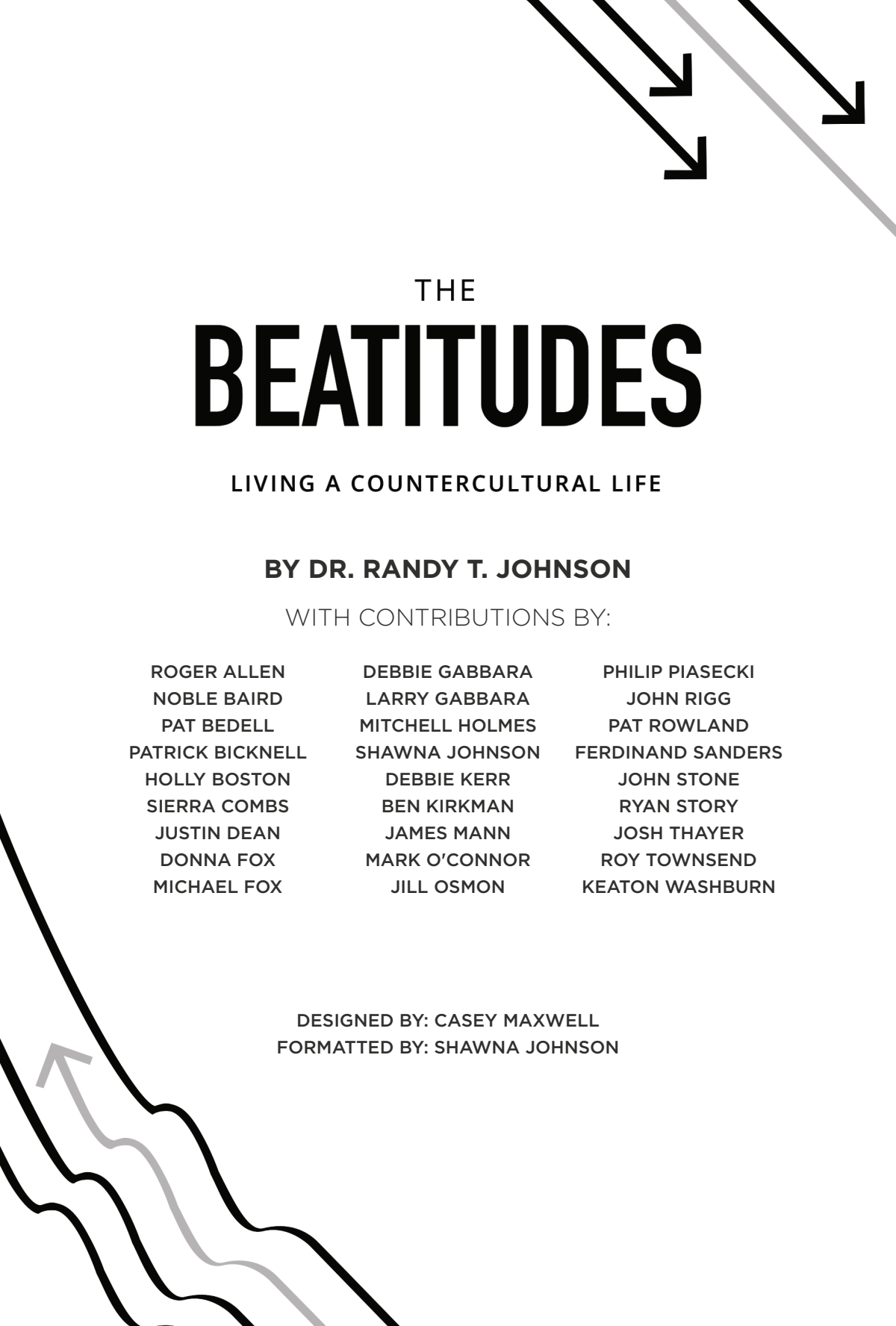


THE

BEATITUDES

LIVING A COUNTERCULTURAL LIFE

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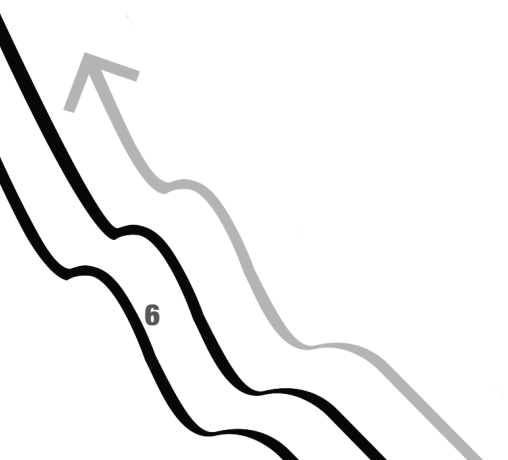
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PREFACE

Jesus often challenged believers to live a countercultural life. He did not want them to just follow the flow of those around them. He did not want them to just "follow their heart." He called them to be individuals who made a difference in the world.

In Matthew 5:3-12, Jesus said,
"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

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

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

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

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

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

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

The Beatitudes consists of nine study guides for personal or group discussion and thirty-six devotions to help you better understand how to live life to the full for Christ.

LESSON ONE

POOR IN SPIRIT

PASTOR RYAN STORY

In 2017, I had an amazing opportunity to go to Israel with many fellow River Church staff members. Many moments of this trip are etched in my head as amazing memories. I experienced floating in the Dead Sea, climbing the hill that the Israelites were encamped at before David defeated Goliath, laying on the road that Jesus walked near the temple, and the ultimate moment, standing at what many historians believe was the borrowed tomb of Jesus. In all of those moments, December 1, 2017, was an amazing morning. We went to the Church of the Beatitudes. Standing in the exact spot where the greatest sermon was ever preached was humbling.

1. If you had the opportunity to visit Israel, what biblical site would you most want to visit?

_____

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Because of this trip, there are many verses that now have a mental picture in my head. To begin the Sermon of the Mount, Matthew records very specific details about the setting of this sermon. While this might not necessarily bring a transformational applicational truth to your life, details like these should not be overlooked because they make the Bible more real for the human audience to whom the Bible was written.

Matthew 5:1-2 says, ***"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."***

There were close to 2000 years separating when Jesus taught at this mountain and me standing and gazing upon the natural amphitheater shaped hill. While sitting there, the questions about the acoustics of

this area began to fill my head. I began rereading Matthew chapter 5, and caught the detail of Jesus ***"opened His mouth and taught."*** That is such a strange verse that we oftentimes might pass over. Of course, a teacher must open their mouth to teach. Unless Jesus used felt-board, pantomiming, or other visuals, you could conclude that Jesus had to elevate the volume of His voice. Then as God often does, our guide told us about scientists who came to this exact spot and tested the acoustics of a person being able to hear clearly. So, sitting at the bottom of the hill with a slightly elevated volume to their voice, one could hear everything clearly. He confirmed that it could be done.

2. How do details like this help you with your understanding of the Bible?

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It is time to get into the heart of this lesson. Jesus' opening lines in the Sermon of the Mount are called the Beatitudes. The reason for this is because in the Latin Vulgate (the Latin translation of the Bible used in the fourth century) ***"blessed are"*** translates from the "beati sunt." With each of these qualities we will go over for the next few weeks, we will be looking at the seeming backwardness of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Matthew 5:3 says, ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."***

3. What is the backwardness of this statement?

_____

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I enjoy lessons where we can focus all our attention on small verses. I love word studies and sentence diagraming of Scripture. In this case, there is one complete thought we get to break down, four keywords to unlock the vastness of Jesus' words.

1.) "Blessed"

4. What comes to mind when you think of the word ***"blessed?"***

_____
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The word that Scripture uses in Greek as ***"blessed"*** is "Makarios" which means happy, fortunate, or well off. My personal favorite aspect of this word is that "Makarios" is used in a poetic form; this gives credence to allowing this word to be overextended and overemphasized because the blessing is coming from God.

5. How does it feel to be blessed?

_____
_____
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6. How do you think of being blessed?

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7. How do you explain what it means to be blessed?

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_____

The most amazing thing about this truth is that Jesus says, ***"Blessed are."*** Not "blessed will be," "blessed at some time," or even "blessed if they continue to live a life in perfect honor toward me." Jesus says, ***"Blessed are."*** Charles Spurgeon said, "The blessing is in every case in the present tense, a happiness to be now enjoyed and delighted in."

2.) "Poor in Spirit"

This is the part of Jesus' statement that can cause us to study. We just discussed that Jesus is indicating a particular type of person will be happy, and Jesus then follows that statement up with ***"poor in spirit."*** Happy and ***"poor in spirit"*** do not seem to be in accord with one another.

What ***"poor in spirit"*** describes is someone who is spiritually bankrupt. ***"Poor in spirit"*** means that the person is completely void of any type of obedience towards God. ***"Poor in spirit"*** is a person full of sin and rebellion. There are no "spiritual assets" or any type of good deeds stored in the bank. This is not a self-induced hatred of self-conceit that is artificial. ***"Poor in spirit"*** means to be void of any semblance of the Holy Spirit.

8. How can a person who is ***"poor in spirit"*** be blessed?

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There is a first step to everything, and Jesus knew what He was saying.

9. Why must ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit"*** be the first Beatitude?

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Read Romans 3:23; Romans 5:8, and Ephesians 2:8-9.

10. What happens to all those who were ***"poor in spirit"*** in these verses?

_____

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3.) "Theirs"

This may seem like a pronoun that we may not need to spend too much time looking into, but to overlook it can cause us to miss out on a monumental truth. Jesus opens His sermon up by telling the crowd that someone can get something. I do not imagine humanity changing too much in 2000 years. You start telling a crowd they can get something and I would bet dollars to doughnuts Jesus got people's attention. Jesus is saying that those who are spiritually bankrupt are happy and can now have something

Read Romans 8:16-17.

11. Why is the ***"theirs"*** and the idea of co-heirs with Christ such an amazing concept in light of our spiritual poverty?

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4.) "The kingdom of heaven"

We are not talking about the amazing 2005 movie starring Orlando Bloom. Jesus is talking about the kingdom in which His rule will be absolute. This is where He will be God to all His people. The Kingdom of Heaven is where there will be no more pain, weakness, hurt, sin, or separation from God. This is the final resting spot for our weary souls. However, it seems like we are missing one extremely important truth. Those who are just spiritually bankrupt are not just gifted Heaven because of their depravity. Rather, it is when a person comes to themselves (Luke 15:17) to the reality that they are in fact completely void of any goodness from God. It is when a person comes to realize that their works will not save them. When a person comes to realize that they are in fact spiraling out of control in rebellion towards God, both externally and internally, there is hope. This is when we come to the truth that we have not a penny to our souls and that our sin would not allow us to stand before our Heavenly Creator. While we may be earnestly desiring and say "let me in" on the day of Judgment, yet we realize that we have nothing.

12. Why do we all have to start our relationship with Jesus at a place of spiritual bankruptcy in order to be given the Kingdom of God?

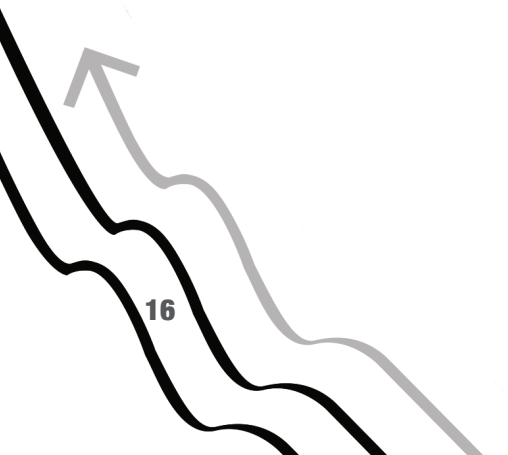
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Charles Spurgeon said, "The poor in spirit are lifted from the dunghill, and set, not among hired servants in the field, but among princes in the kingdom… 'Poor in spirit;' the words sound as if they described the owners of nothing, and yet they describe the inheritors of all things. Happy poverty! Millionaires sink into insignificance, the treasure of the Indies evaporate in smoke, while to the poor in spirit remains a

boundless, endless, faultless kingdom, which renders them blessed in the esteem of him who is God over all, blessed forever.”



BANKRUPT

POOR IN SPIRIT, DEVOTION 1

John Rigg

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:3

"Blessed are the poor?" The Bible often challenges us to believe contrary or differently than we currently think or act. This ***"blessed"*** statement was made by Jesus as He taught His disciples on the side of a hill near the Sea of Galilee. The biblical account, which is now called The Sermon on the Mount, records Him saying that there is a blessedness or happiness that comes from being poor.

Do you remember the board game *Monopoly?* In order to succeed at this real estate game, one player must remain financially solvent while driving all other opponents into bankruptcy by shrewdly buying and developing pieces of property. I recall playing this game for hours and hours, only to be driven into poverty by one of the other players in the end. I do not remember winning that game much, and I certainly did not feel blessed ending up in bankruptcy! Someone once said, "Money can never buy happiness." Apparently, that person never played Monopoly, as the winner always seemed happy to me.

Jesus' proclamation, ***"Blessed are the poor"*** may seem a little shocking to us at first probably because we have a tendency to go through life as if we were playing Monopoly all the time. We define poverty as the state of being we are in lacking material possessions. Being rich, on the other hand, means that our possessions are many. As in Monopoly, the very idea of being poor carries with it the stigma of unhappiness. This is why Jesus' statement seems outrageous at first. He makes it sound like that in order to enter into a blessed life, we must be poor.

However, it helps us to understand that Jesus is not talking about mankind's external condition but their internal poverty, or spiritual condition. When Jesus said, ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit,"*** He was communicating that true blessedness occurs when a person recognizes that they are spiritually bankrupt, see their own inability to do anything, and turn to Him to supply their spiritual need.

Not only are the ***"poor in spirit"*** blessed, but ***"the kingdom of heaven"*** is theirs as well. No prideful, self-reliant person has ever obtained a place in God's kingdom. A real understanding of our spiritual poverty is critical in breaking our prideful spirits. Humility must come before the true blessedness of the kingdom can be obtained. The spiritual bailout that we all need can only be found by looking to the person of Jesus Christ.

"Blessed are the poor?" Probably not if you are playing the game of Monopoly, but certainly true for all those who have seen their spiritual need and have turned to the Savior.

50 YEARS YOUNG

POOR IN SPIRIT, DEVOTION 2

Larry Gabbara

Who would want to be last?

Matthew 20:16 says, ***"So the last will be first, and the first last."***

Jesus tells a parable in Matthew chapter 20, about laborers who were chosen throughout the day to work. Those who were chosen first started work in the morning and others were added to the crew as the day went on. Workers were added at the third, sixth, ninth hours, and finally, some workers did not have to start work until the eleventh hour of the day. However, the parable says that all of them received the same pay. It did not seem right that those that started first thing in the morning would receive the same pay as those who were chosen last and had only worked a short time.

In the parable, those who were chosen first were upset to find out that those who were chosen last were paid the same as the ones who worked all day. The workers chosen early felt they had put in much more time and effort than those who were chosen last. They expected more compensation for their long day of work. Those who were chosen last received the same payment. This is a beautiful picture of God's grace.

In Jesus' parables, the story is an explanation of what He is teaching us. Here, Jesus is teaching us that salvation, whether we receive it earlier in our life or later, is the same free gift. This reward of eternal life is nothing that we have earned. Jesus died on the cross and took on Himself all our sins. He suffered for us and paid for our sins. Because of this, we can freely enter eternity in Heaven!

Romans 6:23 says, ***"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 10:9 adds, "Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."***

I gave my heart to Jesus when I was 50 years old. My wife prayed for twelve years for me to accept the free gift of salvation. She gave her heart to Jesus when she was just nine years old. Our gift is the same no matter how early or late we accept it. This parable shows that God's mercy and grace are immeasurable. What is important in the Kingdom of God is not the length of our salvation, but what we have done with our time on Earth serving the Lord.

RUNNING FOR THE BRONZE

POOR IN SPIRIT, DEVOTION 3

Mitchell Holmes

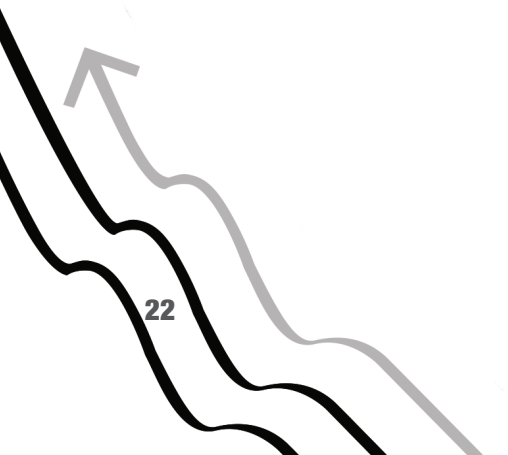
Jesus told many stories and parables during His time on Earth. He made many profound statements, and oftentimes, those statements were contradictory to what the societal norm was at the time and what we still consider to be normal to this day.

Matthew chapter 20 begins with Jesus giving a parable about laborers in a vineyard. He goes on to tell about a master who needs to hire workers for the vineyard. He hires several workers after agreeing to pay them a certain amount. The master then goes out four more times to hire more workers at different hours of the day.

When the workday is finished, the laborers all line up to receive payment. Much to everyone's surprise, the master begins to pay all the laborers the same amount! Those who had worked from dawn until dusk were disappointed that they had not been paid more than those who had only worked a few hours so they begin to complain. The master responded by reminding them that they had agreed to be paid the amount. He tells them that he is choosing to pay those which had worked fewer hours this amount as well. As I read this passage, I put myself in the shoes of the laborers hired at dawn and I find myself thinking that this seems unfair! Surely those who work more hours deserve greater compensation, right? Why is it that our human nature in this situation is to feel greed and resentment at this "unfair" treatment rather than gratitude and happiness for the rest of the laborers who get to share in our reward?

Jesus finishes the parable in verse 16 with the statement, ***"So the last will be first, and the first last."*** This is a profound and backward

statement by societal standards. Imagine watching an Olympic race but instead of trying to win the race, everyone is fighting to be the last to cross the finish line. While humorous, that would not make much sense! What Jesus is trying to convey here is that none of us deserve anything. None of us deserve to go to Heaven when we die and we certainly cannot earn it according to the amount of work we do. The only way to receive the reward of Heaven is to accept the invitation of Jesus. Our human nature is to compare ourselves to others, but we need to instead be grateful for the wondrous gift offered to us and be joyous when others accept the gift of Jesus as well.



THE REAL YOU

POOR IN SPIRIT, DEVOTION 4

Holly Boston

Parents, have you ever been accused of being an armchair quarterback? You know, that parent that knows exactly what your child needs to do to "up his game." My son, Tyler, played travel soccer for years. During the game, I would shout my pearls of wisdom to encourage Tyler. My gems were greeted with his stern stares. One day I decided to offer them to the coach. He was very kind and listened respectfully and when I was finished, he thanked me and said something to the effect of, "Oh, Tyler has a great head on his shoulders; he knows exactly what he needs to work on." In other words, Tyler is well aware of his strengths and weaknesses. I was both proud and leveled.

Having a proper view of myself has never been my strong suit. I have spent most of my life vacillating between thinking better of myself than I should and being my own worst enemy. When I was asked to write this devotion on the first Beatitude, I was reminded of this shortcoming.

Matthew 5:3 says, ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."***

"Poor in spirit" is a misunderstood concept in the Bible. I have heard people define it as downcast, downtrodden, oppressed, and unworthy. When I set out to study the Scripture, my definition was humble. While this is accurate, I realized it was incomplete. Warren Wiersbe adds, "To have a correct estimate of oneself." Again, this is not my strength.

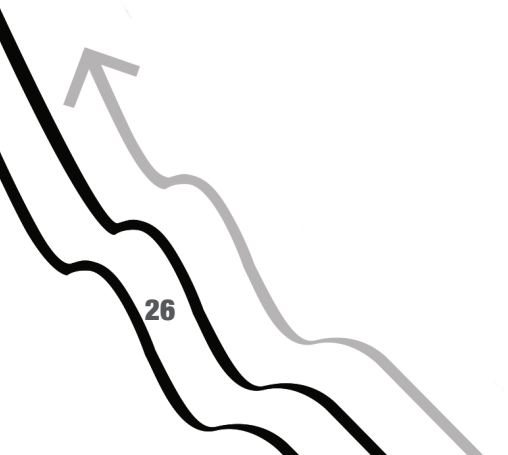
In 1990, my sister began “witnessing” to me. While on vacation, she shared her “conversion story” with me. She explained that she now knew Jesus and was going to spend eternity with Him in Heaven and if I did not repent I would spend mine in Hell. Honestly, I do not remember her exact words but this is what I heard. I was appalled! What kind of person did she think I was? I was not breaking any laws; I was a good person (mostly). I was 26 years old and had the world by the tail. I was a successful Occupational Therapist; running my own pain management clinic in Texas. I was independent, successful, married, and well on my way to my first child. I was living the American Dream. Then in 1995, my world imploded. With marriage problems, health problems, and parents divorcing, I found myself lost for the first time. Life was out of control and I was out of control. I needed help. In April 1995, I was broken and felt alone. Humbled by my circumstances, I repented of my sin and asked Jesus to be the Lord of my life. Over the next two years, the Holy Spirit would reveal the truth of who I was and the life I had been living. According to the world, I had it all, but in truth, I had been an enemy of God (Romans 8:7), completely separated from Him and without hope (Ephesians 2:12). I was focused on the world and pursuing all it had to offer (1 John 2:15-17), living for myself (Ephesians 2:1-3).

Twenty-five years later, Jesus and I have covered a lot of ground together. Over the years, the Holy Spirit has taught me much about who I am in light of my Perfect Savior. At times, the conviction has been so heavy that I questioned my salvation and His presence in my life. Consumed with my tendency to always fall short, I began to pray and ask God to show me how He sees me. He lovingly reminded me that I am a sinner saved by the grace of God (Ephesians 2:8), chosen and adopted by Him (Ephesians 3:1-8), loved by Him and bought with a price (John 3:16). He began to show me all that He had accomplished in me through Jesus Christ (Ephesians 2:10) and reminded me that through Him I can do all that He calls me

to (Philippians 4:13) and bear fruit that will glorify Him alone (John 15:16). God is so good! Yes, He is good all the time!

To the Lost:
Please do not allow the father of lies (John 8:44) to convince you that you are good enough. God would not have sent His only Son to die on a cross for you if there were any other way. It is not enough to believe in His finished work on the cross. After all, Satan himself believes and is committed to keeping you convinced that you are all you need. You must confess your sin and receive Him as Savior (Romans 10:8-9). The choice is yours.

To the Believer:
In confessing your need of a Savior and asking Jesus to be the Lord of your life, you have displayed the first Beatitude - ***"poor in spirit."*** Choosing to humble yourself under His Lordship has opened the door to all His blessings and promises. Welcome to the family! Please keep reading!



BROKEN

POOR IN SPIRIT, DEVOTION 5

Roger Allen

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:3

It is confession time. How many times have I read this verse and not been grieved by the implications and depth of what it means? Writing a devotion on this verse has convicted me of my inability to see the truth. My sometimes haughty attitude was brought to full display as I thought about the meaning of what Jesus is saying here. While it is true, after receiving the gift of grace I have experienced moments of peaceful humility. More often than not, arrogance snuffs out the true peace that only absolute obedience to the Word brings. The root of pride runs deep even in the midst of sinful action. How quickly I find an excuse for my behavior when I feel confronted by others. How can I feel justified in my action and reason when I live outside the commandments that God has given me? Pride knows no boundaries.

Quickly, I am confronted by my own selfishness when I devote myself to Scripture. The Bible illuminates the real me and all that it implies, it becomes the litmus test that I must use to determine my nature. Brought to a place of self-reflection by the world around me, the Bible helps me to understand the nature of "self." Thinking about the implications, I see that without the grace of God in my life, I have no ability to experience the ***"peace of God, which surpasses all understanding"*** (Philippians 4:7). My love for myself is only defeated when I submit to the Lord. There is no good that resides in me.

Romans 7:18 says, ***"For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out."***

I see myself in God's hand as He molds and shapes me, and sometimes "it just ain't pretty," but I know that I am a work in progress. As He transforms me into the likeness of His Son, I begin to experience that peace we all desire. Giving me a glimpse of what it means to have this peace, assures me of a future that I can look forward to. It is one in which the love for myself is replaced by a real and immovable love for the Lord. It is where I can look at my neighbor and truly understand what it means to love them as myself. I will be completely submitting to His will, and not my own vain desires. Even when I take a step back, I hope others might see the small step attributed only to Him, as the focal point. It is by the working of His grace within me that He will be glorified and I will gain the peace I long for.

Finally, in 1 Corinthians 15:10, we read, ***"But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me."***

HUMBLE SPIRIT

POOR IN SPIRIT, DEVOTION 6

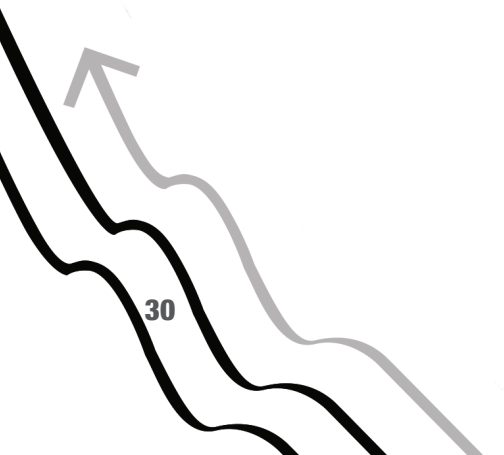
Pat Bedell

Being a worship leader is an honor and a blessing that I have been granted the opportunity to hold. Being a good leader comes with many responsibilities not only for the leader but for who the leader shepherds. It is human nature to struggle with wanting to be recognized for our personal efforts. Just about every musician you know has struggled with pride and self-satisfaction. I know this all too well and it is a constant battle with the devil. It is also a responsibility of mine to make sure that anyone with whom I do ministry, be it in worship or not, has the genuine heart of worship towards Christ that is pleasing to Him. Constant self-assessment is pivotal to be successful in a healthy ministry.

When the Bible forces extreme self-evaluation after you are caught in habitual sin, are you upset because you get caught or upset because you can do better? Matthew 5:3 says, ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*** I first thought to myself, "Why would the poor in spirit inherit the Kingdom of Heaven?" I researched what some other scholars had thought of this Scripture and came across a great interpretation. The late Billy Graham said to substitute the word "poor" for the word "humble." As soon as you make that click in your head, it is easy to understand that being humble in all aspects of your walk with Christ is imperative for your reward that is Heaven. Whether it be an event plan in ministry or leading someone to Christ, you must always know that God did the work, He made the way for success, and that He must be given all the glory no matter what. We must not be self-satisfied or proud of ourselves in the ministry that we do. James 4:6 says, ***"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*** Be sure to

check yourself regularly in your walk to make sure the devil is not creeping in with pride and self-righteousness.

Think of the moments in your life that make you feel the most guilty. Why? Is there something that you should have done differently or something that could have gone way worse? I will be the first to admit that I have sinned my fair share and then some in my lifetime. However, what I do know is that because of God's grace and mercy, I am still alive and doing ministry. What is even more important than doing ministry is the heart that is behind it. Are you keeping a steadfast mindset that God is proud of while you are doing it? What can you do to continuously check yourself to make sure you are genuinely poor in spirit?



LESSON TWO

MOURN

PASTOR NOBLE BAIRD

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Matthew 5:4

Matthew chapter 5, which is also known as the Sermon on the Mount, is a more widely known passage of Scripture, just like John 3:16 or Jeremiah 29:11. Now, I know that many of us may not be able to rattle off the entire Sermon on the Mount as Pastor Tommy does during our Passion Play; however, I love how throughout this study on the Beatitudes we have the opportunity to take a more in-depth look at what Jesus was teaching us.

1. When you hear the word "comfort," what comes to mind?

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In the first four Beatitudes, Jesus is referring to the blessedness that is received to those who are followers of Christ. As we take a deeper look at Matthew 5:4, we read, ***"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."*** As followers of Christ, one who has confessed and received Jesus into their heart, we know that true comfort comes from our Heavenly Father. Sure, this may seem like the "Sunday School" answer, but it is true! It is helpful to look at some passages where we see the Lord providing comfort in difficult times.

Joshua 1:9 says, ***"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go."***

Psalm 23 is a classic, ***"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through***

the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Psalm 27:1 adds, ***"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"***

Matthew 11:28-30 says, ***"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 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."***

2. Which of these passages helps you or what are some passages that you hold onto for comfort?

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3. Is there someone in your life that you go to when you experience difficult or sorrowful times?

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Several months ago, I had the privilege to do a funeral for a young man who tragically passed away. I can remember every day leading up to the service, that I was continually asking the Lord to bring comfort to this family, and ultimately just use me to share the love of His Son Jesus. While it was a very difficult service, the opportunity

to simply love and comfort this family was truly a privilege. As I look at what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians chapter 1, I am reminded of our call to comfort those in need. In 2 Corinthians 1:3-5, Paul writes, ***"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too."***

4. Where are some places you (or others) have searched to try and find comfort?

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5. Who does Paul teach us is the ultimate source of comfort?

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Paul continues on in 2 Corinthians 1:8-11, ***"For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again. You also must help us by prayer, so that many will give thanks on our behalf for the blessing granted us through the prayers of many."***

It may be a bit odd to say, but I find this passage encouraging. Although we are not sure of the true nature of this ***"affliction"*** that Paul experienced while in Asia, we read that it was so bad that it drove him to the point of "despairing" life.

6. Have you ever been through a trial or experience so difficult that you were brought to this point?

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7. Was your reaction to seek "a temporary fix," complain, or pray?

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Yet, amongst this hardship, Paul hung on to hope. It is the hope of Jesus Christ. He even asked the church to pray for him, so that he could push forward and overcome this trial. I know that there have been times in my life that I have experienced these moments of despair. I have been in those trials that I feel almost frozen in my life and truthfully in my walk. It was during those times when I learned that I need to put my pride and my own selfish thoughts aside and reach out. The first is to reach out to the Heavenly Father and realize that He is the true source of hope and comfort. The second is to reach out to my church family and allow them to pray for me and come alongside me during those trials.

8. When was the last time you reached out to your church family for prayer?

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I love this passage because Paul does such an eloquent job of weaving the Gospel of Christ into this lesson of comfort. He begins by identifying the source of comfort, which is God. Then, he shares how we "gain access" to the source of comfort, through Jesus. Yet, he does not stop there.

As we go further into this discussion and understanding of mourning and comfort, Paul brings to light a new directive for those of us who are followers of Christ. He teaches us that as we experience the comfort of our Heavenly Father, through our faith in Christ, we are called to comfort those who are in need, with the same comfort.

9. What does it mean to share the Gospel of Christ?

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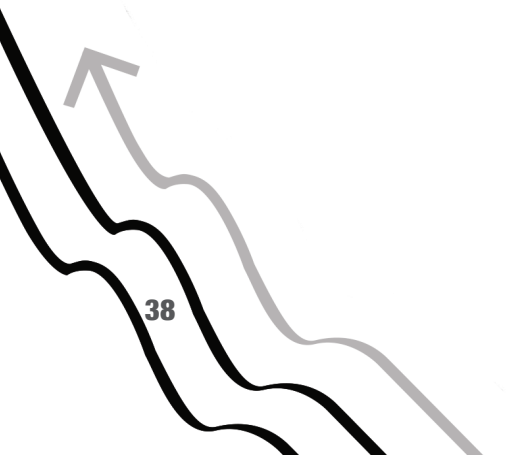
10. Is there a time in your life that you remember feeling this comfort?

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"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." I hope that the next time you read that passage that you are encouraged and challenged. Encouraged, knowing that as a follower of Christ, you have access to the ultimate source of comfort in your life. Challenged, that you would share the source of that comfort to those around you so that they too might experience the hope of Jesus.



WHAT DO YOU MOURN?

MOURN, DEVOTION 1

Pastor Ryan Story

Recently my two sons have taken up playing with blocks, more specifically making giant robots with their "Mega Blocks." So naturally, I was recruited as the head architect for most of these builds. The one area I have put the most emphasis on teaching them is ensuring that all the blocks are fitting together, and ensuring each section of blocks helps the whole structure's sturdiness. Ensuring that each block helps lock another block into place allows one to make a pretty sturdy robot.

Understanding the Bible is a lot like understanding how to build giant robots, each block gets its strength from the blocks with which it is connected. The same can be seen in the Sermon on the Mount, and specifically for us, within the Beatitudes. Jesus' first statement was, ***"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven"*** (Matthew 5:3). Hopefully, last week's lesson was a blessing for you, but the overall focal point on Jesus' statement there was that those who are poor in spirit, or spiritually bankrupt, will receive the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus' revolutionary teaching to a group that God's kingdom is there for those who are void of religiosity was mind-boggling. It was a major reinforcement that our works are not the thing that gets us to Heaven.

This brings us to Jesus' second statement, ***"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted"*** (Matthew 5:4). I am all for the ability to pull this verse out and discuss the truth found that God brings comfort to those who are mourning a tragedy in their life, but I feel Jesus is linking these two ideas more than them just remaining separate truths. In the Beatitude before this one, Jesus discussed

the idea of being spiritually poor, this is a life that is ruled by sin. When Jesus says those who mourn will be comforted, He is teaching more than just comfort from tragic events. In the original language, the Greek word used for mourn (pentheo) is closely linked to a deep degree of mourning over our sinful nature. “Pentheo” can be used in the same aspect as a lament. It is no coincidence that we have an entire book of the Bible called Lamentations. Jesus here is telling us that those who have great grief over their fallen state before God will be comforted.

We should come to a point where we see our sin and we lament over it. There is a point in our lives when we should see the toxic nature of our disobedience towards our Creator and mourn over the effects and damage that has been caused. However, Jesus does not want to leave us in a place of lamenting over the ungodly aspects of our life, Jesus wants to bring us to a place of being comforted by Him. Paul, a man who was the reason for Christians being murdered, wrote, ***“For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death”*** (2 Corinthians 7:10). Our mourning over our sin should lead us to a place of repentance which then leads us to the One who comforts us.

HIS GRACE IS SUFFICIENT

MOURN, DEVOTION 2

Patrick Bicknell

"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me." 2 Corinthians 12:9

About a year and a half ago, my best friend lost his little brother to suicide. It was a really hard time for all of us as we were at a loss of words wondering why and how this had happened. For the funeral, he had asked me to come and read some Scripture along with some other members of his family, to give them some encouragement and peace in their time of struggle. In that moment of feeling joyful that he asked me to come and say a few words to be able to bless them, I felt unworthy to do so. I felt that I was not the person to try and give them some words that may give them just a sliver of peace in this dark valley. Before I went to the funeral, this verse in 2 Corinthians is where God brought me, to remind me that it is not about me or my life, but solely about His power and grace. In my weakness, His power is made perfect. His grace is all I can ever want, and more than I will ever deserve. This verse taught me that I will not fear my inability to do God's work, but I will rest in the fact that even with my many weaknesses and faults, Christ's power can and will work through me because He, not I, is that powerful.

What Paul says here to the church of Corinth is one of the most radical, encouraging, and hard to grasp verses that there is. In our culture, we focus so much on our strengths. It is not about how well we can do something, how long we have worked at perfecting our craft, and what we can do for ourselves. These are all great things,

but that is not the focus for us as Christians. That first statement at the beginning of this verse, ***"My grace is sufficient for you"*** caught my attention. Before he even begins to talk about his weaknesses, he first states that above all else God's grace is more than we will ever need. Even if we live our lives with no money in our pockets, no roof over our heads, or no clothes on our backs, if we accept the free gift of grace that God offers through the blood of Jesus Christ then we will have more than we can ever want, need, or deserve. The rest of what Paul says rests on this idea. In the midst of all our weaknesses and struggles, God's grace is enough for us, and His strength is enough to do all that He wants to do through us. Boast in our weaknesses because in them the power of Christ is made perfect. That is an amazing, and radical truth.

GROANING

MOURN, DEVOTION 3

John Stone

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."
Matthew 5:4

- About 606,500 Americans are projected to die from cancer in 2020,
- Over 300,000 children are trafficked across international borders each year, the majority into the sex trade,
- There were 227,000 dead in minutes during a massive earthquake and resulting tsunami in Thailand in 2004,
- One in eight Americans are alcoholics while ten percent of people in the world are starving,
- About 800,000 Rwandans hacked each other to death by machete in 1994,
- There have been 61.8 million unborn babies murdered by U.S. government-sanctioned abortion since 1973,
- There were 782,000 divorces in the U.S. last year,
- There are 78.1 million visits to pornography websites every single day.

Have you considered the magnitude of the brokenness, the depth of deprivation, and how nauseatingly sinful the world we live in actually is (Romans 3:10-18)? Rarely are any of us exposed to the horror of mass murder or the devastation of natural disasters. However, as believers, we should all feel the effect of sin in our lives and in the lives of those around us. We are witnesses now to the groaning and agony of a fallen creation that is longing for God to lift the curse and make it new. How should we as Christians be affected by this and, more importantly, how should we live?

First, we should be affected. The oppression of sin weighing on both our spirits and our physical bodies is a constant reminder of our and the world's need for Jesus Christ. The sin in our own lives that drags us down, marginalizing our effectiveness for the Gospel, should leave us heartbroken and repentant but many times we feel nothing. Why would you and I spit in the face of our Savior and feel nothing?

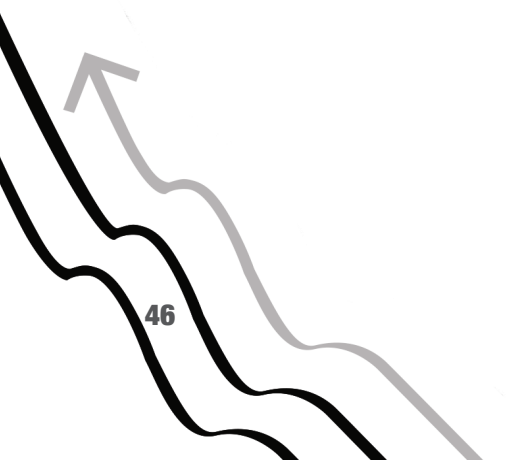
Second, we are told to weep with those around us who are suffering loss and share in their pain (Romans 12:15). God did not give us His Spirit so that we would walk through life self-absorbed and distracted. The outworking of the Spirit produces empathy for broken hurting people who need to hear the Gospel.

Most importantly, we need to realize that as a result of man's sin, it was God who subjected His creation to futility and death as the consequence of that sin (Genesis 3:14-18; Romans 8:18-24). This is a comforting reality for us if we can trust that He did it for a reason that is righteous and just and that He is in total sovereign control. There is hope! It is the hope that in the end God will redeem creation and make all things, including us, new and perfect. Christians have unique knowledge and responsibility that God has given us to share this hope that can be found through the Gospel. It is the only hope for a world that is facing inevitable suffering, atrocities, and death (Luke 13:1-5).

May we live with an acute awareness of our sinful tendencies and mourn because we willfully fail our Savior every day. Let us not sidestep our calling to weep with our brothers and sisters and share in their grief and suffering. May we not be distracted by the numbing effects of our American culture and underestimate how broken and desperate for the Gospel the world is. Yet, let us mourn in hope and live joyfully (2 Corinthians 6:10), because although we are still

waiting, God has already given us the greatest blessing in salvation through Jesus Christ and has promised to make all things new.

"And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." Romans 8:23



GODLY GRIEF

MOURN, DEVOTION 4

Sierra Combs

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." These words, said by Jesus Himself in Matthew 5:4, make up one of the most famous sermons in history. You have probably heard it called "The Sermon on the Mount." I have had the privilege of visiting the spot where Jesus likely said these words, on a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee in Israel, and that picture will live in my head and heart for life! It is easy to read over that sermon, as I have done my entire life, and gloss over the words and what Jesus was actually saying.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Upon quickly reading that it sounds nice enough. Who does not want to be comforted when they are mourning and grieving? Not to mention, life can be so difficult and hard. We all will have times of grieving and mourning. I know for a fact that during these times, the Lord does comfort His children. For those who know Him as Savior, He has given us the most wonderful gift of the Holy Spirit, the One who is actually called "the Comforter." If you are in a state of despair, mourning the loss of a person, a life, or even a concept, cling to the Lord. Rest in His promise of peace and let Him comfort you today.

I could easily go on and on about how the Lord comforts His children as they mourn, which seems like what this verse is referring to, but I want to look at it from a different angle. While looking at it that way is certainly true, it might not have been what Jesus was talking about when He spoke to His Jewish audience. Many scholars of the Bible believe that Jesus was not talking about the sorrows of the world and the many losses that we may see over our lifetime, but instead

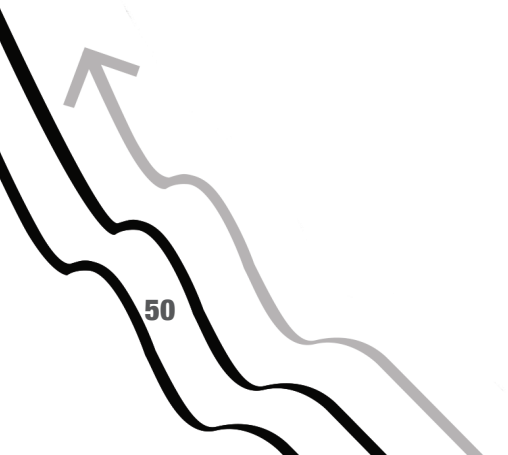
the mourning over the sin that has stained our souls. When Jesus came to the Earth 2,000 years ago, He accomplished many things. He tangibly comforted the hurting, changed the way people thought, brought physical healing, and performed many miracles. He still does this today! However, His main mission was to bring salvation to the lost. Who exactly is lost? Each and every one of us is lost!

The Bible tells us that all have sinned and fall short of God's glory. Every single person is born with the stain of sin, separated from the one true perfect and Holy God. Because of God's goodness, He created a way to bridge the gap. He sent His Son Jesus to come to this Earth as a servant and to preach repentance (the turning away from our sin). He then offered Himself as the only sufficient sacrifice for those sins, dying on a cross for us, and then rising to life three days later. For the sinner who becomes a saint through the cleansing blood of Jesus, there is no greater comfort than the Gospel! When we look upon our sin as what it is, the offensive and disgusting thing that separates us from God, it should lead to weeping and mourning. Strangely enough, it is when we grieve over our sin that we find the true and ultimate comfort. In 2 Corinthians 7:10, Paul says, ***"For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation."*** The promise of salvation is a special kind of comfort, the very best kind, one in which we are pardoned, purified, and restored to the Father through Jesus Christ.

If you know the Lord Jesus as your Savior, you can take ultimate comfort in the fact that your sins have been forgiven. When Jesus said that you would be blessed because of your mourning, He was not kidding! There is no greater blessing than the gift of salvation. You also now have the benefit of the Holy Spirit living inside of you, bringing you peace, joy, and rest.

Even though you will face many trials in this life, you can rest assured that God is in control and is working all things out for your good. If you have not yet put your hope and trust in Jesus to save you, today is the day! Simply ask the Lord to reveal Himself to you, and to reveal the disgusting sin that is standing in the way of a relationship with Him. There is nothing that you can do to get rid of that sin. Only Jesus can do that, and if you confess that you are a sinner and truly believe that only Jesus can save you from that sin, He is faithful and just to forgive you! That is where true comfort begins! If this is you today, please reach out and let us know. We would love to help you with the next steps, helping you grow in your new relationship with the Lord. I may not know you yet, but I am praying for you!

Be blessed!



VULNERABILITY

MOURN, DEVOTION 5

Jill Osmon

Matthew 5:4 reads, ***"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."***

I have a confession to make. Whenever I have surgery, do not feel well, or go through something traumatic (like a car accident), I want my mom. The safety of showing my vulnerability to her makes me open the floodgates and tears pour! I am sure we all have that parent, spouse, friend, or person that is the safe place to be completely vulnerable and open.

For a long time, the world did not want to see that, not really. A controlled showing of emotion when something terrible happens is acceptable, but a deep mourning of loss needs to be measured and controlled. Going a step further, there is an idea in the Church that because we have God, we cannot show the world our vulnerability because then they would look differently at God and the Gospel. We needed to be stoic, God is in control, and if something bad happened, we needed to be seen as accepting God's will for whatever happened. It was a sign of weakness to be seen as sad or affected by bad things.

I have found it a relief that God calls those who mourn blessed, and not just blessed, but then comforted! This idea of "don't show your weakness," was not only unattainable but not biblical. The last few years of my life, through a cancer diagnosis and everything that comes after that, have taught me that showing my weakness can be the perfect path to share the Gospel. I was able to say, "Yes, this is terrible, it is scary, and it hurts but even through all of that God is good."

The world does not need to see us ignore the hardships, they need us to see it and then point people to Jesus as the only hope that can give us true comfort. Ignoring the hardships only makes the world see us as out of touch and fake. Paul talks about it in 2 Corinthians 12:9, ***"But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness,' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me."***

God's power is not made perfect in strength, it is made perfect through our weakness! Hold onto this truth, when we are struggling, mourning, and trying to tread water through difficult times, remember that God's grace is sufficient to see us through it and His power is perfect. It is not an accident, tell everyone who will listen that through our weaknesses we can boast about how good God is. In the honesty of our struggle, people will be drawn to God's power and come to know His saving grace that is the Gospel.

SUFFICIENT GRACE

MOURN, DEVOTION 6

Mark O'Connor

There is a difference between happiness and being blessed. They simply do not always go together. When we typically feel like the Lord is blessing us, it is quite frankly because things are going well in our lives at the moment.

As we read the Beatitudes, and as I have experienced in my life, we see that we are blessed even in the worst of times. Matthew 5:4 says, ***"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."***

Those who mourn are by definition, not happy. However, they are blessed.

Before full-time ministry, I had not experienced an abundance of death. Three of my four grandparents had passed away in my teen and early twenties. This surely affected me but they were all before I had really come to know Jesus. We were, for the most part, as prepared for them as we could be because they were not very sudden deaths. We knew they were coming as a result of cancer or dementia.

Then I came to work for the church. I have experienced more tragic and unexpected loss of life in these four years than I imagine most do in a lifetime. I have also witnessed God do incredible things in the midst of tragedy. The Bible tells us to weep with those who weep. I have wept.

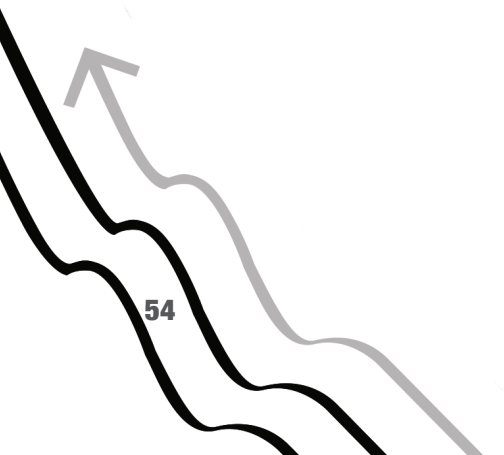
I have also seen Paul's comments in 2 Corinthians 12:9 at work in the darkest of times. It says, ***"But he said to me, 'My grace is***

sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me."

If we are with the Lord, that is knowing who Jesus is and what He did for us with absolute certainty, the blessing of His grace will carry us through any challenge that can be thrown our way. It is in mourning, when we may be at our weakest, when His grace is shown the most.

I have seen the widowed wife stand tall and brave. I have seen the child who lost a parent collapse into a ball. Both have found comfort as a blessing from the Lord.

In Him, and through no work of our own, we find blessing and comfort in mourning. Happiness will come again in time but the blessing of comfort will be there through the entire process when we turn to Jesus and look to Him for strength.



LESSON THREE

MEEK

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Matthew 5:5

1. How would you define ***"meek?"***

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2. Is meekness a positive or negative trait? Why?

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The word meek can often come with negative connotations. It can be perceived that meekness equals weakness. It can be viewed that the meek are willing to be a doormat for people to walk all over. People often view meekness as overly submissive, compliant, spiritless, and tame.

It is necessary to see an accurate description of meekness from the Bible.

The Explanation

When Jesus mentioned that the meek would be blessed, He was being countercultural. He was radical. The culture at the time (and today) normally thinks you have to push others out of the way to get to the top. Jesus said to inherit the earth, you needed to be meek.

Those who are meek are truly humble, gentle, and have a proper appreciation of their position. The Greek word for "meek" is actually translated as "humble" (Matthew 21:5) and "gentle" in its three other usages in the New Testament (Matthew 11:29; 1 Peter 3:4.)

Although the word “meek” may be hard to define, it can signify the absence of pretension and generally suggests gentleness and the self-control it entails. Meekness is seen in our attitudes and actions toward others.

Warren Wiersbe described it clearly when he wrote, “This word translated ‘meek’ was used by the Greeks to describe a horse that had been broken. It refers to power under control.”

3. What are some examples you have seen of “power under control?”

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Meekness, according to the Bible, is being humble and gentle towards others while willingly being submissive and obedient to the Lord.

Meekness and timidity are opposites. Being meek must never be confused with being timid. The quietness which accompanies meekness is the result of one’s trust in the Lord, whereas the quietness of timidity is the result of one’s lack of trust.

4. When are people often timid? Why?

_____

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_____

Meekness refers to someone who is humble or gentle. The meek do not seek gain for themselves; instead, they hope in the Lord.

5. What is the key to being meek or having power under control?

_____

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The Bible gives clear examples of some of our heroes and describes them as being meek.

The Examples

It is helpful to do a word study or search through a concordance on the Bible to see who is described as meek in Scripture.

Moses

Numbers 12:3 says, ***"Now the man Moses was very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth."*** Was this intended to be a compliment? I think it was. Moses was strong but did not always use or show it for personal revenge or gain. He trusted in the Lord and His timing.

Paul

In 2 Corinthians 10:1, we read, ***"I, Paul, myself entreat you, by the meekness and gentleness of Christ - I who am humble when face to face with you, but bold toward you when I am away!"*** In 1 Thessalonians 2:7, he adds, ***"But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children."*** In essence, Paul is attributing meekness to himself and Jesus. He goes so far as to give a beautiful example of a mother nursing her lovely child.

Jesus

Matthew 11:29 says, ***"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."*** Jesus says He is meek or gentle. By using Jesus as an example, it is a form of a mic drop in writing. The same Jesus who defied Pharisees and overturned the tables of the moneychangers in the temple takes a healthy pride in being gentle.

6. When did Jesus show power under control?

_____
_____
_____

7. What are some other Bible examples of men and women who displayed strength or power under control?

_____
_____
_____

The Expectation

The natural next point is to determine what God expects from us.

Colossians 3:12 says, ***"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience."***

8. How are believers described here?

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9. Describe the words used in this passage. Which is most difficult for you?

_____

_____

_____

James 1:21 adds, ***"Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls."***

10. What does it mean to receive the "implanted word" by meekness?

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James 3:13 continues, ***"Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom."***

Meekness or gentleness is even found in the Fruit of the Spirit as recorded in Galatians 5:22-23, ***"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."***

11. What is meant by the Fruit of the Spirit? Why the list?

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The End

The end normally is the stopping point, but it can also be a directive in looking to the future at the outcome.

It is normally viewed that the strong, aggressive, harsh, and tyrannical will succeed, or in this case, ***"inherit the earth."*** However, Jesus says that the meek or gentle will win.

Psalm 37:11 also says, ***"But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace." Isaiah 29:19 agrees, "The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the poor among mankind shall exult in the Holy One of Israel."***

In his commentary research, D.A. Carson noted, "Entrance into the Promised Land ultimately became a pointer toward entrance into the new heaven and the new earth ('earth' is the same word as 'land;' cf. Isaiah 66:22; Revelation 21:1), the consummation of the messianic kingdom."

This reminded me of Jesus' conversation with the rich young man. In Matthew 19:24, Jesus said, ***"Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."***

12. Why can it be difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God?

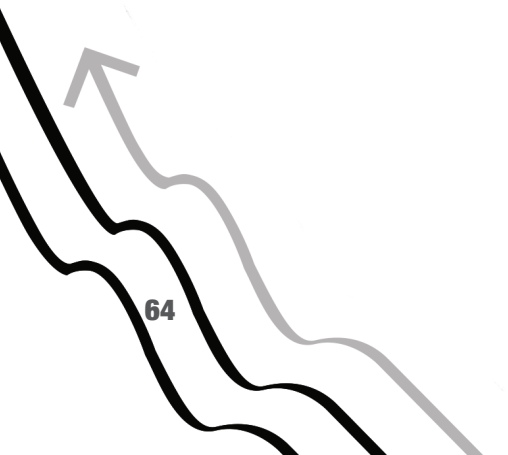
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The meek, gentle, and humble are not often appreciated in our business world today. We need to come to a place where we do not have to be the strong ones all the time. We can choose to be tender and gentle with people. We must give control of our lives to God. Finally, we need to commit to the mindset where we do not have to "win" all the time.

"Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near." Philippians 4:5 (NIV)



PROPER AUTHORITY

MEEK, DEVOTION 1

Pastor Ryan Story

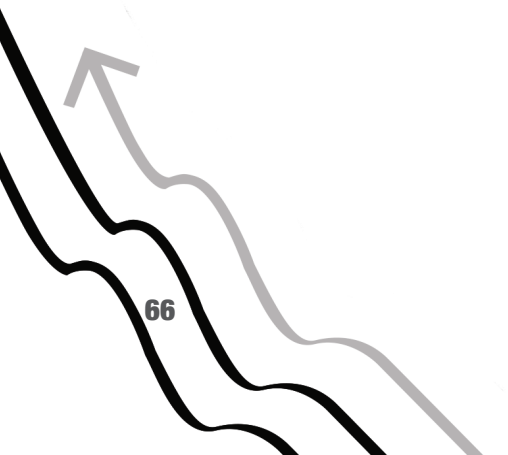
I have gotten to the point where every time I see red letters in the Bible, I instantly know the difficulty of truly understanding and applying it to my life. The difficulty is not necessarily found in my willingness or even in my understanding of what is needed to apply His words to my life. The difficulty is found in the truth that I am a sinful man. The first three beatitudes are so difficult for a person to hear. We hear that Jesus calls us to blessings in spiritual poverty, mourning, and now meekness. These are attributes that can only be found when we as sinful people come to know Jesus as Savior and choose to be ruled by the Holy Spirit, not the flesh.

When Jesus says, ***"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth"*** (Matthew 5:5), we have to see the almost oxymoronically charged statement Jesus left for humanity to know. Meek is not necessarily the first word that one might use to describe a group who will inherit the Earth. As with most things Jesus says, when we understand what He is actually meaning, all things fall into place.

Meek is a very fun word in which to do a word study. I feel the best definition I found was "one's willingness to submit and work under proper authority." When one is meek, one is exceedingly willing to disregard one's own rights and privileges of their life to be subject to another. Meekness is a whiling submission, with a gentle attitude about it.

With that definition understood, the fastest question I feel enters my mind is, "How in the world does a gentle person inherit the world?" The world is in a constant state of chaos, rebellion, and idolatry.

The world is a place where “dog eats dog” is common practice, and commonly accepted. The world is a place where it is better to have the attributes of a hungry wolf than a meek sheep. Yet Jesus says, it is the meek who shall inherit. To pull everything together I think we cannot overlook the word inherit. If we are meek, we understand we submit to the authority that is found in God. Because of our Spirit-led meekness to Jesus as our authority, we receive our inheritance from Him, who is the true ruler of this Earth.



WHERE ARE YOU POINTING?

MEEK, DEVOTION 2

James Mann

"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Matthew 5:5

The concept of meekness is an interesting one in dealing with the Bible. We often hear people discussing it as the same thing as humility. I want us to take a moment and think about our lives and all the fantastic things that we have accomplished in our time here on Earth. Some might be able to think of something that was a personal accomplishment or something that helped others in need. These are all amazing in their own way. The question I want to bring up today is, who did you point to in those moments when you accomplished these things and felt like you were on top of the world? It is easy for us to point to ourselves in our accomplishments. I am speaking from experience here. Often, we get so caught up in the moment, and we are excited about all the praise that we are receiving. We think about all the time that we spent trying to achieve this remarkable feat, but what good does this do for anyone? The thing is, without help, we cannot accomplish anything worthwhile.

Before reading any further, I want to encourage you to read Romans chapter 7.

Romans chapter 7 does a fantastic job of explaining our fleshly desires. Verse 21 states, ***"So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand."*** Our inward being desires to do good, but our outward flesh often acts in evil ways. We have no reason, as sinful humans, for us to be prideful in our actions. When we accomplish amazing things, we need to remember that we have

no reason to point to ourselves, but instead, we should point to our Lord. Only through our God do we have the ability to do these great things. We are truly blessed to have a God that gives us the opportunity to be the tool that He uses in order to make great things happen.

Referring back to the opening Beatitude, God blesses those who are meek and point to Him. Only through our meekness do we have the God-given ability to inherit the Earth. It is not by our own accord but through His grace. My challenge for you is that whenever you do something that people are praising you for, turn the praise to the One who actually achieved the feat. By pointing to Him, we are pointing the world to the One who can save them from their sinful ways. Sometimes for us to do this, with the right mindset, we need to take a step back and evaluate what we have really done and seen for ourselves, that we have done nothing, and that our Lord truly made the way for this to happen.

SILENT NIGHT

MEEK, DEVOTION 3

Josh Thayer

We are in the middle of a study on the Beatitudes, which is part of Jesus' longest recorded sermon. It is in this sermon that Jesus begins to describe the traits He is looking for in His followers. He said that God blesses those who live out these traits. I do not know about you, but when Jesus is pretty clear on what He is looking for I want to listen. We pick up on the third Beatitude that He mentions in Matthew 5:5, ***"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."***

Now, I am very much a feeler. It is part of the way I was designed. I feel everything in life. It can be from music, the tone of someone's voice, to the sudden death scene in a movie. I relate everything to how it makes me feel and I sometimes have a hard time expressing myself with words. My wife is very much the opposite. She is logical, put together, and the smartest woman I know.

Therefore, I logically looked at the word "meek" and it was not sinking into my mind. So I asked the smartest woman I know. What do you know? She spit out the literal definition of "meek" from Google. Then she said it reminded her of Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz. It is the part where she gets to the end of the movie and describes herself to the man behind the curtain as small and meek. So naturally, I tried to remember when I saw that movie last and realized I had no idea. It was another dead end for me. Then a few moments later it all clicked. My wife started humming the song silent night because she thought the word meek was in the song. (She was mistaken. She is human!) All of the sudden, I could feel the word meek just by singing a few lines from that song.

Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright

I was able to feel the quiet, gentle spirit behind the song. It is a song reminiscent of church, Christmastime, and singing while we lit candles in church. The feeling of peace and stillness came over me. It was the feeling like almost everything was standing still in time. The defining feeling of meekness is just that: a quiet, gentle, and humble spirit. Meekness is a trait in which some of us possess naturally, and others, like my loud self, do not naturally possess but we can develop. Look at Matthew 11:27-30:

"All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. 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."

We can develop a meek spirit through Jesus Himself. It says in verse 28 to come to Jesus and He will give us rest. When you think of the concept of rest, it often requires a quiet, peaceful moment. The rest that Jesus promises is love, healing, and peace with God. When you find rest in God, you are able to extend that same rest - the quiet, humble, and gentle spirit to other people. Being able to approach life with a calm faith, humility before God, and hope in His deliverance brings freedom. Then you will enjoy great peace as the Bible says! That, my friends, is a trait Jesus is looking for in his followers.

"But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace." Psalm 37:11

DRIVING IN REVERSE

MEEK, DEVOTION 4

Keaton Washburn

When I was younger, my family took a trip to Disney World in Florida. We spent a couple of days at the various parks and had a great time as a family. Each of us had our favorite rides and shows and mine was a show called *Lights, Camera, Action!* This show consisted of stunt cars, high-speed chases, jet skis, and lots of explosives. The best part about it, though, was that it was all done live. It was like being at an actual movie recording of a high-speed, action-packed car chase!

One of my favorite parts of the show was when the cars disappeared behind the set, only to come speeding out seconds later. The only catch, the car that was being chased was now driving backward at 45mph. The car was being chased and flying through a course at 45mph, in reverse! I remember sitting there being in awe that a driver could be that skilled. I could not comprehend how someone could do this. One of the best parts about the show was that after doing this scene, the director came out and explained to the audience how it was done. He had the driver of the car going in reverse drive the car out. He asked the driver to get out of the car and when he got out we realized that this was a special stunt car. The body of the car was put on backward, to make it look like the car was going in reverse, when in actuality, it was going forward. My mind was blown. I had not even considered that as an option.

Today, as we continue in our series on the beatitudes, I want to take you to Matthew 5:5 which says, ***"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."*** To be meek is to be quiet, gentle, easily-imposed on, or submissive. It is not necessarily something that is

valued in our world today. To be “successful” in the world today means that you are imposing, aggressive, and assertive. To be meek is counter-cultural. One could say that to be meek seems backward or not making sense. It is like driving a car backward at 45mph. It does not make sense.

In the Kingdom of God, the meek will inherit the Earth. It is the meek who are successful in the sight of God, not the aggressive and assertive. At times, being meek may feel like you are driving in reverse. However, in God’s economy, when you are following His commands, even if the world thinks you are going in reverse, like the stunt car in the show, you are going in the direction you were designed to go.

When I was in high school, I was given a picture of meekness like a football player holding a baby. It portrayed immense power and strength held in check for the sake of the baby. To be meek is not to be lacking strength, but to hold it in for the proper times, not lashing out or “putting others in their place.” We need to leave that to God, the Just Judge (1 Peter 2:23).

BE>DO

MEEK, DEVOTION 5

Ferdinand Sanders

Within arguably the greatest sermon of all time, (The Sermon on the Mount), Jesus lays out the framework of the Christian faith through a handful of sayings, what we know as the Beatitudes. Though only twelve verses, these statements serve as the mission and vision of Christianity as a whole. By this point in Jesus' ministry and teachings, we are familiar with Jesus dropping statements which counter how the "world" would think or act. In Matthew 5:5, Jesus says, ***"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth."***

A quick google search defines meek as quiet, gentle, and easily imposed on; submissive. If I am being honest, when I hear the word ***"meek,"*** I find myself associating it with the word "weak." However, the ancient Greek word ("praus"), where we get the word meek from, has a lot more meaning packed into it. The word "praus" was borrowed from the military and is related to the taming and training of a horse for battle. Here is an excerpt from a word study that was done on the word ***"meek"*** that is helpful: "The Greek army would find the wildest horses in the mountains and bring them to be broken in. After months of training, they sorted the horses into categories. When a horse passed the conditioning required for a war horse, its state was described as 'praus,' [that is, meek]. The war horse had 'power under authority,' 'strength under control.' A war horse never ceased to be determined, strong and passionate. However, it learned to bring its nature under discipline. It gave up being wild, unruly, out of control and rebellious. A war horse learned to bring that nature under control. It would now respond to the slightest touch of the rider, stand in the face of cannon fire, thunder into battle and stop at a whisper. It was now 'meek.'"

Meekness shows up in the Bible on a number of occasions. James writes, ***"Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls"*** (James 1:19-21). As a church, last year we spent months looking at the life of Moses. In Numbers 12:3, Moses is described as being, ***"Very meek, more than all people who were on the face of the earth."*** David writes in Psalm 37:11, ***"But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace."***

As I was taking a closer look at our call to be meek, I am reminded of the Fruit of the Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control). These all coincide with the call for us to be meek. Within the Sermon on the Mount and throughout many of the teachings in Scripture, we really are called to "be" more than we are called to "do." A lot of times I think it is easy to get discouraged by what we have done in our past, or by the things that we are not doing today that we wish we were. Maybe we need to wake up each day and focus firstly on who God is calling us to be, rather than the work we feel we need to accomplish, even in the name of Jesus. Through being meek, may we be filled with the strength of God to stand and face the battle, but disciplined enough to hear the gentle whisper of God as He leads and guides from within.

BECOME A FOOL TO BECOME WISE?

MEEK, DEVOTION 6

Debbie Gabbara

In His teachings, Jesus made many statements that would have sounded very extreme. His teaching upset the Pharisees who were the teachers of the law, confused the people and even His disciples. Some thought Jesus was a prophet, others were angered by the things He said, and many decided He was crazy.

In 1 Corinthians 3:18, we read, ***"Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise."*** Paul said that we have to become a fool to become wise. That does not make any sense, or does it?

The world has a lot to tell us about wisdom. Just *Google* "how to become wiser" and you will be astonished! I got 28,800,000 results to my search in just .052 seconds. There were pages and pages of articles; *"10 Ways to be Wise."* If you are not quite there, you can read, *"11 Ways to be Wise."* If you do not have that much time, skip down to the article that gets it all done in just *"3 Ways to Wisdom."* One article even offered a step by step guide with life tips and videos and said that it was written by experts. Experts in what, I wondered? Of course, there was a DIY guide – Do It Yourself! You can do it, just read an article, buy a book, and get a guide. How do you know whose guide is best? Which article is the right one? If I am trying to become wiser than I am, I do not think I am confident enough to take the DIY approach, I am not sure that I would be my best guide.

Therefore, I went to a source we can always depend on and trust, even though I had to go to page three of the *Google* search to even

see a reference for it - The Bible. It is best to see what God has to say about wisdom.

God says that wisdom comes from Him. ***"For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding"*** (Proverbs 2:6).

In 1 Corinthians 3:18, Paul says, ***"Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise."*** If we think we are wise, we have to become a fool. What does that even mean? It sure sounds backward according to the standards of the world.

Proverbs 1:17 (NIV) says, ***"The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction."***

When we find the Lord, we begin to find true knowledge. Proverbs 28:26 (NIV) adds, ***"Those who trust in themselves are fools, but those who walk in wisdom are kept safe."***

Romans 12:2 says, ***"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."***

Max Lucado has pointed out, "It is impossible to know the meaning of life if we do not know the Maker of life. And the Maker of life is willing to be our teacher. Jesus came as our guide. He reveals wisdom and truth. We can know, not just facts about God, but his heart, his joy, his passion, his plan and his sorrows. We are not left alone with our wanderings and wonderings. We have a teacher. His name is Jesus."

"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding." Proverbs 3:5

LESSON FOUR

HUNGER AND THIRST

PHILIP PIASECKI

Whenever I visit a new city or town, one of my main goals is to find the best possible food in the area. Our vacation schedules tend to revolve around what the plan is for our next meal. I was just up north in Charlevoix with some friends this summer and we were literally waiting to pay our bill at breakfast, and already making our lunch and dinner plans. I love finding the best burger in the area as well. I once found myself in downtown Cleveland with one of our Pastors and a couple of friends walking down a sketchy alley, to go down into a dark hallway, to go into the dustiest dingiest hole in the wall burger joint I have ever been to all on the hunt for the best burger. As literal condensation dripped from the ceiling onto our shoulders, let me tell you, the burger was amazing.

1. What are the greatest lengths you have gone to get amazing food when you were somewhere else other than home?

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So you may ask, "Why am I going on and on about food in this lesson?" It is because I take my teaching cues from Jesus, the greatest teacher ever. He consistently used food, hunger, and thirst as an illustration for our lives.

Matthew 5:6 says, ***"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."***

2. Why do you think Jesus uses the phrase ***"hunger and thirst?"***

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When I think of the phrase ***"hunger and thirst,"*** I think of someone who is intensely seeking something to eat. This person is not just trying to find a quick snack, this is someone who is in desperate need of some sustenance and they are willing to go to incredible lengths to achieve that. I think believers too often in our walk with Christ are sadly content to just "snack on" the things of the Lord, instead of truly having a hunger and a thirst for them. I think the world generally is okay with people being "sort of" Christians. We commonly hear phrases like: "Oh yeah, I go to church sometimes" or "Yeah, I believe there is a God." However, when we take what Jesus said and actually hunger and thirst for the things of Christ, that is completely radical in the eyes of the world. If as a believer all you are doing is "snacking" on the things of Christ, you are going to be in trouble when times of famine come.

3. Be honest, do you find yourself snacking on the things of Christ or truly being hungry and thirsty for them?

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Matthew 7:24-27 adds, ***"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it."***

4. Do you find yourself stable in Christ or unstable when difficulties arise?

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At the time of writing this, we are in month eight of the COVID pandemic, and it has been so heartbreaking to see how this difficult time has clearly separated believers who have built their foundation on the rock, and those who have built it on the sand. Or another way of saying that could be those who hunger and thirst for Christ or those who are content to just snack. We all know and understand that difficult times are going to come in our life, and how we are able to survive those times is solely based on the depth of our relationship with Christ. If your confidence in Christ immediately crumbles when difficulties come, I would challenge you to deepen your relationship with Him and strengthen your foundation on the Rock that is Jesus.

5. What is your first reaction when difficult times happen? What should your first reaction be?

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Again, Matthew 5:6 says, ***"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."***

6. What is your understanding of what righteousness is?

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So now that we have the general concept that we should have a hunger and thirst for the things of Christ down, we should look specifically at righteousness. Webster's Dictionary defines the word righteousness as "the quality of being morally right or justifiable." Through Scripture, Jesus has given us commands on how we are to live our lives. He lays out what is morally right, and He calls us to hunger and thirst to follow those things in our lives.

7. Do you feel like you hunger and thirst for righteousness in your life? Why or why not? Give some examples of areas you feel you could improve in this area.

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We know that even as we hunger and thirst after righteousness, we are still going to fall short at times. This is why Jesus had to die for our sins. He knew we had no chance of upholding His commandments, but that does not give us the liberty to just do whatever we want. As believers, we have this tension in our lives of knowing that the Lord has forgiven all of our sins, but He still calls us to righteousness. Paul explores this idea in Romans chapter 6.

Romans 6:1-2 records, ***"What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?"***

8. What is your motivation for living righteously?

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9. Do you believe that God loves you more when you do good things?

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You may answer with a resounding no to the question above, but maybe your actions tell a different story of how you think God's love operates. Our love for Christ, and what He did to save us, should compel us to desire to live righteously. We should have a longing to follow God's law and be righteous. It is not because it makes God love us more, He already loves us more than we could ever fathom. We should desire to follow His commands because it is the least we can offer to Him in response to what He has done for us.

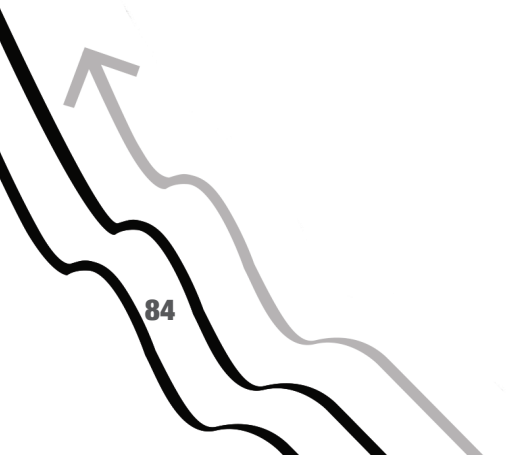
10. Where in your life do you find yourself looking for satisfaction?

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When we ***"hunger and thirst for righteousness,"*** Jesus tells us that we will be satisfied. There are so many things that this world tells us to seek out and desire for our satisfaction, which ultimately just leave us feeling more empty than before. When we seek after being righteous, we will find ourselves no longer hungry for what the world has to offer, but filled and overflowing with satisfaction in the things of Christ Jesus. Pray that the Lord would put a desire in your heart to live righteously, and you will find yourself satisfied.



2020

HUNGER AND THIRST, DEVOTION 1

Debbie Kerr

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." Matthew 5:6

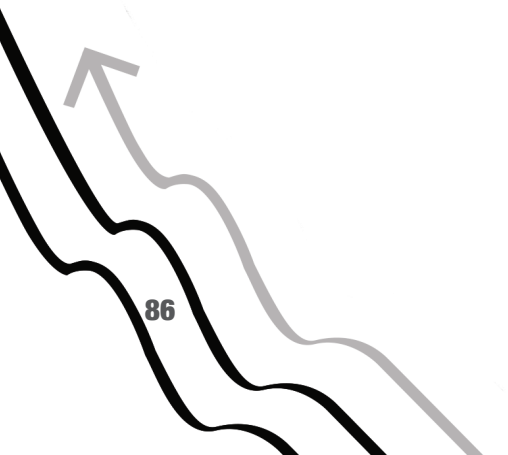
At the time of this writing, there are 84 days, 08 hours, 39 minutes, and 21 seconds left of 2020, but who is counting?

2020! What an interesting, challenging, crazy, confusing, fearful, and unique time in human history! Did you survive so far? I guess if you are reading this you did, maybe by the skin of your teeth. What did you learn? What did you change or re-evaluate? Life is uncertain at best but throw in a global pandemic and all bets are off. We had no dress rehearsal for 2020, so we all pretty much figured it out in our way and timing. I, for one, do not want a do-over and I am anxiously waiting for what 2021 has to offer, or do I? Can it get worse? We shall see.

2020 was a rollercoaster ride that would put the Millennium Force at Cedar Point to shame. However, there were also some bright spots, in my opinion. Families were forced to stay home and spend time together. People gathered around their televisions or computer screens to attend church gatherings (which hopefully for someone other than myself, made us realize how much we need each other in our worship experience). Things we so easily took for granted became a cherished treasure. Our faith was tested by extreme fear, and I saw faith win many times. As I am writing this, I realize we are not out of the woods, but our God is Sovereign and in control, we have nothing to fear!

2020 was also the year we saw extreme evil rear its ugly head in biblical proportions. I was astonished and saddened time after time that humanity could turn so ugly and hateful at the drop of a hat. There was murder, riots, and a destroying of our nation's beloved history. It seemed like right is wrong and wrong is right. Freedom of speech is no longer upheld. Religious freedoms are at stake and many of our inalienable rights are being stripped away one by one. I have always been a seeker for righteousness, but Matthew 5:6 has taken on a whole new meaning for me. I no longer feel at home or satisfied in this world. I do not trust people and I question everything! I truly hunger and thirst for one thing, righteousness! The world needs His light to shine brighter in us because His light overcomes darkness. Is that not the exact point Jesus is making in this narrative? We were created for Him and Him alone. We need to daily deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him. He alone leads to eternal life, joy, peace, and love. I pray you will seek righteousness with your whole heart and flee from all forms of evil, for in doing so, you shall be satisfied. Because of that, we just may owe 2020 a thank you.

"Do not be overcome with evil, but overcome evil with good."
Romans 12:21



CRAVINGS

HUNGER AND THIRST, DEVOTION 2

John Rigg

This past week I had a craving for something that I would not normally even consider eating unless I was seated at a baseball game. You guessed it, a hotdog. What made this an unusual craving is that I do not really like them. I am not quite sure what made me want one bad enough to run to the store to buy some. However, I did. Immediately after returning from the grocery store, I fired up the grill, cooked two of the dogs, placed them on a couple of buns, dowsed them with my favorite condiments, and moments later, just like that, I was completely satisfied. The craving was gone!

The Gospel of Matthew records Jesus making this statement, ***"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied"*** (Matthew 5:6).

I could not help but think about my recent craving after reading this verse. When I hear of someone who hungers and thirsts, it indicates to me that they have an unmet desire, or they still would not be hungry and thirsty for it. My recent unmet desire was a hot dog, but Jesus is speaking about righteousness.

If we are to understand the meaning of the word translated righteousness here, it probably is in reference to having a hunger and thirst for God's righteousness, or a right-standing with God.

So, where do we begin to find righteousness?

In so many of the Apostle Paul's letters, he speaks about righteousness and how to obtain it. I think my favorite is found in

his letter to the Philippians. In Philippians 3:8–9, we read, ***"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."***

According to Paul, right standing with God can only come from God Himself and is dependent on faith in Christ. That is why when we look for righteousness in any other place, we remain unsatisfied.

Blessedness is promised for those who hunger and thirst for righteousness as well as the assurance of being satisfied. When I craved a hot dog, I knew where to go. I went to the grocery store and was satisfied.

Again, Matthew 5:6 says, ***"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."***

So, this is the question then, "Do we have a craving for righteousness?" If so, there is only one place we will find satisfaction. It is in Jesus.

WE HUNGRY

HUNGER AND THIRST, DEVOTION 3

Pastor Ryan Story

I love cheese guy movies. Any movie where there are guns, cars, over the top action sequences, and one-liners are instant classics in my book. For years, Pastor Caleb and I have had a unique bond over *"2 Fast 2 Furious."* Now, I have not seen this movie in years, so I would venture to say this would have scenes that are not the most edifying thing for believers to partake in; however, there is one line that we both love. In the movie, Roman Pearce (played by Tyrese Gibson) and his partner Brian O' Conner (played by the late Paul Walker) are undercover agents of the FBI disguised as street racers. When Roman and Brian finally are in the bad guys' good graces, Roman says one of my favorite lines in the movie, "Like I said, we hungry"

Jesus says, ***"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied"*** (Matthew 5:6). Right out of the shoot, I have always been curious about the number of people who gathered around Jesus this day. I would venture to say many of them were not rich or had immense access to food or proper drink. When we, as Americans, hear hungry we think it is time to go to the pantry and grab a snack. Jesus here is not saying to get a snack. He is saying, blessed are those who hunger for something specific. We have all opened our refrigerators and starred waiting for the proper appetite to kick in, but here Jesus tells us what we should be hungry for, righteousness.

Righteousness is not something a person being led by sin is hungry for. Righteousness is something for which every Christ-honoring Christian should hunger. In order for us to even obtain

the nourishment that comes from righteousness, we have to know where to get it. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, ***"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*** We have to understand that righteousness is not something we can just open our pantry and eat, righteousness only comes from one thing, the work of Jesus Christ. For us to be hungry for righteousness, that means that we are hungry to see God's work transforming people from the inside out. For us to be hungry for righteousness that means we are nourished by living a life that brings the utmost amount of honor, glory, and praise to our Father in Heaven. Any of these cannot be done because we wish to will them into existence. Righteousness only comes from a humble submission to live by the Spirit of God, which brings us closer to Christ.

This should be the goal of the church. We should want to echo the sentiments of Roman Pearce, "We hungry."

WORLD CHANGERS

HUNGER AND THIRST, DEVOTION 4

Donna Fox

I am right-handed. My husband and daughter are right-handed. My son however is left-handed. Statistics show that seventy to ninety percent of the population are right-handed. Some are considered ambidextrous – using either hand. Only a small percentage of the population is left-handed.

If I took my predominate right hand and slapped someone on their right cheek, it would be a backhanded slap, which represents an insult in the Bible.

If someone slapped me, my natural (worldly) instinct would be to slap them back, leading to more violence. But Jesus teaches just the opposite. In Matthew 5:39, He says, ***"But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also."***

As we have been learning in this series, Jesus taught many things that are backward to worldly teachings. Jesus teaches us to love our enemies, give away our worldly possessions, and to be humble, just to name a few.

Go back to verse 38 where Jesus says, ***"You have heard that it was said 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth."*** It is important to read the verses before and after when studying Scripture. Who is Jesus speaking to? What was the culture at the time? People were taking revenge on those that had done them wrong, often punishing harder than the offense. Instead of leaving the punishment up to the authorities, they were taking matters into their own hands. They

were used to seeking their own revenge. Go all the way back to the beginning. Cain took matters into his own hands and took revenge by killing Abel just four chapters into the first book of the Bible. Jesus taught to not only not take revenge, but ***"turn to him the other also."*** Overdo it on the side of kindness and then let God handle it. Romans 12:19 reminds us, ***"Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord."***

"But I say to you" is Jesus telling us "this is what the world tells you, but my ways are different than the world's ways."

"We are called to be world changers,
not world chasers."
Jarrid Wilson

Jesus Himself was accused of things he did not do, beaten, tortured (Matthew 26:27 and many others), yet He did not fight back. In 1 Peter 2:23 (NIV), it says, ***"When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate."***

If you are in a right relationship with God, you understand that you will endure trials, people will "slap you," insult you, and you will want to "slap" back. However, if we trust that there is a purpose for the trial, that God is in control, and He will handle it in His timing, we should humble ourselves and let Him handle it. By doing so, we are showing others (the world) the love that we need to exhibit to show them Jesus.

Let us follow Jesus' example and not "slap back."

SPIRITUALLY HANGRY

HUNGER AND THIRST, DEVOTION 5

Ferdinand Sanders

I find it equally interesting and humorous to see what happens to people when they get hungry. When our newborn baby starts to fuss or cry, my first thought is, “Is he hungry?” On most days, the first words out of the mouth of my four year old are, “Dad, you make me breakfast?” On a good day, she might say, “Dad, please you make me breakfast?” If you are anything like me, you may be familiar with the term “hangry” (anger as a result of hunger). In those moments, my emotional and mental well-being starts to come into question as if I transform into a completely different person if I go too long without eating (apologies to my family and those around me when I reach that point). The decisions surrounding how we approach hunger or eating (what, when, and how much) has huge implications on more than just our physical being, but our mental, and in some cases, our emotional state. Jesus alludes to the concept of hunger within His “Sermon on the Mount” as it pertains to our spirituality.

In Matthew 5:6, Jesus says, ***“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied”*** (Matthew 5:6). Be it from reading the Bible, growing up in church, or being raised in a Christian home, if you classify yourself as a Christian, I think it would be safe to say that we share a general awareness or idea of who we are called to be. We look to the Ten Commandments, the Fruit of the Spirit, even the Beatitudes here in Matthew chapter 5 for some descriptors of a Christ-follower. What is fascinating about this passage is the language that Jesus uses to convey His message. Rather than just saying, “Blessed are those who pursue righteousness,” He says, ***“hunger and thirst.”*** In typical Jesus fashion, Jesus takes a common idea or concept that everyone would

understand, but presents it in a way that packs it to the brim with life-altering meaning.

When reading this passage, I was reminded of the Pharisees who were the experts of religious practices, law, and tradition of that time. If anyone were to know the way of righteousness it would be the Pharisees. Listen to how Jesus refers to the "religious elite" later in Matthew, ***"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness"*** (Matthew 23:27-28). The Pharisees were full of spiritual knowledge, but they did not hunger or thirst for righteousness. Just like the Pharisees, we miss the mark unless our lives are changed through the acknowledgment that we ourselves are unrighteous apart from the redemption through Christ's blood.

Having attention or awareness of righteousness is a good start (I certainly would not say that it is a bad thing), but Matthew 5:6 shows us that there is a lot more to it. This pursuit of righteousness is something for which we need to hunger and thirst. It needs to be the sustenance with which we regularly fill and fuel ourselves. Much like food and drink, it is a basic need - the essence of life.

CHECK YOURSELF BEFORE YOU WRECK YOURSELF

HUNGER AND THIRST, DEVOTION 6

Shawna Johnson

First things first, I need to ask you, do you know who Jesus is, what He has done for you, and have you chosen Him to be your Savior? Did you even know you needed saving?

If you do claim to be a Christian, is your faith genuine? Is it truly *your* conviction, or your parents? Grandparents? Spouse?

I know, so many questions!

Here is the deal, God created us in His image. He loves us and wants us to have a relationship with Him. When He created us though, He gave us the free will to choose to follow Him and what He knows is best for us, or to choose ourselves (selfishness), and the desires of the world in which we live.

Here are some examples of what God wants for us and what that leads to:

- A full life (John 10:10)
- Hope (Romans 15:13)
- Love, Joy, Peace Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, Self-Control (Galatians 5:22-23)
- No more guilt and shame (John 3:17)
- Freedom (Romans 6:22)
- Eternity in Heaven (John 11:25-26)

Here are some examples of the desires of the world and what that ultimately leads to:

- Power and Control
- Sex
- Money
- Addiction
- Brokenness
- Loneliness

After reviewing those options, does God's way not sound better? I think so too! There are some things you should know, though! Following Jesus will often lead to situations where you find yourself responding opposite of what the world would expect of you.

What do I mean?

Where the world seeks power and control, God asks us to be humble. Where the world says lust is sexy, God asks us to be faithful and committed.

Where greed is rampant, God asks us to give, and cheerfully!

Where the world kicks addicts to the curb, God says, you have a future and a way out.

Where the world dwells in brokenness, God gives hope.

Where the world breeds loneliness, God gives us family.

My prayer for all readers today is that you choose Him! It is not always easy, but it is always worth it!

LESSON FIVE

MERCIFUL

JAMES MANN

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Matthew 5:7

As a teacher, I am always wondering what people know before they even begin a project or lesson.

1. That being said, in your mind, what does mercy mean?

_____
_____
_____

2. What does mercy look like?

_____
_____
_____

Mercy is an interesting concept that is defined as "compassion or forgiveness shown toward someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm."

Often, when I think of mercy, I think of the relationship I have had with dogs as I have grown up over the years. As I am not a parent, this is the closest thing I can do to relate, but I do believe these concepts are similar to children as well. As the parent, I have the ability to punish in whatever way I see fit. When a dog does something they are not supposed to do, as the parent, you are left with the decision on how to handle the situation.

Proverbs 12:10 challenges us on how to handle our furry friends, ***"Whoever is righteous has regard for the life of his beast, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel."***

Many people handle this in a physical sense by swatting their behinds or their nose. While this may deter the animal from doing the action again, you are gaining a pet who fears you and flinches every time your hand moves. Another option that some people choose is to do nothing. This causes the action to be repeated, as nothing happened to them to prevent them from reacting in the same way. The third option is mercy. By showing the dog mercy, we are recognizing that what they have done is wrong, but we are meeting them with compassion and forgiveness. This is the same option our God follows.

3. What is one way you could show compassion to a child who has done wrong?

_____

_____

_____

Now that we have discussed what mercy is, I want to discuss why we should give mercy. When I think of the concept of mercy, it often brings me a few chapters ahead of where we are now to Matthew 18:21-35. Here we are presented with a parable that is given to us by Jesus based on Peter's question of, ***"Lord, how often will my brother sin against me, and I forgive him?"*** In this story, we see a servant not giving mercy to those around him, even though mercy was once given to him. Once word got back to the master that the servant was not showing mercy to others, the master sent for him, and Jesus ends this parable by saying, ***"'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 18:32b-35).

4. Based on the above passage, why do you think we should forgive others?

_____

_____

_____

It is interesting that based on the above passage, we see the master offering mercy and then taking the offer away once he sees the actions of his servant. Jesus tells us that the same will be done to us if we do not show mercy to others. I want you to think for a moment about what this would mean for you. Think about everything you have ever done that was not Christ-like. Think about the things you are so grateful God looks past. Imagine now that God took away His mercy from us. That is what things will look like for us if we do not show mercy to our brothers that have done wrong. Luke 6:36 tells us, ***"Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."***

5. In what ways has God shown mercy to you in your life?

_____

_____

_____

6. How would your life look different if you were not shown this mercy?

_____

_____

_____

This is one of those lessons that is great and dandy to learn about, but what are you going to do with it? What about this lesson are you going to take and apply to your life? I want you all to take a moment right now and think about your life. Think about those that you surround yourself with or even those with whom you do not choose

to surround yourself. All of us have handled a situation in the wrong way and with the wrong heart. These choices hurt those around us. All of these things can be fixed with mercy.

7. In what way do you need to show mercy to someone that is in your life right now?

_____
_____
_____

The aspect of mercy that we have not talked about is, who do we show mercy to?

8. Who would you say is the most difficult person or people to show mercy to and why?

_____
_____
_____

When it comes to treating people properly, we should always start showing this in the home. An interesting thing to think about though, have you ever noticed that sometimes it is easier to show mercy to someone you work with over someone you live with?

9. Why do you feel that it is more difficult to show mercy to someone in your household over another area of life?

_____
_____
_____

Galatians 6:10 adds, ***"So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."***

By looking at Galatians, we can see the next two groups that we should be showing mercy towards. The first mentioned is ***"those who are of the household of faith,"*** or simply put, believers. The second group from this passage is simply ***"everyone."***

There is an interesting group of people that I want to put some focus on as we wrap things up. What do we do with those who hate us? We can look to the story in 2 Samuel chapter 9 and see an interesting scene beginning. David is asking if there is anyone from the lineage of Saul to which he can show kindness. As many of us know, Saul made David's life extremely unpleasant. Saul's mission was to kill David before David took his spot as king. In 2 Samuel chapter 9, David finds Saul's crippled grandson, Mephibosheth, and verse 7 says, ***"Do not fear, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan, and I will restore to you all the land of Saul your father, and you shall eat at my table always."*** David is choosing to show mercy to the grandson of the man that hated him the most. This is something that even throws the grandson for a loop as he asks in verse 8, ***"What is your servant, that you should show regard for a dead dog such as I?"*** What a beautiful picture of mercy. This is how we should show mercy to those in our life that make it difficult.

10. How have your views on mercy changed after this study?

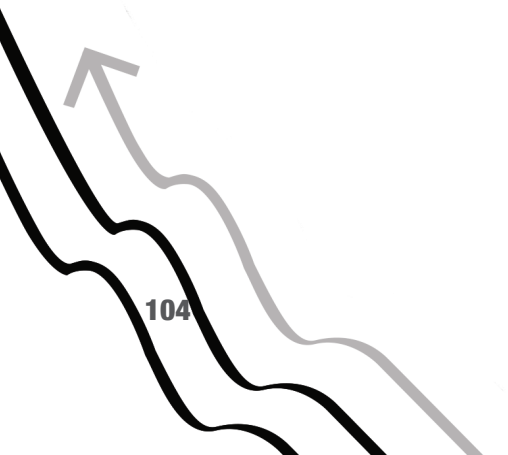
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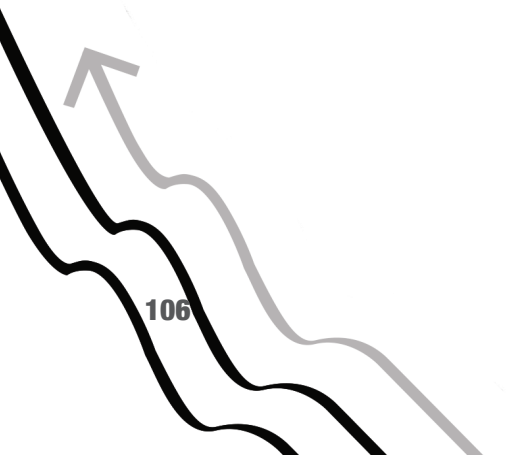
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As we come to an end, I want you to take this quote to heart as it a great model for showing mercy to those in your life.

"God's mercy to us is the motivation
for showing mercy to others.
Remember, you will never be asked
to forgive someone else more
than God has forgiven you."
Rick Warren





WHAT IS DESERVED?

MERCIFUL, DEVOTION 1

Roger Allen

"Jesus replied, 'A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, 'Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.'" Luke 10:30-35

The age of COVID-19, masks, floods, political dissent, presidential campaign, and defunding the police has brought to the forefront a weakness in the church. As I have read social media posts by others, I soon realized we are on a precipitous slide. The outpouring of our hearts' true self is alarming. As a supposedly cohesive group, we are quick to disagree and quick to condemn others who happen to be of a different persuasion. Pointing fingers at those who do not share our political ideas or backgrounds, we consider them the enemy. What I am saying is, our hearts are broken. Just like the Priest and Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan, we have lost our way (Myself included).

Growing up, I was taught to "never allow a bad deed go unpunished." It was thought of as being weak and foolish. Getting even meant

that sometimes two wrongs do make a right. Seeking revenge was a "normal" reaction to those that seemingly had done you wrong. It was said, "Never allow yourself to be considered weak" by letting a wrong go unavenged. It was not the manly thing to do. Forgiveness was not considered an option, only a weakness. Showing understanding and compassion were less than masculine, and possibly a dangerous thing to do, that is until I received Christ. It changed everything. He changed everything.

Today, I see that same embattlement manifesting itself in the church. We have begun to appear like the world. Reacting to the smallest of provocations, we illicit man's law in lieu of God's. Instead of having compassion and mercy, we have chosen a different path. Just as the Pharisee and Levite, we have strayed from the course that Jesus intended. Allowing our differences to become a wedge in our relationship with others, we lose the credibility to speak into their lives. Seeing those shipwrecked along the way, we continue on a course unabated. Either because of selfish desires or worse yet, an angry heart, we have little patience for those we feel "deserve it." I hope we remember, we also "deserve it," and Christ had mercy on us. As those who have already found compassion from the Lord, we should share the hope that is in us. Our relationship with others should be mixed with salt and light, not anger and disdain, for the Holy Spirit is in us. Through no good of our own, we have been given mercy and we should show that as proof that we are His.

"Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience." Colossians 3:12

MERCY TRIUMPHS OVER JUDGEMENT

MERCIFUL, DEVOTION 2

Philip Piasecki

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Matthew 5:7

One of the things I absolutely love about the Bible is how within its pages it can hold such mind-boggling, earth-shattering, and cosmically-altering truths, while also giving us every day, practical, life wisdom. Sometimes, you even get all of that within the exact same verse. I believe this is true for the Beatitudes, with so much depth, yet so much practical wisdom as well. When I read Jesus saying, ***"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy,"*** I first think of my own personal relationships. I want to be known as someone who is quick to give mercy and slow to give judgment. When my wife makes a mistake, I want my first reaction to be mercy. Then when I make one of my many mistakes, I pray that she will show me mercy as well. How can I expect mercy for the mistakes that I make in my life if I am never giving mercy as well? I would encourage you to pray that the Lord would soften your heart if your first reaction is normally anger and judgment to others instead of mercy. The Lord can change your reactions, even if you feel like you cannot be changed.

However, to take this deeper, I want to be like Jesus and show mercy to people knowing that since I am saved, one day Jesus is going to give me the greatest amount of mercy imaginable. He is going to let me into His kingdom and say, "Well done my good and faithful servant" because of my faith in Him. If the way you live your life looks nothing like the way Jesus commands us to live, then I would pray that today you reevaluate how you are living. We only have the ability

to extend mercy to others because of the great mercy that Jesus has shown us. I keep thinking of the song lyric, *"Your mercy triumphs over judgment."* The Lord desires to show mercy to each and every one of us if we would just accept Him. If we deny Him, then we will one day receive the proper judgment for our sin. Think of the mercy you have received from the Lord, or even think of the mercy you have received from other people in your life, take the challenge today to be more merciful just like our Lord is merciful.

FORGIVENESS

MERCIFUL, DEVOTION 3

Pastor Noble Baird

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Matthew 5:7

One of my favorite parables throughout the four Gospels is the parable of the unforgiving servant. In Matthew 18:23-35, Jesus is teaching and He shares this story about a master, his servant, and then the servant's friend. Many of you may be familiar with this parable, it begins in verse 23, ***"Therefore the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his servants."*** As the story continues, we know that the servant was forgiven his massive debt from his master, so that he did not end up losing his house, his family, and at that point all that truly mattered in the world. Yet, after receiving forgiveness, he goes on to reach out to a fellow servant and demands that the small debt they have be settled.

The story ends as the master receives word of what the servant he just forgave has gone out and done, causing the master to seize him and throw him in jail until the original debt is paid off. In verse 23, Jesus says the word ***"therefore."*** Whenever we see this word, it is important to look at the previous verse, because this word tells us that we are about to learn about the consequences of the previous statement. In this case, Jesus is referring to Peter's question about forgiveness; to which Jesus says that forgiveness must never cease. Why is this the case? Why are we called to forgive and be merciful, even when we have forgiven time and time again? It is because we have been forgiven.

Jesus came and paid our debt on the cross. It is through His sacrifice that we have the privilege to walk around justified through His blood and able to live a free life in Him. Our sin gave us a debt that we could never repay on our own, a debt that would only be filled through death and eternal separation from the Master (God). Jesus tells us in Matthew 5:7, ***"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."*** Just as the servant who was forgiven his debts from his master, we too have been forgiven our debt from our Heavenly Father. However, we are called to share the same forgiveness and mercy to our brothers and sisters in this world, so that, through our actions, the world might too see our mercy and forgiveness. Which will then give us an opportunity to share with them the forgiveness of the Master and a chance for them to live life debt-free from sin, just as we are.

WE ARE A TEAM

MERCIFUL, DEVOTION 4

Michael Fox

"Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you." Luke 6:38

Reading through Jesus' teachings, and thinking about those that had to have been listening to this, I cannot help but wonder what they thought. How foreign of a concept was this? Most, it seems, are taught if you want something you have to take it, not give it away.

I, at times, have a struggle I am sure most can relate to. I want things. This shows itself often in marriage. I have an emotional need, or I have a physical need. I want time alone. I want to be served. Can anyone else relate?

A friend recently reminded me of a concept in marriage - we are a team. It is not new, but a great reminder that I frequently need. She is not out to get me, and I am not out to get her. I am reminded of this passage in Ephesians chapter 5.

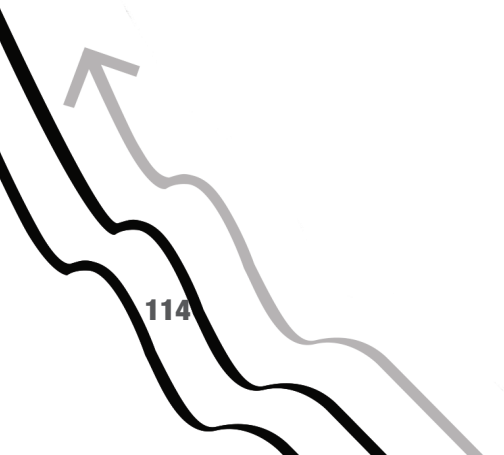
Ephesians 5:28-30 says, ***"In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body."***

Reading Luke 6:38, God reminded me of this passage in Ephesians and I could not help but think of the relationship with my wife. I have been told by many to succeed in marriage you have to stop thinking

about yourself and what you want, and focus on what she wants or needs. Love my wife, provide for her, and in doing so, God will bless. I can tell you, that every time I have done this, and done so with the right heart with love toward my wife and toward Christ, it has been given back to me. God has an amazing way of providing what I need when I first put my focus in the right place.

"Give, and it will be given to you" seems a little odd maybe to some, but it is actually fun to follow Jesus' teachings and watch His promises come to life.

Hebrews 6:10 adds, ***"For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do."***



DO BE A GOOD BOY!

MERCIFUL, DEVOTION 5

Pastor Roy Townsend

When I was first taught to be a good boy and share my toys with others, it was really hard because in my sinful nature I did not want anyone else to play with my toys. My natural disposition was to be selfish. When I was taught to speak kindly to my brother and sisters, I was angry and wanted to hurt them because I was hurt. When I was taught to be generous and to give money to help others, it did not make sense to me. Why did they need my money? They should go get their own money. Thankfully, I grew up in a home that reinforced being kind, speaking well, and giving generously, but these teachings went against the natural fallen disposition of my sinful nature.

Then when I became a young man that accepted Christ as my Savior, I was warned about being countercultural. I was given reasons why being countercultural was wrong. We were to do the right things because culture demanded the right things from us. My family, pastors, and teacher reinforced that I needed to be a good boy. However, as I matured in my faith, the teachings of Christ did not really get any easier. Today, the more I study and mature in Christ, I realize that Christ's teachings are now very countercultural. They do not make sense anymore when they are compared to culture or the natural fallen disposition of mankind.

Matthew 5:7 reads, ***"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."***

Now, wait for a second, happy are the people who give mercy because they will receive mercy. This seems very counterintuitive and countercultural. This almost seems like a riddle, and I am not

a fan of riddles. I was taught that this verse means that you should be actively compassionate, withhold punishment from people who deserve it. No! No! No! What happened to justice? What happened to holding people accountable? What happened to "you get what you deserve?"

Again, as I studied and matured. I am so glad that I did not get what I deserved many times in my life. God showed mercy in my life and eternal life by not "giving me what I deserved." I am so thankful for this blessing. The teaching goes on to say that when you are merciful, you shall obtain mercy. God and others have been very merciful to me many times in my life. Now, I am glad to extend mercy to others because there will be another day that I am going to need mercy. I want to be an imitator of Christ, and that means that I must extend mercy and compassion to others. When I stand before Christ, I want Him to say, ***"Well done, good and faithful servant"*** (Matthew 25:21). It makes me think as if He is saying, "Love Me, love others, and do be a good boy!"

MERCY BECAUSE OF MERCY

MERCIFUL, DEVOTION 6

Justin Dean

Growing up, mercy was the constant focus of my prayers. I felt like I was constantly asking God to make people in my world show me mercy. Be it my parents, my teachers, or older kids who I was a smart-aleck to, I was always trying to dodge the bullet of punishment. I wanted for everyone in my world to show me mercy, but when it came to anyone else, namely my sister, I wanted the hammer of justice brought down. It is always funny how that works. When we speed or accidentally run a red light, we hope there is no cop around or that we get let off with a warning, but if someone else does the same, we wish that they would get the biggest fine possible.

I was reading through the Beatitudes in Matthew chapter 5 and I came across this in verse 7, ***"Blessed the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."*** The first thing that came to my mind as a kid seeing this verse was, "See, if everyone was merciful to me, they would get mercy too." It is easy for us to view this as a transaction statement, or worse, a transaction that applies to others before ourselves. Our lives are constant testimonies to the mercy of God. Every breath we breathe is a mercy from God because He is withholding the punishment which we are due for our sins. Every time we sin and He does not erase us from existence, He relents, showing us mercy rather than justice. Yet we expect justice for those around us rather than seeking mercy for them also.

This is a statement that should produce heart change in us. We should see the mercy we have received and seek to show mercy to others. In Luke 6:36, it says, ***"Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful."*** We should see the mercy of God and seek to emulate

it rather than expect it from others. The mercy we receive should soften our hearts so that instead of wishing punishment on those who wrong us, we should show them mercy and seek mercy for them, just as Christ sought mercy and grace for us.

This is also a statement that should erase fear within us. We see in James 2:13, it says, ***"For judgment is without mercy to one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment."*** The mercy we show and have been shown triumphs over the judgment and punishment for our sins. We do not have to worry about receiving the punishment we are due, because the mercy we have received is enough. We can be confident in He who has shown us mercy. That confidence should be the reason you show mercy to others.

LESSON SIX

PURE IN HEART

DR. RANDY T. JOHNSON

I was recently meeting with someone who was distressed. After some initial discussion, it was clear that for starters she needed the Lord. She had stated she believed in God and Heaven, so I asked, "What must I do to go to Heaven?" The response was fascinating, "You have to be a good person." After a pause, "But nobody is good. The world is full of sin." I asked, "Did you just defeat your own argument?" The answer was in agreement and I went on to share the work and offer of Jesus Christ. I then had the privilege of leading her in a prayer of salvation.

1. What is the work of Jesus Christ?

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2. What is the offer of Jesus Christ?

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In Matthew 5:8, Jesus says, ***"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."*** Something that is amazing about the Beatitudes is that there is often a fulfillment of the blessing both now and later.

3. Before we begin the study, what do you believe this verse means?

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As we look through this verse, it is valuable to view it from two perspectives. First, all of Scripture should be viewed from the lenses of the Gospel. This verse can relate to our salvation. Once we give our lives to the Lord, we are cleansed and promised to see God

in Heaven. Second, it can relate to our growth in the Lord once we are saved. This is also referred to as sanctification. This is the daily decision of growing in the Lord which allows others to see God through us, but also, helps us see God now and hear what He desires of us.

"Blessed are the pure in heart" - Salvation

One of my professors from Dallas Theological Seminary has written, "The pure in heart are those who are inwardly clean from sin through faith in God's provision and a continual acknowledging of their sinful condition." It must be realized that the only way to be ***"pure in heart"*** is through the work of Jesus on the cross.

The Bible is clear and consistent in both the Old and New Testaments that no one is or can become ***"pure in heart"*** on their own accord. In 1 Samuel 15:22, we read that we cannot buy God's blessing, ***"And Samuel said, 'Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.'"***

4. How would this have been a radical statement in Samuel's time?

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In Ephesians 2:8-9, Paul adds, ***"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."***

5. Paul is redundant in this verse. How does he twice say that salvation is not based on our own works?

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"What? Get to heaven on your own strength?
Why, you might as well try to
climb to the moon on a rope of sand!"
George Whitefield
(Evangelist from the 1700s)

Paul was redundant in saying we cannot obtain a pure heart on our own works, but he is also redundant on how we can be ***"pure in heart."*** In Ephesians chapter 2, he mentioned it was ***"the gift of God;"*** however, in Romans 6:23, he is more redundant, ***"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."***

6. How is Paul redundant here? Why?

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Other passages reiterate that becoming ***"pure in heart"*** is not through our works, but through the work of Jesus. Titus 3:4-5 says, ***"But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit."*** Romans 3:28 clearly states, ***"For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law."***

"You can't go back and change the beginning,
but you can start where you are
and change the ending."
C.S. Lewis

***"Blessed are the pure in heart"* - Sanctification**

In his commentary, R.V.G. Tasker writes, "Others take it to mean singlemindedness, a heart 'free from the tyranny of a divided self.'" This is the concept of being free from deceit. The ***"pure in heart"*** are thus "the utterly sincere." This idea acknowledges that we are saved by faith, yet focuses on a changed heart and life as a logical result of following Jesus.

We already saw that we are saved by faith and not our works in Ephesians 2:8-9. However, the next verse says, ***"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."***

7. What were we created for? What does that mean?

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8. Why should a believer do good works?

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King David was a man after God's own heart, yet he sinned. After his multiple sins surrounding Bathsheba, he is broken and writes Psalm chapter 51. He was already a "follower of the Lord" when he

says, ***"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me"*** (verse 10).

9. What were some of David's sins? What does he mean in this verse?

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This concept of holiness is also expressed in 2 Timothy 2:22, ***"So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart."***

As Christians, we know of the horrible reputation surrounding hypocrisy. In Matthew 23:25-28, we read of the difference between a pure heart and mere outward actions, ***"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you clean the outside of the cup and the plate, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. You blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and the plate, that the outside also may be clean. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness."***

10. Describe the illustrations given here. What is being said?

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"The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith." 1 Timothy 1:5

The outcome or blessing of having a pure heart is the ability to see God. This also can be viewed from the now or later aspect.

***"For they shall see God"* - Salvation**

The promise for Christians is that they will have eternal life. This means Heaven and being with the Lord forever. We will see Him face to face.

In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul beautifully displays the future, ***"For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known."*** John adds in 1 John 3:1-2, ***"See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."*** John also records in Revelation 22:4, ***"They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads."***

11. What is promised here? What do you think your response will be?

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"For the Christian, heaven is where Jesus is.
We do not need to speculate
on what heaven will be like.
It is enough to know that
we will be forever with Him."
William Barclay

***"For they shall see God"* – Sanctification**

John Peter Lange wrote, "This vision of God commences when the eye of the soul opens, or when spiritual vision begins in the regenerate heart: it is perfected when in eternity we shall see Him face to face." Basically, he is saying that by being ***"pure in heart"*** we ***"see God"*** now in daily events and will be with Him when we die.

Ephesians 1:16-18 adds light to the topic, ***"I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers, that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints."***

12. How can having ***"the eyes of your hearts enlightened"*** be helpful?

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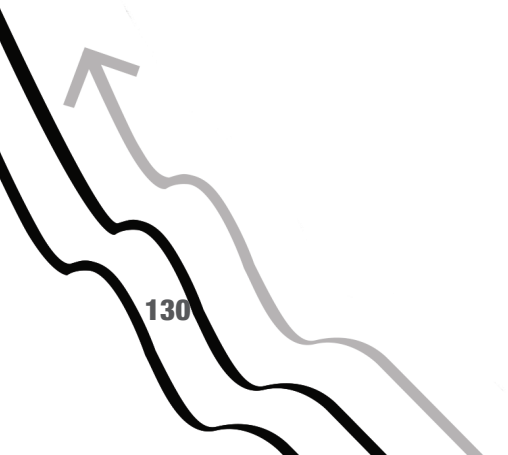
Warren Wiersbe seems to always have a good practical perspective, "We experience God's mercy when we trust Christ, and He gives us a clean heart and peace within. But having received His mercy, we then share His mercy with others. We seek to keep our hearts pure

that we might see God in our lives today. We become peacemakers in a troubled world and channels for God's mercy, purity, and peace."

This aspect of seeing God is when we come to a place where I can be completely open and honest with God and others. It is a life that is transparent because I have nothing to hide. I do not have to pretend what I am not.

Hebrews 12:1-2 talks about seeing Jesus today, ***"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."*** A Couple of other translations (NIV and NASB) use the wording, "Fixing our eyes on Jesus." That should be our goal every morning. We need to wake up and look up until the day we see Him face to face.

"Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false and does not swear deceitfully." Psalm 24:3-4



THE WONDERS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

PURE IN HEART, DEVOTION 1

Keaton Washburn

One of my favorite parts of being a student director is the variety of it. Some days I spend in meetings, another, planning events, another, meeting with students, and, still another, building a makeshift mausoleum. Yes, I was building a mausoleum. A few weeks ago, I and the other student directors put together and painted a wooden mausoleum for our student leadership conference. The theme for the conference had to do with Jesus' words to the Pharisees and teachers of the law in Matthew 23:27-28. In this passage, Jesus calls them whitewashed tombs because they look beautiful on the outside but on the inside they are full of dead bones and everything unclean. If you have not read Matthew chapter 23 lately, I urge you to read it this week and examine the words of Christ against your life.

Mausoleums can be beautiful and grand, all while housing dead and decaying bodies. The Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, which was located in modern-day Turkey, is one of seven wonders of the ancient world. It was built around 350 B.C. and lasted until the 14th century when it was destroyed by earthquakes. It was around 150 feet tall and 400 feet around at the base. It was built to be the tomb of Mausolus, the ruler of Caria at that time, from whose name we get the modern word mausoleum. Jesus understood the purpose of a mausoleum when He called the Pharisees out for being like whitewashed tombs. Before He gives that call to the Pharisees, He gives His followers the words of Matthew 5:8, where He says, ***"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."***

Matthew 5:8 is the sixth of the beatitudes that Jesus gives in His Sermon on the Mount. To be ***"pure in heart"*** is to be the opposite of a

hypocrite, which is what the Pharisees were. Martin Luther, referring to Jesus' words here says, "Christ … wants to have the heart pure, though outwardly the person may be a drudge in the kitchen, black, sooty, and grimy, doing all sorts of dirty work." He adds, "Though a common labourer, a shoemaker or a blacksmith may be dirty and sooty or may smell because he is covered with dirt and pitch, … and though he stinks outwardly, inwardly he is pure incense before God because he ponders the word of God in his heart and obeys it." To have a pure heart is to be sincere, someone who not only ponders the Word of God but also obeys it.

The world builds mausoleums, beautiful and grand on the outside, but filled with dead bones. Jesus calls Christians to the opposite. We are to be true and alive inside, not putting on an outward show of false humility or living in sin when others are not around. Those who live sincerely are the ones who ***"shall see God."***

Are you putting on a show when you are at church or around other Christians? Have you experienced the transformation that comes from a repentant, honest life?

SILVERSMITH

PURE IN HEART, DEVOTION 2

Debbie Kerr

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Matthew 5:8

You can fool some of the people some of the time but you cannot fool all the people all of the time! I would like to add, more importantly, you can never fool God! In 1 Samuel 16:7, we read, ***"Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."*** Jeremiah 17:9 adds, ***"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"***

How do we obtain and maintain a pure heart in the eyes of God? One of the most painful, yet effective ways God uses to purify our hearts is through trials. I often hear people say, "God won't give me more than I can handle." The truth is, He will not give you more than He can handle. Is it hard to rejoice through our trials, but James teaches us why God uses the trials in our life. James 1:2-4 says, ***"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing."***

I heard the story of a woman who asked a silversmith about the process of refining silver. He graciously invited her to come to his shop and watch the process. As she watched him hold the piece of silver over the fire, he explained why the flame needed to be in the direct center of the silver piece. He said, "It is where the flame is the hottest in order to burn away all the impurities." The woman immediately thought of the verse in Malachi that says, ***"He will sit as***

a refiner and purifier of silver" (Malachi 3:3). She then asked the silversmith if he needed to stay the entire time it was being refined. He said, "Yes, but not only to hold onto the piece but to keep my eye on it while it is in the fire." He said, "You see, if the silver gets too hot the piece will be destroyed." She then asked, "How will you know when the silver is fully refined?" He said with a smile. "Oh, that's easy! When I can see my image in it."

I appreciate the song, *"How Firm A Foundation:"*

> *When through fiery trials, thy pathway shall lie*
> *My grace all-sufficient shall be thy supply*
> *The flame shall not hurt thee, my only design*
> *Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.*

The condition of our heart is very important to our relationship with God. We can be deceived into believing we have a pure heart but God tests all motives, thoughts, and actions. I would encourage you to pray and ask the Lord Jesus Christ to purify your heart each day.

THE CORE

PURE IN HEART, DEVOTION 3

Mitchell Holmes

Matthew 5:8 is a short and straightforward verse. However, as with much of Scripture, it is incredibly profound in the statement it makes. The verse reads, ***"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."*** This verse serves as a reminder of the gift that we have all been offered. It is the gift of Jesus, through whom we are able to have a relationship with our Father in Heaven. This verse promises that if we are pure in heart, we will see God and we shall reside in Heaven one day when we die. However, what does it mean to be ***"pure in heart?"***

In our culture, the heart is used to describe emotion and feeling as well as to describe your inner person, or the center of your personality. MacArthur says that in Scripture, it also means a person's thinking process and their will. In Scripture, the heart is used to describe the very core of your being. Therefore, if your heart is in the wrong place, your mind, your thoughts, and your actions are all affected negatively. Matthew 5:8 states that the very core of our being must be pure to see God. Above all else, God is concerned with the condition of your heart. It is possible to go to church, help people in need, and do the things you are supposed to do, but if your heart is in the wrong place, you will have missed the point. Many of the Pharisees featured in the Gospels can attest to this.

Purity of heart means to cleanse your being of wrong behavior. Those that are ***"pure in heart"*** give their undivided devotion to the Lord, and sincerely strive for righteousness at the core of who they are. Their deepest will is to be motivated to purity because they belong to the Lord. Isaiah 59:1-2 warns us what impurity of heart warrants,

"Behold, the Lord's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden His face from you so that He does not hear."

How do we achieve purity of heart? The first step is Jesus. Recognize that none of us are able to achieve any semblance of purity without Jesus. The second step is spending time with the Lord in the form of prayer and reading of Scripture. How else are we to strive for purity and walk in God's will if we are not near Him? Last, we must put forth genuine effort to obey God's will and strive for righteousness.

It is impossible to achieve complete purity, yet it is our obligation to attempt to live as Christ-like as possible. So, in those moments that you notice that your heart is not in the right place, take a quiet moment to ask for God's help in correcting your heart.

I WANT THAT

PURE IN HEART, DEVOTION 4

Pastor Ben Kirkman

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." Matthew 5:8

There is a scene in *Napoleon Dynamite* where Uncle Rico is trying to sell a set of Tupperware-like products to a young couple. To motivate the potential buyers, he offers to throw in a small sailboat model (it was clearly something he picked up at the thrift store) if they will buy the 24-piece set. When the woman sees the sailboat, she leans over to her husband and whispers, "I want that." I enjoy quoting that ridiculous line from that ridiculous movie anytime the opportunity presents itself.

It seems pretty messed up to use that illustration when thinking about the words of Jesus. However, as I read, ***"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God"*** over and over, I could not help but sincerely and honestly think, "I want that." I doubt I am alone in that thought either. I would guess if you are taking the time to read this devotion you would have similar feelings toward the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:8.

I want to have a pure heart. I want to see God. The problem is found in Jeremiah 17:9, ***"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?"*** We have impure hearts, and we are incapable of purifying our own hearts. Our greatest attempt to purify our hearts will still fall short of God's perfect holiness. As Romans 3:23 points out, ***"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."***

There would have been "religious" people in the audience while Jesus was preaching this sermon. They were people that had given their entire lives to following religious laws, traditions, and rules. They saw themselves as pure and righteous before God because of their dedication to a system. The reality was, no matter how much "right" they did, they were still sinners and still fell short of God's perfection. They had, as we have, an impure heart issue. The only hope for a pure heart is found through Jesus and the sacrifice He made with His life.

Many of the people listening to Jesus that day would reject His message and, later, His personal sacrifice as well. It kind of hits our pride to admit we are incapable of doing something on our own. The Gospel calls for us to admit we have a sin problem that we cannot fix on our own. We must believe Jesus paid the price to make our hearts pure before God. We must turn to Him to be made truly righteous. In God's Word, we find the truth that those who trust in Christ ***"are justified by His grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by His blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness because in His divine forbearance He had passed over former sins. It was to show His righteousness at the present time, so that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus"*** (Romans 3:24-26). Have you turned to Jesus to make your heart pure? ***"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."***

BEAUTY

PURE IN HEART, DEVOTION 5

Patrick Bicknell

In the society that we live in today, external beauty is all that really matters. How attractive a person is, what clothes they are wearing, what house they live in, and what cars they drive are all things that the world cares about and determines the value of a person. Jesus taught completely different from this way of thinking, not just from the world's perspective, but from a religious perspective as well.

Around the time of Jesus' earthly ministry, the Jewish religion had turned into a religion of outward rituals. It only mattered what you did, not what your heart was like. It only mattered how you were perceived by other people, not what your heart truly felt. Beginning in Mathew chapter 5, Jesus began the most amazing sermon ever spoken in the history of the world called the Sermon on the Mount. He started off by listing what is called the Beatitudes, talking about what the nature of life in the Kingdom of God is like. In verse 8, He says, ***"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."*** Jesus is speaking to a crowd filled with Jews, His disciples, and even the religious leaders of the time. These statements were so radical because it went against what the religious teachers were falsely teaching at the time. He was calling out the manner of their living telling them that it is not through the actions that you perform that will bring you to God, but rather the condition of your heart. Does the question then become how are we to be ***"pure in heart"*** if our hearts are deceitful? Are we not all sinners who fall short of the glory of God daily?

The answer to both of those questions is yes. Our hearts are deceitful, and yes we are sinners who daily fall short of the glory of

God. However, Jesus is not commanding us to be pure in heart on our own power. He is telling us that we need Him to make us pure in heart. The only way for us sinners to be cleansed from our sin and break the bondage that sin has in our lives is to submit to Jesus as the Lord and Savior over our lives. Trusting, and having faith in Jesus' sacrifice for us, living the perfectly righteous life that we could never live, and dying the death we were supposed to die is the only way to be pure in heart. It is out of this love that one can live pure in heart and see God. Paul says it perfectly in 2 Corinthians 5:17, ***"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come."*** Christ gives us a new heart, and through His Spirit if we have surrendered our entire life to Him as Lord we can live with a pure heart by His power.

IMAGE IS NOT EVERYTHING

PURE IN HEART, DEVOTION 6

Philip Piasecki

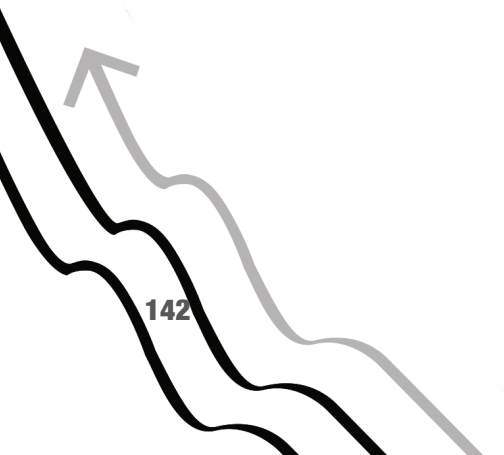
I love sports. I played baseball, basketball, and soccer growing up. Not to brag, but I was an intramural basketball and dodgeball champion at Oakland University, it was a big deal (it was not a big deal at all). It seems like every year there is a player somewhere on some team that tests positive for performance-enhancing drugs. Anyone who knows anything about sports knows the first reaction from a player when they test positive, "What? Me? No way, must have been a mistake." It goes from that to apologizing for their horrible mistake and vowing to never be that selfish again. However, we all know what they are really sorry about, they are just sorry they got caught. They only cared about the outward appearance of how they were playing, with no guilt or remorse for how they were cheating until they got caught.

It seems that all humanity is concerned with these days is how we look externally. It is easy to attack the "world" on this issue, but I think Christians in the church are most guilty of it. We know the right things to say, the right stuff to post on social media, the times we need to show up to the church to make it look like our life is just cruising along, and then internally our hearts are moving further and further from Christ.

Matthew 5:8 says, ***"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."***

What God looks at is the heart behind our external actions. In a world that constantly looks at the external, God is looking internally at what is truly behind our behavior. As believers we need to check our hearts

often, taking inventory of what is actually motivating our actions. I will warn you too, you can only keep up the charade of "good" behaviors coming from a heart that is far from God for so long. Scripture warns us that ***"what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart."*** This means that eventually if your relationship with God is failing, your external behaviors will reflect that. When I find myself being mean to my wife or impatient with my kids, normally it is when I have not been taking proper care of my relationship with the Lord. God wants us to be pure of heart, not just appear "pure" to those around us. Be honest with yourself about what drives you actions, and make a change if needed.



LESSON SEVEN

PEACEMAKERS

KEATON WASHBURN

One of the greatest tragedies of the Christian church today is that, often, deep scriptural truths are reduced down to nothing but moral teachings. Bible teachers will take the commands that Scripture gives us that are meant to be a command with a promise and reduce it to just a command. Teachers will call their listeners to do or not do certain things, simply because "the Bible says so." While it is true that the Bible does contain moral teachings, it goes deeper than that!

1. How have you experienced the truths of Scripture being stripped down to simple moral teachings?

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2. What sets the Bible apart from being simply moral teachings? What are some of the deep truths of Scripture?

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The world that we live in today, for the most part, does not care what the Bible says. Calling someone to live a certain way because "the Bible says so," does not cut it. In 1 Peter, Peter understands this. He calls believers in chapter 3, verse 15, to, ***"Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."*** Peter calls believers to have ***"a defense."*** It is not an offense, something that you look to hurt others with, but a defense. When approached, it is something you have ready.

Today, as we continue in our series, *The Beatitudes*, examining the beatitudes, I hope you will walk away with a deeper understanding of what God has called believers to do and be, but also with a clear "why" God requires this of believers.

Matthew 5:9 says, ***"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."*** The seventh beatitude, being a peacemaker, comes in the second section of the beatitudes which contain the values of God's Kingdom- mercy, purity in heart, peace, and those who are persecuted.

3. How would you describe someone who is the opposite of a peacemaker? How would you describe a peacemaker?

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4. When is a time you saw someone be a peacemaker? It could be in the news, workplace, or family.

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In a world that is competitive and filled with conflict and rivalry, a peacemaker stands out. Jesus says, ***"Blessed are the peacemakers."*** To be blessed, here, means that God gives gracious condescension. To give someone a condescending look is to be disapproving, to look down upon them, or think you are better than them. However, in God's case, since He is simply greater and above all things, He is always looking down. As Doc, our Education Pastor, put it, "When you're at the top, you're always looking down." It is like being at the North Pole. You have no choice but to go south, everything is south of you. So God's gracious condescension is something that I hope you desire as a follower of Christ.

5. What is the difference between a human being condescending and God's condescension?

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6. Why should Christians desire God's gracious condescension?

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Matthew 5:9 goes on to say, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." Jesus says that peacemakers will be called sons (and daughters) of God. When Jesus says this, He is not saying that "if you do this, then you become sons and daughters." When you accept the perfect life, death, and resurrection of Christ and turn of your sins, you are adopted into the family of God. That decision and the work of Christ are what allow you to become children of God, not any good works. What Jesus means here is that when you are a peacemaker, the world will call you children of God, because you reflect Him.

As I have grown older, to my chagrin, I have realized more and more how similar I am to my dad. The things I say to my wife, Haleigh, the reasons I give for doing things, and my habits are becoming more and more like my dad. For years, I fought these tendencies. I would say something reminiscent of my dad and immediately scold myself. I wanted to be my own person, or so I thought. Over the last few years, though, God has shown me how being like my dad is natural. When I am around my family, they are quick to point out when I do something like my dad. Similarly, when Christians choose to be peacemakers in a world that is filled with competition and rivalry, they reflect the heart of God Himself who sent Christ as the ultimate picture of peace between humankind and God Himself.

7. How are you similar to your parents? What tendencies do you (or others) see in you that are like your parents?

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8. How does being a peacemaker reflect the heart of God?

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God is not asking Christians to do something that He has not done. The "why" Christians are to be peacemakers is two-fold. It is because it points others to the work of Christ and because it reflects the heart of God Himself. At the beginning of our time, I shared that my hope was to give you a "why" as to for what reason God calls Christians to be peacemakers. I hope you see that the teachings are not simply moral, they are redemptive, purposeful, and reflect the character of God.

The Beatitudes are attitudes and postures that are blessed in the sight of God. To be a peacemaker is to put one's pride aside and be a keeper of the peace. It is generally easy to have peace, stay out of conflicting situations, but not as easy to keep or make peace. It begins with your heart. When Jesus gave these teachings, He gave them in contrast to the attitudes of the Pharisees. The Pharisees were more concerned about the external than the internal. The teachings of Jesus always begin with and are focused on the internal, the Christian's heart and mind. This is no different. To be a peacemaker begins with being at peace with God.

9. What does it mean to be at peace with God? Think communion and reconciliation. Are you at peace with God?

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Once you are at peace with God, you can then bring peace to the situations you face daily. To the coworker who is out to get you, being a peacemaker may mean having a difficult but honest conversation. To the family member who has been hurt by your actions, peace may look like asking for forgiveness for your actions.

10. Is there a circumstance in your life where God is calling you to be a peacemaker? If not, how can you seek to be a peacemaker when a situation does arise?

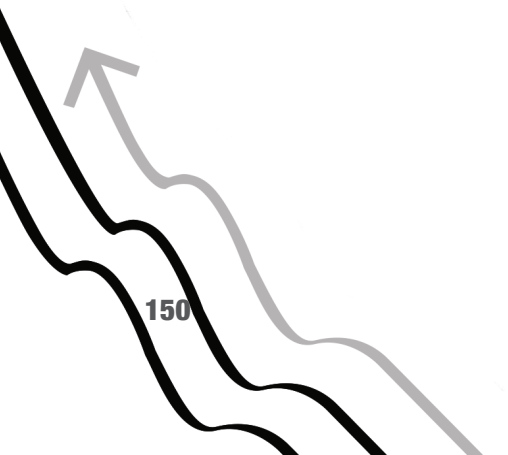
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As you seek peace in your workplace, family, and daily life, you will stand out in a world that is filled with rivalry and competition. This may look like coming alongside a struggling coworker rather than blowing past them to advance your career or calling the family member with whom you need to reconcile.

Spend five minutes praying for each other in your Growth Community. Ask that God would give you the courage to be a peacemaker and the ability to humble yourself so that your pride does not get in the way.



PEACE IS PERSONAL

PEACEMAKERS, DEVOTION 1

Josh Thayer

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." Matthew 5:9

Being a peacemaker is very difficult for individuals who are competitive. If we are going to throw a specific person under the bus, "I will volunteer as tribute!" If you have seen the movie or read the books from the quote I just casually tossed out *(The Hunger Games)*, then you also know that the concept of peace really does not apply to any of them either. That is except for the main character, but I digress.

It says in the Scripture above that peacemakers shall be called ***"sons of God."*** That is a pretty significant statement in my opinion. Basically, if you showcase the trait of a peacemaker, when people see you in action they will be able to tell that you are a "son of God." I mean nobody actually thinks of that phrase, but they would most likely say, "Hmm, what is different about them." They may ask themselves, "Didn't they say they go to church?" It is true when you think about it. I mean anytime I see my wife (who is the peacemaker in our home) acting as a peacemaker, I sarcastically think, "Man, she is getting into Heaven before me."

When you think of Jesus and you read the stories about what He was like here on Earth, all I think about is how peaceful He was. This was evident even when the Pharisees or other groups of people questioned Him or attempted to trap Him. I know if I was in Jesus' place at that time, there would be some type of crazy altercation (in my head I am envisioning explosions and something similar to an

action movie trailer). Jesus was always very chill and wanted nothing more than peace. Even when He flipped the tables in the temple, He was in full control of His emotions as He told them to remove the birds.

If in our lives we want what the Bible states, to live like Christ and strive to be like Him, then a peacemaking life is something we should attempt to do. I say "we" should attempt to do it because at the end of the day peace is personal.

Romans 12:18 adds, ***"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."*** Here Paul is writing to the Christians in Rome and he just started an excerpt on how followers of Christ should behave. I love how he opens up this verse, ***"If possible."*** I just envision Paul saying good luck and laughing but he probably did not do that. He goes on to say, ***"So far as it depends on you."*** This key phrase in that verse is where I want to end. Peace is personal and it will always depend on us. At the end of the day, we have the ability to determine how we are going to act in a specific situation. We have the ability to determine how we are going to live our lives. We can all be peacemakers or hellraisers if you want a strong contrast. Now you choose, what do you want to be known for, and what will honor Christ the most?

THE GIFT OF PEACE

PEACEMAKERS, DEVOTION 2

John Stone

In 1847, the Texas Rangers placed an order with an American inventor, Samuel Colt, for 1,000 repeating pistols to help arm the Rangers in their mission of defending the citizens of Texas. He accepted the order and invented a standardized process through which a six-shot revolver, named "The Peacemaker," could be quickly and inexpensively produced. For the first time, weapons of this type were affordable for the average person, and it changed American culture forever. There is a saying: "God made men. Sam Colt made them equal." Although an intriguing bit of history, this is not the peacemaker Jesus was talking about in Matthew 5:9 when He said, ***"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."***

In this verse, like the other Beatitudes, Jesus is defining characteristics of regenerated, Spirit-led lives, not specific actions with their corresponding rewards. God is the ultimate peacemaker, and if we, who claim the name of Christ, are to be called ***"sons of God,"*** we should be recognizable by traits that resemble those of our Father. To be a person who seeks peace involves far more than simply wishing that wars would end, politics were civilized, and people could get along. It is a way of life, evidence of regeneration. Galatians 5:22-23 includes peace in a famous list, ***"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."***

It is indelibly woven through our relationships and interactions with others. We must have an inner peace that is secure and unshakeable

despite our circumstances, a rock-solid foundation that can endure (Luke 6:47-48). This kind of inner peace is a gift from God that is reserved for His children (Romans 5:1). When we have this strong foundation built on Christ it provides true security and only then can we reach out to others with genuine offers of peace. Hebrews 12:14 says, ***"Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord."*** Romans 12:18 adds, ***"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."***

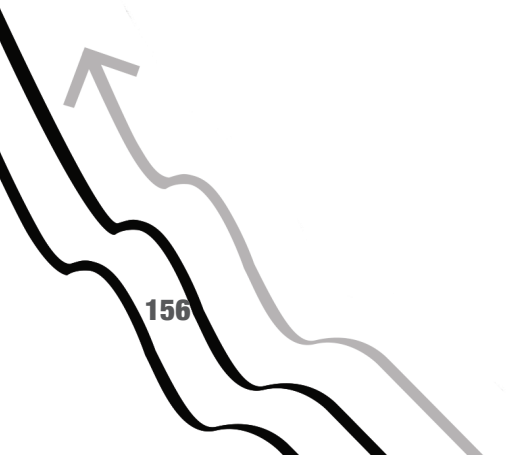
In order to truly seek peace with others, we must genuinely love and want what is best for them. This is easier said than done. People (including you and me) are hard, selfish, obstinate, vengeful, angry, opinionated, and the list goes on (Romans 1:28-32). It is very difficult to love people even for those who are closest to them. Jesus takes this idea to another level in Matthew 5:43-45 when He says, ***"You have heard it said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven."*** This truly is a monumental task Jesus is laying out! Not only should we love our neighbor, which can be hard enough, but also our enemies! We cannot do this in and of ourselves in our own strength. Fortunately, God has made it possible through His Spirit to truly pray for our enemies and seek good things for them. This is nothing less than a miracle, a gift of the Holy Spirit to believers, and by it, we are known as children of our Father.

The moment sin entered the world, sides were drawn in a rebellion that, in one sense, has yet to reach its conclusion. On one side is the holy, just, sovereign Creator God who cannot allow sin in His presence (Psalm 5:4-6). On the other side are the rebellious descendants of Adam, created from dirt, sinful, fallen, broken, and desperate, with their middle fingers to the sky blaspheming their Creator's name while pretending He does not exist. The Almighty, although without

any need, secure in Himself, reached out first to those who were His enemies with an offer of peace they did not deserve (Romans 5:8-10). He did more than just offer peace, He made peace, satisfying the just demands of His perfection by sacrificing His own Son. Jesus suffered the penalty and died in the place of His enemies (including you and me), making a way for them to have true peace with God. Colossians 1:19-20 says, ***"For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross."*** This ultimate gift of peace with God is freely extended to any who will accept it (John 3:16).

So, how does all this apply to our practical everyday lives as believers? Why is it important to have a foundation of peace that our life is built upon? Why must we love people including our enemies? Why should we work hard and press toward peace with everyone? The answer is the Gospel! The motivation for all that we do should come from a desire to glorify God and share the Good News of Jesus Christ with the world around us.

How can we effectively do that when we are angry, argumentative, and unapproachable? How can we be ambassadors of the peace our Father offers when our lives are in chaos, when a trial or persecution sends us plummeting in a tailspin of faith? We need to perform an audit on our lives and relationships and ask God to reveal the things that need to be set right: with Him, within ourselves, or with other people. If we need to make peace, let us not wait. If we need to forgive, we should do it today. We desperately need the Holy Spirit to lead and empower us to do the humanly impossible, and demonstrably show Christ's love and peace to a desperate world. Then we will truly be called ***"sons [and daughters] of God."***



PEACEMAKER OR PEACEKEEPER?

PEACEMAKERS, DEVOTION 3

John Rigg

Years ago, I was a design leader at a large manufacturing company and had several designers that were on my team. As their leader, I was not only responsible for the productivity of the team but the relational aspect of the team as well. Then one day, while conducting a yearly review with one of the designers, he said something to me that made me realize something about myself. During his yearly review, I began to address an issue he had with getting to work on time, but in an indirect way. In the middle of his review, he interrupted me and said these words, "John, you know what your problem is? You just want everyone to like you! Why don't you just get to the point!" He was right, I was not giving him the truth, I was avoiding personal conflict with him in an effort to keep the peace. I was being a peacekeeper.

Matthew 5:9 says, ***"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."***

Notice our Lord's words; He does not call us to be peacekeepers, but peacemakers. Although we may think of the two as being the same, they are not. Jesus was called the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), yet it seems that everywhere He went He was involved in some kind of conflict!

Although this has been a process for me, here are a few things I have learned.

1. Peacemakers Speak the Truth, Peacekeepers Avoid It

This is what I was struggling with and is a characteristic of a

peacekeeper. Peacekeepers want everyone to like them and conflict is hard for them. Often, we read of Jesus flipping over tables in the temple or confronting the religious leaders of His day, but He always spoke the truth. Truth's goal is to make peace, it does not always keep it.

2. Peacemakers Love Others, Peacekeepers Love Peace
Speaking the truth is much easier when our concern is for others and their well-being, rather than keeping the peace or avoiding conflict. Our efforts to make peace do not always have to be ugly or argumentative just to prove we are right. A peacemaker's love for the relationship will always be the driving force behind delivering the truth.

3. Peacemakers are Proactive, Peacekeepers are Passive
Peacemaking involves being active in the process of accomplishing peace not avoiding it. The greatest example I know that shows us what peacemaking is all about is recorded in Paul's letter to the Romans, ***"But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us"*** (Romans 5:8 NKJV).

God spoke the truth: Sinners and are not at peace with God.
God loved others: His love for the sinner made a way for peace.
God was proactive: He sent His only Son to die so that God and sinner may have peace.

The blessing of Matthew 5:9 is that the peacemakers will be called ***"sons of God."***

So, what would someone say if you were to ask them, "Am I, peacemaker or peacekeeper?"

CREATE PEACE

PEACEMAKERS, DEVOTION 4

Donna Fox

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." Matthew 5:9

As I write this devotion in December 2020, we have just had a very contentious presidential election. We are still smack dab in the middle of Covid. There are protests and riots every day for one reason or another. In the midst of all this, social media use is skyrocketing. Anyone can post anything about any subject and start a barrage of differing opinions in the comments. You can argue with people you do not know and will never see, and say anything you want without retribution. This stirs up conflict and is the opposite of peace!

I would say I am a peacemaker. I do not like to cause conflict or get into the middle of strife. I try to be even-keeled and keep everyone happy. My daughter says I do this to a fault (I make everyone else happy even if it makes me unhappy). Yet, I do not ignore conflict. I usually go to the other person and talk to them about what is bothering me, or what I see they are doing to another to cause conflict and disrupt peace.

One definition of a peacemaker might be to "create peace." A peacemaker steps into the conflict and brings calm and reason to hopefully result in peace. Romans 12:18 says, ***"If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all."*** Romans 14:19 adds, ***"So let us pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding."***

There are many examples of peacemakers in the Bible, of course, most notably Jesus. Jesus paid the ultimate price to restore peace between God and man.

However, many others come to mind as well. One I thought of was Abigail. She stopped David from heading into a fight with her husband Nabal. She stepped into the middle of the conflict and helped bring the situation to a peaceful resolution (1 Samuel 25). Another example is Joseph. His brothers were angry with him and jealous, yet he sought peace with them (Genesis 37-47).

If you do not consider yourself a peaceful person, you can be, with God's help. Pray and ask God to soften your heart to be more peaceful. Look at Paul. He was converted and changed into a peacemaker. Follow his example and turn your life around!

Set an example for others. As I am a peacemaker, my children and grandchildren will learn the behavior from me.

We read in 1 Corinthians 14:33, ***"For God is not a God of confusion but of peace."*** Those who strive to promote peace are like Him and are worthy to be called his children. Luke 6:35 adds, ***"But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil."***

Mahatma Gandhi said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ." Christ was the ultimate peacemaker. We are to be Christ-like. Therefore, we are called to be peacemakers.

BE THE PEACE

PEACEMAKERS, DEVOTION 5

Holly Boston

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." Matthew 5:9

As a kid, I was punished fairly often for "having to have the last word." As a teenager, I was often told I would make a great attorney because I was so good at arguing my case. My desire to be right and convince others of my position has negatively impacted my relationships over the years. My husband used to say: "I am sorry 'but' is not an apology." He has not had to say that in a while. I must be growing. This is one of a number of attributes Jesus has been weeding out of me over the past 25 years.

Today is Friday, December 12th, 2020. As I write this, Michigan is in a partial shutdown to minimize the spread of the COVID-19 virus. We just experienced an election that has polarized our country in ways I have never experienced and there is tremendous social unrest. The Second Amendment has been hijacked as people use free speech to express their opinions cruelly and without respect for others. In our anger, frustration, and discouragement we have become self-centered and self-indulgent. If ever there was a need for peacemakers, it is now.

As I studied the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, I realized that the Beatitudes are not merely a "to do" list to check off. The Beatitudes describe an attitude or way of life; in other words, who you are not what you do. As I read, I was struck by how challenging it would be to uphold such standards. I imagine the Jewish people viewed the Ten

Commandments much the same way - impossible to accomplish. Was Jesus dangling an unachievable carrot in front of them, offering a blessing to a select group? If Jesus' promises were limited to the Beatitudes, we would be overwhelmed with defeat. However, Jesus gives us another promise to cling to in Matthew 19:26, ***"With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."*** Jesus does not leave us to ourselves. He makes a way.

The question then is how are we to be peacemakers in this broken, angry world? Matthew 5:9 teaches us that there is a direct correlation between being a peacemaker and a son or daughter of God. Romans 5:1 says, ***"Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."*** Left to ourselves we are driven by our old sinful, rebellious nature; led by our own will and desires. However, when we choose Christ to be the Lord of our lives, we become a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). We take on God's own nature through Jesus and are then free to pursue His will and desires. We make others more important than ourselves (Philippians 2:3). Warren Wiersbe says that when we live for Him, "We become peacemakers in a troubled world and channels for God's mercy, purity, and peace." It is only through Jesus that we are able to be the peace we are called to be. He is the way!

Inner peace begins with surrendering your life to him. Isaiah tells us how to keep this peace throughout our walk. In Isaiah 26:3, we read, ***"You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you."***

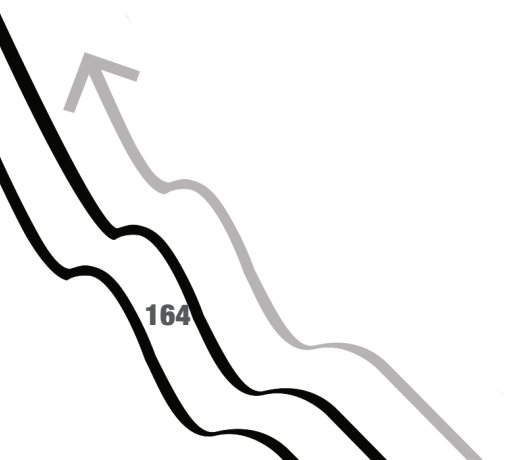
Believer, what consumes your mind? Is it the number of COVID cases reported yesterday or maybe the debate on wearing a mask? In what or who do you place your trust? Is it an election? Choose to consume your mind with the Word of God and trust in the certainty of His promises. As you do, God will transform your heart, your desires,

and your attitude. You will become a peacemaker!

I discovered a new Christmas song that speaks to this very topic. The song is entitled *"Here to Stay"* by Hannah Kerr. The chorus is beautiful:

"The baby in the stable
Is the only one who's able
To bring comfort and peace
That's never gonna leave.
There is hope for every season
And Jesus is the reason
Love came down on Christmas Day
Now my hope is here to stay."

May we be the peace!



SAVE THE LOST

PEACEMAKERS, DEVOTION 6

Ferdinand Sanders

In Matthew 5:9, within the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, ***"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God."*** As all Scripture should, as I was reading and pondering this verse, especially in the greater context of the Sermon on the Mount, it forced me to take a closer look at myself and where my focus and priorities lie. I would argue that peace is obtained when we have Christ at the top of our list and allow Him to be the lens or filter through which we view and approach everything that we face. Knowing that we have the keys to true peace through Christ, what then does it mean for us to be peacemakers?

Not only is Christ our source of peace, but He is also the perfect example of what it means to be a peacemaker. If you had to sum up the purpose of Jesus' life and ministry into one main concept I would say that Luke 19:10 might fit the bill, ***"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."*** Through Jesus taking our sins upon His shoulders and dying the death we all deserved, we were reconciled and now have peace with God, through Christ. Jesus' life and ministry were to be a peacemaker to all mankind.

Paul writes about this in his letter to the church at Ephesus, ***"But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in His flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that He might create in Himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace,***

and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And He came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through Him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God" (Ephesians 2:13-19).

Not only have we been given the direction of the Beatitudes found within Matthew chapter 5, but we are also called to be imitators of Christ. John puts it simply when he writes, ***"Whoever says he abides in Him ought to walk in the same way in which He walked"*** (1 John 2:6). Sometimes I think it is easy to fall into a trap of seeing others in a judgmental way when they do not walk or believe the same way that we do, or how we think they ought to be living. In order to be the peacemakers we are called to be, we need to go out of our way to listen, love, and serve those that we disagree with or differ from.

Philippians 2:3-7 adds, ***"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."***

LESSON EIGHT

PERSECUTED

PASTOR ROY TOWNSEND

Have you ever wondered if you are doing the right thing then why does everything go wrong? In my family, we were taught that you have got to stand for something, or you will fall for anything. The Scriptures give us backward sounding advice directly from Jesus.

Matthew 5:10 reads, ***"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."***

Really, the Kingdom of Heaven is promised to people who are persecuted not for their own wrongdoings, but for ***"righteousness' sake."*** People will suffer for doing right. The Scripture goes on to say that these people are blessed or happy. Many commentators say that blessed really means we are to "leap for joy." So, those believers that are ***"persecuted for righteousness' sake"*** are going to leap for joy. Does this not sound backward?

1. Have you ever heard the saying that a "church persecuted is a church pure?" What do you think that means?

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Luke 6:22-23 reads, ***"Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets."***

We were taught that when the church is truly being persecuted for doing the right thing, then you know that those continuing to serve are for real or pure. The persecuted church is standing up for what is right. The religious leaders of Jesus' time had a fake righteousness that they put on for others to see, but Jesus reveals that a true

righteousness comes from the heart. True righteousness comes from the inside. Barclay wrote, “The Pharisees were concerned about the minute details of conduct, but they neglected the major matter of character. Conduct flows out of character.”

Matthew 24:9 reads, ***“Then they will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name’s sake.”***

Christ teaches that as the world moves further and further from the teachings of the Scriptures, we as believers will become more offensive to the world.

2. What does it mean to be persecuted?

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3. In what ways do you see the persecution of believers growing in our world?

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According to the dictionary, persecuted means hostility or ill-treatment toward a person, especially because of their race, political, or religious beliefs. Further, it can mean to harass or annoy persistently. What is crazy is that this persecution for righteousness leads to a double blessing, but the Scriptures further reveals the type of actions that will befall His children.

Matthew 5:11-12 reads, ***“Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely***

on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

4. Have you ever had someone falsely accuse you of something?

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5. Is there someone who reviles you? Why?

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6. So why does the world respond to the followers of Jesus in this way?

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John 3:19-20 reads, ***"And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed."***

The world hates the righteous life because it exposes the world's unrighteousness. When the world sees how you are living, they do not like what they see because it reveals what is wrong in their lives. The Apostle Paul tells his spiritual son, Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:12, ***"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."*** The principle is clear that we will be persecuted.

However, we know that Christ has told us how to respond. We are told to ***"rejoice and be glad"*** (1 Peter 4:13). Again, this is where it sounds backward. New Testament believers prayed for boldness to tell others about Christ when they were persecuted. Christ's followers rejoiced after they were beaten in Acts 5:41, ***"Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name."***

7. Does persecution make you care more for the lost?

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8. Why is it hard to rejoice when persecuted?

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Paul and Silas sang when they were beaten for Christ. In Acts 16:25, we read, ***"About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them."***

MacArthur writes, "If we never experience ridicule, criticism, or rejection because of our faith, we have reason to examine the genuineness of it." Paul wrote, ***"For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer on His behalf, experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me"*** (Philippians 1:29-30 NASB).

9. If you are not persecuted, can anyone tell that you are a follower of Christ?

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Luke 9:26 reads, ***"For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."***

We have been warned. You have got to stand for something, or you will fall for anything!



MARKED BY SUFFERING

PERSECUTED, DEVOTION 1

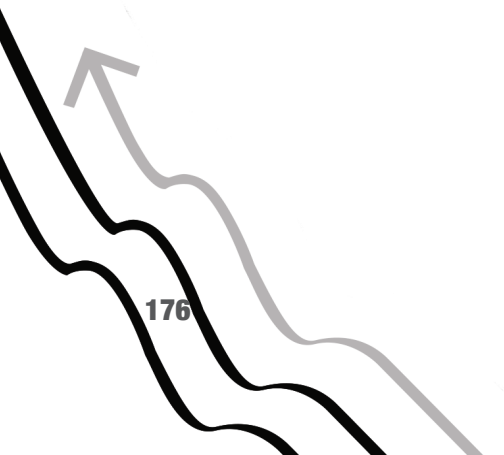
Patrick Bicknell

In the greatest sermon ever uttered in the existence of humanity, Jesus delivers the eight Beatitudes or blessings at the beginning of the sermon. He lists eight character qualities or traits that a believer can have and the blessing that comes with these traits. What is so beautiful about these blessings that Jesus speaks of is that all of the qualities have to do with our character, desire, and heart. They have nothing to do with what our culture would view as blessings, or marks of a successful person.

In our culture, a person may be blessed if they have lots of money, good health, extremely athletic, or incredibly intelligent, and this is all true as they are all great blessings. However, this is not what Jesus is concerned with when discussing these Beatitudes in Matthew chapter 5. He talks about what we should thirst for, how our spirit should be, and then He comes to verse 10 in chapter 5 which says, ***"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven."*** Jesus is saying here what an incredible blessing it is for a person to be persecuted for the name of Christ! Most people would question that and say, "How is that a blessing?" When we are persecuted and suffer for righteousness' sake, we make God look glorious. John Piper says, "When you say, through the deepest possible pain, God is enough, He is good, He will satisfy us, that makes God look glorious."

That is why the church, those who proclaim Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, should be marked by suffering. God does not look glorious if all we receive from Him are material things, good health, and all the gifts that we could want. Jesus tells us in the Sermon on

the Mount that the blessed are those who are persecuted for Him because they will receive the Kingdom of Heaven. We have a much greater hope than any money could give us, we have much greater confidence than any health could grant us, and we have much greater security than any government could offer us because we rest on the fact that the Creator of the universe came down to this Earth and died for sinners and rose again on the third day so that we may have eternal life. With this hope, we need to go out into the world, preach the Gospel, and be marked by suffering to show the world that we desire nothing else than for the name of Christ to be lifted high. Isaiah 26:8 says, ***"In the path of your judgments, O Lord, we wait for you; your name and remembrance are the desire of our soul."***



THE SUMMER OF "76"

PERSECUTED, DEVOTION 2

Roger Allen

Many years ago, I watched as a friend gave his life to the Lord. I had no understanding of what had happened, but somehow I knew he was different. You see, I had never been introduced to Jesus and without having a family connected with the church, I had no way of knowing the truth. My friend's family came from a long line of churchgoers, so he fit right in and I am sure there was a celebration for his new birth. Throughout my teen years, I watched as others gave their lives to the Lord as this was the "Jesus movement" of the '70s. So many were leaving the party scene for the Jesus scene that I actually contemplated joining. Those that left, had a different way about them. It was a more joyous and sincere outlook on life. This intrigued me.

John 15:11 says, ***"These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full."***

Intrigued, but not overcome, I continued to chase what the world had to offer. Occasionally, I would look back on that summer of "76" and think about those who had given their lives over to Jesus. Where were they now and what were they doing? Did they stay committed to Jesus, or did they succumb to the constant pressure of the world? Did they somehow get worn down from the constant cajoling that a non-believer would put on them? Did campus life finally get to them? Had they fallen back into the lifestyle they had before? Were they somehow persecuted for their beliefs or made fun of by others? Or did they find a peace that surpasses all understanding? It is where no matter what was thrown their way, they were able to endure it. It would be many years before I would experience what they most assuredly did back in the '70s and it was an eye-opener.

Philippians 4:7 adds, ***"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."***

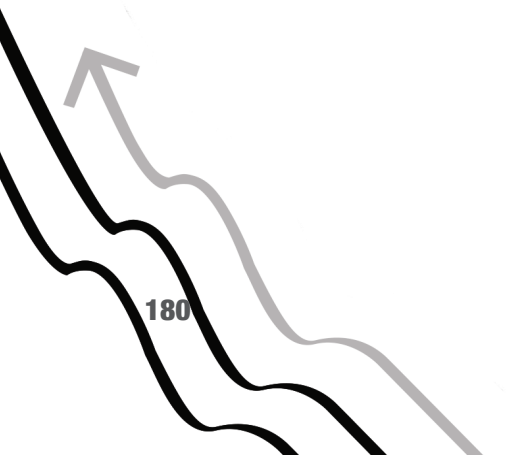
Thirty years later, as I freely sat in a church for the first time, I finally experienced the joy so many had talked about years ago. My sin before me, as the Holy Spirit convicted me and I repented, receiving a full pardon for my transgressions, I now understand who Jesus is talking about in His sermon on the hill in Galilee so many years ago. The redeemed are those that Jesus speaks of in the Beatitudes. Only those who receive salvation will see the Kingdom of Heaven and only "they" will have the blessing of being persecuted for righteousness. Until that day of salvation, I could never have known who Jesus spoke about. While most people were intrigued by my instantaneous change, others were amused (thinking I was going through a phase), and yet others found no amusement at all in my new found faith. That very evening, I began a long list of calls inviting others to get to know the Savior and telling them of my new transformation. For most, this invitation was considered a nice gesture, but for others, it was an outright battle cry. There are those that I have not spoken to since that fateful night because of my testimony. Merely mentioning the name Jesus created a chasm that has yet to be spanned to this day. Yet, there are others who try and find a reason to knock me down a notch any chance they get. I guess it makes them nervous that I belong to the King.

Matthew 5:10 says, ***"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."***

While it hurts to lose friends because of your faith in Jesus, it quickly becomes apparent that it is yet proof, you are a child of God. I am no prophet, but I see a time coming soon when we will see persecution, unlike anything we have seen before. At the mere mention of Jesus'

name, we may find ourselves in a place of extreme danger, but remember, it only proves we are His. Continue to pray for those who are now your enemies and that they too can become a child of God. Hopefully, they will learn first-hand what it means to be persecuted for righteousness' sake, and the only way to receive that righteousness is through faith in Christ.

Romans 3:22-24 records, ***"The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus."***



I WANT HEAVEN'S BLESSINGS

PERSECUTED, DEVOTION 3

Josh Thayer

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:10

We have been exploring the Beatitudes (beautiful attitudes!) this month, and throughout these readings, Jesus highlights eight unexpected situations in which you receive God's favor and blessings. As we get to the end of the Beatitudes, we see here in verse 10 nothing different but it does not sound easy.

When you read through each verse of the Beatitudes you can see how to be blessed. The word "blessed" means happiness. The beatitudes do not promise laughter, pleasure, or earthly prosperity (Which is what we all want, right?). I love laughing and enjoying life with the people that are the closest to me, and I enjoy buying new toys to play with. I mean, I am human, but that is not what Jesus is talking about here.

To Jesus, ***"blessed"*** means the experience of hope and joy, independent of outward circumstances. Basically, you will be able to be happy no matter what is happening around you. To find hope and joy, the deepest form of happiness, follow Jesus no matter what the cost. In verse 10 there is a deep cost, ***"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."***

Matthew is saying to expect nothing in return except persecution. Do not expect anything from the world in return except criticism. Now that sounds fun, does it not? That is all I want is to be criticized,

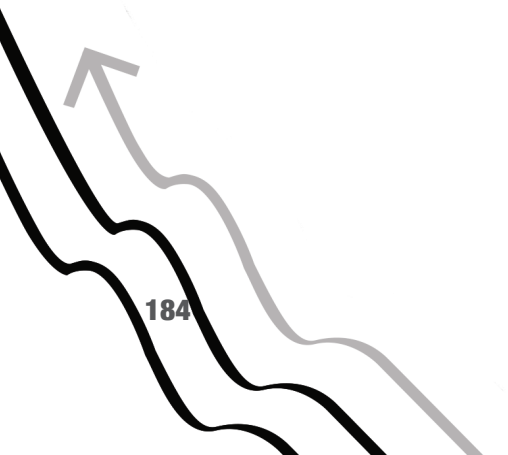
persecuted, and get nothing in return (says the extremely sarcastic person). However, God is with the persecuted church as you read the second half of this verse, ***"theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*** The Message paraphrase says, ***"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution."*** We will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven, that is our blessing for being attacked here on earth for what we believe. It would not be an instantaneous blessing, like we may want. It is a long term blessing, one that you can take to the bank when you get to Heaven!

So, to pose a question, do you believe in Jesus enough that it is evident to others around you to receive persecution and criticism? That really puts this into perspective. You may be thinking to yourself as you consider your walk with Jesus, "Do I even love Jesus?" Relax, of course, you do, or you would not be pursuing holiness by reading this devotion today. It is one step closer, it is one more level up in your walk with Jesus.

I love that 1 Peter 3:14-15 confirms a blessing when we are suffering for Jesus, ***"But even if you should suffer for righteousness' sake, you will be blessed. Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect."***

It all goes back to what I stated in the beginning as we defined blessing. The blessings we will receive are not earthly blessings - they are heavenly blessings. When we are persecuted and attacked for what we believe we need to not fear our enemies but rather trust in God as the Lord of all. We must believe that Jesus is truly in control of all events. When He rules our thoughts and emotions, we cannot be shaken by anything our enemies may do for we are inheriting the

blessings of Heaven! One day we will be with God in Heaven with no pain, no sadness, no fear, and all His glory and wonder! That is what we are striving for.



RACHEL SCOTT

PERSECUTED, DEVOTION 4

Debbie Kerr

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:10

The word or concept of persecution is foreign to the American church. Miriam Webster defines it as the act or practice of persecuting especially those who differ in origin, religion, or social outlook. Christian persecution goes all the way back to the early Church. We have been extremely blessed in America for centuries because of the faith of our Founding Fathers. America was founded on Judeo-Christian beliefs and freedom of religion is part of the First Amendment of our Constitution. Other areas of the world do not have such an amendment and Christian persecution is an actual thing today. What Jesus is saying in Matthew 5:10, explains that there is a special blessing for people who are persecuted for their faith and righteous living, they will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. This account in Matthew is before Jesus' shed blood on the cross which brings salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Jesus is speaking to the Jewish people that followed the Law of Moses, but I believe the promise extends to the believer in Jesus Christ as well.

Have you ever thought about being asked the question, "If someone put a gun to your head and told you to deny Christ and live or profess Christ and die, what would you would do?" That is a very hard question but many, many early Christians and missionaries around the world have died for their faith. There is a book called Foxes Book of Martyrs. It's a very old book with several accounts of those who gave up their own life because of their commitment to Christ. Ten of

the twelve disciples were martyred for their faith in Jesus. I fear that in the day in which we live in 2021, Christianity has grown weak in our commitment and devotion to Christ. We tend to be consumers more than devoted followers. It is often more about, "What is in it for me?" I thank God for the devoted Christians that have been a faithful example in my life.

In 1999, at Columbine High School in Colorado, two young men entered the school with assault weapons. They went up to the library and held several students hostage. They began to ask the question to each one of the students, "Do you believe in God?" One girl in the library, when asked the question, said, "Yes." She was shot and killed right there on the spot. She was robbed of growing up, getting married, having children, and serving Christ, but her story has reached the masses and her bold testimony for Christ lives on. She did not lose that day, she actually won! Jesus said, ***"Therefore whosoever confesses me before men, him I will also confess before my Father who is in heaven. But whosoever denies me before men, him I will also deny before my Father who is in Heaven"*** (Matthew 10:32-33).

What would you say?

"He is no fool who
gives what he cannot keep
to gain what he cannot lose"
Jim Elliott
(Martyred missionary)

THE EXAMPLES

PERSECUTED, DEVOTION 5

John Stone

"Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:10 (NASB)

As I studied this verse, I found that it has many layers and more than one way that it can be applied. From the context, I believe Jesus was using the example of the Old Testament prophets (Matthew 5:12; Luke 11:49-51) to encourage His disciples to face the trials He was preparing them for. Fast-forward a short time, and Jesus has fulfilled the words of those prophets by dying on a cross and rising again, paying the penalty for sin (Isaiah 53:10-12). In Acts chapter 5, the disciples have been publicly defying the Jewish rulers by preaching the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. As a result, they are arrested and threatened before being beaten and released. In verse 41, we see a very strange thing - they are rejoicing (Rejoicing!) for being counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. Jesus told them that they would be persecuted and hated by all for following Him. History tells us that all of the Apostles would suffer gruesome deaths and yet they continued to boldly share the Gospel, persevering through ridicule, betrayal, and beatings. Why would anyone continue to face such hardship when they could just stay quiet, live a comfortable life, and wait to see Christ?

In one of the strangest encounters in the Bible, Jesus confronts one of His sworn enemies on the road to Damascus. He shows him how he will suffer persecution and death for faithfully preaching the Gospel (Acts 9:15-16). Once he recovers from coming face to face with the Creator God, the man we know as the Apostle Paul immediately

starts down a path of some of the worst sustained persecution and suffering ever recorded (2 Corinthians 11:23-27). This drastic switch in behavior needs an explanation. In his own words, he writes, ***"But whatever things were gain to me, these things I have counted as loss because of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them mere rubbish so that I may gain Christ"*** (Philippians 3:7-8 NASB). The result of his perseverance was the introduction of the Gospel to an entire continent. According to *"Foxes Book of Martyrs,"* Paul was later beheaded at the order of Nero, Emperor of Rome.

Christians have been, and still are, hated just as Jesus said they would be. This treatment by the world should not be surprising (1 John 4:13). God's chosen people have been a hated target from the beginning, many times by those whose fake religiosity is exposed and threatened by the light of true righteousness (Genesis 4:3-4; Acts 7:52). Should this hatred and threat of persecution or even death cause us to shrink back and hide? Absolutely not! If we are truly a regenerated child of God we will not be able to hide, at least not for very long (Jonah 1:3; Matthew 5:14-15).

There are many astonishing examples throughout Christian history of people who chose not to hide, not to back down in the face of persecution, and not to lose faith. Through the power of the Spirit and the grace of God they demonstrated with their lives that Christ is more valuable than anything the world has to offer:

1. Abel, the second man ever born, was murdered by Cain his older brother because God approved of him and not of Cain (1 John 3:10-12).
2. The Old Testament prophets called "blessed" by Jesus:

Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel murdered by their own people (one sawn in two) for publicly condemning unrighteousness and calling for repentance.

3. First-century believers in Rome, singing praises to God as they were led into the Colosseum to be killed as macabre entertainment.
4. Japanese families in the 1500s were crucified head-down on the beach and allowed to drown as the tide rose because they refused to recant their belief in Christ.
5. Oregon Community College students in 2015 lined up and shot in the head for answering "yes" when asked if they were Christians.

Under threat of torture and death, these amazing Christians refused to compromise or deny their Savior and were summarily executed, some in the most excruciating ways possible. After they had suffered for a short time, they were introduced to their Heavenly Father and it was all worth it (2 Corinthians 5:8; Philippians 1:22-23).

Do you and I have what it takes to be called blessed by our Savior? Would we persevere to the end if our Disneyland life were turned upside down by the threat of persecution or death? What if you were the sixth student standing against the wall and the first five were already lying crumpled on the floor? What if you were on the beach watching your family being nailed to crosses and the soldiers were walking toward you? Would you stay focused on your Savior (Hebrews 11:27; Acts 7:55)? Could you endure to the end and gain your life? Could I? Jesus said that anyone who denies Him before men, He will deny before His Father (Matthew 10:33). That is a serious consequence, infinitely more serious than an entire lifetime of suffering and persecution. Will we value Him above our own fleeting life and gain what is truly valuable (Hebrews 10:29; Philippians 3:8)? Will we be the example an unbelieving world needs to see

(Colossians 1:24) so that they may understand the price Christ paid for their souls?

Not all Christians are subjected to persecution or martyrdom. Some live quiet lives in holiness and humility (Micah 6:8), walking with the Lord until He takes them home. Other believers boldly challenge the world with fiery sermons, calls for repentance, and unrestrained passion only slowed by time and old age. However, there is another type. It is one that Jesus calls blessed. It is one who discovers that God has found them worthy to suffer and they rejoice at the opportunity to glorify their Savior with their blood. They persevere through the power of the Spirit knowing that God is faithful to sustain them through whatever may come and carry them home to His Kingdom in which they share.

I pray, “Lord, please count me worthy of bearing my cross. Allow me to see beyond the vapor of this life, to gain a tangible understanding of what is truly important. Strengthen me to unashamedly proclaim Your name like a banner; may my life reflect the faith and hope You have given. Help me to make war on my sin; purify for Yourself this unworthy sinner. When my day comes, if it be Your will, let me endure with joy the pain and suffering You have appointed as my share. Glorify Yourself through my death that others may find life.”

PERSECUTION VERSUS PUNISHMENT

PERSECUTED, DEVOTION 6

Keaton Washburn

I was recently watching a tv show that follows community college football players who have lots of talent, but somehow got overlooked. It is a true, unscripted story that has me hooked. One of the main characters is a young man named Dion. Dion has been through a lot of hardship in his life. His father was abusive, he got kicked out of his home at age 17, he can barely afford college tuition, and spends much of the year living out of his car and sleeping on friend's couches because he cannot afford rent. As the show goes on, viewers see Dion's struggle with anxiety and panic attacks, manifesting itself in horrible chest pain. In an interview with the camera crew, Dion opens up about the ways his father abused him. He said it included beating him with belts, shaving his head, forcing him to dress up in girl's clothes and go to school, and eventually forcing him to quit high school football. In the interview, Dion readily admits that he deserved punishment for his actions, but his father took it way too far, constantly seeking to humiliate him as punishment. It is a heartbreaking story, but what stuck out to me was Dion's willingness to admit that he did deserve punishment for his actions. There are not many young men mature enough to realize that there are actions that deserve punishment and consequences. Frankly, there are many adults that run from the consequences of their actions.

In Matthew 5:10, Jesus said, ***"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*** It is natural to think, "Blessed are those who are persecuted? How is that a blessing?" However, Jesus, as He does so often, reverses natural thinking and calls His followers to a Kingdom mindset. It is important that Christians understand the

difference between punishment and persecution. A punishment or consequence is deserved for actions carried out. Persecution is not deserved. Jesus says, ***"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."*** Righteousness! It is the opposite of an action that deserves punishment. It does not make sense to go through hardship because of righteousness.

I want to remind you what Jesus endured. For us, He experienced mocking, scourging (flogging), a crown of thorns, being spit on, carrying his own cross (literally), and ultimately death on a cross. For what? His righteousness. His perfect life was without sin. Jesus did not deserve any of it, yet He allowed Himself to endure it.

If you find yourself being persecuted, mocked, being called out, or put on a pedestal for your faith in Jesus Christ, look at His perfect example of suffering persecution. What you are enduring, Jesus knows what it is like and empathizes with you. He is with you in your persecution!

Today, take ten minutes and read Mark chapter 15. Consider what Christ endured for your sake and allow Him to comfort you in your suffering.

LESSON NINE

REVILE

PASTOR PAT ROWLAND

I love the outdoors anytime I can get out and experience the beauty of God's creation. I feel like I am really living life the way we are supposed to.

1. On a scale of 1-10 (10 being "more outdoors the better"), how do you feel about being in the outdoors? Why?

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_____

Several years ago, I had the opportunity to try my hand at fly fishing. A friend of mine who is an avid fly fisher invited me to spend a few days with him and a couple of other experienced fly fishermen at his cabin up north. It was an opportunity I was grateful to experience; however, I was not "hooked" on the sport. One thing I will say was I was exhausted after spending all day walking the river mainly because I kept having to walk back upstream to have my friend help me with the fly rod.

Whether you appreciate the outdoors or not, you know what it is like trying to move upstream against a current. If you are trying to paddle a canoe it is always easier to go with the current than it is against the current.

2. In today's culture do you ever feel like you are moving more against the current than with it? If so, when was the most recent time?

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Read John 15:18-20, ***"If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world,***

but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you."

I want to talk about being persecuted for ***"righteousness' sake,"*** which is what Jesus often talked about. When we do right or live in a certain way it is a reminder to those that do not walk in the light that they are wrong. Their conviction does not come from those who are "righteous" or at least it should not. The conviction comes from the Holy Spirit and moral consciousness. Conviction is normal, but the persecution is a reaction of the sin nature. When you live a life in a way that is countercultural or "righteous" you will stand out and you may experience some level of persecution.

3. Have you had a time where your behavior was noticed by someone as different?

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Read Matthew 5:10-11, ***"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."***

In Matthew 5:11, the emphasis makes a shift from ***"blessed are those"*** (verse 10) to ***"blessed are you."*** No matter the level or degree of persecution for your beliefs it is personal. At the core, the attacks or the persecution are because of your faith; however, the impact is directed personally and can be painful. Jesus identifies insults, slander, and false accusations as some of the types of attacks you might receive because of your faith.

4. What other kinds of persecutions have you seen, experienced, or heard about?

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_____
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5. How do you typically feel and react to that level of persecution?

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Read Matthew 5:12, ***"Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."***

6. How does Jesus say we should respond to the persecution?

_____
_____
_____

The natural reaction to persecution is not to ***"rejoice and be glad."*** Rather it is to defend, counter, and retaliate. Jesus does not call us to do as the world does but to live a life that is countercultural. When we live countercultural we disrupt in a way that makes people stop and take notice. Though it seems backward, Jesus calls us to live in a way that people take notice in a positive way.

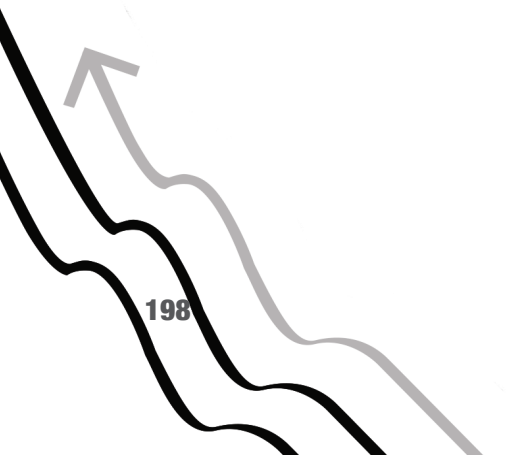
7. In Matthew 5:12, Jesus promises a reward. What is the reward?

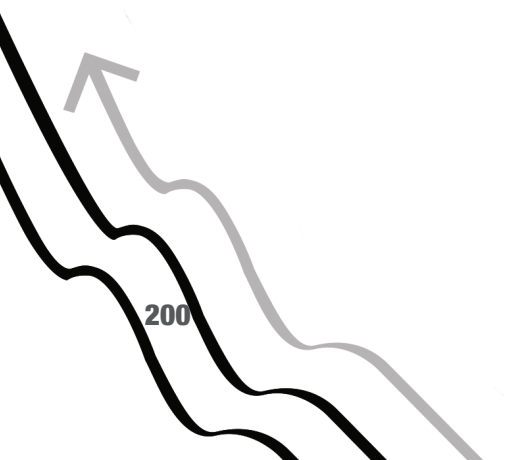
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Not only do we not know specifically the reward, but we also have to wait. The reward is a heavenly reward which means not something

we will experience on Earth or even directly change the degree of persecution. We may continue to experience the persecution, but the reward is in knowing that our Heavenly Father knows we are faithful and promises to grant us favor.

"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing." James 1:2-4





DID YOU HEAR?

REVILE, DEVOTION 1

Philip Piasecki

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Matthew 5:11-12

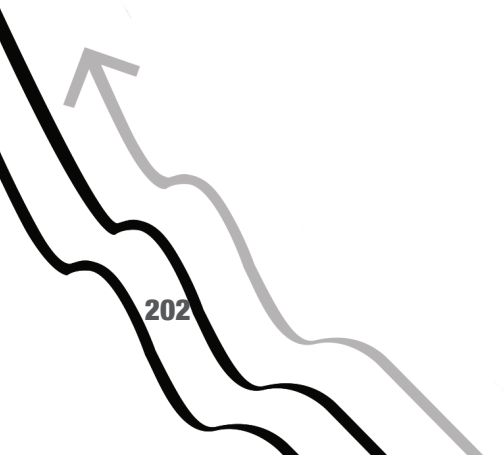
There are few worse feelings in life than when someone says, "Hey, did you hear what 'so and so' said about you?" I want to be clear, rarely ever is that a good thing. I would love it if the follow-up sentence to that was, "Yeah, they are just telling everyone how amazing of a person you are!" Normally it is quite the opposite, normally that next sentence is filled with how someone has been talking bad about you behind your back. It is even more hurtful when that slander is being directed towards you because of your faith.

We have this false idea that if we are following after the things of Christ that people are going to love us and get along with us. If you thought that, then read the verse above, I am sure it hit you like a ton of bricks. Christ said people are going to revile us, persecute us, and utter all kinds of evil against us on His account. We are currently living in very turbulent times, with the direction of our culture seemingly getting more hostile towards Christians and the truth that we proclaim. I constantly see people surprised by this. These believers are more passionate about protecting themselves and others from encountering these things than they are about actually sharing the truths of Christ.

This verse does not instruct us to complain about the evil that may come our way. It does not instruct us to seek out revenge for the

injustices that may be done for us. It does not tell us to hide from the world so that we may be protected. It tells us to rejoice and be glad. Let me highlight this again so we do not miss it - Rejoice and be glad when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely.

This is what Scripture is teaching us, and it says that we are blessed when this happens. We are blessed because it means that we are truly living a life for Christ if this is happening to us. We are in good company as well, Scripture says that they also persecuted the prophets who were before us. What an honor to even be considered in the same sentence as the biblical prophets that Jesus is talking about here. If we are followers of Christ, there will be a deep-rooted joy in who Christ is, but that does not protect us from encountering persecution. These things in Matthew 5:11-12 will happen to us, but if our faith is in Christ alone, we will persevere and His name will be made great through our adversity.



BLESSED PERSECUTION

REVILE, DEVOTION 2

John Rigg

"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Matthew 5:11–12 (NKJV)

Blessedness Jesus says, comes when people defame us, persecute us, and say all kinds of evil things about us. He also tells us to rejoice, to be exceedingly glad, and expect a great reward in Heaven, just in case blessedness skipped our attention. Have you been slandered lately? Has someone said something behind your back? Have you been harassed recently or felt intimidated by anyone? How did it make you feel? Blessed, exceedingly glad, or worthy of great reward? Probably not. Maybe we do not feel this way because the reason behind the mistreatment failed to meet the conditions spelled out by Jesus.

Condition one: According to Jesus, the accusations that are spoken about us must be "false." It would be wrong for us to expect the blessings of persecution if everything that is being said about us is actually true. So, we must be willing to be honest with ourselves, "Are people making defaming statements and saying things about us falsely? Or are they true?" Have we acted in ways that are deserving of their words? I am sure we can all agree that no blessedness should follow if the accusations against us are true!

Condition two: Persecution must be the result of acting for "His sake," or out of regard or respect for Jesus, for His benefit, advantage, or

good. If we are all honest, each of us has an expectation of blessing but want nothing of persecution. Let us be encouraged by the "expectation of persecution" from the great 18th century Methodist preacher John Wesley. J. G. Morrison reported:

> John Wesley was riding along a road one day when it dawned on him that three whole days had passed in which he had suffered no persecution. Not a brick or an egg had been thrown at him for three days. Alarmed, he stopped his horse, and exclaimed, "Can it be that I have sinned, and am backslidden?" Slipping from his horse, Wesley went down on his knees and began interceding with God to show him where, if any, there had been a fault.
>
> A rough fellow, on the other side of the hedge, hearing the prayer, looked across and recognized the preacher. "I'll fix that Methodist preacher," he said, picking up a brick and tossing it over at him. It missed its mark and fell harmlessly beside John. Whereupon Wesley leaped to his feet joyfully exclaiming, "Thank God, it's all right. I still have His presence."

I was challenged by John Wesley's expectation of persecution and maybe you are as well. So, I had to ask myself the following questions. "Do I expect to be persecuted?"

"When was the last time I was persecuted falsely and for His sake?" I must ask, "What about you?"

TEST OF AUTHENTICITY

REVILE, DEVOTION 3

Mitchell Holmes

Matthew 5:11-12 says, ***"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*** These verses make a statement that is highly contrary to standard human thinking. No one likes to be bullied, feel like an outsider, or be persecuted. However, these verses seem to indicate that we are doing something right when we encounter those situations. These verses are not telling us to go out and be antagonistic, or seek to make as many enemies as possible. No, these are verses of encouragement and endurance.

We live in a corrupt and broken world, a world that despises God and His people. When we live our lives in a God-glorifying and righteous way, we demonstrate Christ through our actions. That godliness and righteousness generate hostility and antagonism from the world. John MacArthur says it like this, "Righteousness is confrontational, and even when it is not preached in as many words, it confronts wickedness by its very contrast." When we live our lives in a way that points to God, our righteousness rebukes those around us that are living in wickedness and sin.

Being rebuked causes tension and conflict within oneself and can lead to people lashing out in anger due to this turmoil. Often times, the target of that lashing out will be none other than the source of their rebuke - you and your righteous actions. That lashing out may look like bullying. It may look like being excluded from plans or conversations. It may look like persecution in the form of lies and rumors against you.

While these things are terrible to endure, persecution is the surest and most tangible evidence of salvation. In 2 Timothy 3:12, it says: ***"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted,"*** So you see, when we receive persecution on behalf of the Lord, we can be reassured in the knowledge that we are living a godly life. We can be encouraged that we are not suffering for an unjust cause, nor must we suffer it alone; when we gather together as a family in Christ, we have a unique ability to share these burdens with those around us and assist one another in these struggles. I encourage you to lean on your church family during times of persecution.

Avoiding persecution is easy. It is as simple as mirroring the corrupt world around us and remaining silent about the Gospel. It is easy to fall into the trap of feeling ashamed to take a stand for Christ. It is easy to remain silent and avoid persecution. We all struggle with this; it is human nature to want to be liked. The apostle Peter denies knowing Jesus three times in Luke chapter 22 in order to avoid persecution. I urge you to endure persecution and continue to glorify God with the way you live your life. The Bible tells us our reward in Heaven for doing so will be great.

GREAT IS YOUR REWARD

REVILE, DEVOTION 4

Debbie Gabbara

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Matthew 5:11-12

Here in Matthew, the word blessed is the Greek word "Makarios," meaning "happy" or "fortunate, and often indicates someone who is favored by God." How would being persecuted make a person fortunate or happy?

For many years, I worked in a place where it was tough to be a Christian. I did not go around proclaiming to be a Christian, but as we worked together my co-workers saw that my life was centered around serving the Lord and trying to live a Christ-like life. However, if I said or reacted to something in a negative way, there was one person in particular who was quick to remind me that I was "supposed" to be a Christian. He often gave me a hard time and called me names that were meant to be hurtful. Sometimes it felt pretty lonely to work there. For a while, my password at work was courage, because that was what I needed every day to go and do my job.

Those days were nothing when we look at the kind of persecution that the first Christians experienced. History tells us that almost all of Jesus' twelve disciples were martyred. John was exiled to the isle of Patmos for preaching the Word of God. We read of Paul, who was beaten, stoned, and imprisoned multiple times for his faith. All through history, we find accounts of Christians who risked their lives and were persecuted for believing and telling others the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Though some days were challenging at that job, the Lord blessed my life and I grew in so many ways during those years. It was then when my husband got saved and we got connected in the church. I became involved and began to teach in women's ministry, and at work, I developed wonderful friendships with my coworkers and industry peers. Prayer got me through, and the Lord was always with me. Even on the hard days, I was fortunate and happy to work in a position that gave me the chance to encourage and help others when they were often facing uncertainty in their lives.

There is an old hymn titled, *"When We All Get To Heaven."* The chorus reminds me that one day all those who have accepted Jesus as their Savior will have their great reward and will be in Heaven with The Lord for all eternity. So, stand strong, fight the good fight; people all around us need to see Jesus.

When we all get to heaven,
what a day of rejoicing that will be!
When we all see Jesus,
we'll sing and shout the victory!

"Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven." Luke 6:23

PROPHETS, TOO

REVILE, DEVOTION 5

Pastor Noble Baird

"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Matthew 5:11-12

Rejoice and be glad when others revile, persecute, and speak evil of you. Wow! If that is not completely counter-culture, I do not know what is. Yet, is that not who Jesus was? He often lived the complete opposite of everything that this world values and stands for. We live in a broken, sinful world. Paul reminds us in Romans 3:23, ***"For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."*** However, as followers of Jesus Christ who have experienced the life change that comes through knowing Him, we know that we no longer have to live in our sin, nor are we held back by the chains of death.

When Jesus shares this passage here on the mount, He takes the opportunity to teach a real, and sometimes hard truth about what this new life through Him looks like - a life that has been justified through the blood of Christ and the new life we enter into. You see, if we truly enter into a relationship with Christ, our life is going to change. It will be a life change that will radically change your life for the better. However, just as true with many changes in life, there will be growing pains and learning curves. One of these learning curves is persecution. The fact is, that once we take on the identity of Jesus, this broken and sinful world will not accept us in the same way it did before. Why? It is because we are no longer conforming to the things of this world as Paul writes in Romans 12:2, but we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Therefore, this is why Jesus tells us that we are to rejoice and be glad when we are reviled, persecuted, and people speak evil against us for His sake. We know that the reason this will happen is that we are truly following the heartbeat of Christ and becoming more and more like Him as we daily grow closer to Him. Jesus adds one final note saying how this persecution and hate we as followers of Christ receive is nothing new. In Matthew 5:12, Jesus says, ***"Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*** I truly believe Jesus said this as an encouragement to us. First, it is to know that we are not alone. Second, it is so that we will look to the Scriptures for encouragement and see that our brothers and sisters before us who were counter-culture and lived a life pleasing to the Lord, experienced the same persecution and hate that we experience today over two thousand years later.

PROMISES AND TREASURES

REVILE, DEVOTION 6

James Mann

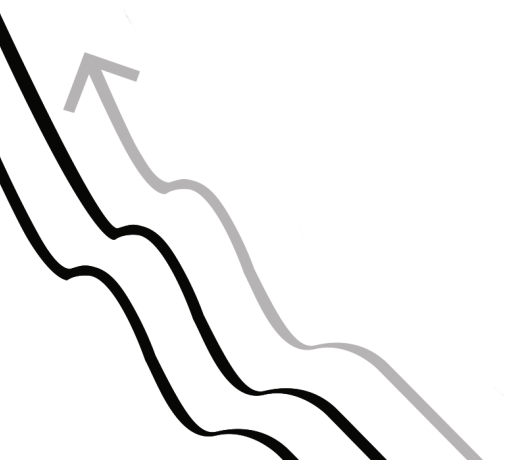
"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." Matthew 5:11-12

The concept of suffering for the name of God is often something that is a struggle for many, including myself. We often think that when we become a follower of Christ that we are going to have a great life on Earth and that things are going to go our way. Usually, when things do not go the way we want and we struggle, our blame goes towards God. The truth of the matter is that this is something that is never promised to us. Instead, it is promised to us that we are blessed when we do suffer for the name of the Lord.

There is a sense of boldness that needs to come from the believer. Instead of running from the opposition, we are to stay strong and be bold for the Lord. When we are following God and living our lives the way that He has commanded us to, the enemy will begin to target us. Satan sees the light of God shining in our lives and he is going to do anything and everything in his power to exterminate this light. People will try to test our character and lead us out of the path of light and lead us towards darkness. We are meant to stand firm against this adversary and push the name of God. Arthur W. Pink states, "Having deliberately chosen to suffer with Christ rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season, we shall also reign with Him, according to His own sure promise."

This is something that is not for the faint of heart. This is a time in our life that we cannot make it through on our own. It is during times like these that we must lean on God for guidance and for Him to give us the strength and endurance to persist. This is a time that if we try to enter this fight alone, we will crumble and succumb to the temptation of the enemy.

In my own life, I struggled with this. We live in a world that around every corner we are being tested and tempted by the enemy. This is not something that stops at any point until we are in the presence of our Savior. I remember my time in college and seeing and hearing things that would continuously test me and try to pull me away from the plans God had laid out for me. It was not easy to stay strong and resist, but the ending of this verse serves as a great reminder that when we do remain strong, we should rejoice and be glad because the treasures that are waiting for us in Heaven are much greater than any “treasures” we think that we can receive in this world.



OUR MISSION

Matthew 28:19-20: ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."***

REACH

At The River Church, you will often hear the phrase, "we don't go to church, we are the Church." We believe that as God's people, our primary purpose and goal is to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ. We encourage you to reach the world in your local communities.

GATHER

Weekend Gatherings at The River Church are all about Jesus, through singing, giving, serving, baptizing, taking the Lord's Supper, and participating in messages that are all about Jesus and bringing glory to Him. We know that when followers of Christ gather together in unity, it's not only a refresher it's bringing life-change.

GROW

Our Growth Communities are designed to mirror the early church in Acts as having ***"all things in common."*** They are smaller collections of believers who spend time together studying the Word, knowing and caring for one another relationally, and learning to increase their commitment to Christ by holding one another accountable.

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