you notice who was kneeling beside me at the Communion rail this morning?"

The pastor replied, "Yes, but I didn't think that you did."

The two walked along in silence for a few more moments, when the judge declared, "What a miracle of grace."

The pastor nodded in agreement. "Yes, what a marvelous miracle of grace."

Then the judge asked, "But to whom do you refer?"

The pastor responded, "Why, to the conversion of that convict."

"But I was not referring to him. I was thinking of myself," explained the judge.

Surprised, the pastor replied, "You were thinking of yourself? I don't understand."

"Yes," the judge went on. "It was natural for the burglar to respond to God's grace when he came out of jail. His life was nothing but a desperate history of crime, and when he saw the Savior he knew there was salvation and hope and joy for him. He understood how much he needed that help.

"But I . . . I was taught from earliest infancy to be a gentleman—that my word was my bond, that I was to say my prayers, go to church, receive Communion. I went up to Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar, and eventually ascended to judge. My friend, it was God's grace that drew me; it was God's grace that opened my heart to receive Christ. I'm a greater miracle of his grace."

Listen again to Jesus' words, "Blessed [approved of God] are the [beggarly] poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven [now and forevermore]."

The question I must ask is, have you experienced true poverty of spirit?
Can you say,

Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

Augustus M. Toplady
1740–1778

Is this your heart's cry? Or are you a church attender without Christ? Are you an unregenerate evangelical? Are you a Christless "Christian"? If so, hear God's Word and take it to heart: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The other great lesson for all who are born again, regardless of their spiritual maturity, is that poverty of spirit is necessary for continuing spiritual blessing.

I personally can say that the most profitable spiritual experiences of my life have come out of times of profound spiritual poverty, times when God has brought me face-to-face with the fact of my need, times when I once again realized there was nothing within me to commend me to him. Sometimes he has done this through professional failure, sometimes through intellectual shortcomings, sometimes through social or family pressures.

Whatever the case, in him my bankruptcy has been the opening for his riches. And it can be yours as well. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

2

The Comfort of Mourning

MATTHEW 5:4

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

5:4



CHARLES COLSON, in his brilliant book of essays *Who Speaks for God?*, tells of watching a segment of television's *60 Minutes* in which host Mike Wallace interviewed Auschwitz survivor Yehiel Dinur, a principal witness at the Nuremberg war-crime trials.

During the interview, a film clip from Adolf Eichmann's 1961 trial was viewed that showed Dinur entering the courtroom and coming face-to-face with Eichmann for the first time since being sent to Auschwitz almost twenty years earlier. Stopped cold, Dinur began to sob uncontrollably and then fainted while the presiding judge pounded his gavel for order.

"Was Dinur overcome by hatred? Fear? Horrid memories?" asks Colson, who then answers:

No; it was none of these. Rather, as Dinur explained to Wallace, all at once he realized Eichmann was not the godlike army officer who had sent so many to their deaths. This Eichmann was an ordinary man. "I was afraid about myself," said Dinur. "I saw that I am capable to do this. I am . . . exactly like he."

Wallace's subsequent summation of Dinur's terrible discovery—"Eichmann is in all of us"—is a horrifying statement; but it indeed captures the central truth about man's nature. For as a result of the Fall, sin is in each of us—not just the susceptibility to sin, but sin itself.¹

Colson follows his penetrating observation with this question: Why is

it that today sin is so seldom written or preached about? The answer is in Dinur's dramatic collapse, for to truly confront the sin within us is a devastating experience. If pastors preached on sin, says Colson, many people would flee their church pews never to return.²

The abiding fact is that man has always been in need of such an encounter. And to this end Jesus has given the second Beatitude, because it shows the necessity of truly facing one's sin.

So no one would miss the point, the Lord put this in the most striking language.

Truth Upside-Down

When read apart from its context, the second Beatitude is startling: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." This is, of course, a paradox—and it is meant to grab us.

G. K. Chesterton once defined a paradox as "truth standing on its head calling for attention," and this is certainly true here. Jesus states one of the essential truths of life in such a way that it cries for all to come and take a good long look, a look that can bring life. "Blessed/approved are those who mourn."

The intimate connection of this second Beatitude with the first is beautiful and compelling. The first Beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," is primarily *intellectual* (those who understand that they are spiritual beggars are blessed); the second Beatitude, "Blessed are those who mourn," is its *emotional* counterpart. It naturally follows that when we see ourselves for what we are, our emotions will be stirred to mourning.

Again, as with the previous Beatitude, we cannot place enough stress on the importance of these spiritual truths as they relate to the gospel. The Beatitudes are *not* the gospel because they do not explicitly explain Christ's atoning death and resurrection and how one may receive him. But they are *preparatory* to the gospel.

The Beatitudes are preparatory in the sense that they slay us so that we may live. They hold us up against God's standards for the kingdom so that we can see our need and fly to him. They cut through the delusions of formula Christianity and expose the shallowness of evangelicals who can give all the "right" answers but do not know Christ.

The Blessed Paradox

To begin with, what does the paradoxical pronouncement "Blessed are those who mourn" mean? Let us first note what it does not mean.

Jesus does not mean, “Blessed are grim, cheerless Christians.” Some believers have apparently interpreted it this way. The Victorian preacher Charles Spurgeon once remarked that some preachers he had known appeared to have their neckties twisted around their souls.³ Robert Louis Stevenson must have known some preachers like that because he once wrote, ironically, in his diary, “I’ve been to church today and am not depressed.” Christ certainly is not pronouncing a Beatitude on a forlorn disposition.

Neither does Jesus mean, “Blessed are those who are mourning over the difficulties of life.” The Bible does not say that mourning by itself is a blessed state. Sorrow is not blessed any more than laughter is. In fact, some mourning is cursed. For example, Amnon mourned because his lust was not fulfilled by Tamar (2 Samuel 13:2). Also, Ahab mourned because he wanted but couldn’t get Naboth’s vineyard (1 Kings 21:4).

Mourning over Sin

A great day has come when we see our sinful state for what it is apart from God’s grace and begin to mourn over its devastating dimensions in our souls, words, and deeds as described in Romans 3.

- *Souls*: “None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one” (vv. 10–12).
- *Words*: “Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive”; “The venom of asps is under their lips”; “Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness” (vv. 13, 14).
- *Deeds*: “Their feet are swift to shed blood; in their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known” (vv. 15–17).

Such are we all if left to ourselves. There is always room for decline if we refuse the grace of God.

But it is an even greater day when we are truly confronted with our individual sins, when we refuse to rationalize them, when we reject facile euphemisms, when we call sin “sin” in our lives. And it is the greatest of all days yet when in horror and desolation over our sin and sins we weep, so that the divine smile begins to break.

Mourning over the Sins of the World

Such personal mourning is naturally expansive because one who truly mourns over his own sins will also sorrow over the power and effects of sin in the world. David mourned for the sins of others in Psalm 119:136: “My eyes

shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law.” The great characteristic of Jeremiah, the Weeping Prophet, was that he wept for his people (Jeremiah 9:1; 13:17).

Of course, our sinless Lord Jesus was also deeply grieved by sin in the world. Through the mystery of the incarnation his heart became a spiritual seismograph, registering the slightest tremors of the earth’s pain and sorrow. No wonder some thought Jesus was Jeremiah returned from the grave (Matthew 16:14).

Now we begin to see the force of the brilliant paradox of the second Beatitude. The Lord Jesus has stood truth on its head, and it shouts for us to take notice and understand. “Blessed [approved] are those who mourn [over sin—that is their own sin and the sin that poisons the world], for they shall be comforted.” Christ shouts for our understanding. Blessed are we if we hear and put our understanding to work.

Mourning Is Not Popular

It is very important to see that mourning is definitely not in vogue today, despite its necessity for spiritual health. However, before elaborating on this point we must emphasize that humor and laughter are good and necessary for the believer. Solomon says that a merry heart acts as a “good medicine” (Proverbs 17:22), and we have found this to be true. Abraham Lincoln said, “If I did not laugh, I would die.” The need for laughter in the church was underlined by missionary statesman Oswald Sanders with these questions:

Should we not see that lines of laughter about the eyes are just as much marks of faith as are the lines of care and seriousness? Is laughter pagan? We have already allowed too much that is good to be lost to the church and cast many pearls before swine. A church is in a bad way when it banishes laughter from the sanctuary and leaves it to the cabaret, the nightclub, and the toastmasters.⁴

Laughter is essential, but the world despises sorrow so much that it has gone wild in its attempt to avoid it. Moderns have structured their lives to maximize entertainment and amusement in an attempt to make life one big party. They laugh when there is no reason to laugh. In fact, they laugh when they ought to cry.

Solomon was right that a merry heart acts like a “good medicine.” But that does not mean you cannot overdose! Much of our culture has overdosed on amusement, as Neil Postman has so convincingly chronicled in his highly regarded *Amusing Ourselves to Death*.

The world thinks mourners (those who mourn the course of the world, who mourn sin) are mad. John Wesley observed that they consider it “. . . to be more moping and melancholy, if not downright lunacy and distraction.”⁵ Some have actually argued that Martin Luther was insane because of his deep mourning over his sin before his new birth. They judge his behavior as psychotic. Indeed, the world regards pain of heart with suspicion and restraint.

The church is much the same. Some actually hold that if we are good Christians, filled with the Spirit, we will experience no sorrow and will wear eternal beatific smiles like plastic Mona Lisas.

I personally know of preachers who though they maintain that they belong in the evangelical tradition never mention sin in their preaching because that makes people unhappy. The result is a Christianity that is pathetically shallow—if indeed it is Christianity at all!

True Christianity manifests itself in what we cry over and what we laugh about. So often we laugh at the things that we should weep over and weep over the things we should laugh at. In our heart of hearts, what do we weep about? What do we laugh about?

Good Mourning!

In matters of spiritual life and health, mourning is not optional. Spiritual mourning is necessary for salvation. No one is truly a Christian who has not mourned over his or her sins. You cannot be forgiven if you are not sorry for your sins.

This was powerfully argued in the article “There Is One Thing Worse than Sin,” which first appeared in the *Chicago Sun-Times*. In it, Dr. Thomas F. Roeser compared the equally reprehensible sins of Congressmen Daniel Crane and Gerald Studds. Both had been censured by the House of Representatives—Crane for having sexual relations with a seventeen-year-old female page and Studds for having relations with a seventeen-year-old male page. Roeser observed:

Being censured is the only thing Crane and Studds have in common. The nation got a glimmer of their philosophical differences when Crane admitted tearfully to his district, then to the full House, that he “broke the laws of God and man,” casting a vote for his own censure, facing the House as the Speaker announced the tally. Studds, in contrast, acknowledged he was gay in a dramatic speech to the House, then defended the relationship with the page as “mutual and voluntary.” He noted that he had abided by the age of consent, and said the relationship didn’t warrant the “attention or action”

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of the House. Studds voted “present” on the censure and heard the verdict from the Speaker with his back to the House.

Roeser went on to contrast the different moral traditions both these men represent—properly excusing neither one for his sin.

But there’s one consolation for Crane. His . . . philosophy teaches that there is one thing worse than sin. That is denial of sin, which makes forgiveness impossible.⁶

The saddest thing in life is not a sorrowing heart, but a heart that is incapable of grief over sin, for it is without grace. Without poverty of spirit no one enters the kingdom of God. Likewise, without its emotional counterpart—grief over sin—no one receives the comfort of forgiveness and salvation.

Good Grief!

If you have never sorrowed over sin in your life (not just its consequences, but sin itself), then consider long and carefully whether you really are a Christian. Genuine believers, those who are truly born again, have mourned, and continue to mourn, over sin.

For Christians, mourning over sin is essential to spiritual health. The verb used here is the most intensive of the nine verbs employed in the New Testament for mourning, and it is continuous.⁷ Godly believers, therefore, perpetually mourn, and thus perpetually repent of their sins.

It is significant that the first of Martin Luther’s famous *95 Theses* states that the entire life is to be one of continuous repentance and contrition. It was this attitude in the Apostle Paul that caused him to affirm, well along into his Christian life, that he was the chief of sinners (1 Timothy 1:15).

What is the result of our mourning? In the first Beatitude we saw that an ongoing poverty of spirit leaves us open to ongoing blessings of the kingdom. Here our ongoing mourning opens us to his unspeakable comfort and joy.

This naturally anticipates and introduces the paradoxical reward: “. . . for they shall be comforted.”

The Comfort of Mourning

Notice that the comfort is actually immediate. Don’t misinterpret the future tense, which is used merely to sequence mourning and comfort. The actual sense of Christ’s words is, “Blessed are the mourners, for they shall be immediately comforted, and they shall continue to be so.”

Forgiveness

Notice, above all, that the basis of comfort is forgiveness. Believers are the only people in the world who are free from the guilt of their sins. The word “they” is emphatic. The sense is: “Blessed are those who mourn, for *they alone* shall be comforted.” We actually know we are mourners if we have the paradoxically comforting sense of God’s forgiveness.

This forgiveness is also accompanied by changed lives, diminishing the sources of so much personal sorrow—arrogance, judgmentalism, selfishness, jealousy, to name a few. Therefore, comfort springs from within—from changed lives.

The Holy Spirit

The very Greek word used here for “they shall be comforted” has the root from which we get *paraclete*, which is also used for the Holy Spirit, the One who comes alongside and comforts us. God’s comfort is relational. It comes in the form of his divine companionship. He is our ally. He personally binds up our sorrows and consoles us.

How comprehensive our comfort is! It is immediate. It comes to us alone. It comes personally in the Person of the Holy Spirit. And it is based on the forgiveness of our sins. That is why we are called “blessed.”

What a stupendous paradox! Jesus stands truth on its head to get our attention, and he says, “Would you be comforted? Then mourn. Would you be happy? Then weep.”

Salvation

To those who are not yet believers, perhaps unsaved evangelicals, understand that this paradox is meant to lead you to salvation. If a spirit of mourning is welling up within you, then let your mourning elevate you to him.

Do as the prodigal son did. He recognized his condition and mourned over it and in the midst of his misery said:

“I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.’” And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. (Luke 15:18–20)

Do you acknowledge that there is nothing within you to commend you to God? Are you mourning? Do you ache with the guilt of your sin before God

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and man? If so, and if you are a Christian, return to the Lord and be restored to fellowship. If you are not a believer, come to him now and he will give you the kingdom. He will put his robe on your shoulders, his ring on your hand, and his sandals on your feet and will prepare a feast for you. You will be comforted!

That is what he has done for Charles Colson and multitudes of others. Colson says of his own experience:

That night when I . . . sat alone at my car, my own sin—not just dirty politics, but the hatred and evil so deep within me—was thrust before my eyes, forcefully and painfully. For the first time in my life, I felt unclean, and worst of all, I could not escape. In those moments of clarity I found myself driven irresistibly into the arms of the living God.⁸

Charles Colson followed his mourning to God. And so can you. Be comforted now!

3

The Strength of Gentleness

MATTHEW 5:5

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

5:5



TWO MEN FACED EACH OTHER on the pavement before the governor's palace. One was Jesus Christ, the meekest man who ever lived. The other was Pontius Pilate, a man of extraordinary pride.

Jesus appeared as the epitome of weakness, a poor Jew caught on the inexorable tides of Roman history, frail and impotent, a man destined to be obliterated from the earth. Pilate was the personification of Roman power. The tides of history were with him. As part of Rome, he was heir to the earth.

The two figures are opposite ends of a tragic paradox. Jesus Christ, the prisoner, was the free man. He was in absolute control. Jesus, the meek, would inherit not only the earth but the universe. On the other hand, Pilate, the governor, was the prisoner of his own pride. He could not even control his soul. He had no inheritance.

Jesus not only taught the paradox "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth"—he lived it.

Christ was master of the paradox. His teaching is salted with shining contrasts like:

Last is first.
Giving is receiving.
Dying is living.
Losing is finding.

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Least is greatest.
Poor is rich.
Weakness is strength.
Serving is ruling.

For Christ, paradoxes were an especially effective way of getting people to see essential spiritual truth—in this instance, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”

The beauty of a paradox is that it grabs our attention because it falls on the ear with an elevating dissonance. In the case of Matthew 5:5, it seems far truer to say, “Blessed are the proud, the intimidating, for they shall inherit the earth.” But Jesus is teaching the survival not of the fittest but of the meekest! How in the world are the meek going to inherit anything? Life simply does not work that way. Jesus’ Beatitude contravenes the laws of nature—and of society. Just look at those who occupy the executive suites—the strong, the self-sufficient, the overbearing, the capable, the aggressive, the ambitious. The world belongs to the “John Waynes.” It belongs to those who proudly intone:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the Pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.¹

The last thing the average man wants to be known for is meekness.

It seems that Jesus has made a great mistake, but of course we know that our Lord has not. Indeed this Beatitude provides an infallible law of life and a remarkable power for living and dying.

Tender Steel

So to begin, what does “Blessed are the meek” mean? Specifically, what does the word “meek”—or as many translations have it, “gentle”—mean?

Understand first that meekness is *not* weakness. It does not denote cowardice or spinelessness or timidity or the willingness to have peace at any cost. Neither does meekness suggest indecisiveness, wishy-washiness, or a lack of confidence. Meekness does not imply shyness or a withdrawn personality, as contrasted with that of an extrovert. Nor can meekness be reduced to mere niceness.

Bearing this in mind, we must note that the Greek word’s development in classical literature and its other usages in the New Testament absolutely confirm the popular translations of *meek* and *gentle*.

In classical Greek the word was used to describe tame animals, soothing medicine, a mild word, and a gentle breeze.² “It is a word with a caress in it.”³ The New Testament bears the same sense. John Wycliffe translated the third Beatitude, “Blessed be mild men.”⁴ *Gentleness* and *meekness* are, indeed, caressing words.

Meekness/gentleness also implies self-control. Aristotle explained that it is the mean between excessive anger and excessive angerlessness. So the man who is meek is able to balance his anger. It is strength under control.⁵ The meek person is strong! He is gentle, meek, and mild, but he is in control. He is as strong as steel.

Trusting Steel

A reading of Psalm 37 shows that Jesus consciously alluded to verse 11, “But the meek shall inherit the land,” when he formulated the third Beatitude. This statement’s location in the heart of this great Psalm is deeply revelatory of what meekness/gentleness rests upon. The Israelites to whom the Psalm was written, despite living in the land, did not truly possess it because of the working of evil men. What were they to do? In a word, *trust* (“trust,” vv. 3, 5; “be still . . . wait,” v. 7). Thus a deep trust in the sovereign power of God is the key to meekness.

Gentle Jesus himself forever displayed the dynamic of trust that is part and parcel of meekness. “When,” as Peter records, “he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Peter 2:23).

Jesus’ Meekness

Jesus said of himself, “I am gentle and lowly in heart” (Matthew 11:29). As the incarnation of meekness, he displayed it in two ways, both of which showed his power.

In respect to his own person, he practiced neither retaliation nor vindictiveness. When he was mocked and spat upon, he answered nothing, for he trusted his Father. As we have noted, when he was confronted by Pilate, he kept silent. When his friends betrayed him and fled, he uttered no reproach. When Peter denied him, Jesus restored him to fellowship and service. When Judas came and kissed him in Gethsemane, Jesus called him “friend.” And Jesus meant it. He was never insincere. Even in the throes of death, he pleaded, “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). In all of this Jesus, meek and mild, was in control. He radiated power.

Yet, when it came to matters of faith and the welfare of others, Jesus was a lion. He rebuked the Pharisees' hardness of heart when he healed the man's withered hand on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:9–45). He was angered when his disciples tried to prevent little children from coming to him (Mark 10:13–16). Jesus made a whip and drove the moneychangers from the temple (John 2:14–17). He called Peter "Satan" after the outspoken fisherman tried to deter him from his heavenly mission (Matthew 16:21–23). All of this came from Jesus, the incarnation of gentleness.

Bringing this all together, we have an amazing picture. The one who is meek has a gentle spirit because he trusts God. Indeed, there is a caress about his presence. At the same time the meek person possesses immense strength and self-control, which he exhibits in extending love rather than retaliation against those who do him evil. But he stands up fearlessly in defense of others or of the truth as the occasion arises.

Jesus' Smile

Our Lord's words "Blessed are the meek" make it clear that a gentle and meek spirit has divine approval. Therefore the presence or lack of such is indicative of one's spiritual status.

Of course, no one perfectly manifests meekness in his or her life. No one's life is a perpetual caress. No one is so strong that his or her only response is love. No one totally escapes pride and self. Nevertheless, Jesus' warnings are clear.

- *Harshness*: If you are mean in your treatment of others, if there is an absence of gentleness in your treatment of others, take heed.
- *Grasping*: If you make sure you always get yours first, if *numero uno* is the subtle driving force in your life, if you care little about how your actions affect others, beware.
- *Vengeful*: If you are known as someone never to cross, if you always get your "pound of flesh," be on your guard.
- *Uncontrolled*: If rage fills your soul so that life is a series of explosions occasioned by the "fools" in your life, watch out.

Again, this is not to suggest that you are not a Christian if you fall into these sins, but rather to point out that if they are part of your persona, if you are a self-satisfied "Christian" who thinks that the lack of gentleness and meekness is "just you" and people will have to get used to it, if you are not repentant, you are probably not a Christian.

Jesus' words are not demanding perfection. The point is, however, that

if a gentle/meek spirit is not at least imperfectly present in your life, if it is not incipient and growing, you may very well not have the smile of Christ, which is everything.

The Sublime Paradox

The reward for meekness is truly amazing: “They shall inherit the earth.”

As was mentioned, the inspiration for this magnificent paradox is Psalm 37, which encourages God’s people not to fret because of evil, but rather to trust because “the meek shall inherit the land” (v. 11; cf. vv. 9, 22, 29, 34). In the New Testament, God’s people are not a physical nation—they are gathered from all nations and tongues. And the land/earth they inherit is not a physical plot of ground—it is Heaven itself. The time is coming when, as fellow heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17), we will reign with him in his earthly kingdom. We will inherit the earth. We will even judge the world (1 Corinthians 6:2). The paradox will be literally fulfilled, far beyond our wildest dreams.

But there is also a present inheritance that abundantly enriches our earthly existence. There is a sense in which those who set their minds on riches never possess anything. This was given classic expression by one of the world’s wealthiest men when asked how much is enough money. “Just a little bit more,” he answered. He owned everything, yet possessed nothing!

It is the meek who own the earth now, for when their life is free from the tyranny of “just a little more,” when a gentle spirit caresses their approach to their rights, then they possess all. As Izaak Walton explained:

I could there sit quietly, and looking on the waters see fishes leaping at flies of several shapes and colors. Looking on the hills, I could behold them spotted with woods and groves. Looking down the meadows, I could see a boy gathering lilies and lady-smocks, and there a girl cropping columbines and cowslips, all to make garlands suitable to this present month of May. As I thus sat, joying in mine own happy condition, I did thankfully remember what my Saviour said, that the meek possess the earth.⁶

The meek are the only ones who inherit the earth. The “they” in “they shall inherit” is emphatic: “*They alone, only they*, shall inherit the earth.” They are rich right now; and fifty billion trillion years into eternity they will be lavishing in the unfolding of “the immeasurable riches of [God’s] grace” (Ephesians 2:7).

Becoming Meek

There are three concurrent paths to Christlike meekness.

First, we must realize that a gentle, caressing spirit is a gift of the Holy

Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). Therefore, it comes only through grace. We must cast ourselves on God, asking in humble prayer that he give us life, make us his children, and instill in us a spirit of meekness. At the same time, we can ask confidently because we know that if we ask anything according to his will he will do it (cf. John 14:13; 1 John 5:14). Such asking ought to be continual because every soul needs to grow in grace regardless of one’s level of spiritual maturity.

Second, we must yoke ourselves to Jesus, for he was the incarnation of meekness. Our Lord said of himself, “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matthew 11:29, 30). Jesus promises us that if we yoke ourselves to him, we will learn gentleness and humility.

In Biblical times a young ox was yoked to an older, experienced ox so that the older might train him to perform properly. By bearing the same yoke, the untrained ox learned the proper pace and how to heed the direction of the master. We learn by being yoked to Christ as we surrender our lives to him for direction.

Third, we must give close attention to the progression of thought in the Beatitudes, for it provides us with a three-step ladder to meekness. The initial step begins in the first Beatitude (Matthew 5:3) with poverty of spirit, which comes from a true knowledge of ourselves. We realize that there is nothing within us that would commend us to God. We fall short. We need God.

In the next Beatitude (v. 4) we progress to mourning. We most naturally lament our state of spiritual poverty. This mourning is an enviable state because in it we are blessed and comforted.

We should note that poverty of spirit and mourning are negative. However, when true poverty of spirit and spiritual mourning are present, they make way for the positive virtue of meekness. In a sense, meekness is superior to the two preceding states because it grows out of them. The process is all so natural, so beautiful, and yet also quite supernatural!

We must stop here and say to ourselves, “I see how the progression works, and I see that it comes by grace, but how can I know when I am truly meek?” That is a good question. Martyn Lloyd-Jones gave his congregation in Westminster Chapel the answer, and I can say it no better. “The man who is truly meek is the man who is amazed that God and man can think of him as well as they do and treat him as well as they do.”⁷⁷ The test as to whether we are truly meek is not whether we can say we *are* poor sinners, but rather what we *do* when someone else calls us vile sinners. Try it!

The Need for Gentle Christians

We need to rise above superficial Christianity. None of us must imagine that because we have good manners and display the proper social conventions we are fulfilling the meekness called for in this third Beatitude.

Evangelical passwords and civilities are not enough. God will not be impressed, nor will the world. May the paradoxes of the Sermon on the Mount penetrate our beings and drive us to an ongoing poverty of spirit, ongoing mourning, and ongoing meekness.

We cannot afford *not* to have this happen! Those closest to us need to see positive spiritual reality in our lives, especially the paradox of Christian meekness. They need to see its strength as we are willing to put our lives on the line for others and to stand tall for truth when necessary. They need to see gentleness and a nonretaliatory spirit within us. And when they do, they will see Jesus. That is who the world really needs to see!

4

The Fullness of Hunger

MATTHEW 5:6

*Blessed are those who hunger
and thirst for righteousness,
for they shall be satisfied.*

5:6



NUTRITIONISTS HAVE DRAMATIZED the importance of diet by telling us that we are what we eat. The thinking is, if we eat too many doughnuts and cream puffs, we'll become walking pastries. And the argument is pretty sound, as far as it goes.

In the realm of the mind and the spirit, “you are what you eat” is more penetrating. If you feed on violence, excitement, erotica, and materialism, you will eventually personify them. You will become what you eat.

I think we can accurately say that Elvis Presley never understood this. His life was a pitiful pursuit of materialism and sensuality. In Elvis's heyday he earned between \$5 million and \$6 million a year. It is estimated that he grossed \$100 million in his first two years of stardom.

He had three jets, two Cadillacs, a Rolls-Royce, a Lincoln Continental, Buick and Chrysler station wagons, a Jeep, a dune buggy, a converted bus, and three motorcycles.

His favorite car was his 1960 Cadillac limousine. The top was covered with pearl-white Naugahyde. The body was sprayed with forty coats of a specially prepared paint that included crushed diamonds and fish scales. Nearly all the metal trim was plated with eighteen-karat gold.

Inside the car there were two gold-flake telephones, a gold vanity case

containing a gold electric razor and gold hair clippers, an electric shoe buffer, a gold-plated television, a record player, an amplifier, air-conditioning, and a refrigerator that was capable of making ice in two minutes. He had everything.

Elvis's sensuality is legendary. Those friends and relatives most familiar with his state in the last months of his life tragically reveal that Elvis had very much become the victim of his appetites. He was what he had eaten—in the profoundest sense.

Elvis Presley's tragic life dramatizes the significance of the Lord's teaching in this fourth Beatitude, because in it Jesus sets forth the appetite and menu that bring spiritual well-being: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

In this splendidly paradoxical sentence Jesus tells us what we ought to eat and how we must eat if we are to have spiritual health and ultimate satisfaction. Spiritual health comes from hunger.

A Healthy Hunger

Because Christ declares that hunger for righteousness is essential to spiritual health and satisfaction, we must carefully consider what it means. Some have supposed that it is the *objective righteousness* described in Romans that God reckons to the believer's account, sometimes called imputed righteousness—"righteousness from God" (Philippians 3:9; cf. Romans 1:17; 3:21, 22). However, while the gift of such righteousness is foundational to every believer's salvation, that is not what is meant here.

Others have confined the meaning to *social righteousness*, the righteous treatment of the poor and oppressed. This is certainly part of the meaning because in the preceding context (4:12–17) Matthew quotes Isaiah 9:1, 2, which goes on to describe the social justice that will result from the coming of Messiah's reign. However, the root meaning here is determined by the seven occurrences of "righteousness" in the Sermon on the Mount that indicate it means a *subjective righteousness*, an inner righteousness that works itself out in one's living in conformity to God's will—righteous living. Thus, those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" long to live righteously, and for righteousness to prevail in the world. It is a passionate desire, which begins with one's own life, that all things should be lived in line with God's will.

This desire to live in compliance with God's will is expansive. It includes an increasing sense of a need for God—a desire to be like him. To hunger and thirst for this righteousness means longing after the practical righteousness that the Beatitudes represent both personally and in the world. The one who

hungers and thirsts wants the character of the kingdom. He pants after the fruit of the Spirit. He wants God's will and all it entails.

A Desperate Hungering

The fourth Beatitude is a call to pursue conformity to God's will stated in the most extreme of terms. The intensity of the expression is difficult for us to feel because if we are thirsty today, all we need to do is turn on the tap for cold, refreshing water; or if we are hungry, we just open the refrigerator. However, to the ancient Palestinian the expression was terribly alive because he was never far from the possibility of dehydration or starvation.

It is not a comfortable picture. Jesus is far from recommending a genteel desire for spiritual nourishment, but rather a starvation for righteousness, a desperate hungering to be conformed to God's will.

The Beatitude is further intensified by the fact that this hungering is continual. "Blessed are those who are hungering and thirsting for righteousness." King David, at his best, was like this. He walked with God as few mortals have. He penned some of our favorite psalms about his lofty spiritual experiences. And at the same time he wrote of his continual thirst and hunger: "O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water" (Psalm 63:1). "As for me, I shall behold your face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with your likeness" (Psalm 17:15).

This is the way it is for a healthy believer. He or she never has enough of God and righteousness. He or she is always hungry.

Such Hungering Either Repulses or Draws Us

The language of this Beatitude does not make sense to the modern ear. Indeed, it is too strong for some Christians. It rules out sleek, self-satisfied, halfhearted religion. In fact, hungering and thirsting for righteousness is the only approach the Beatitude accepts.

For some, Jesus' pronouncement may uncover buried, almost forgotten glimmers of past life when you first came to Christ and perpetually hungered and thirsted for righteousness. You couldn't get enough of Jesus or his Word. You were joyously desperate for the things of God. You also cared about the world and its spiritual famine. You welcomed opportunities for self-sacrifice and were willing to go for it all. But time blunted your desires, "the realities of life" took over, and that delectable hunger ceased. Now you are content with a life of lesser, limited devotion.

Yet you have not quite forgotten the joy and warmth of earlier times, and Jesus' words here still stir you. If so, you should heed his call, because you can be restored to what you were meant to be.

You must never be spiritually satisfied. You must pray that each decade of your life will find you more thirsty for a life pleasing to God.

"Blessed are those who desperately hunger and thirst for righteousness," says our Lord.

Hungering People Know Christ

Jesus pronounces the spiritually famished to be "blessed" or approved. The reason is this: Those who truly hunger and thirst know Christ. And that is why this is such a penetrating warning to evangelicals. Concern for righteous living is on the decline in the evangelical church. Many watch more murders and adulteries on television in one week than their grandparents read about in a lifetime—and with no twinge of conscience. Their casual viewing is a tacit approval of evil. The pollsters tell us that the ethical gap is narrowing between the church and the world. And many evangelicals are no more concerned about the unrighteous plight of the world than their non-Christian neighbors. Some professing evangelicals would regard a desperate longing for righteousness as odd, even fanatical.

If you have no longing for righteousness, you had better initiate a careful analysis of your soul. Christ's words are such a gracious test, because each of us knows in his heart of hearts whether he really does long for righteous living.

However, if you do hunger and thirst for righteousness, if the Lord has given you a holy discontent with your life, you have his smile!

A Hungerer's Reward

This Beatitude is, of course, another attention-grabbing paradox. It suggests that those who continually hunger are satisfied. Yet, how can one be hungry and satisfied at the same time? Or how can one be satisfied and experience hunger? Satisfied but never satisfied? Full yet empty? Content but discontent?

Paradoxical Satisfaction

How does it work? Like this. Someone left a plate of brownies in my church office. I resisted temptation (for a minute or two!) and then poured myself a cup of coffee and retreated to my study, brownie in hand. When I bit in, I tasted the best of brownies, for it was layered with caramel. I was "in heaven" with my brownie and cup of coffee. And I was completely satisfied—for

about half an hour. Then I began to hunger and thirst for more! And I ate again with the same effect. It was a sublime cycle.

There you have the idea. The paradox describes a spiritual cycle. The more one conforms to God's will, the more fulfilled and content one becomes. But that in turn spawns a greater discontent. Our hunger increases and intensifies in the very act of being satisfied.

Paul lived in the blessing of this paradox. He wrote to Timothy, "I know whom I have believed" (2 Timothy 1:12). Yet to the Philippians he expressed a profound longing for Christ—to "know him and the power of his resurrection, and . . . share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death" (Philippians 3:10). Paul knew Christ intimately, but the intimacy and satisfaction made him long for more. Bernard of Clairvaux sang of this cycle. Read his great words slowly:

We taste Thee, O Thou living Bread,
And long to feast upon Thee still;
We drink of Thee, the Fountainhead,
And thirst our souls from Thee to fill.

Complete Satisfaction

The world only offers us empty cups. That is why our text emphasizes that "they alone [those who hunger and thirst] shall be satisfied." No one can know anything of this satisfaction but a believer.

The Scriptures joyfully attest to the satisfaction that Christ brings:

But whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life. (John 4:14)

I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. (John 6:35)

For he satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul he fills with good things. (Psalm 107:9)

Eternal Satisfaction

The image of a divine feast is used more than once by Jesus to illustrate the satisfactions of the kingdom. On one occasion Jesus told his disciples, "And I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom, that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:29, 30). Now that will be eternal satisfaction!

We need to believe the words of Isaiah: "Come, everyone who thirsts,

come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food” (Isaiah 55:1, 2).

We need to practice Jesus’ words: “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matthew 6:33).

God’s Call: A Profound Hunger

Consider the force of this fourth Beatitude as we have opened it: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst [like the starving do for food and the thirsty do for water] for righteousness [righteous living], for they shall be [fully] satisfied.”

“You are what you eat” is not as simple as it may first appear. It is profoundly esoteric. The tragedy of our time is that the world is hungering and thirsting after sex and wealth, violence and excitement. The church’s tragedy is that many in her are seeking the same thing—and their diets are making them as empty and pathetic as the world.

We must remember that Jesus has provided us with the menu and appetite. The main course is righteousness—conformity to his will. The method is desperation. We are to hunger for righteousness and so pursue it with all that is in us. The result is profound satisfaction, now and forever.

How Is Your Appetite?

The answer lies in the spiritual logic of the Beatitudes.

- We must begin with the first Beatitude, true poverty of spirit, realizing that there is nothing within us that commends us to God. We must affirm our spiritual bankruptcy.
- Next, we must graduate to the second Beatitude, truly mourning our sins as well as the sin around us.
- Then we must ascend to the third Beatitude by allowing our spiritual bankruptcy and mourning to instill in us a truly meek and gentle spirit.
- Finally, as we live the logic of the Beatitudes, we will be able to desperately hunger and thirst for righteousness.

There are few things more important than our spiritual appetite. We are what we eat.

Evangelicals, we need to hear Jesus’ words afresh: “If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water” (John 4:10).

5

The Dividend of Mercy

MATTHEW 5:7

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

5:7



YEARS AGO A SMALL-TOWN MERCHANT had identical twin boys who were inseparable. They were so close that they even dressed alike. It was said that their extraordinary closeness was the reason they never married. When their father died, they took over the family business. Their relationship was considered “a model of creative collaboration.”

Because he was busy, one of the brothers neglected to ring up a sale and absentmindedly left a dollar bill on top of the cash register while he went to the front of the store to wait on another customer. Remembering the dollar, he returned to deposit it only to find the bill was gone. He asked his brother if he had seen it, but the brother said he had not.

An hour later he asked his brother again, but this time with an obvious note of suspicion. His brother became angry and defensive. Every time they tried to discuss the matter, the conflict grew worse, culminating in vicious charges and countercharges. The incredible outcome was the dissolution of their partnership, the installation of a partition down the middle of the store, and two competing businesses. This continued for twenty years—an open, divisive sore in the community.

One day a car with an out-of-state license pulled up in front of the stores. A well-dressed man entered one brother’s shop and asked how long the store

had been there. Learning it had been twenty years, he said, “Then you are the one with whom I must settle an old score.”

Some twenty years ago I was out of work, drifting from place to place, and I happened to get off a boxcar in your town. I had absolutely no money and had not eaten for three days. As I was walking down the alley behind your store, I looked in and saw a dollar bill on the top of the cash register. Everyone else was in the front of the store. I had been raised in a Christian home and I had never before in all my life stolen anything, but that morning I was so hungry I gave in to the temptation, slipped through the door, and took that dollar bill. That act has weighed on my conscience ever since, and I finally decided that I would never be at peace until I came back and faced up to that old sin and made amends. Would you let me now replace that money and pay you whatever is appropriate for damages?¹

When the stranger finished his confession, he was amazed to see the old store owner shaking his head in deep sorrow and beginning to weep. Finally the old man gained control and, taking the gentleman by the arm, asked him to go to the store next door and tell its owner the same story. The stranger complied. Only this time two old men who looked almost identical wept side by side.²

From our distance we cannot say whether the two brothers professed to be believers, or were even churchgoers. Given the time and the culture, they probably owned some religious inclinations. Indeed, they could have been enthusiastic churchmen—even evangelicals. But whatever their spiritual profession, their merciless, unforgiving spirits revealed hearts that had never understood the mercy of God. For if they had, they themselves would have been merciful.

The fifth Beatitude—“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy”—is the perfect corrective for all those who are caught in bitterness.

If you have problems similar to the two unhappy brothers, this chapter could lead you to liberation.

The Merciful

The basic idea of the Greek word translated *merciful* is “to give help to the wretched, to relieve the miserable.” Here the essential thought is that mercy gives attention to those in misery. From this we make the important distinction between mercy and grace. *Grace* is shown to the undeserving; *mercy* is compassion to the miserable. Thus the synonym for *mercy* is *compassion*. Mercy, however, is not simply *feeling* compassion. Mercy exists when something is done to alleviate distress. This is uniform in the Old Testament (cf. Hosea and Amos 5). Jesus made this perfectly clear when, after he told the Parable of the Good Samaritan, he asked his questioner:

“Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise.” (Luke 10:36, 37)

Mercy Is Compassion in Action

We must never imagine that we are merciful because we *feel* compassionate toward someone in distress. Mercy means *active* goodwill. This was well understood by the nineteenth-century preacher who happened across a friend whose horse had just been accidentally killed. While a crowd of onlookers expressed empty words of sympathy, the preacher stepped forward and said to the loudest sympathizer, “I am sorry five pounds. How much are you sorry?” And then he passed the hat. True mercy demands action.

Mercy Is Forgiving

New Testament scholar Robert Guelich has shown that especially in this Beatitude *merciful* describes one who forgives and pardons another who is in the wrong.³ An inspiring display of this forgiving aspect of mercy in Scripture is that of Joseph to his brothers. The only reason they had not murdered him as a boy was that as they were ready to perform the act, they saw an approaching caravan and decided to sell him into slavery instead. Years later, when Joseph had his guilty brothers literally “at his mercy,” he showed them exactly that. There was *compassion* as he wept for their misery, and then *action* as he met their needs. There was *forgiveness* as he restored them all to his grace, saying, “You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Genesis 50:20).

The merciful person remembers his own sin and God’s mercy to him, he understands the weaknesses of others, and he forgives. W. E. Sangster, the much-loved pastor of the renowned Westminster Central Hall, London, was graced with this quality in his own life. “It was Christmas time in my home,” as he tells it:

One of my guests had come a couple of days early and saw me sending off the last of my Christmas cards. He was startled to see a certain name and address. “Surely, you are not sending a greeting card to him,” he said. “Why not?” I asked. “But you remember,” he began, “eighteen months ago . . .” I remembered, then, the thing the man had publicly said about me, but I remembered also resolving at the time with God’s help . . . to forget. And God had “made” me forget! I posted the card.⁴

I once had an associate who was like this. On one memorable occasion the name of someone came up who had grievously slandered him, and I said

something derogatory about that person. But to my embarrassment (and instruction!), my friend began to quietly defend his slanderer: “Life has been hard for him . . . we have no idea of the pressures he has been under . . . he has done a lot of good things too.” My colleague had compassion on the miserable soul who had given him so much trouble and, from what I could tell, had forgiven him! How beautiful that was! Our text tells us what God thinks of this: “Blessed are the merciful.” Jesus says, “Such are the ones whom I approve.”

They Shall Receive Mercy

The reason the merciful are blessed is that “they shall receive mercy.” The word “they” in the phrase is emphatic: “Blessed are the merciful, for they [they alone] shall receive mercy.” Other Scriptures teach the same idea. James says, “Judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy” (James 2:13). Jesus himself says, “For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14, 15).

Predictably, some have completely missed the point here, supposing that this Beatitude teaches that one can merit God’s mercy by performing acts of mercy. Such an idea is at complete variance with the rest of Scripture, which teaches salvation by grace alone (Ephesians 2:8, 9). Moreover, if receiving God’s forgiveness could only be merited by becoming forgiving, none of us would ever be truly forgiven, for none would ever absolutely meet this standard.

What this Beatitude means is that those who are truly God’s children, and as such are objects of his mercy, will themselves be merciful and will receive mercy in the end. Showing mercy is evidence that we have received mercy.

This interpretation suggests two very penetrating tests. The first is this: If we have no mercy toward those who are physically and economically in distress, we are not Christians. Notice I did not say we become Christians by showing mercy toward the unfortunate, but that we are not believers if we are unwilling to show mercy to them. This is precisely the point of the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Jesus told the story to demonstrate that the religious establishment of his day did not fulfill the Great *Shema*—loving God with all one’s might and one’s neighbor as oneself (Luke 10:25–28). The fact that the priest and the Levite turned away from the needy man proved they did not love their neighbor as themselves; they thus failed to fulfill the Law and were lost. But the Samaritan’s act of mercy showed that he loved his neighbor as

himself and that he was living within the gracious parameters of the Law. He was a lover of God and man.

If we remain impassive or callous to human need and refuse to do anything about it, we need to take a good long look at ourselves and see if we really are believers. John says it best: “But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” (1 John 3:17). This is a test evangelicals haven’t liked. Today, I suspect, there are some who would reject this test outright. If so, they are in great peril of soul. True belief is never to be divorced from attitude and action.

The second test involves the corresponding aspect of mercy—forgiveness. The test is this: If we refuse to exercise mercy by extending forgiveness, we are not Christians. Of course, it is frightening to maintain that we cannot be truly forgiven unless we have forgiving spirits. But it is true, because when God’s grace comes into our hearts it makes us merciful. Forgiveness demonstrates whether we have been forgiven. So the telling line is this: If we refuse to be merciful, there is only one reason—we have never understood the grace of Christ. We are outside grace and are unforgiven.

Jesus taught this in the Parable of the Unmerciful Slave (Matthew 18:21–35). The slave owed his master an immense sum—in today’s currency over twenty million dollars. The debt was impossible to repay, so he pleaded with his master who, with astonishing compassion, forgave him the entire debt. Incredibly, however, the wicked slave went out, found one of his fellow slaves who owed him the equivalent of three months’ salary, and threw him in prison. When the other slaves reported this injustice to their master, he summoned the wicked slave:

Then his master summoned him and said to him, “You wicked servant! I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. And should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?” And in anger his master delivered him to the jailers, until he should pay all his debt. So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart. (Matthew 18:32–35)

These are hard, violent, surgical words. But they are mercifully so. The Lord here warns the religious person who attends church, can recite the appropriate answers, leads an outwardly moral life, but holds a death grip on his grudges. Jesus warns the one who will not forgive his relatives or his former business associates regardless of their pleas. He warns the one who nourishes hatreds, cherishes animosities, and otherwise lives in settled malice.

Such a person had better take stock of his life.

Some words of qualification are in order. The warning is not for those who find that bitterness and hatred recur even though they have forgiven the offender. The fact that you have forgiven and continue to forgive is a sign of grace, despite the ambivalences and imperfections of your forgiveness. The warning is for those who have no desire to forgive. Their souls are in danger.

There may also be some who find forgiveness difficult because they have been recently offended and are still in such emotional shock that they *cannot* properly respond. The warning is not for these.

The overall lesson is, if we are Christians, we can forgive and will forgive, however imperfectly it may be. We cannot live like the miserable brothers who divided over a dollar bill.

On Forgiving

The late Corrie ten Boom recalled in her book *The Hiding Place* a postwar meeting with a guard from the Ravensbruck concentration camp, where her sister had died and she herself had been subjected to horrible indignities.

It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S.S. man who had stood guard at the shower room door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there—the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, Betsie’s pain-blanching face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. “How grateful I am for your message, Fraulein,” he said. “To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!”

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often to the people in Bloemendaal the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.⁵

Forgiveness is possible for the most grievous of wounds. When I was a young man, I was acquainted with a Christian who took in a troubled teenager and tried to help him. The boy brutally murdered this man’s daughter.

Amazingly, my friend visited him in prison, forgave him, and eventually led him to Christ.

If you are a Christian, regardless of the wrong done to you, you can forgive. By God's grace, you can forgive the domestic wrong. By God's grace, you can forgive the professional wrong. For your soul's sake, you must.

When we began our study of the Beatitudes, we observed that they were given to us so we could ascertain two things: first, the authenticity of our faith, and second, the health of our spiritual lives. In the searchlight of this Beatitude, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy," is your salvation authentic? Are you merciful? Are you forgiving? Or do you hold grudges as your treasured possessions?

If you have come to understand that you are without grace and mercy, then no more fitting word could be commended to you here than this parable:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get." But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner!" I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 18:10–14)

Now do as the sinner did. Confess your sin. Affirm your faith in Christ as your only hope of salvation. Rest in his mercy. Thank him for saving you.

If you need to develop the compassion and forgiveness of a merciful spirit, here are some suggestions:

- *Confession*: Admit your need to God. Pray to this effect: "Father, I know your mercy. I have been merciful at times. But, God, I need more compassion, and I need to forgive. I know this is your will for me. Help me."
- *Scripture*: Read the Scriptures that have to do with mercy and compassion. Begin with Hosea 6:6, and then read Jesus' application of it in Matthew 9:9–13 and 23:23. Also examine Micah 6:8 and Amos 5:21–24. And especially meditate on Luke 10:30–37. Regarding forgiveness, read Matthew 6:14, 15 and 18:21–35.
- *Mercy*: Then get out and do mercy. Volitionally forgive those who have wronged you. Purposely become involved with those who are hurting.

Enjoy God's smile! "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."



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ISBN-10: 1-4335-3621-8



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U.S. \$29.99