

## **Be-Attitudes: “Be Humble”** **Matthew 5:3 – May 9, 2010, Mother’s Day**

<sup>3</sup>*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Sometimes it is easier to understand something by its opposite. I think that may be true for this beatitude. I’ve been trying to think of what the opposite of “poor in spirit” is, and I think it might be a sense of entitlement – believing that both heaven and earth owe you something. “Entitlement.” This legal term has almost become a curse word. Many feel that our culture has fostered a sense of entitlement, a narcissistic lifestyle that makes me the center of the universe. Parents, educators, employers, counselors and pastors have all heard our fair share of complaints from people who feel they are owed special privileges. The language of blame, complaint and grievance is heard far too often instead of “Please,” “Thank you,” and “I’m sorry.” “I deserve it,” the entitled person says, if it is the best school, a grand home, preferential treatment, or the good life. “I deserve it, and if you don’t give it to me, I’ll kick the door down and take it!”

Two years ago, UVA student George Huguely was arrested for public intoxication and resisting arrest. According to the New York Times the arresting officer said: “He was by far the most rude, most hateful and most combative college kid I ever dealt with.” But George comes from one of the most prominent families of prominent Chevy Chase, Maryland. He was born with a silver spoon in his mouth, attended the best schools, had a family vacation home in Palm Beach, was a star athlete and dated one of the most impressive and attractive girls at UVA. But last week George kicked down his ex-girlfriend’s door and brutally killed her.

There is certainly more going on with George Huguely than narcissistic entitlement gone very bad, but that is at least part of what has gone on. And our whole country is reeling. George possesses so much of what our culture values. But his life is now in utter ruins.

Jesus’ beatitudes are not just sweetsy, nice sayings or pious platitudes. They are counter-cultural attacks on some of the assumptions of our unredeemed way of life. Our culture says, “Blessed are the entitled, even if they are rude, crude and kick the door down, for theirs is the Kingdom of Thingdom.” But counter-cultural Jesus says, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

In Luke’s Gospel, he translates this beatitude, *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”* (Luke 6:20). Actually, the same Hebrew word is used in the Old Testament for physical poverty and spiritual poverty. Jesus gives us a two-fer challenge with this beatitude. To live in the kingdom of heaven we must not consider ourselves to be entitled to either the kingdom of God or the kingdom of thingdom!

Newspaper cartoon characters, Frank and Ernest are sitting on their proverbial park bench, philosophizing with their friend, the miser. Frank says to the miser: “Ernest says the three keys to a happy life are health, home and friends. I say they are eating, drinking and sleeping. What do you say?” And the miser responds: “Getting it, counting it and keeping it!”

But Jesus says, Blessed, happy are those who are poor in spirit, those who are aware of their utter dependency on God, those who are humble. Blessed are those who realize their own helplessness, their inadequacy, their desperate need to trust God. Because to do that is to be willing to do the will of God. *“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”* Only a humble person can genuinely pray that prayer. Only one poor in spirit can be so desperate for God that they will do the kingdom of heaven’s will on earth.

This is a fitting be-attitude to look at on Mother’s Day! I have never known a good mother who did not feel inadequate to the responsibility. Most of us would say that our mothers have been models of humility and service, doing those thankless jobs without any sense of entitlement. I saw an interesting bumper sticker this week advertising a tattoo parlor: “The Ink House – Tattoos Your Mother Would Love.” Most of us have already been tattooed by our mothers’ humble service. Our lives bare the heart-shaped tattoo of “Mother, Poor in Spirit.” “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven!”

Blessed are those who realize that to be human is to be profoundly needy. We bring nothing into this world, and we take nothing out. Blessed are those who hear (the) what the Spirit is saying to the church in Jesus’ message to the Church of Laodecia in Revelation 3: <sup>17</sup>*For you say, ‘I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.’ You do not realize that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.* Blessed are those who hear the word of the prophet Isaiah: <sup>15</sup>*For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite.* (Ch. 57)

To humbly move outside of ourselves is to move close to the kingdom of heaven! Our grandson, Jack, had a fine Easter! He was lovingly carried to worship – not only to be shown off in his Easter outfit, but to connect with others outside himself and his immediate family. And it was on Easter that Jack for the first time started following another person with his eyes. At lunch Jack followed the waiter with his eyes. Certainly he is growing in awareness and self-differentiation. But he is also growing in spirit – moving outside of himself, and seeing the humble service of others. Can’t you tell that Jack went to church on Easter!

Someone has wisely said spiritual formation is a lot like the growth of wheat: the more we mature, the more we bow down. The more of God’s grace, love and holiness we see, the less of ourselves we focus on. The more entitled we see that God is for all our praise and honor, the less entitled we see that we are for anyone’s praise and honor. The more we bend down to open up the door of our life to the knocking Jesus, the less we kick down the door to the things we think we are owed. For blessed are the humble!

There is a great deal of truth in that classic story of the frog that decided to seek a warmer climate for the winter. At first he could think of no fit way to go south. Then he contrived a way. He found a piece of string and convinced the two wild geese who were his friends to hold each end of the string in their mouths while he held onto it. So off they flew, he

feeling especially important and smart! But pride goes before a fall, and there is no blessing to those who think themselves too entitled and elevated above others! A neighbor frog, whom he especially looked down on, yelled up: "Who thought of that?" And the flying frog could not contain his pride. He cupped his hands and yelled: "I diiiiiiiid!" Splat!

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* Blessed are those who acknowledge God Almighty as the one who empowers us to mount up with the wings as eagles, or fly with the geese! Blessed are those who know that it is by grace that we are saved, not by our works or our entitlements!

Prayer:

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

## Be Attitudes: “Be Mournful” Matthew 5:4 – May 16, 2010

<sup>4</sup> *Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted!*

As if last Sunday’s counter-attack on culture’s assumptions about happiness was not enough, get ready for the second wave! If poverty that brings happiness sounds strange, crying that brings happiness sounds even stranger! Who thinks to congratulate a person with tears of sorrow on their face? Happy are the unhappy? This Word seems to come from the moon, not from real life. We ridicule tears. “Big boys don’t cry!” It was a childhood fate worse than death or lima beans to be called a “cry baby!”

I had a nanny for some of my preschool years. She did not like for me to cry, and when I did, she would taunt me with her translation of that old Mother Goose nursery rhyme: “Cry, baby, cry. Stick your finger in your eye and see the water fly.” I’m scarred to this day, can’t you tell!

*Blessed are those who mourn?* Not according to my nanny! Not according to our culture! From preschool through adulthood we are taught the same attitudes: Happy are the tearless! Blessed are those who bite the bullet! To be envied is the person with a stiff upper lip! You may as well stick your finger in your eye as to be a cry baby!

The Greek language of the New Testament is quite descriptive. It has several words for grieving, but Matthew translates Jesus’ Aramaic word for mourn with the strongest word for grief that New Testament Greek has. It has the connotation of weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. Think mid-eastern funeral. Much of the Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek at the time of Jesus and it was known as the Septuagint. Many of the Old Testament quotes in the New Testament come from it, rather than from the Hebrew originals.

In that most familiar story in Genesis about Joseph’s supposed death this same word is used for father Jacob’s inconsolable grief. Joseph’s jealous brothers have sold him into slavery. To cover their evil deed they take his treasured coat of many colors, dipped it in goat’s blood and took it to their father, Jacob. Here is the text from there: <sup>33</sup> *[Jacob] recognized it, and said, “It is my son’s robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.”* <sup>34</sup> *Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. <sup>35</sup> All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” Thus his father bewailed him.*

Happy are those who mourn, who bewail like father Jacob mourned for the horrific death and dismemberment of his favorite son, Joseph!

My first funeral was full of that kind of mourning. I was only twenty-two years old. I had never even assisted in a funeral, and now I *is* one. And it had more bewailing than any funeral since. The deceased, Earl, was a part of the largest extended family in my rural Kentucky congregation. He had a number of children and siblings and tons of cousins, aunts and uncles. He had inherited a kidney disease that affected the males of his family. Several other family members had the disease, so the sanctuary was full of anticipatory grief. Back then dialysis was much more demanding and less successful than today, and during Earl’s long siege of treatment his wife had left him. She was there, full of guilt, and his children were there, full of anger.

As I falteringly started the service, reading from the Pastor’s Handbook I had bought for the occasion, several family members on the front row fell out. In the hundreds of funerals I have done, this, my first, is the only time I have seen a funeral director get out the smelling salts to revive someone! And so it went. Think mid-eastern funeral here! Weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth! When we left the sanctuary, the funeral director and I had to literally peel several family members off the casket. After this “funeral boot camp” for me was all over I was an emotional wreck and asked myself: “What have I signed up for?” Jacob’s bewailing and mourning Joseph didn’t have anything on this grief. So this is my picture of the kind of mourning Jesus is referencing. Blessed are those who hurt even that deeply!

Certainly much, if not most pain does not lead to a blessing. Many who mourn are not comforted and do not find happiness. Many find what they are looking for, which is the worst. Like the card-carrying pessimist who had his id card in his wallet: “In case of emergency, I told you so!” Someone has said that the card-carrying pessimist finds a problem in every opportunity, while a hopeful Jesus-follower finds an opportunity in every problem. The greatest grief in human history is to be found at the cross of Jesus, yet God has turned our mourning into rejoicing.

As we go through these beatitudes, think of them as the “be attitudes” of Jesus. These are the most succinct descriptive of the being part of Jesus as a human being that I know. These be attitudes are not just counter-cultural attacks on our unredeemed way of life, they are powerful autobiographical descriptives of Jesus!

So, blessed are those who mourn like Jesus, for they will be comforted by Jesus. Jesus mourned the loss of a loved one, Lazarus, when he wept near his grave. Jesus grieved over the lostness of humanity when he cried out in the Temple, “*You do not know the one who sent me!*” “*Let anyone who thirsts come!*” Jesus bewailed the lost peace of Jerusalem as he entered that forlorn city on Palm Sunday. Jesus agonized over a tough decision to the point of sweating blood in the Garden. Jesus cried out in abandonment on the cross, “*My God, why have you forsaken me?*” And Matthew says that the last sound Jesus made on the cross before breathing his last breath was one final cry.

Blessed are those who mourn like Jesus. Blessed are those who see the world as God intends it and grieves over the distance between that and the world as it is. Blessed are those who cry out to the point of death over the lostness, the pain, the missed opportunities, the tough decisions, the physical and emotional forsakenness of others! Jesus was indeed a *man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (Is. 53:3)*. Surely, he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows (Is. 53:4). The good news of the gospel is that our joy in Christ is not the absence of pain nor the opposite of pain, but our joy is to be

found because of, through and even with our sorrow. Our joy is to be found when amidst our mourning we come to know better this Man of Sorrows!

Blessed are those who mourn like Jesus. But there is one way in which our mourning cannot be like Jesus, because he knew no sin: Blessed are those who know their sin and mourn over it! The way to God is the way of the broken heart. Augustine wrote in his famous *Confessions* about his conversion: "I grew more wretched, and Thou didst grow nearer." Paul said, *godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation (2 Cor. 7:10)*. There is an interesting progression in Paul's spiritual biography as you read his letters in order of their writing. Galatians was among the earliest of Paul's letters, perhaps written around A.D. 50, and in his opening sentence he lays claim without hesitation to the highest office of the church, calling himself *Paul an apostle (1:1)*. But a few years later he writes the Corinthians: *I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle (1 Corinthians 15:9)*. Maybe around the year A.D. 60 Ephesians was written in which Paul refers to himself as *the least of the saints (3:8)*. And in the early 60's, shortly before his death, Paul is quoted in Timothy saying: *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the chief (1 Timothy 1:15)*.

The longer we know Christ and the nearer we come to Christ, like Paul, the more the standard shifts from judging ourselves against other people to having Christ as the standard of our life. And the more Christ is the standard of our life, the more we will mourn for our sin and the cost of our sin on the cross. Blessed are those who mourn like Jesus could not mourn – who mourn over their sin and its cost to Christ.

Grief and pain can lead us to God! And it is there that we find comfort! It is there that we find the hope of tearlessness and eternal beauty in His bright shining presence! French impressionist painter, Pierre Renoir, suffered toward the end of his life with debilitating arthritis. He painted in great pain, using only his fingertips. One of his students asked him how he endured such suffering. He responded: "The pain passes, but the beauty remains."

"I walked a mile with Pleasure, she chattered all the way, but left me none the wiser for all she had to say. I walked a mile with Sorrow, and ne'er a word said she, but, oh, the things I learned from her when Sorrow walked with me!"

Blessed are those who mourn like Jacob mourned over the seeming death of his beloved son, Joseph. Blessed are those who mourn like Jesus – who cry out over the distance between the world as God intends it and the world as it is. Blessed are those who mourn like Jesus could not mourn – whose tears of repentance over sin lead us to God.

For, *blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted!*

## **Be Attitudes: “Be Meek”**

### **Matthew 5:5 – May 23, 2010, Pentecost and Graduate Sunday**

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

During the nineteenth century colonial days of India, a missionary was instructing a Hindu man on the Beatitudes. When he came to the blessing of meekness, the Hindu man retorted: “Sir, the Englishman may inherit the earth, but if you called him meek, he would be insulted.” So true. But why? Jesus has called us to meekness. We want to be transformed by Christ. So why would we be insulted to be characterized by one of Christ’s top eight attitudes?

Part of the reason is that we have misunderstood some of what biblical meekness is. We have mistranslated this attitude to mean spinelessness and weakness. Who would not be insulted to be called a doormat!

But part of the reason is that we actually have understood some of what biblical meekness is, and we don’t like it! Meekness is the disciplined use of power. It is strength grown tender. It is gentleness. Mildness. The word is used of a powerful domesticated animal that accepts the control of another. A horse under the reins. An ox yoked to a cart. Meekness was a classic Greek virtue which Aristotle described as the mean between anger and indifference. Try these translations on: “Blessed is the person who is always angry at the right time, and never angry at the wrong time.” “Blessed is the gentle spirited person, the tame person, the person who does not have an arrogant bone in their body.”

Part of the reason we might be insulted to be called meek is that meekness critiques our misuses of power. It asks us the soul-searching questions: “How do I live with integrity? How do I virtuously handle the authority I have – in my home, at my job, in my church? How do I reject destructive power and embrace creative power? How do I change from wielding worldly power to being spiritually empowered?”

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.* We need some better models than the doormat ones that normally come to mind for what biblical meekness is. I have several people whom I associate with authentic biblical meekness. Vernon is one. He is my friend since childhood. A year older and twice as big – since we were kids. He was the gentle giant of my childhood.

My childhood summer afternoons were spent trying to escape the scorching Florida heat. That was before the days of home air conditioning. So, off to the city pool we went, two blocks from my house. After a tortuous barefooted run across the melting asphalt convenient store parking lot, I made it to the pool. After showering off, I looked for Vernon and my other buddies. We would gather in the shallower end of the pool and wrestle. Lifeguards were much more lenient in those days, so we wrestled in the water until we were completely worn out – we were, but not Vernon! It was usually two or three of us versus Vernon, and he always prevailed. He laughed the whole time and never became angry as he swatted his skinny buddies off like horseflies.

Big Vernon grew up to become a Baptist pastor. And he was a fine one with a big voice and a big heart. An authentically biblically meek one. But a few years ago I guess he ran into the kind of worldly power that likes to hang out in the church. And he couldn’t swat it off like a horsefly, and I think he stopped laughing. So now Vernon is an excellent high school biology teacher.

Frankly, after thirty-five years of pastoral ministry, most of the colleagues I started this journey with are doing something else. And most of the reasons have to do with worldly power in the church. “*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*” But in the mean time, they may need to find another job!

Another person I associate with meekness is a very unlikely sounding one: Retired Marine Corps Colonel, 32<sup>nd</sup> degree Mason and Mayor, Wilson Cook. He was the Chairman of the Deacons of Seminole First Baptist Church where I served in the 80’s. He enlisted in the Marines as a seventeen-year-old, island hopped across the Pacific in World War II, saw more combat in Korea and Vietnam. Then he retired to Florida, opened a real estate office and got into politics.

Wilson was the consummate southern gentleman. From south Georgia, beautiful, cultured accent, genteel ways. Disciplined. Powerful yet virtuous. Tame. One Sunday morning, as we sang the invitation hymn, a guy walked in off the busy six-lane road in front of the church. He was shirtless, obviously on drugs with a wild-eyed, disheveled look, and had an eight inch hunting knife strapped to his leg! He wildly made his way down the aisle to me, and Wilson followed right behind him! Before I could give him the proper pastoral handshake and inquire of his spiritual need, Wilson, the gentleman, asked: “Sir, may I be of any assistance?” Which being interpreted is: “Buddy, if you reach for that knife, this Marine is going to storm your beach!”

Wilson, the Meek. Strength under control. The disciplined, protective, even genteel use of power. *Blessed are the meek*, for they are often our protectors! They know when and how to act!

The Bible describes two great heroes as meek, one in the Old Testament and one in the New Testament. Moses is described as *very meek, above all men (Num. 12:3)*. But Moses had to learn this “be attitude.” God had to tame him, to domesticate him, to turn him into the gentle giant of a protective leader that he became. His early anger expressed in the wrong way led him to murder an Egyptian and have to run for his life. But this wild man was tamed in the wilderness as he tended sheep for forty years. And he left the wilderness as the greatest leader of the Old Testament. He led slaves to become a disciplined, traveling, worshipping community. He stood up to Pharaoh. He wielded the miraculous and protecting rod of God. He brought the life-giving law of God. He kept the people from starving during forty years in the wilderness. He was used by God to deliver the people of promise into the Promised Land. The furthest thing in the Old Testament from a doormat!

*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.* They are the children of promise, the children of the Promised Land! They will be mightily used of God and mightily blessed by God. But first they have to be tamed. First they have to have their murderous anger transformed into life-giving meekness.

As with Jesus' other Be Attitudes, this one is also autobiographical. Later in Matthew, chapter 11, Jesus describes himself as meek with this same beatitude word: <sup>28</sup>“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. <sup>29</sup>Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle – meek – and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. <sup>30</sup>For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

It is no coincidence that Jesus talks about meekness, gentleness in the context of being domesticated like an ox who takes on the yoke of discipline. Jesus is that spiritual gentle giant who invites us to connect ourselves to him and be taught by him. He invites us to be yoked with him through Christian discipline and learn to utilize the power he gives us to pull the load he gives us. Yoked to him we will refuse to manipulate others through the undisciplined use of power, as he refused when tempted to jump off the Temple or turn the rocks of Judea into wonder bread. Yoked to him we will become a meek, gentleperson, like he was who could attract little children and also say “woe is you” to the power abusers. Yoked to Jesus we will learn the disciplined use of power that will never run roughshod over the weak, that will not even break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick, but *will faithfully bring forth justice (Is 41:3)*

*Blessed are the meek*, for they will be transformed by Christ! They will be yoked to his power through the grace of spiritual discipline!

Graduates, let me say a few words to you. One of my favorite authors, Richard Foster, wrote a book with the catchy title of Money, Sex and Power. In it he challenges Jesus followers to take seriously today the vows that monks have taken since the middle ages: vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Vows to discipline the use of money, sex and power. Every time I participate in a ministerial ordination or the calling of a ministerial staff member, I give the same speech: I challenge them to live as a Baptist monk!

Over my years as a pastor, the vast majority of failings that I have observed by pastors and lay people alike have been because of their failures to discipline their use of money, sex or power. So I want to challenge you as you graduate soon and go out to build your houses made of brick: Live under the discipline of your gentle spiritual giant, Jesus. Live with the disciplined use of money, sex and power. Live as Baptist monks!

This Be Attitude can help you, especially with the disciplined use of the power and influence you will be developing in the coming years! It can help us all! *Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth*. Go out, yoked to Jesus, and claim your inheritance!

## Be Attitudes: “Be Hungry and Thirsty”

Matthew 5:6 – May 30, 2010

Family meals, a very rare occasion for our family, have become even more unique because of the very healthy eating habits our children and their spouses have adopted. One is a vegetarian. Another is almost one. All four count calories and trans fats and portions. Even our three-month-old grandson, Jack, is very particular with his diet!

“Healthy choice” is now one of the top marketing slogans in the grocery store and the restaurant. It is a good thing that our eating habits have started to change toward the healthier. That has not been our culinary pattern since the days of Methuselah! The poet has spoken to this with his tongue in his cheek:

Methuselah ate what he found on his plate,  
And never as people do now;  
He took no account of the calorie count;  
He ate it because it was chow.

He wasn't disturbed as at dinner he sat,  
Devouring a roast or a pie  
To think it was lacking in granular fat,  
Or a couple of vitamins shy.

He cheerfully chewed every species of food,  
Unmindful of troubles or fears  
Lest his health might be hurt by some fancy dessert,  
And he lived over nine hundred years.

Well, Methuselah was certainly the exception to the rule of “healthy choice!” And he was certainly the exception to the rule of a subsistence diet of most of the characters in the Bible.

Even into the twentieth century most of the inhabitants of Israel – the land ironically known as “flowing with milk and honey” – most survived on a very meager diet. Hunger was the norm. When Jesus needed to feed the five thousand it was not just because their mothers had not packed them a lunch, like the little boy's mother had! It was not only because their hunger and thirst for Jesus and his righteousness was even more powerful than their hunger for food. It was also because they didn't have anything to eat. That is the only miracle of Jesus that is recorded in all four gospels. Perhaps it is because it spoke to the pervasive hunger of the peasants he preached to.

Of course, water has always been a huge need in Israel. A big source of tension between Israel and its neighbors today is over who owns the water rights to the Jordan River. Much of Israel is a dry and barren land. The Hebrew word for “well” is “*beer*” as in “Beer-sheba,” and you find wells, springs, fountains and cisterns playing important parts in the biblical story. Stories are told of thirsting to death, of fights over wells and watering rights, of celebrations at the digging of a well or the discovery of a spring. Water had to be hauled from community wells. Peasant homes did not have their own water source.

Hungering and thirsting were a daily reality for first century Jewish peasants. These disciples and the crowd listening to the Sermon on the Mount knew intimately what Jesus was talking about! But most of us know very little about such hunger and thirst. Our problem is usually quite the opposite! That's where the “Healthy choice” slogan comes from!

A few years ago Morgan Spurlock made an award-winning independent documentary film on the fast-food industry. He was motivated by the fact that 37% of American children are overweight, and the Surgeon General had called obesity a national epidemic. Spurlock spent a month eating three meals a day at a particular fast-food chain. He only ate what was on the menu, nothing between – not even a Tic Tac. He ate every item on the menu at least once, including three salads.

In five days the athletic, thirty-three year old 6'2” 185 pound Spurlock gained ten pounds. At day 20 he went to his doctor with heart palpitations and was advised to stop his experiment. At day 30 he had gained 25 pounds, had fatigue, headaches, indigestion and depression. It took him 18 months to lose the weight. His conclusion: America's hungering and thirsting for fast-food is killing us! To their credit, the fast-food industry has responded by offering increasing numbers of “Healthy choice” items.

Our culture is addicted to fast food and, even worse, to junk food. Not just colas and fries and Twinkies! We take in all manner of spiritual toxins! Exploitive films, radio and TV shows that pander to our lower nature. Howard Stern, Jerry Springer, trash TV, shock jocks, unhealthy online chat rooms, provocative texting, the political rhetoric of hate, violence and uncivil discourse. “Unhealthy choices.” The revenues of the porn industry in our country are bigger than the revenues of the NFL, NBA and Major League Baseball combined!

As part of his fast-food research, Morgan Spurlock showed pictures of famous people to school children. Most recognized President Bush, who was serving then. All recognized Ronald McDonald. None recognized Jesus.

Augustine, the fourth century Christian convert, said it this way: “Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it rest in Thee.” Blaise Pascal, the seventeenth century French convert, said it this way: “There is a God shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator.” C.S. Lewis, the twentieth century British convert and Oxford don, said it this way: “If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.”

The prophet Jeremiah said it this way: <sup>1</sup> *For my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living water, and dug out cisterns for themselves, cracked cisterns that can hold no water (ch. 12).* The prophet, Isaiah,

said it this way: <sup>2</sup> *Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food.* <sup>3</sup> *Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live (ch. 55).*

Lots of seekers have said it. Lots of hungry and thirsty souls who have not found it any other place but in God. But Jesus said it the best in this beatitude: *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

Biblical righteousness is not self-righteousness. It is God's righteousness. It *is* a private and personal affair, but it is more than that. It includes moral righteousness – eating and drinking from sources that build up our integrity instead of eroding it. It includes legal righteousness, being in a right relationship with the Holy One through the grace and mercy of Christ's sacrifice. And it includes social righteousness, seeing everything in life – in the home, on the job, in the culture, in the world – conform to what is right in God's plan.

Billy Graham has been a life long learner of the righteousness of God. Years ago, Ruth Bell almost returned his engagement ring when Billy the Baptist questioned her medical missionary father's spirituality because he was a Presbyterian! But narrow, young Billy was hungry and thirsty, and God has been filling him up ever since, and making him a bigger person. He grew to embrace Catholic and Orthodox Christians. He met with his critics and sought to learn from them. He did not target Jews or Muslims for direct evangelism. He received awards from Jewish groups. A few years ago he was quoted in Newsweek Magazine as saying: "There are many things that I don't understand. Sincere Christians can disagree about the details of scripture and theology – absolutely." He has said that if he could live his life over he would study more and preach less! Billy turns 92 this fall, and is still hungry and thirsty. And he has been incredibly blessed because of it, and so have we!

Blessed are those who, like Saint Billy, can grow in their faith! Blessed are those who passionately desire God! Blessed are those who earnestly pray and study the Bible and worship and serve! Blessed are those who make spiritually healthy choices to feed on! Blessed are those who crave the rightness of God in every area of life! Blessed are those who can say with Paul: *For me to live is Christ (Phil. 1:21)*. Blessed are those who will do what the rich young ruler would not do: Give it all up for the highest appetite of following Jesus! Blessed are those who are life long learners of the things of God!

For, *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

## Be Attitudes: “Be Merciful” Matthew 5:7 – June 20, 2010

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

One of the best Father’s Day stories I know is also a mercy story. In fact, it is the story of MercyMe founder and lead singer, Bart Millard. MercyMe has been the most popular contemporary Christian band of the last decade. Its song, “Word of God Speak,” was named by Billboard Magazine as the Christian song of the decade, and its hit, “I Can Only Imagine,” crossed over and went double platinum. Even if you don’t follow contemporary Christian music, you have seen this band. Its music is frequently advertised on TV, featuring the shaved-headed Bart singing. I know them because Bart and Mike, the guitarist, started out in 1993 as the nucleus of the youth worship band at Lakeside Baptist Church in Lakeland, Florida, where I served as their pastor.

Bart was raised with his older brother by a single father, Art, who had been an All-American football player at SMU, and by his “Granny.” Both of the Millard brothers were also outstanding football players, and wanted to be that when they grew up. But in high school Bart so severely injured his ankles that his football days were over. But, amidst the pain and disappointment, mercy broke through. True to His promise, God brought good out of Bart’s bad circumstances. He started taking choir as a high school elective, and became hooked on music. MercyMe, what God can do!

To hear Bart describe it, his relationship with his father was idyllic. They were like best friends. So far as I can tell, his mother was uninvolved in his life, but his Granny filled in some of those needed maternal gaps. But most of Bart’s parenting came from his beloved father. But during Bart’s freshman year of college his father died of cancer. Bart was devastated. He dropped out of college. His previously strong Christian faith was challenged. But amidst that devastation mercy broke through. Our youth minister at Lakeside Baptist had been Bart’s youth minister while he was in seminary in Texas, and he invited Bart to come and help out as a summer student ministry intern. Bart liked it, and particularly liked helping with the worship band, so he stayed a few years past that summer. MercyMe, how God works!

Contrary to the best advice Bart received from all of us, he decided to work on his music full time and not return to college. He had a trust fund from his father, and Granny was well-healed, so he didn’t have to worry about income. He never even got a job. Every day Bart would go up in the youth worship area, turn on accompaniment CDs and the sound system, and sing and sing and sing. He would sing for hours, and at first it wasn’t very good singing! Believe me, I know! My office was right underneath the youth worship area!

Every time Granny would call to check on him, he seemed to be singing, to which she would regularly reply: “Well mercy me, why don’t you get a real job?” Which, by the way, is where the band name, “MercyMe,” comes from! Bart dated our niece for a while, and I remember, as I wondered where that relationship might go, saying the same thing to myself! But mercy broke through – believe me, Bart is doing quite well these days, and I’m sure he doesn’t need his trust fund or Granny’s help!

Mike Scheuchzer, the guitarist in our youth band, was going to college. He was the only son of a hard-working couple and I think the first in his family to go to college. His mother was our church’s financial secretary. This was a very practical family who knew about things like budgets and bills. But Bart asked Mike to move with him to Oklahoma City, join up with a keyboardist, and try to make a go of their music. Mike was in the valley of decision. But something I said in a sermon triggered a leap of faith by Mike. He came in to talk it through with me. I encouraged him to trust his heart, but to also finish his college. Mike moved to Oklahoma and did not stay in college. Some years of poverty followed as the band evolved, worked as waiters and pizza delivery guys, and got little church group gigs and summer youth camps.

But finally, after seven years of lean, mercy broke through! Bart had written “I Can Only Imagine,” dreaming about what it will be like to be in heaven one day – in the presence of Christ and reunited with his father. In 2002, it received a Dove Award as the song of the year. And, bless Granny’s heart, Bart finally had a real job! MercyMe!

Mercy – it is God’s gracious intervention in our lives – when dreams crumble, and loved ones die and the well-intentioned advice is ignored and hard decisions are agonized over and we don’t please God or Granny and there is too much month at the end of the money. Mercy, it is our great hope, our highest imaginings of what heaven will be like!

I used to often quote these well-travelled definitions of “grace” and “mercy:” “Grace is God giving us what we do not deserve, and mercy is God withholding the punishment from us that we do deserve.” But I don’t think that is a big enough or biblical enough definition of either grace or mercy. In grace, God also withholds from us what we do deserve, and in mercy, God also gives us what we don’t deserve.

From my study of the scripture, I am coming to believe that grace and mercy are almost biblical synonyms – that they are two sides of the same coin – that grace is the preferred New Testament word and mercy is the preferred Old Testament word. But that both grace and mercy involve God giving us what we don’t deserve and withholding from us what we do deserve.

In the Bible, even in the New Testament, mercy is certainly more than just withholding punishment. Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan about the two pious Jews who walked past the beaten man and the Samaritan who took care of him. When he ended, Jesus asked the lawyer: *Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?* <sup>37</sup>He said, *“The one who showed him mercy.”* Jesus said to him, *“Go and do likewise.”*

For, *blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.* Go and do like the Samaritan, and it shall be done unto you like the Samaritan did to the beaten man!

What is mercy, Old and New Testament mercy? It is seeing, not ignoring the hurt beside the road. It is going to the hurting person, bandaging them, and carrying them to a place where they can receive proper care. It is paying for their care, and coming back to check on them! It is one of the sterling attributes of God. Nine out of ten times when the Bible

uses the word “mercy” it is referring to God. To be merciful is to take on the attribute and attitude that we see perfectly modeled in Jesus.

In the Old Testament, which was certainly Jesus’ point of reference for this verse, human mercy is only referred to one out of ten times when the word “mercy” is used. But when human mercy is referred to, it has two main focal points. For the pious Jew, mercy included giving alms for the poor and needy. To be merciful means we give sacrificially for the cause of God’s Kingdom. We have a passion for others who are in need, and we respond, whether they are in the ditch, are Samaritans or Americans. Blessed are the merciful – people who live in a world without borders and give as if their life and others’ lives depended on it. Blessed are the merciful, for one day, standing before the judgment seat of God, what they deserve will be withheld from them, and what they do not deserve – the unimaginable beauty of God’s presence – will be given to them!

Also in the Old Testament, in those 10% of the verses where mercy is referring to humans, mercy means being non-judgmental. Mercy means we worry about the log in our eye rather than the speck in someone else’s eye. Mercy means we do not pick up stones in judgment against another person, for we realize that we are not without sin. Mercy means we forgive others their trespasses as we pray for our own trespasses to be forgiven. Mercy means that we believe more in the power of forgiveness than of judgment, as James says: <sup>13</sup>*Mercy triumphs over judgment.*

After the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, Marina Oswald, the widow of assassin Lee Harvey Oswald, was perhaps more in need of mercy than any person living in the United States. She had married Lee Harvey only six weeks after meeting him. She was only twenty-two years old, had a one month old and a toddler, and didn’t speak English. It was the middle of the Cold War, and she was a citizen of the USSR. She was living with a friend and had no source of income. Reporters were hounding her, and she lived in fear.

Motivated by the Sermon on the Mount, and particularly this Beatitude, a church in Michigan offered her sanctuary. They offered to take her in, love her, help her, protect her and her children. They acted like Jesus to her. They offered to financially meet her family’s needs, and withhold judgment for the horrible deed her husband had done. That church was blessed by God. And one day, a day that I can only imagine, they will be perfectly blessed.

For, *blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

## **Be Attitudes: “Be Pure”** **Matthew 5:8 – June 27, 2010**

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

Maybe Curly read the Bible. You remember Curly, the tough-as-nails trail boss in the movie, “City Slickers.” It is one of the most popular comedy films of the past twenty years. Its re-runs continue to be seen almost weekly on television. Mitch, the character played by Billy Crystal, is going through his mid-life crisis. He joins with two friends, also in crisis, and other city slicker novice cowboys, to help drive a herd to Colorado. Curly, the Trail Boss, played by Jack Palance, proves to be not only tough but wise. He tells Mitch that the secret to life is finding and focusing on “one thing.” “But what is that ‘one thing’?” Mitch asks. But that was for Mitch to find out.

Maybe Curly’s wisdom came because he spent his lonely nights on the range, after he had sung the cows to sleep, reading the Sermon on the Mount. Or maybe he was a fan of the nineteenth century Danish existential philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard. Cowboys can surprise you! Kierkegaard wrote a famous book on this beatitude from the Sermon on the Mount entitled Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing. Sounds like Soren and Curly agree with Jesus!

The word for “pure” from this sixth beatitude means clean, clear, simple, single, without alloy. Gold that has been highly refined is called “pure.” Glass that has no flaws and water that is clean are called “pure.” It has strong ritualistic and legalistic meanings in the Old Testament. But Jesus’ use of purity goes beyond having clean hands and clean food. Jesus seems to have Psalm 24 in mind when he gives this beatitude: *Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. . . Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob.* (vv. 3-4, 6)

Blessed are those who will one thing. Blessed are those who are single-minded, clear and simple in their approach to God. Blessed are those who are unambiguous. Blessed are the non-duplicitous. Blessed are persons of integrity. Blessed are the utterly sincere, for they shall see God!

The longing to see, to experience the Holy One is certainly one of the common denominators of most of the world’s religions. The eastern holy man rejects comfort and community to live a disciplined, monastic life with the hopes of one day seeing God. Some ancient Greek philosophers sought to free themselves from their passions so that they might view the Divine. Moses longed to see God, but was placed in the cleft of the rock and only allowed to see the hind parts of God. When Philip said, *Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied* (John 14:8) he was echoing this desire. The Pharisees focused on ritualistic cleansing with the hopes that with clean hands they would encounter the Holy One.

Recently I read the biography of Dr. Solon B. Cousins, who served as our pastor from 1921 through 1937. He began to teach Bible classes at the University of Richmond in the thirties. In 1937, he resigned as our pastor to serve as the head of U of R’s Religion Department there for twenty-two years. He kept his membership at our church until his death in 1971 – almost fifty years! He was beloved by the U of R students and faculty, and served twenty-six interim pastorates in the Richmond area.

I wish I could have known Dr. Cousins. He was a remarkable person. Though he had no seminary or other graduate school degree in theology, he was an excellent scholar and built a strong Religion Department. He read voraciously and worked slavishly. He had remarkable discipline. He was renowned for his pastoral touch, his humor and his tender love for his wife and son and others. His influence was huge. Hundreds of ministers turned to him for advice and encouragement.

Dr. Cousins’ biographer, Joseph Nettles, served on the U of R faculty with Dr. Cousins for twenty-three years and remained a close friend until Dr. Cousins’ death. Nettles knew Dr. Cousins as well as anyone outside Cousins’ family. Nettles said Dr. Cousins could best be described as a mystic. He certainly was not a theological conservative, Nettles says. And, although Dr. Cousins’ favorite theologian was Harry Emerson Fosdick, a well-known American theological liberal of his day, Nettles says Dr. Cousins could not be classified as a liberal. He was a mystic, a man of profound personal spirituality. He prayed, journaled, studied the scripture and worshipped with deep devotion and discipline. He had the glow about him of one who had been in the presence of the Holy One, of one who had come close to seeing God, of one who had experienced the blessing of this sixth beatitude.

This is how Dr. Cousins, the blessed, pure hearted one, is remembered by his long-time friend and biographer: “Certainly he missed perfection by ‘a long sea mile’ (an expression [Dr. Cousins often used], but there are many, including the writer of this chronicle, who consider him the most nearly perfect man they ever knew.”

Dr. Spence in his funeral eulogy probably did the best job of anyone summarizing Dr. Cousins’ full and influential life and ministry: “Solon Cousins,” Dr. Spence said, “was the most uncomplicated man I have ever known. He believed by faith that Jesus Christ was Lord. Every movement he made came from the wellspring of that belief.”

The mystic, Solon B. Cousins, pure in heart, saw and continues to see God. For blessed are the uncomplicated people who simply believe that Jesus Christ is Lord and make their every movement come from that wellspring! For the secret of life – the key to happiness – is willing that one thing!

In 1937, as he was transitioning from our pastorate to full-time teaching, Dr. Cousins preached the Annual Sermon at the Southern Baptist Convention. This was quite an honor – he was the only Virginian to do that for more than a hundred years. It was a remarkable and renowned sermon on the Christian life as a journey with Jesus. Dr. Cousins used the pure-hearted image of Jesus setting his face to journey toward Jerusalem as the central distinctive of our Savior.

Let me quote this mystic’s sermon about his Savior’s perfect model of flint-faced pure-heartedness: “The spot where Jesus took His first step away from Galilee toward Jerusalem is one of the turning points in the history of mankind. For a few miles on the journey Confucius, Buddha, [Mohammed] and the prophets and seers can walk comfortably in His company. But not now. With His face steadfastly set toward His Cross, that is the difference between Jesus and the other

teachers, between reformers and saviors, between saviors and The Savior, between a code of ethics and the religion of redemption.”

Blessed are the pure in heart – those who set their face like a mystic to journey toward the cross of Jesus – for they will see God! For they will experience The Savior and his religion of redemption! For they will find the one thing that is the secret to life!

E. Stanley Jones was a renowned Methodist missionary to India. While he was visiting the famous spiritual leader of India, Mahatma Gandhi, an Indian holy man came eight hundred miles to ask Gandhi two questions: How can I get rid of sin, and how can I see God? Having asked Gandhi, the holy man came to ask Jones the same questions.

Jones said: “Before I answer you, would you mind telling me what Gandhi told you?” “No, I don’t mind telling you,” he answered. “He told me to sit down in one place and not roam about as we holy men do, but stay in one place till I had conquered my senses and my passions and worn them out, then I might find release.” “Was there no offer of immediate relief?” Jones asked. “Oh, no,” was the reply. “He said it would take a long, long time.” And then he turned to Jones and said: “Now what do you say?”

And this radiant missionary told him what had happened to him. He said: “My yearning was exactly your yearning. I needed to know how to get rid of sin, and I needed to know God. But I did not stay in one place till I had worn out my passions; I simply turned over a bankrupt soul to Jesus Christ, and, lo, as I gave my all He gave me His all. It did not take ages, it took surrender. It did not take time, it took me.”

Curly, or Kierkegaard or Cousins could not have said it any better. But Jesus, the one and only who perfectly and pure-heartedly did the will of the Father, said it the best: *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

## **“Be Peacemakers”** **Matthew 5:9 July 11, 2010**

*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”*

I remember the first time I ever tried to preach on peacemaking. We were living next to Ft. Knox, Kentucky. I was pastor of a country church during seminary and Beverly taught in the military schools. Ft. Knox is not only the home of the 4,500 tons of U.S. Gold Bullion Reserve, but also the home of the U.S. Army’s Armor Training Center and its 25,000 soldiers and family members. Our country church was surrounded by the U.S. Cavalry! Tanks and target practice were daily sights and sounds.

The first time I tried to prepare a sermon on peace I was in my little church office, thinking about peacemaking to the accompaniment of tank canon explosions. My office windows were rattling, and the profound irony and reality of that moment shook me up. Never have I felt more idealistic as a preacher than in that moment.

In March, I had a similar experience. While attending the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship of Virginia meeting in First Baptist Church, Virginia Beach, Brian McLaren was speaking on a videocast about peacemaking. As he spoke, Navy jets from the nearby Naval Air Station flew over, almost drowning him out. This week I had another such experience. I wrote this sermon in my study at home, surrounded by folded American flags, semaphore flags and other military mementos from my grandfather, who served in World War One, and my father, mother, and father-in-law, who served in World War Two.

How do you preach peace in a world at war? How do you preach peace in a world of Abrams tanks, smart bombs, nuclear warheads and their potential “megacorpuses?” How do you preach peace in a world of Al Qaida, the Taliban, murderous despots and spies? How do you preach peace in a world of Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and Somalia? How do you preach peace in a world of ethnic cleansing and veiled women blowing up themselves and innocent women and children in the name of God? How do you preach peace when the Church is so divided? I don’t want to be a false prophet, like the ones Jeremiah condemned: *They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace (6<sup>14</sup>).*

In our ironic, strife-filled, dangerous world, all of us are trying to find peace, aren’t we? The world really is a puzzle with a *peace* missing. And we are all looking for that missing peace. Whether in a pastor’s study, preparing your sermon, or in an Army tank, practicing your artillery. A World War I American soldier from the backwoods was constantly receiving negative letters from his wife. She complained about everything: food shortages, problems on the farm, frustration with his absence. The soldier’s dangerous life was all the more problematic because of his wife’s letters, so he finally wrote her back: “Woman, I want no more of your letters. Please let me fight this here war in peace!”

Few people know like most soldiers know the desperate need for heeding Jesus’ call to peacemaking. The “soldier’s general,” World War II General Omar Bradley, gave one of the strongest calls ever for biblical peacemaking when he said: “We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living.”

Back to my rattling old Kentucky home. My church, Rock Haven Baptist, had a split ten years before I came. A new building was built out on the highway, and when we moved, some decided to stay and form a new church at the old building. This was not very much fun in that small place, especially when the “stayers” wrongly named themselves “First Rock Haven Baptist Church.” We were the original church, but they had the original building. The fracture deepened in our country community.

Everywhere I visited, the prospects wanted to know which “Rock Haven Church” I was from. There weren’t enough people to support two Baptist churches less than a mile apart. And it was a terrible, seemingly irreconcilable witness. The pastor of the other church and I became friends and began to ride back and forth to seminary together. We began to pray and plot together. We took some peacemaking initiatives. The two congregations began to do some things together and to talk about our problems. Eventually the unheard of happened: a split church reunited as one, and is reconciled to this day. Peacemaking came to Rock Haven!

I learned some things about peacemaking in my old Kentucky home, in the shadow of Fort Knox. And I think these lessons apply to peacemaking in the family, in the church and between nations.

First, peacemaking is divine work. I do not know that I have ever felt more a part of the work of God than I did in the process of these two churches reconciling. This seventh Beatitude uses the same verb that is used for Christ making peace through the blood of the cross. Ephesians 2 says: *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. <sup>14</sup>For he is our peace; in his flesh he . . . has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. . . . thus making peace, . . . he came and proclaimed peace (2:13).* To make peace is to participate in the very work of God, the very work of God’s only begotten Son, the very work of the cross. No wonder peacemakers are called children of God. For peacemaking is divine work!

Secondly, participating in this divine work of peacemaking is not so much about inner peace as about reconciliation at all levels of human engagement. It was not good enough in Rock Haven to find a place of inner contentment and ignore for another decade the major fracture in our small community. The term, “peacemaking” that Jesus uses in this Beatitude is a more political term than we might realize. It was primarily used of Roman emperors and generals, but Jesus hands it over to us.

Christian peacemaking cannot stop with peace in my heart and your heart. Christian peacemaking must make peace in the church and peace in the community. We must make peace between the races and the classes and the nations. Christian peacemaking must go to the heart of every tension-torn territory on God’s fractured world. The peace in my heart must

flow to Rock Haven and to the uttermost parts of the world! For peacemaking is about reconciliation at all levels of human engagement!

And thirdly, we are called to peacemaking, not peacekeeping. This Beatitude is a call to wage peace, more than we wage war. Making peace in Rock Haven wasn't easy. In fact, it was some of the hardest work I have ever done. People got mad in the midst of making peace. Misinformation was put out by opponents, even in the newspaper. Everyone did not reconcile. The same people who led the split ten years before would still not make peace. They even tried, to no avail, to start another, other church.

One of the greatest challenges of peacemaking is to not let what is best for the whole be demolished by the irreconcilable will of a few. There really are people who are enemies of peace. And Edmund Burke was right when he allegedly said: "All that is necessary for evil to triumph is for good people to do nothing." Good people must do a lot of hard work, a lot of heavy lifting, to make peace!

Certainly we are to love peace and to hold onto peace when we find it, but we are to do more than that. We are to make transforming initiatives that bring the Shalom of the Kingdom of God more on earth as it is in heaven. We must pray for peace and work for peace. Give presents to a prisoner's children this Christmas. Adopt a deployed soldier and her or his family and write them. Help a single mom find a better job. Let our politicians know your convictions on the hot issues of our day. Work to alleviate poverty in the greater Richmond area. Get to know a neighbor of another religion. Give and go in the cause of world missions. Make peace, don't just keep it or love it. Initiate. And don't let a few trouble-makers stand in the way of this great work of God. Don't let an irreconcilable older brother keep you out of the Father's house and the party He has planned!

We had a wonderful party – a service of reconciliation – when Rock Haven Baptist Church and First Baptist Church of Rock Haven merged to become Rock Haven Community Baptist Church. Almost everyone in the community was there, but a few did not show up. They stayed out in the field and complained about the party. And you know, I think they are still out there!

It is an ironic world to which we are called to be peacemakers. There are enemies of peace who will not come to the party, and will even try to destroy the party. But this is the Father's party! And His Kingdom is coming to earth as it is in heaven! A glorious, peaceful Kingdom where the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the calf and the lion, the cow and the bear, the baby and the snake and the prodigal son, the elder brother and the reconciling Father will live together in peace! *They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, the Father says, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea* (Isaiah 11:9).

Yes, peacemaking is the Father's hard, reconciling work! Not everyone came to the Rock Haven reconciliation party. But I tell you, the Father was there! And you could almost hear the Father's voice booming from heaven as He did at Jesus' baptism: "*These are my beloved sons and daughters in whom I am well pleased.*" For, "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*"

May we pray:

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;  
where there is hatred, let me sow love;  
where there is injury, pardon:  
where there is doubt, faith;  
where there is despair, hope  
where there is darkness, light  
where there is sadness, joy  
O divine Master,  
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;  
to be understood, as to understand;  
to be loved, as to love;  
for it is in giving that we receive,  
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,  
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

## **Be-Attitudes: “Be Glad” Matthew 5:10-11 July 25, 2010**

<sup>10</sup>“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>11</sup>“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”<sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

It was one of those pastoral visits you never forget, even though it was over twenty years ago. I’ll call him John. He was a bright, energetic, winsome high school senior. He was active in our youth group – a leader. And after a lot of prayer, soul-searching and talking with trusted advisors, including, me, his pastor, John felt he was being called into the pastorate. He had shared that calling with our congregation, and all rejoiced, except his father. I had steered John toward my *alma mater*, Stetson University, which had a scholarship for ministerial students. But to say his father was not supportive is an understatement!

John’s family was pathologically dysfunctional. And his father was the major pathology. We now know that – after years of secrecy, intense therapy and a shattering of the children’s relationships with their parents. John’s father, an adult Sunday school teacher, was adamantly opposed to John going to college as a ministerial student. And John’s father was used to getting his way. So, at John’s encouragement, I went to visit his parents.

We sat in the living room, John, his parents and I, and had cordial chit chat until I raised the issue. “Why don’t you want John to go into the ministry?” I asked. “He’s too smart to be a pastor,” was the father’s response.

Now, you can imagine how that made me feel! But I’m not the one being persecuted in this story! John is. To have his father oppose, manipulate and bully him into submission to his will instead of the Heavenly Father’s will was an act of religious persecution. So John went to college, but not as a ministerial student. But he rebelled against his father by goofing off at college for four years, thus proving, I guess, that he wasn’t as smart as his father thought, or maybe that he was not too smart to be a pastor!

The happy ending to part of this story is that, ten years after college, John finally returned to his calling and enrolled in seminary. He is now a bright, successful, insightfully blogging Ph. D. student in patristics. That is a specialized and tough field of Church history and theology, thus proving that John is, indeed, smart enough to be a pastor!

I share that story to say that religious persecution doesn’t just happen in Saudi Arabia or India or Indonesia. It can even happen inside church-going families. Religious persecution is the clash between two irreconcilable value systems. John valued the spiritual life – a life of service, study, teaching and ministry. His father valued a much more “worldly” life – the life of control, monetary success, power and prestige. But John has been rewarded with things of the kingdom and great joy in his new vocation.

There is a lot more persecution taking place than we realize. Experts say there is more persecution of Christians in the world today than in any time in history. In Florida, we had a Spanish congregation with Cuban members who had been imprisoned by Castro simply because of their faith. The Russian congregation that meets in our Chapel has members who were sent to a Siberian gulag because of their faith. A Chinese young man who plays basketball in our gym every week was persecuted by the Chinese government because of his faith. Our ESL ministry has a number of Egyptians attending, many of whom are here as refugees from religious persecution.

*Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake!* Blessed are those who are reviled because they seek to follow Jesus and live by his Beatitudes. Isn’t it interesting that Jesus ends the Beatitudes on this note. It is a real reality check. In fact, this is what is called a “double Beatitude.” Some scholars treat these as two Beatitudes, but the second is more of a reiteration and a personalization of the first. The previous eight Beatitudes are in third person language, “Blessed are those.” But this double, this restatement of the eighth, moves in to the very personal, second person level, “Blessed are you.”

Jesus doesn’t want any followers to be misled. Be very clear: To follow Jesus can be a dangerous thing! That’s why he called his followers to take up a cross. To be poor in spirit, to mourn, to be meek – to hunger and thirst for the right things, to be merciful, to be pure in heart – even to make peace can be dangerous things! People can persecute you because of them. The Beatitudes are ultimately not a third person experience! They can get very personal!

We had Rev. John Lennon’s memorial service here this week. He, like Bob Piper, whose life we also celebrated, is one of the unsung, quiet heroes of the faith. He simply tried to follow Jesus, and went about doing good. Serving as a pastor in Amelia County and as the President of the PTA, he took a costly stand opposing the anti-desegregation movement. He didn’t try to lead a protest, he simply spoke up for righteousness’ sake, gently and with a twinkle in his eye. Some leaders in his church didn’t like it. And some members of the community didn’t either. One day Rev. Lennon was walking through the parking lot of the grocery store and a guy in a pickup truck tried to run him over.

See, it isn’t strange to end the Beatitudes – to follow the call to peacemaking – with this reality check. Following Jesus can be dangerous!

It is a sad indictment of religion that a lot of persecution is fomented by religious people upon each other. Christians have probably done as much persecuting of other Christians as non-Christians have. The guy in the pickup truck could have been one of John Lennon’s church members, or even the pastor of a sister congregation! My Scheraus ancestors were part of an early eighteenth century emigration of Lutherans who were forced off their land by the state church system. Every day I drive by an historical marker on Highway 6 about Baptist minister William Webber. He was the pastor of Dover Baptist Church near my home. In the latter eighteenth century, he was one of dozens of Baptist preachers and leaders who were persecuted by the Virginia state church.

Persecution happens very close to home, perhaps even in our house. A spouse or parent may belittle your faith. A boss may ask you to do things that contradict the teachings of Jesus. A friend may ridicule you for your convictions. A fellow

church member may slander. Another religion or denomination may call your beliefs foolish. Your stands for righteousness and justice may do more than get you dropped from some invitation lists. Martin Luther King had his house bombed and his life taken.

So what do you do in the face of persecution? What do you do when following Jesus brings pain very close to home? What do you do when the Beatitudes move from speaking in the third person and start causing you personal pain? Do you retaliate like an unbeliever? Do you sulk like a child? Do you lick your wounds like a dog? Do you just grin and bear it like a Stoic? Do you pretend to enjoy it like a masochist?

No! Jesus says we are to *rejoice and be glad!* In Luke 6's version of this Beatitude Jesus says we are to *leap for joy* (v. 23). We are to jump up and grab our heavenly reward! We are to live ahead of time into the future of God's joyful Kingdom! We are to celebrate that we are in the same class as the prophets – even Jesus himself – who were persecuted before us!

That is what the Apostles did. They were arrested and flogged by the same Sanhedrin that condemned Jesus to death. And Acts 5 tells us: <sup>41</sup>*As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.*

That is what Paul did, as he writes from prison in Colossians 1: <sup>24</sup>*I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church.*

That is what Peter calls us to do: <sup>13</sup>*But rejoice insofar as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed.* <sup>14</sup>*If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed . . .* (1 Peter 4).

That is what eighty-six year old Polycarp did. He was a second generation Christian, a student of John and the leader of the church of Smyrna. When the Roman soldiers came to arrest him and burn him at the stake for refusing to burn incense to Caesar, he served them a meal and prayed blessings on them out loud while they feasted!

That is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer did. This Lutheran pastor was vocal in his opposition to the Nazi regime and its idolatry that draped the pulpits of Germany with the swastika flag. His opposition to Hitler brought imprisonment, the threat of torture, danger to his family and finally death. He was executed by the direct order of Heinrich Himmler in April, 1945, in the Flossenburg concentration camp, only a few days before it was liberated. But hear what he wrote in his famous book, The Cost of Discipleship: "Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer. In fact, it is a joy and a token of his grace." (pp. 80, 81)

Several years ago, I had lunch with South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu. For decades he has worked in the name of Christ for righteousness and justice. He battled apartheid and afterward led his nation's healing as the head of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He is a most impressive person, a Nobel Peace Prize winner. But the thing I was most impressed with was his joy. He is probably the most joyful person with the most beautiful smile I have ever met. He has seen as much of persecution as anyone I have ever met. But this tiny man exudes a gigantic force field of pure, unadulterated joy! It is Jesus joy, the blessing of those for whom not only persecution but the Christ have become very personal!

As I have said all the way through these eight, the Beatitudes are autobiographical. They are Jesus describing his character. They are the attributes of the changed life which comes with the exchange of our life for the Jesus life. And the more like Jesus we become, the more we should expect some pain in our life. The disciple is not above the Master. But the more of Jesus' pain that we experience, the more of Jesus' joy we will also experience!

So what do you do when the suffering of Christ comes home and becomes your suffering? What do you do when even in your own household the earthly parent's will tries to trump the Heavenly Father's will? What do you do when the pain of following Christ moves from the theoretical to the personal?

You joyfully claim the promise of this double, culminating Beatitude: <sup>10</sup>*"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* <sup>11</sup>*"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* <sup>12</sup>*Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*