

Beatitudes: Lucky Are the Unlucky

Adapted from the study guide for *The Jesus I Never Knew* by Philip Yancey

The Sermon on the Mount haunted by adolescence. I would read a book like Charles Sheldon's *In His Steps*, solemnly vow to act "as Jesus would act," and turn to Matthew 5-7 for guidance. What to make of such advice? Should I offer myself to be pummeled by the motorcycle-riding "hoods" in school? Tear out my tongue after speaking a harsh word to my brother?

Now that I am an adult, the crisis of the Sermon on the Mount still has not gone away. Though I have tried at times to dismiss it as rhetorical excess, the more I study Jesus, the more I realize that the statements contained here lie at the heart of Jesus' message. If I fail to understand his teaching, I fail to understand him.

When I covered the Beatitudes with my class at LaSalle Street Church, the Gulf War began and ended. As I prepared videotapes of Jesus delivering the Sermon on the Mount, General Normal Schwarzkopf was giving a briefing. Blessed are the strong, was the general's message. Blessed are the triumphant. Blessed are the armies wealthy enough to possess smart bombs and Patriot missiles. Blessed are the liberators, the conquering soldiers. The bizarre juxtaposition of the two speeches gave me a feeling for the shock waves the Sermon on the Mount must have caused among its original audience, Jews in first-century Palestine. "How Lucky are the unlucky!" Jesus said in effect.

A few years later I attended a prayer breakfast at the White House with President Bill Clinton and eleven other evangelical Christians. We were given the opportunity to express our concerns. The question, What would Jesus say in such a setting? Crossed my mind. Would he say, "Don't worry about the economy and jobs – the poor are the fortunate ones"? Or "Relax, sir, government oppression gives Christians an opportunity to be persecuted and therefore blessed"? I realized with a start that the only time Jesus met with powerful political leaders, his hands were tied and his back was clotted with blood. I came away from the experience puzzled afresh. What meaning can the Beatitudes have for a society that honors the self-assertive, confident, and rich?

To put the issue bluntly, are the Beatitudes true? If so, why doesn't the church encourage poverty and mourning and meekness and persecution instead of striving against them? What is the real meaning of the Beatitudes, this mysterious ethical core of Jesus' teaching?

I am not, and may never be, ready to declare, "This is what the Beatitudes mean." But gradually I have come to recognize them as important truths. To me, they apply on at least three levels.

1. *Dangled Promises.* The Beatitudes are not merely Jesus' nice words of consolation to the unfortunates. It is a plain fact of history that for convicts in the Soviet Gulag, and slaves in America, and Christians in Roman cages awaiting their turn with the wild beasts, the promise of reward was a source of hope. It keeps you alive. It allows you to believe in a just God after all.
2. *The Great Reversal.* I have also come to believe that the Beatitudes describe the present as well as the future. They neatly contrast how to succeed in the kingdom of heaven with how to succeed in the kingdom of this world. The Beatitudes express quite plainly that God views the world through a different set of lenses.
3. *Psychological Reality.* The Beatitudes reveal that what brings us success in the kingdom of heaven also benefits us most in this life here and now. I would rather spend time among the servants of this world than among the stars. The servants clearly emerge as the favored ones, the graced ones. They possess qualities of depth and richness and even joy that I have not found elsewhere. Somehow in the process of losing their lives, they find them.

Seeing Jesus Through Scripture

The Sermon on the Mount is found in Matthew 5:1-7:29. In reading the following passages together, you will hear the Beatitudes and a selection of verses from the Sermon on the Mount. During this next week I strongly recommend that you read the entire Sermon on the Mount, as described in "Gazing on Jesus This Week" at the end of this chapter (in the study guide). For this meeting read together slowly:

Matthew 5:1-12, 14-16, 29-30, 38-42

Matthew 6:1, 19-21, 25, 31-34

Matthew 7:12, 13-14, 21-23, 24-25

Looking at Jesus Within and Without, 25 Minutes

1. If you have read the Sermon on the Mount before, how did you interpret it? Did you ever consider following it literally, such as by giving away all your money or possessions or by letting someone hit you a second time or by cutting off a body part? If you are reading it for the first time, what is your first impression of Jesus' words?
2. The trend today is self-help -- learning how to be assertive and independent, learning how to practice "tough love," learning to

confront, learning to set limits, learning to manage finances wisely. In fact, much of the teaching on these subjects comes from respected Christian psychologists and writers. Many people have had radical, positive change occur in their lives due to these teachings. How do you reconcile this approach with what Jesus spells out in the Sermon on the Mount?

“But I tell you, Do not resist and evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Matt. 5:39).

How does assertiveness fit with turning the other cheek? Do you think that the same principle applies to word fights? For example, does Jesus call us to fight back with words, if not physically? How does he call us to speak (see Matt. 5:33-37)? Does that mean never speaking your mind? Does it mean being a doormat? Does it mean letting it appear that the other person has won? Read the second full paragraph about Gandhi in page 121 in the book:

The movie *Gandhi* contains a fine scene in which Gandhi tries to explain his philosophy to the Presbyterian missionary Charlie Andrews. Walking together in a South African city, the two suddenly find their way blocked by young thugs. The Reverend Andrews takes one look at the menacing gangsters and decides to run for it. Gandhi stops him. “Doesn’t the New Testament say if an enemy strikes you on the right cheek you should offer him the left?” Andrews mumbles that he thought the phrase was used metaphorically. “I’m not so sure,” Gandhi replies. “I suspect he meant you to show courage – be willing to take a blow, several blows, to show that you will not strike back nor will you be turned aside. And when you do that it calls on something in human nature, something that makes his hatred decrease and his respect increase. I think Christ grasped that and I have seen it work.”

Have you grappled with this issue? Can you share an example? Can you describe someone you know who shows the power of “quiet strength”?

3. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3).

What does it mean to be poor in spirit? Which word would you choose from this list?

- Lonely

- Confused
- Remorseful
- Ashamed
- Depressed
- Needy
- Self-sacrificing
- Beaten-down
- Oppressed
- Another word _____

How do independence, strength, and confidence fit with being poor in spirit? How did Jesus embody strength? How did Jesus embody confidence? What does this verse say to the person suffering from low self-worth or from depression? To the person who has chosen a low-paying or unglamorous job? Read the second full paragraph on page 118 of the book:

I was prepared to honor and admire these servants¹, to hold them up as inspiring examples. I was not prepared to envy them. Yet as I now reflect on the two groups side by side, stars and servants, the servants clearly emerge as the favored ones, the graced ones. Without question, I would rather spend time among the servants than among the stars: they possess qualities of depth and richness and even joy that I have not found elsewhere. Servants work for low pay, long hours, and no applause, “wasting” their talents and skills among the poor and uneducated. Somehow, though, in the process of losing their lives they find them.

How have these issues become real in your life?

4. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Matt. 5:7).

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:10).

“So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matt. 7:12).

What does it mean to show mercy toward someone who has cheated you? To someone who has embarrassed you? What does it mean to show mercy to someone who has abused you, physically or emotionally? How does the tough love concept (setting limits as to how much one will tolerate in an

¹ Doctors and nurses and volunteers who work among lepers, the homeless, etc.

unhealthy relationship with another) fit with finding blessing in persecution and doing to others as you would have them do to you? What is the value in showing mercy to the helpless? Read the last full paragraph on page 120:

Then Nouwen² began listing for me all the benefits he has gained. The hours spent with Adam, he said, have given him an inner peace so fulfilling that it makes most of his other, more high-minded tasks seem boring and superficial by contrast. Early on, as he sat beside that helpless child-man, he realized how marked with rivalry and competition, how obsessive, was his drive for success in academia and Christian ministry. Adam taught him that “What makes us human is not our mind by our heart, not our ability to think but our ability to love.” From Adam’s simple nature, he had glimpsed the “emptiness” necessary before one can be filled by God – the kind of emptiness that desert monks achieved only after much searching and discipline.

Have you struggled with these issues? Share an example from your life.

5. “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:19-21).

“For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own” (Matt. 6:32-34).

“Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” (Matt. 5:42).

What does Jesus say about money management? What would he say if questioned about IRAs and retirement

planning or even health insurance? About saving for college? About a nest egg for emergencies? About spending wisely? About generosity in giving? How have you confronted this issue in your life?

***Being Seen by Jesus*, 5-10 Minutes**

Spend this time in quiet prayer or meditation. You may want to reflect again on the words Jesus repeated more often than any others:

“Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matt. 16:25). Do they have additional meaning for you after studying the Beatitudes?

You can take notes during this time if you choose. Or you can write a prayer in your journal.

Further Glimpses of Jesus

- This week find out what your church or community is doing to serve the poor. Make plans to volunteer a couple of hours serving. Maybe others you are studying with would like to do this with you. As you serve, observe the poor. Are they blessed? How do you feel while serving?
- Review Monika Hellwig’s list of advantages of being poor: (See me for this, if interested.) Are these advantages or qualities true of the poor people you know? Plug in “I” in place of “the poor.” Are these statements true of you?
- This week talk with someone who has experienced grief. If they are willing and able to share with you, ask them how God comforted them during their time of grief.

***Gazing on Jesus this Week*, Optional**

Focus on the following passages from the Sermon on the Mount this week in your quiet moments as you reflect on Jesus. Consider using Eugene Peterson’s version of the New Testament in contemporary English, *The Message*, for your reading. Or use Clarence Jordan’s *The Cotton Patch Gospel of Matthew* if you can locate a copy.

Day 1: Matt. 5:1-16

Day 2: Matt. 5:17-37

Day 3: Matt. 5:38-6:18

Day 4: Matt. 6:19-34

Day 5: Matt. 7:1-29

² Henri Nouwen is a priest and respected teacher at Harvard. As an adult he started caring for Adam, a man who lives in a community home and needs help with even basic tasks such as dressing.