

PRACTICING THE BEATITUDES

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PRACTICING
the BEATITUDES

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INTRODUCTION

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

Blessed are they who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the land.

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

Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the clean of heart,
for they will see God.

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

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

Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of evil against you [falsely] because of me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward will be great in heaven. **MATTHEW 5:3-12**

Imagine what it must have been like nearly 2,000 years ago to be part of a large crowd listening to an itinerant preacher describe the qualities and actions of people especially blessed by God—among them, the poor in spirit, the meek, the persecuted. Even today, we scratch our heads and wonder at the paradoxes found in Jesus' Beatitudes. This book helps us deepen our adult understanding of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, and it enriches our understanding of how Jesus calls his disciples to live.

The BEATITUDES: OUR MORAL COMPASS

DAVID WHEELER-REED

Almost every biblical scholar I know says that the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' template for what it means to live life in the Kingdom of God.

Every time I think of the Sermon on the Mount, I am reminded of two quotes. The first is from a pacifist farmer from Kentucky named Wendell Berry. In his book *Citizenship Papers* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2003), he says that the best advice we as human beings were ever given is found in the Sermon on the Mount. But he also notes that this template for human progress is the least obeyed.

I also think of the French peasant Peter Maurin, who was the intellectual guru behind the Catholic Worker movement. In his *Easy Essays* (Yonkers, NY: Rose Hill Books, 2003), he writes, "When the Sermon on the Mount is the standard of values, then Christ is the leader." Unfortunately, in our own day and age—even in our own church—it often feels as if the Sermon on the Mount is not our moral compass. Rather, it is more a mere suggestion than divine fiat concerning what our Lord expects of us.

Almost every biblical scholar I know says that the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' template for what it means to live life in the Kingdom of God. It is not just about how we as Christians interact with the larger world of which we are a part. It also is about how we as Christians treat one another as sisters and brothers in Christ.

What He Says, What He Doesn't Say

Matthew sets out the major themes of the Sermon on the Mount with what we call the Beatitudes, found in Matthew 5:3–12. It is important for us to notice what Jesus says here—and what he does not say. For instance, as a poor peasant from Nazareth, Jesus blesses the “poor in spirit,” or what today we would call “those who are spiritually down and out.” He blesses those who mourn, those who hunger, and those who promote peace.

But he never once blesses those who are violent, those who are rich, those who persecute, or those who refuse to show mercy. I also have been struck by the fact that never once in the Sermon on the Mount does Jesus approve of any governmental authority, nor does he bless the religious hierarchy of Jerusalem. I can only wonder what we are to make of this today.

When I reflect on these things, I am often reminded of something the Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide said. In his little book titled *Sermon on the Mount: Utopia or Program for Action?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, Rev. 1986), Lapide expresses bewilderment at Christians who think they are better off under grace than under Jewish Law. He tells his readers that after reading the Sermon on the Mount he came to the conclusion that he would rather be bound to the 613 commandments of the Torah because grace looks really hard!

Although many Christians may not be prepared to hear this, Lapide suggests that the Sermon on the Mount is a summons to give up everything and follow Jesus, even if it means losing one's life. He also notes that Jesus' radical teachings in the Sermon on the Mount would set him apart from many of the later rabbis of the Jewish Talmud.

Do We Take Him Seriously?

I often find myself wondering if we take Jesus seriously. Do we take him seriously when he talks about anger (Matthew 5:21–26)? Do we take him seriously when he tells us that being angry at a sister or brother makes us a candidate for judgment? How often do we think before we call a sister or a brother “a fool”?

I am often puzzled by Christians who speak in mean ways about other Christians, especially politicians. Moreover, when I go to restaurants and watch folks clapping their hands together or crossing themselves in public, my mind returns to Matthew 6:6, “But when you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will repay you.” When I go to our megamalls or megachurches or chain restaurants, I am often haunted by Jesus’ words that “No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and mammon [money]” (Matthew 6:24).

The Beatitudes, however, are not promises of future redemption. They are promises of present redemption.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches his disciples the Lord’s Prayer. But unlike Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer, Matthew’s Jesus gives us a little bit of extra commentary. In Matthew 6:14–15, Jesus says, “If you forgive others their transgressions, your heavenly Father will forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your transgressions.”

The early church took this admonition seriously. The early Christians knew that to forgive was conditional; to ask for forgiveness from God meant showing mercy to those who had caused Christians hurt and pain.

It is easy to see why Pinchas Lapide thought Jewish Law was easier than Jesus’ teachings on grace.

The Beatitudes, however, are not promises of future redemption. They are promises of present redemption. The Greek translation of the

Beatitudes tells us that “those who mourn” will be “comforted right now!” and that “those who hunger and thirst for justice” will be “satisfied right now!” It is no wonder, then, that spiritual masters like Gandhi and civil rights leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., found in the Sermon on the Mount a moral compass for a new world that was possible even in the present.

Practical Suggestions

I would like to make some practical suggestions as to how we might implement the Sermon on the Mount in our own lives. I will limit myself, of course, to the Beatitudes, but any of my suggestions could easily be used in any part of the Sermon.

We must identify with the “poor in spirit.”

This term is a tricky one, which eluded scholars until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. The poor in spirit is a Hebrew idiom that means “those who have been beaten down by the vicissitudes of life.” To put it another way, it is a term that describes those who have experienced the “injustice” of an unfair world.

Since, as Christians, we are already part of the “new creation” (Galatians 6:15), there is no need for us to wait for Christ to bring justice to this world at a future, unknown date. As ambassadors of Jesus, we can start working with Jesus right now by promoting justice in our own churches, by identifying with people who are crushed by life, and by lending a helping hand to anyone in need.

One suggestion I would offer is, for those of us who have the financial resources, to adopt a family who struggles financially or to pay for healthcare for someone who doesn't have it. Or we could be even more radical and tell a pregnant teen contemplating abortion that we will do all that we can to help her financially so that she may keep her baby and bring life, not death, into the world.

We can help comfort those “who mourn” right now.

I often have been amazed at how the simplest acts of kindness can change people. Instead of just tossing some coins at people who ask for money on the street, we can sit down with these persons, listen to their stories, and perhaps invite them to share a meal with us.

If we were to choose a more radical path, we might take the suggestion of Peter Maurin and make up a room in our homes called a “Christ room,” where anyone who comes knocking throughout the day or night can find a bed, a shower, and a hot breakfast in the morning.

We can ask ourselves if injustice makes us sick.

Are we the kind of people “who hunger and thirst for justice,” or are we the kind of people who turn blind eyes away from injustices? I have been disturbed recently by the number of Christians who say, “God is in control. All I need do is pray.” I do not doubt that God is in control, but we must never forget that God also asks us to work together with Jesus to further the Kingdom of God on earth.

We can ask ourselves, “Are we merciful?”

Do we call our opponents “blessed enemies” or do we call them “fools”? Do we gossip and ridicule a fellow sister or brother? Do we heap harangue after harangue on the heads of politicians and pundits who need our prayers more than our criticisms?

We can ask ourselves, “Are we peacemakers?”

Does each and every action we take promote discord or unity? Do we participate in acts of violence, or do we eschew violence entirely? Do we support a political system that leads to war, or do we do everything we can to make sure that future generations never need to know the horrors we have known in our own generation or in generations past?

We need to ask ourselves a very difficult question: “Are we being insulted and persecuted, or are we just plain comfortable?”

In the Sermon on the Mount, there is a call from Jesus to let go of our comfort and to engage the world in ways that ultimately lead to persecution and criticism—from both the church and the world. The Kingdom of Heaven does not belong to those who are “just plain comfortable,” but to those who seek justice and, as a consequence, experience the world’s wrath.

So we must ask ourselves, “Why are we not being persecuted? Why are we not being criticized? Have we become too comfortable? Are we trying to change things or are we simply part of the system?”

Conclusion

I know a devout Catholic who gets very upset with me when I talk about Jesus’ moral compass in the Sermon on Mount. He often interjects, “This is impossible. No one could do this. Surely Jesus was not being serious!”

This man is very pragmatic, so I often tell him, “We must realize that Jesus is not very pragmatic! In fact, some might say he was irrational—perhaps even criminal!” I then remind him of what Pinchas Lapide said: “The law is easy, but grace is hard!”

Does each and every action we take promote discord or unity?

Your Thoughts

1 How do I understand the Sermon on the Mount to be the moral compass in my life? How often do I refer to this moral compass in my ordinary day-to-day choices? (Be specific.)

2 What is my perspective on “The law is easy, but grace is hard”?

Try This

Identify a practice for living the Sermon on the Mount in a meaningful manner. Write a personal contract for incorporating a new Beatitude way of living.