

THE BE-ATTITUDES

YOU'LL NEVER

BE

THE SAME

Nine sermons preached by Dr. John Vawter

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CHAPTER ONE

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

Matthew 5:3

Spiritual Poverty is a Good Thing

January 13, 1991

Our society is so success-oriented that those of us who live in Minnesota always have to answer why the Minnesota Vikings have gotten to the Super Bowl four times but have never won it. It is as though nothing was accomplished by getting to the Super Bowl. Or, we have to answer why Hubert Humphrey never fulfilled his dream of becoming President. It is as though there is something second-rate about being Vice President. It's a crazy society in which we live. It's so success-oriented that society tries to determine for you and me what's successful and what's not successful, what's success and what's not success. Society is defining for us whether or not we are the kind of people we should be.

In thinking about this week's topic, I went to a magazine rack just to see what was there that might relate. The magazine *Success* has fifteen articles listed in the contents and thirteen of them are, "How to Become What You Want to Become" type articles. Let me just read four of the titles to you: "Editor's Note, A Blueprint for Achievement"; "Technology Clinic: Create Sizzling Ads and Savvy Sales Letters"; "Unleash Marketing Power With Your Desktop Computer"; "Reviews, Books and Tapes: Score Again and Again With Continuous Improvements, Become a Money Magnate, Hypnotic Video Shows How to Visualize Your Way to Health." Obviously, I don't think there is anything wrong with setting goals and achieving them. But we must understand that when we live in such an achievement-oriented society, we can begin to focus on our goals and achievements rather than on becoming conformed to the image of Christ. I don't know any statement in the Bible that's clearer relative to how Jesus wants us to live and what He wants us to be than the Beatitude at which we will look this morning when He said, **"BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT, FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN."**

We must come to the point where our motivation is to want to be the kind of people that Christ wants us to be. But in the society in which we live, we are being told "you can become, you can be anything you want to be if you just work at it," as though everything we want to be and everything we can be is already resident in us and we have the power to be that kind of person. But Jesus is saying something else must take place in our lives. We must recognize He has to be working in our lives spiritually for us to become the kind of people He wants us to be. And we must understand when we begin talking this way, there is a certain risk that we take because we live in a culture that is so success-oriented and achievement-driven. And when we say, "My highest priority in life is to work on my character and become the kind of person Christ wants me to become," not everyone is going to understand. In fact, they may think we are people of weakness because we have character as our highest goal. But there are many parallels between the culture in which Jesus lived and our culture today. As a theocracy, His was a little bit different. But nevertheless, if you were successful in the Jewish religious system of Jesus' day, you wore that success on your sleeve and you expected people to pay you honor as they walked down the street or saw you at the temple. In many ways Jesus was speaking to exactly the same culture in which you and I live. His words penetrate the same today as they did then when He said, "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

BLESSED

He uses the word "blessed." "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit." Actually the word can be translated "happy" or "state of bliss." We must understand Jesus was not talking about something in the future; He was talking present tense. Jesus was saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." There is a present-tense benefit that comes to those who are "poor in spirit." We must understand this state of blessedness or happiness is a gift from God. It's not something we achieve ourselves; it is not something we arrive at ourselves. It is given by God lest we tend to take the credit for it. Also, it is independent of our circumstances; in fact, frequently it comes about more often because of negative circumstances than positive circumstances.

POOR IN SPIRIT

We read "poor in spirit" and immediately begin to think it must convey weakness or the idea of deprivation. But not really so. There are two different words the New Testament uses that we translate "poor." One is the word that means, "I have enough to eat, I have enough clothes to wear, I have a roof over my head, I have nothing superfluous in my life, but I have enough." There is another word that is translated "poor." It means to be impoverished, to be destitute, not only of what I want, but of what I need. The word Matthew uses is the latter. Now the Beatitude begins to take shape and form because we realize Jesus is saying, "Blessed are those who are destitute of any spiritual ability or any spiritual capability; spiritually destitute and spiritually impoverished." We begin to understand that Jesus is talking about the inner self to the point where I come to empty myself and realize I truly am inadequate spiritually. I am inadequate to be the kind of person I want to be. I am inadequate to be the kind of person God wants me to be. I realize that as difficult as it is to acknowledge and admit it, I am sinful. I am a human person. Thus we see... "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit" because they are spiritually destitute.

But let's understand what spiritually destitute or spiritually impoverished is not. It is not a person who lacks in capability or courage. To be spiritually destitute does not mean I don't have any capabilities and I can't be successful in life. Some think to be spiritually impoverished means that I am weak, anemic, stand for and speak out for nothing. That's not what Jesus had in mind at all. To be spiritually impoverished or poor in spirit does not mean to be a weak person. Rather, it means to come to the point where I acknowledge and admit that in my own power I cannot be the kind of person I want to be; I cannot be the kind of person God wants me to be. And yet, as simple as that sounds, it is extremely difficult for us to admit. And, unfortunately, we may come to that point once in our life and think that takes care of us for the rest of our life. But we must realize that spiritual impoverishment is a process to continue throughout our lives.

The Bible helps us understand what spiritual poverty is. In Psalm 8 David says, "What is man that You are mindful of Him?" David says out of the most intimate and private moment of his heart, "Why is it that You would think about me? What is there about me, God Almighty, that You would be aware of me? Who am I that You are mindful of me?" We realize that God really does owe us nothing. There is nothing we do to gain favor with Him. And so David ponders and asks the question, "What am I that You would be aware of me?" Spiritual poverty is realizing God does not owe us anything. Jesus said, "Apart from me, you can do nothing." With all of the success in our society and community, with all of the successful people in our church and with all the success God has given to our church, it is extremely difficult to recognize our inadequacy to be the kind of people that God wants us to be. And so Christ says, "But apart from me, you can do nothing." Some of us would rebel at that at a moment's notice. But Jesus said it. So when we acknowledge it, we are on the road

to spiritual poverty.

We begin to realize that spiritual impoverishment is to realize who God is. He is perfect. The more I understand who He is, the more I understand who I am and the clearer I understand the chasm between us. So all that I can say is, "Who am I that You would consider me?"

This week, many of you in the business world will be honored for something you have done. And it is difficult to look upon ourselves as spiritually impoverished because there is so much affirmation wherever you go. Yet David says, "What is man that You are mindful of him?" One of the reasons we have a difficult time looking at ourselves honestly is because we look at other people who don't seem to be as spiritually mature as we are and we judge ourselves against them. We judge ourselves against the fact that they don't live up to our standards. But Jesus said, "Apart from me, you can do nothing."

THE SPIRITUAL POVERTY TRAIL

The road to spiritual poverty is not necessarily an easy road to tread. Let me give you three thoughts. One, spiritual success lies in defeat. This defeat is when I come to the point where I acknowledge my sinfulness; when I acknowledge my helplessness spiritually; when I acknowledge there is something that's gotten the best of me and exposed me for who I am. As I look at myself, I realize this is the defeat that can make me spiritually successful. Two, the defeat moves me to the point where I re-evaluate and realize what God wants from me is character. He doesn't want activity. He wants character. My Christian activity should proceed from my character. Third, the freedom to be that kind of person comes when I surrender myself to God. I recognize who I am. I recognize that my behavior and character are not pleasing to God. And I surrender that part of my life to Him. I say, "Now, You take this part of my life where I can't be the kind of person You want me to be. Make me the kind of person You want me to be."

But all too often what happens is that we resent the negatives in our lives. We should respond, "God, this can be used in my life to mirror to me what kind of person You want me to be." (Now please understand the word defeat here does not mean abuse. I am not talking about a husband abusing his wife and therefore the wife saying, "Well, this is a defeat. It's going to help me grow." If you are in an abusive situation, you will tend to be victimized and to say once again of yourself, "Well, the pastor said this is just a defeat that's going to help me become spiritually successful, and so I should enjoy it." I'm not saying that at all. Don't let me miscommunicate.)

PERSONAL EXAMPLE

If I am going to challenge you to turn your filter inward and look at yourselves as we study the Beatitudes, then I can only do the same to myself. Hopefully, this will provide a model for you to follow. I want to share something with you that's extremely personal. I've shared it with very few people. I do it with the risk that some of you are going to misunderstand. I do it with the risk that some of you, if you want to, can say, "He's being arrogant and self-aggrandizing himself because he is telling us something about himself." I can't deal with how you respond if you want to think my motive is impure. You have the freedom to think that, but my motive is pure.

The account is about something that happened in a motel room in Kenosha, Wisconsin, in June of 1989. Let me set the context for you. In June of 1988, the president of our denomination, Dr. Tom McDill, announced his retirement effective June of 1989. In July of 1988, I received a letter asking if I would be willing to allow my

name to be considered for that position. As I read the job description, I realized I was not the person and wrote back to decline.

By January of 1989, a candidate was ready to be announced. Everything was in place. He asked for a month to reconsider. During the month of praying and thinking, he realized that he was not the person and stepped out of the process. It was sometime in late February that I got a phone call from a representative of the search committee asking, "May I come over to see you at your house?" He came and sat with Susan and me and asked, "We would like you to put your name in the process to be considered as the president of our denomination." I said, "I don't think I'm the person you want. I've seen the job description. I don't necessarily agree that my capabilities are in line with what you want. But I want to be a good team player. We'll pray about it." Virtually every test that I set up and every person I talked to said, "Put your name in the process," and so I did.

The first step of the process was a questionnaire to ask my impressions of our denomination, where we need to go, what I thought our future could and should be and the changes that need to be made. I passed that test. The next phase was to spend a full day with an industrial psychologist in Minneapolis. A team of people evaluated me. I passed that test. The next test was an eight-hour interview. In the middle of that interview when one of the people on the committee said, "Why do you want this job?" I said, "I don't want this job. I'm just trying to be a good guy. In fact, I asked other people to get in the process, but I'm just trying to be a good team player." He was sort of startled by that and I went on to say, "Look, God is going to speak His will through you people on this committee. He's not going to speak it through me. All I know is that you came to my house and I believe that God has led me thus far." A few weeks later, the committee called to say that Paul Cedar would be the candidate. When I hung up the phone, I said to Susan, "I am placing myself under a discipline of silence. I will speak freely and openly to you about how I feel and about what I think, but I will talk to no one else."

At the national conference, the nomination of Paul Cedar was brought to the floor. The microphones were open for anyone to say anything they wanted relative to his candidacy. One of my two roommates that week went to the microphone to speak against Paul's candidacy. But he was a military man and believes you speak your mind and then close ranks with the majority if you are in the minority. This is exactly what he has done since Paul's election as president. However, even at the conference, these two close friends did not know what I was thinking because I had maintained the discipline of silence.

One night in the motel room, my two roommates and I were getting ready to go to the evening service when a friend came to say a rumor was being spread through the conference that we three men were trying to sabotage Paul's candidacy. Now all that I have communicated thus far comes to this point in that motel room. Those of you who know me and who criticize me have never criticized me for not being truthful. You have criticized me, legitimately so, for not being diplomatic. (And I need to continue to learn diplomacy from you.) But I pride myself on the fact that I speak my mind. I will say anything to anyone if I think it needs to be said. It's probably a weakness, but I pride myself that people always know what I think. I want to become more diplomatic, but I am a truthful person.

I cannot tell you how angry and hateful I was in the twinkling of an eye in that motel room. In addition to that, I cannot tell you how deeply the rumor cut me because I have always prided myself on speaking the truth and speaking openly. If I was going to try to sabotage someone's candidacy, I would not do it in the dark comers of hallways. I would raise money. I would send letters. I would have banners. There would be wagons.

There would be bands. It would be an all-out campaign. But, for once in my life, I was saying nothing and yet I was being criticized unjustly that I was part of a triplet trying to sabotage Paul's candidacy. But someone was lying about me; someone was gossiping about me; someone was accusing me of trying to sabotage Paul's candidacy when only Susan knew what I was thinking and feeling. So I spent much of that week running every trail I could run down to find out who it was who had started the rumor. Every trail led down a dead-end. The thing that got to me and intensified my hatred and anger is that I wanted to do battle with someone. I wanted to tell someone they had sinned against me and had harmed me. But I couldn't find out who was spreading the rumor. It seemed as though people had heard it but nobody seemed to know who had started it.

I didn't know at whom to lash out. But at that moment in my motel room, I understood how someone can get so angry they can kill someone. I could have killed that night. I wasn't just hurt, I was angry. I wasn't just angry, I was hateful. And how do you resolve hurt, anger and hate when there is some anonymous person-some phantom-talking about you, and you don't know who it is and cannot find out. I was angry ... hateful ... and frustrated.

And then these words from the writings of the Apostle Peter came to my mind. Jesus, while on the cross, "being reviled, did not revile in return; being insulted, did not return insult for insult." I began to realize my reaction in the motel room...and the hateful feelings that persisted...were used by God to mirror my humanity, imperfections, and sinfulness back to me. Frankly, the rumor persists-I have heard it as recently as two weeks ago – but I cannot regret the rumor because as a mirror it exposed a dark side of me that I didn't know existed. Some of you, if you knew the language I used in that room that night, would say; "I don't want him to be my pastor." Others would say, "Praise God. He's human just like I am. He understands what I live through." The two men in the room are some of my closest friends, but when I let go with words that I didn't even know were in me, they backed up. Maybe it was the shocked look on their faces that caused me to realize what I was doing and what I am. Not what I became, but what I was. It is difficult to admit there is a dark side to me. But there was and there is. When I finally got hold of myself, and it took me over a year to recover from this – I'm sorry I couldn't share it with you and I'm sure sometimes you felt the effect of it – I remembered a statement I have on the lamp in my little office at home..."hurt feelings will only hurt you in the end."

POOR IN SPIRIT

Notice what Jesus said. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." And this experience has brought me to the point where I realize there is an area of my life I did not know exists. There is an area of my life where I am spiritually impoverished. I cannot love; I cannot forgive; I cannot get over this hate without saying, "Christ, I am at the bottom: I don't like what I see: I didn't know it was here: I can't get out of it except that I give it to You; and You work in my life."

The pain was like a knife wound. At first I thought it was like a knife that was thrust into my stomach and then pulled out. Such a wound would quickly heal over. But I realized this was a serrated knife. It was not only thrust in, but it was twisted. So once the obvious wound was healed, there were all kinds of little wounds inside that now I began to be aware of. But I say to you, without equivocation and without ambivalence, I wouldn't trade that night in the motel room for anything. As painful as it was and as difficult as it was, it helped me to understand in deeper measure how human I am and how many dark sides there are in my life. And I need defeat in my life to help give me spiritual success.

I need situations like that to be a mirror for me to show me who I am.

I tell you today that if I had not gone through that experience, I would not have understood when I began this study what Jesus meant when he said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Without equivocation, this has been one of the greatest times in my life.

Because Paul Cedar did not think in 1989 that he should become our president, he was not elected until this past summer. Last May we had lunch and I told him what had happened. I told him, "Paul, I make this commitment to you and I want a commitment from you. I commit to you that I will never criticize you. If I am not happy with something you do, you will hear it from me. And I want a commitment from you that if you ever hear that I said anything negative about you, you will either write or call me to ask if it is true before you believe it." And I said, "I want you to know that it hurts deeply to have people say that I was trying to sabotage your candidacy when I took a vow of silence that I have maintained to this day."

He sort of laughed and said, "The other day I was with a group of pastors who were asking me about my candidacy. One fellow said, "I understand that at such and such conference you said such and such, Paul." Paul said, "Well, let me just respond to that in two ways: (1) I wasn't at that conference and (2) I never said it." And then he said, "I understand what it feels like to have people say things about you that aren't true."

COMMENTARY

By way of commentary on us here this morning, we are strong-willed people. We want to be right. Most of us have quick minds. Many of you make a lot of money selling. And when someone attacks your products, you're quick to come up with an answer as to why the criticism of your product is wrong. This carries over into our personal lives. What frequently happens is that someone says "no" to us or someone disagrees with us and our reaction is, "Do you know what that person did to me?" Instead of letting that person's response to us be a mirror to show us our dark side, we resist and resent them. That's why I can't be at all resentful or regretful for what happened to me. The experience in that motel room helped me to see a dark side of my life that I needed to give to God. Understand this is not a once-and-for-all experience. It's a process. I assume that I will see more dark sides – but hopefully not in such a dramatic or painful way. But I wouldn't trade this experience for the world. It's made me a better person; it's humbled me; it's brought me closer to Christ; and it's helped me to see more of my humanity which hopefully I have given to Him.

KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

We must understand something about Jewish prose and the way the Jews wrote. Frequently when the Jews wrote, they would write a line and then the very next line would be a parallel line to describe what they just wrote. For example, the Lord's Prayer says, "Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." That second line is a descriptive phrase telling what the kingdom of heaven is when Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven happens on earth as well as it happens in heaven." Now think of heaven for a moment. Even without being there, we know what it is. It's a place of perfection where angels are in submission to God. "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Then doesn't it follow that the kingdom of God on earth would be Jesus' people, that is you and I, who have committed ourselves to Christ, being in submission to Him?

So "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit." Blessed are those who come to face

themselves and realize what a dark side they have and how much they need Christ in their life. Blessed are those people, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." You see, the Beatitude is not about being weak people; it's not about being anemic people. It's about being a group of people who look at ourselves and the defeats in our lives as instruments that become mirrors to help us see who we are. And once we see those parts of our lives that are out of sync with the character of Christ, we give Him those areas of our lives. And then we become more like Christ.

I wouldn't trade the motel room/rumor experience for anything. Not at all! Now listen, I'm strong-willed. I know how to kick back. I know how to make excuses. But God taught me through that experience not to kick back and not to make excuses. He showed me to let that rumor be a mirror so I could see my reaction and realize there was a part of me that wasn't controlled by Christ.

I hope you go through some spiritual defeats even though I wouldn't want them to be as traumatic and painful as what I went through. But that's why sometimes when you come to my office and say, "I'm in pain," I sit and smile. And you always say, "Why are you smiling? This is not funny." My answer is, "Because I know that God will use this in your life. If you will start looking at your reaction to the person who has hurt you, this will be a mirror to show you who you are." Spiritual success comes through defeat. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

"Father, help us to be men and women who use the negative circumstances and the defeat in our lives to become mirrors to show us who we are. And where there are dark sides in our lives of which we are unaware, use those defeats to show us how You need to take more complete and deeper control of our lives so that we have the character of Christ. I pray this thanking You for the refiner's fire in my life. I thank You for what happened that night in that motel room because You used it to show me a side of myself that shouldn't be there. I pray this now in Christ's name. Amen."

CHAPTER TWO

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

Matthew 5:4

Joy Comes in the Morning

January 20, 1991

America is at war; but there is not one of us who is excited about that. We would be very cold-hearted if we didn't mourn the fact that people are dying and being maimed. The war has become so specialized and so electronic that, in some cases, people never have the chance to defend themselves. One of the men in our church told me our missiles are so accurate that if you fired one from Duluth at the church here you wouldn't have to pick the building as your target; you could pick the window through which you want the missile to enter the building and no one would ever know it was coming. You saw last night on the news the airplane hangar that has been turned into a giant triage hospital center. Wheelchairs were sitting there waiting for maimed young men to come in. Their lives will never be the same. We can't sit in our television rooms and watch this every night and not mourn. Over the last few years in our church, many of you have lost loved ones. You mourned that loss. We have mourned it with you. We've cried together. Everywhere we turn in life there is opportunity that has fallen and we mourn. We feel as though we will never be the same.

MOURNING

In His second Beatitude, Jesus says, "**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN, FOR THEY SHALL BE COMFORTED.**" And we think surely death is what He is talking about. Surely He is talking about times like what is going on in the Middle East now. Surely He is talking about those people who mourn the loss of a loved one. But in actual fact, He is not. He's talking about a mourning that is much deeper than that and in fact much more personal. He is talking about the mourning that takes place in a person's life (and their emotional and mental life) when they recognize, either for the first time or as a process, the perfection of God and their own imperfection. Jesus is saying the result of understanding that God is perfect and we are imperfect is to mourn. And yet He says, "Blessed are those who mourn." That's almost a contradiction, isn't it, because we understand the word "blessed" to mean to be happy or to experience life in a blissful way. So at first glance it makes Christ out to be a sadist and it makes us out to be masochists in that we don't enjoy life until we mourn.

But we have to understand something about the Beatitudes—Jesus starts with the general and begins moving toward the specific. In fact, we see that happening from when we looked at His first Beatitude, "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit." And now He says, "Blessed are those who mourn." It's as though life with Christ is a wide-mouthed funnel. All of a sudden we realize it gets narrower and narrower until we hit the stream of life for which the funnel was created. And so Jesus begins with broad, brush-stroke principles and now begins to narrow down and force us to look more honestly at ourselves when He says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." We begin to see a progression. I can't just say I am poor in spirit because I recognize that I am sinful. Jesus forces us to take a step further down the road when He says, "Blessed are those who mourn."

THE MOURNFUL

Who is it that mourns? Would it be the person who is not a Jesus-follower and at one point comes to the place where he recognizes Christ died for his sin? At this point of recognition, he mourns his sinfulness. Is Jesus talking about that person? Or, is He

talking about the person, such as most of us here this morning, who has already made the decision to follow Him, but somehow still stumbles along the way and mourns the fact that he has not been all that God wants him to be? Well, I suggest He is talking about both of these. He is talking about those of us who have not yet made the decision to be Jesus-followers and of us who have already made the decision to be Jesus-followers.

Let me give you an example from a person who was not a Jesus-follower. Once he understood the perfection of God and his own personal imperfection and made the decision to be a Jesus-follower, he looked back on his life and mourned who he was and how he lived life. In this month's *Life* magazine, there is a moving article about Lee Atwater. Lee was President Bush's campaign manager and was rewarded by being chosen the National Chairman of the Republican Party. Just a year ago, he discovered he has terminal brain cancer. Atwater says, "I have found Jesus Christ. It's that simple. He has made a difference, and I am glad that I found Him while there is still time. I've committed myself to the Golden Rule, and that means coming to terms with some less than virtuous acts in my life." He is reflecting on events in his past...back ten years. He is now beginning to understand how his life was not consistent with how it should have been lived, and he is mourning what he was.

"In 1980 while running a Congressional campaign against South Carolina Democrat Tom Turnipseed, I reacted to charges that I had exposed his history of psychological problems and electroshock therapy by saying, I'm not going to respond to allegations made by someone who was hooked up to jumper cables." Then he continues, "And an apology to Turnipseed was among the conciliatory notes I wrote last summer." He goes on to talk about his life before he became a Jesus-follower. "Mostly I'm sorry for the way I thought of other people. Like a good general, I had treated everyone who wasn't with me as being against me. After the election when I would run into Ron Brown, my counterpart who was the National Chairman of the Democratic Party, I would say hello and then pass him off to one of my aides. I actually thought that talking to him would make me appear vulnerable. But I have learned a lesson-politics and human relationships are separate. I may disagree with Ron Brown's message, but I can love him as a man."

So, there comes a point in life, if we become a Jesus-follower, when we look back on our life and mourn what we have done. We mourn who we have been because to be a Jesus-follower we must recognize God in all His perfection and ourselves in all our imperfection. There are some people who call themselves Christians and yet still don't recognize that. An anonymous author writes, "During my days of being an agnostic and then my early days of inquiry into the Christian faith; I was not aware of my sin. I had come to believe that Jesus was the Son of God, that He died on the cross, but somehow it had not dawned on me that I was that bad. My lifestyle was not much different from that of the average church member. And though my life was far from exemplary, in my own estimation, I was a pretty decent fellow." Sounds like us, doesn't it?

"Then one day as I read the Bible, I was suddenly gripped with the necessity of Christ dying on the cross for my sins. I finally realized without the shedding of His blood, there is no forgiveness of sin – that I had fallen far short of the glory of God and that I deserved death. I realized there is nothing in me that merited His love, His forgiveness, His cleansing. I found myself on my knees, deeply conscious of my unworthiness."

So who is to mourn? Obviously, the person who is not a follower of Jesus

when he or she comes to understand that He, as the perfect one, came to earth for our sins. But those of us who have already made the decision to be Jesus-followers also need to be aware that because of our humanity and our imperfection, we still fall short and stumble along the way. And Jesus is saying in this progression of life and spiritual development, we are to continue to mourn over what we do.

I have a picture that hangs in my office in our home. It was given to Susan and me by a young woman, a long-time friend, who was in the ministry. As a single woman, she found herself reneging on her commitment to holiness in Christ and found herself pregnant out of wedlock. She was embarrassed and was ashamed. She felt guilty. But a number of friends figuratively wrapped their arms around her and helped her back on her feet. She gave up the baby for adoption; she found that great secret of how she could be forgiven of God. She could sense that she was cleansed; she sensed that she was made new. She found a verse that talks about being sinful and then being forgiven of your sin. It's Psalm 35 which says, "Joy comes in the morning." Because we were part of that story, she gave us the picture that simply says, "Joy." Her joy came in the morning. Out of her mourning, joy came to her in the morning. In other words, the nights were dark. The nights were lonely. But as she understood God's forgiveness and His ability to rebuild her life, she understood there was joy in the morning. If she were here this morning, she would talk about her mistake in the past tense and her wonderful life in the present tense because God forgave her. She no longer has to think about her sin because it's forgiven.

We begin to understand that we mourn when we see God's perfection. We see He has standards for our lives. Because He is perfect, He can set those standards. And we begin to mourn when we realize we fall short of these standards. But sometimes we don't want to admit that. We don't want to admit there is a God, He is perfect and He has the right to set standards for us.

Robert Coles is known as one of America's foremost child psychiatrists. He wrote a book called *The Spiritual Life of Children*. In a one-page article in *Time* magazine, Coles says he is not a Jesus-follower. He just has an interest in religion. If anyone here this morning is an agnostic or an atheist, this article helps us understand that God is real. As the Apostle Paul says, "God has put knowledge of Himself in us." This whole book is about Coles interacting with little kids about their perceptions of God. The author of the article asks Coles, "Are most children really interested in spiritual questions?" Answer: "They're interested out of their humanity because they know what questions to ask. Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? Those are the great existential questions of artists, philosophers, novelists, historians, psychologists and the questions of children and of all human beings."

Coles is then asked, "Well, didn't these children just learn to ask those questions from their parents who are religious?"

Coles answers, "No. Many of these children have parents who are not religious. These are natural responses that God places in us because He gives us a knowledge of Himself."

So the question is asked, "So we adults can learn religiosity from the children?"

Coles says, "The spiritual interests of children have a lot to teach us as well. I have listened to children of eight or nine or ten years getting to the heart of the Bible. I have found in elementary schools a good deal of spiritual curiosity that does not reflect mere indoctrination. This is an interesting capacity children have, and I think we ought to pay attention to it."

Then Coles says, "Lest we think that we are perfect and don't need a perfect God to forgive our sins, the question is asked, 'But isn't religion used negatively to cause people to think negatively about themselves?'" Coles continues, "Look at the Ivy League colleges. The meanness you find there rivals Belfast. Look at sectarianism in the name of psychoanalysis, the way we have learned to hate one another. There is no sphere of human activity that lacks smugness, arrogance, self-importance, divisiveness and all of the other sins we are capable of and I say, sins. If you look at what the religious traditions tell us, it warns about this sin of pride. No amount of secular progress, social or economic or educational, has so far enabled us get beyond the darker side of ourselves."

He is learning all of this from little kids. He is one of the foremost child psychiatrists in our country and he is learning from little kids they understand that there is a God.

Understanding this, what is this mourning that we do? Simply put, it's a deep sorrow that pierces our heart; to feel sorry for what we have done to the point that we sorrow over it. We may express our emotions differently from one another. And we do one another an injustice when we assume someone is not mourning because they express themselves differently. We must recognize we are all individuals created differently and uniquely. When we understand this, we understand mourning...because we all may express it differently.

And so whether I am a person who is not a Jesus-follower and come to the point where I realize that He is perfect and I am imperfect, or I am already a Jesus-follower, but along the way recognize I have stumbled, I can mourn over my sinfulness. This is what Christ is talking about. "Blessed are those who mourn." Out of that mourning and sorrow over my sinfulness comes happiness, which is what the word blessed means.

THREE MOURNINGS

There are at least three different mournings. First, there is the mourning we call "natural mourning." This is the mourning we are doing today over the fact that people are being killed in the Middle East. Natural mourning is how we feel when a loved one is taken from us.

Secondly, there is a sinful mourning. This is when I refuse to acknowledge that I can be forgiven. Sinful mourning is when I refuse comfort. Sinful mourning is the person who rejoices in his sin and seems to enjoy the fact that he has done something wrong. We are told this is the wrong kind of mourning.

Thirdly, there is a spiritual mourning. This mourning relates up to Almighty God. First of all, this mourning has to be awakened in us. It is the kind of mourning awakened in me 27 years ago as a college student when I realized for the first time that God is perfect and I am imperfect. I said, "I want You to forgive my sin and come into my life." Something was awakened in me. And I began to mourn over my sinfulness.

But you see, mourning doesn't stop there. It's a progression. It grows in us. It has to continue. And so 27 years later I still find myself in times of mourning because now I understand more clearly who God is and I understand more clearly His perfection. Twenty-seven years later I understand more clearly who I am and my imperfection. And so as I stumble along the way, in spite of the fact that I mourned initially when I established the relationship with Him, I still need to be mourning over the fact that I sin and don't live the way He wants me to live. And that sense of continuation ultimately becomes an ever deepening process as I understand more clearly who He is and who I

am. That sense of mourning deepens in my life as I become more sensitive to the fact that He is perfect and I am imperfect.

But, unfortunately, one of the things that happens in our lives is that far too often we begin looking at the sins of other people. As we mourn their sins, we forget our sinfulness. And we become very good at it. We become very adept at it. Sometimes it happens with parents who have unruly children and we say, "Oh, if my kids would just mature so I could get a balanced life back in this home." And when they talk, all they do is talk about their children instead of saying, "My unruly child has become a mirror for me and I recognize my sinfulness and my imperfection in this equation. In spite of the fact that this unruly child is creating all kinds of pain for me, I now mourn my sinfulness because I recognize my reactions are not what they should be and not how Christ would be reacting if He were here."

Sometimes we get caught up in Christian books written by Christian authors who make commentary on the church or on our society and how Christians are not living the way we should be living. We say, "Yes, that's right. The author is right." In our minds we begin hurling at those other people and think critically of them. Maybe we even mourn for them. When this happens, we miss the whole point of the book...it was written to us and for us. But we become so adept at thinking about the sinfulness and imperfection of others that we fail to recognize our own sinfulness. This mourning process means Christ wants us to recognize our imperfection. And instead of being intolerant of others' sinfulness, we should be broken-hearted over it.

COMFORT

When we come to the point of mourning, how are we comforted? It is important to note comfort means to come along-side someone to help them, to love them, and to assist them. It doesn't mean to come along-side someone and say, "Now, now, now, things are going to be all right tomorrow; God bless you," and then go on our way. It means we come alongside them; we love them, help them and assist them. It's as though we lock hands with God and work together with Him because more often than not He shows his comfort through people such as ourselves.

We begin to understand a part of comfort is love. And so this morning if I shared with you that I am struggling with sinfulness in my life, because you love me, you come to comfort me. You would not slap me as some people would, but you help me because you love me. You help me by telling me I need to confess to God and the person I offended. In helping me, you help me understand that God can restore me so there will be joy in the morning. Comfort means you help me to be encouraged that tomorrow life can be better.

Let me make the point by telling you a story out of my life. All too often we look at someone and make a judgment on their life. Instead of encouraging them with comfort, we judge them for some action they have committed and we keep that action in our mind. It can be years later, but we carry it as though it happened yesterday. We talk about their mistake or error they could have committed years ago as though it happened yesterday. Let me give you an example.

My last year in seminary I was older than most of the people in class. In one particular class, the professor would walk up and down the aisles. And as he walked, people would get nervous. At some point he would stop and begin a series of questions of some poor soul. With every question, the hook would go in deeper and deeper. No matter how you answered the questions, the final analysis was that you were stupid and the professor was intelligent. It was humiliating and embarrassing.

Being the competitive person that I am, I decided that if he ever stopped at my desk, he wasn't going to hook me. One day he stopped at my desk and said, "Mr. Vawter," and began his little game. Every question I parried with either another question or, if I needed time, I would ask him to repeat the question to give me time to think up an answer. He never hooked me.

After class some students came and said, "How did you do that?" I didn't have time to answer the question because I was following him across campus to his office. When I knocked on the door, he said, "Come in."

I said, "May I have five minutes with you, please."

He said, "Yes."

I said, "I'm here to ask you one question. Will you pray and ask God if He approves of the way you treat students in class?"

He said, "I beg your pardon?"

I said, "I'm just here to ask if you will pray and ask God if He approves of how you treat students in class? I'm just asking you as one Christian brother to another."

He looked at his watch and said, "You don't have an appointment with me right now, do you? I don't have office hours this hour."

I said, "I asked for five minutes and have only taken two or three. I've got a couple of more minutes coming. I'm just here to ask you a question. Will you pray and ask God if He approves of how you treat us in class? You don't even have to answer me. I'm just asking you to talk to the Heavenly Father."

Well, I don't know if he ever prayed, but I know that he never did that again the rest of the term.

Twelve years later, I'm now sitting on the Board of Directors of our seminary. This professor has left the seminary and has now made application to come back to teach at our seminary. People were saying we should hire him because he has a great name and reputation. I raised my hand and began to tell the story I just told you. Then I stopped and simply said to the president, "I don't think we should hire him and I'll tell you why in private." It dawned on me that I had not gone to comfort him when I went to his office. I had gone to challenge him and I had gone to beat him. And from 1977 to 1990, I had given God no latitude to be working in his life. I was judging him in 1990 for something he had done in 1977.

This is exactly how we treat one another occasionally. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." And that comforting is to be done by us. But frequently we see someone who has committed a sin or who has done something that is un-Christian and years later we will talk about that action as though it was just done. As it relates to the professor, not only had I thought evil of him for all of those years and never given God the opportunity to change him, I had not seen him since that class was over. God may have changed him into a very beautiful, kind, warm and loving person; but I was still hanging onto something that happened in 1977.

Does this help us begin to understand what Jesus means when He says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted?" We are part of God's

process of comforting other people. But we comfort with love, not judgment.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." God wants you and me to go hand-in-hand with Him to be comforting people, to be loving them, to be helping them, to be stimulating them and to help them understand they can be forgiven. Do you mourn today? Do you mourn the way I did back on that cold, rainy day in Oregon when I said, "Jesus Christ, I recognize Your perfection and my imperfection?" I didn't understand those words then, but I understand now that I was beginning to understand them. Or, do you mourn today because you have done something as I did about this professor? I have good news for you. In Matthew 11:28-30, Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your weary souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." That's the God of all comfort. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." Pray with me, please.

"In the privacy of your thoughts this morning, will you evaluate your life? If you are not a Jesus-follower, are you like I was that cold, rainy day as a college student beginning to mourn because I was just beginning to understand that God is perfect and we are imperfect? If so, let me encourage you to take the next step as I did and say, 'Christ, forgive my sin. Come into my life.' Or, maybe you're already a Jesus-follower but you've stumbled along the way as I have pointed out from my own life this morning. I encourage you to mourn, ask forgiveness and be comforted. As we leave, remember the words to the song which remind us of Jesus saying, "Take my yoke upon you. I am gentle and humble, and you will find rest for your weary souls. Amen."

CHAPTER THREE

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

Matthew 5:5

Meek is not Weak

January 27, 1991

You and I live in a world that is frequently based on aggression and assertiveness. We are being told to be assertive if we want to succeed. But Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek (or the gentle), for they shall inherit the earth." In one of His only self-portraits, Jesus showed us Who He is when He said, "I am meek and lowly." Jesus also said, "What is the profit of man if he gains the world, but loses his own soul?" And yet, our society seems to be saying, "I want to gain the whole world. I will worry about my soul later." This contrast drives us to an issue of priority. We realize that Jesus is telling us something different from what our society says.

As we reflect on the first two Beatitudes – "Blessed are those who are poor in spirit" (Blessed are those who realize that they are spiritually impoverished) and "Blessed are those who mourn" (Blessed are those who are sorry because of their sinfulness) – He is asking us to take a self-look. But the Beatitude, "**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE MEEK (gentle), FOR THEY SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH,**" asks us to do more than take a self-look. It asks us to evaluate our relationships with other people.

When we considered "being poor in spirit" and "mourning," we saw a relationship with two parties – God and ourselves. But being meek (gentle) brings three parties into the equation – God, ourselves and others. It's very important for us to understand the word "meek" is much better translated "gentleness." The word "meek" meant one of three things in Jesus' day. One, soothing medicine. We understand that. We've all benefited from soothing medicine. Two, gentle breeze. On the hot, summer Minnesota days, we've all felt the benefits of a gentle, cool breeze. Third, a colt that was broken so it responds to every command of its owner and master. The most common usage is the third. Thus, we understand the person who is truly gentle is the person who has allowed himself/herself to be broken by God, the ultimate master.

It is helpful to understand what gentleness is not. First of all, gentleness is not niceness. We all know people who are nice by disposition. They never say anything wrong; they never say anything harsh; they never say anything unkind. But that's not necessarily a spiritual quality. It can be a product of environment or a genetic quality. They are just that way by disposition. Secondly, meekness or gentleness is not a weakness of character or personality. Sometimes we think the person who is gentle or meek is weak of character. This is not what Jesus is talking about. Thirdly, the gentleness Jesus is referring to is not the person who is easygoing without any conviction. There are some people who are so easygoing they don't stand for anything. Fourthly, Jesus was not describing the person who says, "Peace at any price." Such people have no convictions. Fifthly, when Jesus said, "Blessed are the gentle." He was not saying, "Blessed are the timid." To be gentle as Jesus was describing does not mean timidity.

Rather, the attitudes we should have are these: first of all towards God, then towards ourselves, and thirdly towards others. To be gentle means I understand God is perfect, needs to be honored because of Who He is, and wants to control my life. And if I want to be on the path towards being gentle as Jesus said, "Blessed are the gentle," I need to understand the first part of the equation is God. I understand He is perfect. I understand He is to be honored and I understand my life will never be what it should be except when He is in control of it.

Far too often, we evangelical Christians think we have a corner on truth. We argue "Biblical truth." We are very quick to confront anyone who doesn't agree with us and tell

them they are wrong. But having head knowledge and being able to articulate that head knowledge can have very little to do with my quality of life. When I come to understand God is perfect, is to be honored and wants to control my life, then I begin to understand what the pathway is to becoming a person about whom Jesus would say, "Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth."

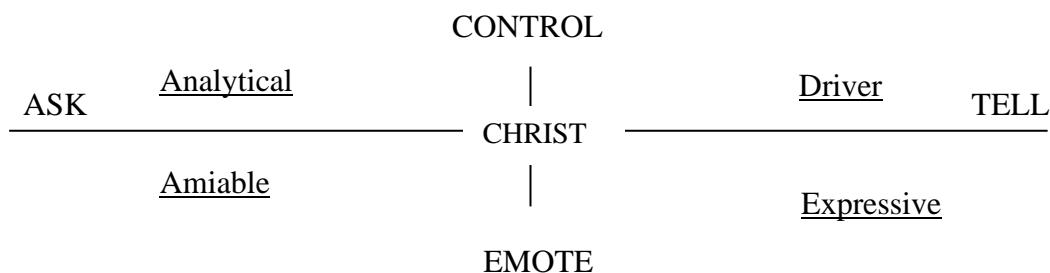
Not only does the gentle person have a proper attitude towards God, but he or she has the proper attitude towards himself or herself. And we begin to understand that if God is perfect, we are imperfect. If God is to be honored, then I'm the one who honors Him. Because He is perfect, He needs to be in control of my life. That's a tough admission for many of us. And yet the pathway to gentleness not only includes the proper attitude towards God Almighty, it includes the proper attitude towards myself. The proper attitude towards myself is that sometimes I am improper because I am imperfect and sinful...and need Him to control my life.

Finally, it's a proper attitude towards others. I begin to understand I need other people in my life to show me who I am. I need other people in my life to confront me. I need other people in my life to love and care for me. Suddenly, when I realize this need for other people, I begin to understand how God needs to control me so I will treat other people with gentleness as Christ would treat them. And that's a definition of gentleness – to understand how God wants to control me and to ultimately treat other people as Christ would treat them if He were here on earth in the twentieth century. That's what Jesus was talking about when He said, "Blessed are those who are meek" (gentle).

A DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESSION

This helps us understand a progression in the Beatitudes. The first two Beatitudes are vertical in that they relate to God. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." I realize that I am spiritually impoverished and cannot be the kind of person I want to be and God wants me to be unless I understand I am spiritually impoverished. I cannot be Christly except that I give Him control of my life. "Blessed are those who mourn." I cannot be the kind of person I want to be until I come to the point where I genuinely am sorry for the sins that I commit. The third Beatitude relates not only to God but also to my horizontal relationships. So the person who is truly gentle is the person who understands his/her need to have God in control. And out of God's control comes an ability to treat people the way Christ would treat them.

As we consider application of this truth and recognize this lifestyle is a progression, we notice four different personality styles: Analytical, Driver, Amiable and Expressive. Psychologists tell us that all of us fall into one of these four categories:¹



Christ is in the middle as the perfect personality. When Christ walked on the earth,

¹ Merrill, David. Social Styles. Denver, Colorado.

He embodied all of the perfect components of each of these personality styles. He did not embody the imperfect elements of any of these styles. In other words, the perfect personality is part Analytical, part Driver, part Amiable, and part Expressive. Because you and I aren't perfect personalities, we have imperfect components.

The Analytical is one who simply is always asking questions or needs one more bit of detail before making up his or her mind. The Analytical can be a negative or pessimistic person. In fact, you have probably heard the story about the Analytical who was asked, "Are you an optimist?" And he answered, "Yes, I am an optimist. I believe today is going to be better than tomorrow will be." As you look at the grid above, you realize the Analytical controls by asking.

The Amiable person is one who frequently never takes a stand for anything. Because they are so committed to relationships, they never want to harm anyone's feelings. They never want to run the risk of hurting a relationship, so they never say "Yea" or "Nay," "Yes" or "No." They make everyone feel good because they never tell us what they think. They emote and ask.

The Expressive personality makes a great used car salesperson. Everything is positive. Frequently they are not in touch with their feelings while ignoring the negative. They are always able to make something positive out of what's negative because they are always talking. They emote and tell.

And finally the Driver. The Driver frequently is a task-oriented person. Drivers can run over or ignore people's feelings. Drivers control and tell.

On the diagram, Jesus is in the middle as the perfect personality. Regardless of what our style is, as we grow in meekness, we will become more like Him. This does not mean our style disappears. Rather, it means the weaknesses of our style disappear as more of Christ's perfect personality is reflected through us.

FURTHER EXPLANATION

The Analytical is the person who always is exact and figuring the cost. The Analytical needs to learn to be teachable. The Analytical needs to learn to trust other people. As the Analytical becomes more meek, he/she won't ask as many questions. Think of Jesus. Sometimes He just gave Himself to people. Sometimes He just trusted them. And as the Analytical becomes more gentle and consequently is more Christly in how he or she treats other people, he/she will be teachable.

The Amiable is always so nice, he/she never wants to hurt anyone's feelings. And as the Amiable personality becomes more gentle, they will allow Christ to control them so that they are willing to confront other people. Amiables are the people who will stay on the phone for ten or fifteen minutes when someone calls at dinner time to sell something because they don't want to run the risk of hurting some stranger's feelings. The Amiable, as they become more like Christ, as they move to the center of the continuum, will allow Christ to control them and change them to the point that they are willing to say, "This is what I believe. This is not what I believe. I agree with you. I disagree with you. No, you can't do that. No, I won't go with you." They will always say it diplomatically. They will always say it politely. They will always say it nicely. But they will learn to say it.

The Expressive doesn't always tell the truth but the Expressive is always talking. And the Expressive frequently responds to conflict by laughing it off, by saying tomorrow is going to be better, and ignores the conflict and the pain of today. As the Expressive personality moves to the middle of the continuum and is in the process of becoming more gentle, they will become more truthful with themselves and with how they feel. They will become more truthful with other people, and allow other people to suffer. The Expressive person is the person who sometimes tries to joke people's pain away because they are not truthful

with themselves. And yet, as we look at Jesus Christ, we recognize that Jesus was the One who was willing to mourn. He wept over the death of His friend. He wept over Jerusalem. He understood the pain of other people.

Drivers need to realize that as task-oriented people they sometimes are unaware of other people and their feelings. Drivers need to be aware that when conflict arises, they can become aggressive and controlling. As Drivers move to the center of the continuum to become more Christly, they need to talk less, listen more, slow down, and realize other people have feelings.

You see, all of us—whether we are Drivers, Expressives, Amiables or Analyticals—have committed our lives to Christ and want to be Christly in how we treat other people. But unless we have other people telling us about our excesses and blind spots, we don't realize there are areas of our lives where Christ isn't in control. The Analytical needs someone to tell him to relax and enjoy life, to let some things go, to not always have to be right. God has given many of you Amiables such wisdom and keen insights. The rest of us need to have you becoming more gentle, more meek and more Christly, to point out to us the areas of our lives where we are not Christly in our relationships with other people. Just as the Driver can be excessive by being harsh with people, so the Amiable can be excessive by not telling the truth. Just as the Analytical can be all alone in life because he or she is always wanting answers to everything, so the Expressive can be alone in life because he or she is talking positively so much that the people around them will gravitate to people who will speak the truth – even if it hurts.

You see, it all relates back to the fact that Jesus Christ was the perfect personality when He walked here on earth, embodying the perfect components of each of these four personality styles, but not embodying the imperfect components. And unfortunately, as imperfect people, we embody both the perfect and the imperfect and that's why we need each other. The personal application is very simple. Invite other people into your life. Be willing to confront people, to help people and be willing to be confronted and helped. We all need help. We all need to have a better picture of who we are. And as we have that picture, then we must allow Christ to control our lives so that we will be in the process of becoming meek.

Inherit the earth? To simply rule the world with Christ one day. It's in contradistinction to how our world lives. We want it today. But Christ says, "Blessed are those who are meek," for one day, we shall rule the world with Christ.

"Lord, for those of us who are Drivers, it's easy for us to understand the excesses of the other three personalities. For those of us who are Analyticals, it's easy for us to understand the excesses of the other three personalities. The same is true for the Amiables and the Expressives. But out of this, help us to understand that Your Son Jesus Christ was the perfect personality. Although our humanity will prevent us from becoming perfect on this earth; nevertheless, more of Christ's likeness can shine through our lives if we commit ourselves anew to becoming men and women who are meek or gentle. So wherever we are in terms of these categories, please bring people into our lives who will help us understand who we are so we can give You more of our lives. We pray this because we want to be like Christ more than anything else. Amen."

CHAPTER FOUR

*"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst
after righteousness for they shall be filled."*

Matthew 5:6

Life's Number Two Priority

February 3, 1991

This past Friday our staff had a half-day retreat at St. Paul Bible College. After our meetings, we watched a basketball game being played as part of a national tournament. Probably the best player on the floor was a young man from a California team. He was a little bit beyond anyone else in terms of ability. And yet he moaned and complained about most of the calls the referees made. If an opponent would brush against him, he would look at the ref and wonder why he didn't get a foul called. As I watched, I wanted to stop him and say, "Young man, this game of basketball is a physical game. It's not as physical as hockey, but it's a physical game. It's not for the faint-hearted, so quit moaning about what's going on because it's not becoming of a man of your talent." I thought, why is it that this young man would work so hard, practice so many hours, get in such good shape, be so good, and yet not be as good as he could be because he spent far too much time moaning to the referees? It was enigmatic as I watched it happen.

This young man's court behavior relates to the Beatitude, "**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST AFTER RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR THEY SHALL BE FILLED.**" This Beatitude helps us understand our responsibility of being filled with Him and being all that He wants us to be. Just as the young basketball player could not always look to the referee for help but needed to do certain things on the court for himself, so we, too, must take responsibility for our personal desire to know God. As we watch the development of the Beatitudes, we see them moving from a personal relationship with God Almighty where we look at ourselves and say, "I need Christ in my life," to a point of deeper maturity where we see more clearly who God is, His perfection and our imperfection. The result is our being mournful as we recognize that we fall short of how He wants us to live. Once we get this relationship and understanding firmly established, the Beatitudes begin to move us into looking at our human relationships as well. When Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek," He refers to qualities He wants to build into our lives which will affect the relationships we have on a horizontal plane. As we recognize these two important relationships, we ask, "How do I sustain and maintain them?" Jesus in His infinite wisdom gives us the answer in the fourth Beatitude when we read, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled."

Notice that Jesus did not say, "Blessed are those who possess righteousness," "Blessed are those who have righteousness" or "Blessed are those who are righteous." He said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness." With these words we begin to understand if we are going to be the kind of people God wants us to be and to have the kind of relationship He wants us to have with Him, we must begin a life-long process of hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

HUNGRY ACHIEVERS?

I was talking to a psychologist friend of mine over the Christmas season. Dr. Ray Burwick lives in Birmingham and called to wish me a holiday greeting. In the course of the conversation, he said something that is helpful for all of us but especially to us achievers and over-achievers who think the end-all of life is to be achievement-oriented. He said, "It is a rare breed who is achievement-oriented and yet pursues God full-bore." This is exactly what Christ is saying when He says, "Blessed are those who hunger and

thirst after righteousness." We should be full-bore about God. And if that means we must set aside our achievement orientation in order to know God better, then we need to set it aside. Dr. Burwick, who spends most of his time working with and helping Christian people, says it is the rare breed of achievement-oriented person who pursues God with the kind of intensity with which they tend to their achievements on a human sphere.

As we look at this issue of "hungering and thirsting after righteousness," there are two mistakes we make of which we need to be aware. For those of us who are new to the faith or immature in our faith, we tend to look at other people and think we could never match their spiritual maturity or be as Godly as they are. The result is that we become discouraged because we have judged ourselves based on other people. In fact, someone said it this way, "It's as though we re-write this Beatitude to say 'Blessed are those who have cleaned up their act adequately so that they can be accepted by God.'" That's not the case, though. Jesus is saying regardless of where we are in our spiritual development, He wants us to be falling more deeply in love with Him and to pursue Him with more vigor; this is putting ourselves on the path of hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

Conversely, there is a second mistake. Some of us who have been around the Christian faith for awhile look at some who have been around the faith for a short time and assume we have developed spiritually just a little more than they have. We begin to become self-righteous, as though we have possessed all that God wants us to possess, instead of realizing that He still wants us to be in the process of hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

TO BE RIGHT WITH GOD-FOUR PICTURES

With this in mind, let's consider the goal of righteousness. Simply stated, righteousness means to be "right with God." As we consider the subject of hungering and thirsting after righteousness, we could re-phrase it to say, "hunger and thirst after being right with God." And I suggest to you this plays itself out in at least four ways.

The first area is simply to know God, to have established a relationship with Him, to know Him enough to love Him, which allows me to trust Him, which allows me to obey Him. When Jesus prayed His last prayer in John 17 about knowing God before He went out to be crucified, He was praying we would come to the point where we would know Him well enough to love Him, and love Him enough to trust Him so we will obey Him.

Secondly, I come to the point where I am relating my life to God on a daily, weekly or monthly basis and giving Him control of more areas of my life. The person who has become self-sufficient and self-righteous – that is, the person who acts as if he has no more room to grow in his faith – is the person who is no longer hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

Robert McQuilken recently resigned as President of Columbia Bible College and Seminary. His wife of 25 years now has Alzheimer's disease. The Board of the school brought someone into their home to take care of Mrs. McQuilken so he could continue serving as President. But the disease has progressed to the point where he made the decision to give up his ministry career in order to serve his wife. Let me share what he wrote about his wife's illness:

"Muriel still knows us three years later. She cannot comprehend much, nor express many thoughts, and those not for sure. But she knows whom she loves and she lives in happy oblivion to almost everything else. She is such a delight to me. I don't have to care for her, I get to care for her. One blessing is the way she is teaching me so much about love: for example, God's love. She picks flowers outside – anyone's flowers-and fills the house with them."

"During the last two years, it became increasingly difficult to keep Muriel at home. As soon as I left for my office, she would take out after me barefooted. With me, she was content. Without me, she was distressed. Sometimes terror-stricken. The walk to the school was a mile round-trip. She would make that trip as many as ten times a day. Sometimes at night when I helped her undress, I found bloody feet because she had walked barefooted. When I told our family doctor, he choked up. He said simply, 'such love.' Then after a moment he continued, 'I have a theory that the characteristics developed across the years come out at times like these.' I wish I loved God like that. Desperate to be near Him at all times. Thus, Muriel teaches me, day-by-day. To relate my life to God is simply to have this as my heart's desire. I wish I loved God like that. Desperate to be near Him at all times."

Mrs. McQuilken's love is a beautiful picture of "hungering and thirsting after righteousness." The reality is that you have to live with someone for 25 years to have that kind of love. This is why we must realize "hungering and thirsting after righteousness" is a life-long process. We don't just establish the relationship with God and then have righteousness to the fullest extent possible.

Thirdly, to be right with God is to walk in the light and avoid darkness. We ponder that and say, "H'mm, what is the light of the world? What is darkness?" Then we remember the Bible tells us Jesus is the light of the world. Thus, anything that Jesus would do is the light of the world. Anything that Jesus wouldn't do is the darkness of the world. Anything that would bring a person closer to Christ is the light of the world. Anything that would take a person farther away from Christ would be the darkness of the world. Instead of creating incredibly complex lists for ourselves, we should be motivated by this thought: "I don't want anything in my life that will take me away from Christ. I want everything in my life that will move me closer to Christ." And yet, some of us will spend all our time trying to figure out whether something is right or wrong, or being critical of some other person's lifestyle rather than saying, "For my life's goal, I want to walk in the light as Christ is in the light. I don't want to walk in the darkness."

Fourth, to be right with God is to be like Christ; to walk in integrity. Jesus is integrity. If we are going to live lives that are right with God, this demands that we be men and women of integrity. Part of integrity is to be pure in our desires. Isn't it interesting that Jesus had a lot to say about our minds? Far too often we think if we have proper actions we are living the way God wants us to live. But Jesus said a lot about how we think and feel. Some of us are clever enough to be one person on the outside but an entirely different person on the inside. For example, I could smile at you and say, "Good morning, God bless you. I trust you are doing well," when on the inside I am thinking, "What a jerk. I can't wait till he/she gets out of here." You would never know what I am thinking; but God knows what I am thinking. And He is saying to be right with Him is not only to have the right actions but also the right thoughts and feelings.

The Apostle Paul gives us a picture to help us understand the concept. He says, "I have been crucified with Christ, and I no longer live but Christ lives in me, and the life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God." Simply stated, to live this life means there is less of myself in my life; there is more of Christ in my life. As I become more Christ-like, He is allowed to express Himself in my thoughts and feelings as well as my actions.

THE VALUE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Let's look at the value of righteousness. Proverbs 11:28 says, "Whoever trusts in his riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf." Proverbs 16:8 says, "Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice." And yet what does our society suggest to us? The one with the most toys or biggest bank account wins. We judge

people based on how much they have. Along with you, I read the Business Section virtually every day. But wouldn't it be something if the newspaper had a Character Section? Just as we read articles on people who get to the top in the business world, we would read feature articles on men and women of Character. The issue of these Proverbs is exactly that – "Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice." You and I live in a world of achievers and are achievers. We live in a world that says "get, acquire and build." It's so easy to lose sight of the fact that God is more interested in our Christ-like character than He is interested in how much we build. Thus, "Better a little with righteousness than much gain with injustice."

The Apostle Paul also points out the responsibility to be pursuing righteousness. In Romans 6:12-13, he says, "Therefore, do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies so that you would obey its evil desires. Do not offer the parts of your body to sin as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life and offer the parts of your body to Him as instruments of righteousness." Notice the phrase used twice – "offer the parts of your body-not as instruments of unrighteousness, but as instruments of righteousness." You and I have a choice. We can either offer the parts of our bodies as instruments of unrighteousness or as instruments of righteousness. There is not much in between.

Now, when you consider this, what do you think? The mind is part of our body, is it not? Thus, how we think and feel are part of our mind. This picture gives us a clearer perspective. To offer parts of my body would not only include my activity but also my mind and how I think and feel. Thus, I am either in a process of offering parts of my body to unrighteousness or I am offering parts of my body to righteousness. And it's our responsibility. But too many of us are like the basketball player on Friday afternoon who has made the team, who is on the first string, who was better than anyone else on the court, but was not or is not all that he could become as a basketball player because he didn't give one-hundred percent. He was always looking for the easy way out by looking to the referee.

So I look at some of you and say, "Well, I'm doing better than you are." And you look at me and say, "Well, I'm doing better than you are." And we lose sight of the fact that the issue is not to be looking at one another but rather to be presenting the members of our bodies to righteousness.

TRUE HUNGER

Understanding righteousness helps us understand "hunger and thirst." If Jesus were talking about physical bread, He would tell us to go for the whole loaf not just a slice of the loaf.

In World War I, the British were fighting against the Turks in the Palestinian desert. The Major who lead this particular battle writes about being in the searing sun:

"Our heads ached, our eyes became bloodshot and dim in the blinding glare. Our tongues began to swell. Our lips turned to a purplish black and burst. Those who dropped out of the column were never seen again. But the desperate force battled on to Sharia. There were wells at Sharia, and had we been unable to take the place by nightfall, thousands of us were doomed to die of thirst. We fought that day as men fight for their lives. We entered Sharia's station on the heels of the retreating Turks. The first objects which met our view were the great stone cisterns full of cold, clear drinking water. It took four hours before the last man had his drink of water. And I believe that day we all learned our first real Bible lesson on that march to the wells. If such

were our thirst for God and for righteousness, for His will in our lives, a consuming, all-embracing, preoccupying desire, how rich in God we would be."

It was in this geographical context that Jesus said "hunger and thirst after righteousness." Now as I have pondered this, I have thought, "How do I know whether or not I truly hunger and thirst after righteousness as opposed to being as the basketball player on Friday afternoon?" So I thought about this: What if, when I finish this series on the Beatitudes, I just start over and preach the same series? I'll do more research, but as soon as we get to the end, we'll start all over. Some of you would come up to me that first Sunday and say, "You just preached this series. Why are you doing it again?" Now, you know you would. But think with me for a moment. Are any of us so wise that after having listened to eight half-hour sermons on the Beatitudes we could say we have plumbed the depths of those Beatitudes and now are living them to the fullest? Absolutely not!

You see, what happens is that sometimes truth is put in front of us, and our immediate response is to say, "I've heard that before. I don't need to hear it again." Or, someone will come to us and say, "May I point out something to you that I don't know if it's right or not, but could I just point it out to you?" And our immediate response is to become defensive and to say, "Well, I know that." But it seems to me that if we are really hungering and thirsting after righteousness, if someone comes to present something to us, instead of resisting it, our initial response would be to listen to see if there is anything else that we could learn about God and our relationship with Him.

I was wrestling with this this week with a pastor friend of mine, asking his advice on how to express the concept. And he started laughing. He said, "One day I gave a sermon illustration and I used the person's name." In the sermon he said, "I share this illustration with permission." It happened to be a sermon on gentleness. But the most interesting thing happened after the sermon. A man came up to him and literally pushed him on the chest and said, "You should not have used that person's name in the sermon." He heard...but he did not hear. The sermon was on gentleness...but this man was not being gentle as he made his point to the pastor. This is exactly what we frequently do with bits of truth about God that should help us understand Him more clearly. If our immediate response is to resist instead of being open, that may well be a sign that we are not hungering and thirsting after righteousness as much as we think we are.

A PARADOX

Finally, Jesus says if we hunger and we thirst, we shall be filled. This is a paradox. It's an absolute and unequivocal paradox because the more we are filled, the hungrier we get. The more we come to know God, the more we want to know God. And it's a never-ending process. I don't know how to explain the concept except to use the analogy of my own marriage. For a marriage course that Susan and I are teaching, we sat down and thought through 23-1/2 years of marriage. We did it in five-year blocks with two columns-positive and negative. In the first five years, we both talked about how we had to learn to adjust to one another. But by the time we got to the tenth year, I said, "Do you notice that we have quit using the pronoun 'I', and I've had to learn to adjust to you? We've started using the pronoun 'we.' And now as we get closer to 25 years together and are talking about the second 25 years, we know a lot more about love than when we first got married. And we're talking about how we want to fall more deeply in love the next 25 years." This is not profound, but the more I come to understand her and love her, the more I want to come to understand her and love her. It's a paradox. Jesus says if we hunger and thirst after righteousness, we will be filled; but the more we are filled, the more we hunger and thirst after righteousness. And that's why Jesus, I believe, was so critical of the Pharisees-because they acted as if they knew it all and didn't have to search

and grow anymore. And woe to us who have been Christians 25 years or so and think we have no more to learn and no longer "hunger and thirst after righteousness."

"Father, forgive us for we have sinned. Forgive us because as achievers we think more about our achievements in society than we do about our character. I pray that You would use these simple but profound words of Christ today, 'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness,' to motivate us to be men and women who genuinely and without equivocation hunger and thirst. We pray this in His great name. Amen."

CHAPTER FIVE

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

Matthew 5:7

Mercy...Attitude Precedes Action

February 17, 1991

Imagine you are sitting in a room somewhere in Saudi Arabia and across the table from you is Saddam Hussein. You have a weapon at your side and you have a Bible. What would you think? What would you say? What would you do?

If you can't deal with this because it's too far-fetched, go 90 miles south to Rochester. Tomorrow you are sitting in a room in a federal penitentiary and Jim Bakker comes in. You, and you alone, decide whether the time he has served is the entirety of his sentence or if he serves more time. What would you think? What would you do? What would you say?

Maybe that's too far-fetched. So imagine tomorrow in your office there's someone with whom you have been feuding. You have initiated a time together to resolve the conflict because you are sincere in wanting peace. But he or she is demeaning to you, is arrogant, is surly, and has no interest in resolving the conflict. What would you think? What would you do? What would you say?

Finally, what would you do if you were me, father of a then 18-year-old daughter. One night while she was walking down the street, out from the dark shadows came a man who jumped her from the back and pinned her arms to her sides. As our Stephanie recounted the incident to her mother and me, she said she was so frightened she couldn't even scream. Somehow she finally wrestled herself from his grasp except for his tight grip on one forearm. She turned around, looked him straight in the eye, and still was so frightened that she couldn't scream. She somehow broke loose of him and was able to duck into an alley and get into her apartment. And so you get a phone call from your daughter telling you this. What would you think? What would you say? What would you do?

Meeting with Saddam Hussein or Jim Bakker may not be reality, but what happened to our daughter or what might happen tomorrow at your office are realities. That's where we live. Jesus said, "**BLESSED ARE THE MERCIFUL, FOR THEY SHALL RECEIVE MERCY.**" It is important to understand the context and world in which Jesus said this. It was a religious world, but in many ways, it was a vicious world. For example, there was a rabbi about the time of Jesus who said, "There is joy before God when those who provoke Him perish from the world."

Just a few years before Jesus was born, a Roman soldier named Hillarian in Alexandria, Egypt, wrote home to his wife, "Alice, warmest greetings. I want you to know that we are still in Alexandria. Don't worry if when the others all go home I stay on in Alexandria. I beg you, take care of the little child. And as soon as we get our pay, I will send it up to you." Now his wife is pregnant with another child. "If, good luck to you, you bear a child, if it's a boy, let it live. If it's a girl, throw it out. You told Aphrodesius to tell me, 'Don't forget me'. How could I possibly forget you? Don't worry." Here's a man's love letter to his wife telling her not to worry, he couldn't forget her, nor would he forget her. In the same letter he says, "If the child is a girl; throw it out." That's the kind of society to which Jesus came and to which He said, "Blessed are those who are merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

WHAT IS MERCY?

The mercy about which Jesus was talking is not some cheap sentimentality. Rather this mercy is a combination of love, sympathy and compassion. Love, sympathy and

compassion when combined together move to solve someone's problem or to relieve suffering. But we must understand this issue of mercy brings us face-to-face with some personal questions that we must ask ourselves because God looks on the inside while you and I look on the outside. Before we consider being merciful and whether or not we are men and women of mercy, we've got to take a moment to ask ourselves, "Are we on the inside what we portray ourselves to be on the outside?" Maybe the way to ask the question is this: We need to understand the difference between being and doing. If I'm a doer only, then all I have to worry about is my behavior. If I'm only concerned about my life on the outside, then I'm only concerned about my behavior and I can always manipulate my behavior to make you think what I want you to think of me. But when I focus my attention on my being, then I am focusing my attention on who I am on the inside. The Bible says God is concerned with what we are on the inside. He looks at us from the inside and at the outside.

Maybe another way to say it is that we need to understand the difference between our attitudes and our knowledge. There are many in Christendom who say, "I am somebody and I am the kind of Christian I want to be because of the knowledge I have about the Bible, Christian books, Christian things and Christian people." If you don't understand what I am talking about, let me remind you of the last time someone asked you if you knew and were acquainted with their favorite Christian musician, Christian singer, Christian television preacher or Christian author. And if by chance you didn't know that person, the nonverbal response to you may well have been, "Well, my, I thought you were a Christian."

It's my opinion that in Christendom we are focusing more attention on what we know about the Bible and Christian things than we are focusing our attention on our attitudes which is what we are from the inside. Our attitudes are what we think and feel, both when things are going well for us and when things are going poorly for us.

Finally, we can make the comparison between character and action. You and I can do the right actions. You and I can do the right actions for the wrong reasons. It may be nothing more than learned behavior. And some of us, as I said before, are smart enough and clever enough to cause other people to think that we are doing the right thing; but when we focus on character, then we are focusing on who we are from the inside out. We're talking about whether or not we are Christly and developing Christ-like lives. Thus, as we talk about mercy but before we talk about how we are to act to one another, we have to ask ourselves the questions, "What am I as it relates to my being? Who am I as it relates to my attitudes? And who am I as it relates to my character development?" God looks on the inside. You and I look on the outside.

IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

Now there are some necessary concepts we need to understand. How does grace relate to mercy or how does mercy relate to grace? And how does mercy relate to love and how does mercy relate to forgiveness? Let me say it in simple terms. Grace and mercy relate to one another like this: grace deals with the whole problem. Grace is the macro solution to the problem so that when God looked down on the world and saw our trouble because we are a sinful people in a sinful world, His grace dealt with the whole problem; He sent His son. But God's mercy deals with the symptoms of the problem; mercy deals with the misery caused by the larger problem. And so out of His grace, God sent His son to deal with the whole problem. But out of His mercy, God deals with each of us in a personal way. Grace is the macro solution and mercy is the micro solution. Grace takes care of the whole problem for the whole world, but mercy takes care of my problem on an individual basis.

Having said that, how does mercy relate to love and how does mercy relate to

forgiveness? Most of you are aware that in the New Testament there are three words that describe love as God would want us to understand it. The first word "agape" describes God's love as a love that simply gives and asks nothing in return. The second word "phileo," from which we get the word Philadelphia, City of Brotherly Love, is the kind of love that I feel for my brother and the reciprocal love and relationship that we have with one another. It's a give-and-take kind of love, whereas "agape" love is simply a love that gives. The third word "eros," from which we get the word erotic, means you have something I want and I'll take it. It doesn't make any difference whether or not you give it to me. I'll take it because I am selfish. The only one of those three words that describes God in its entirety is "agape" love which means He gives to us and asks nothing in return. "Agape" love relates to mercy which relates to forgiveness.

Well, if God is that kind of lover who would give to the world and ask nothing in return, from where does mercy come? The Apostle Paul helps us when he said, "God is rich in mercy because of His love." All of a sudden we begin to understand that mercy comes from love. And taking it one step farther, forgiveness flows from mercy.

So this morning if I can convey myself to you as a man of forgiveness, you have every right to say to me, "Tell us about your mercy. Tell us about your acts of mercy." And if I present myself to you as a man of mercy, you have every right to say, "Tell us about your acts of love." If I present myself to you as a person of love, you have every right to say, "Tell us about your acts of grace." It's very important for us to understand we can't take this quality of mercy and delineate it from the others because forgiveness flows out of mercy, which flows out of love, which flows out of the grace of God.

A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

Now back to my questions. You're sitting in a room with Saddam Hussein, with a weapon at your side and a Bible on the table. What would you think? What would you say? What would you do? You're in Rochester with Jim Bakker. What would you think? What would you say? What would you do? You're at your office tomorrow to solve a problem with someone and they're surly in their treatment toward you and disrespectful of your initiating the time together. What will you say? What will you think? What will you do? Your then 18-year-old daughter calls you because someone has stepped out of the shadows and changed your lives forever because of the fear it brings to you. What would you say? What would you do? What would you think? Well, I'll tell you what I thought. I wanted to kill someone. No questions asked, no equivocation—just find his throat and squeeze it. But then God began to work in my life. God began to deal with me and began to show me His love and His mercy in a new way. I began to feel broken-hearted for this phantom person who stepped out of the shadows, who is so deranged and so in need of sound, human relationships, that he would do that to another human being.

God worked in my life so that when I was visiting Stephanie this summer, I said, "Steff, now that it's dark, let's drive that neighborhood to see if you might spot that guy." And she said, "Dad, we don't need your kind of justice." I said, "I'm not talking about justice alone. I'm talking about mercy. We're talking about a human being, created in the image of God, for whom Christ died who is not living what God created him to be. He needs help. Therefore, if we could find him, and I could hold him long enough for you to get the police, we can bring justice to this situation, but we can also bring mercy to it because we can get him help to the point where he can live the kind of life God wants him to live." You see, that's not easy to say. That's not easy to do when someone jumps your daughter. But Jesus said, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy."

So how do you view Jim Bakker? How do you view Saddam Hussein? A good test to self-apply is simply to ask ourselves the question, "How do I respond when I see

someone being something other than what God created them to be?" I'm not talking about sentimentality; I'm not talking about a lack of justice; I'm not talking about not having a military; I'm not talking about not having a police force; and, I'm not talking about not having laws. When Jesus was moving south to Jerusalem to die for the sins of the world, He wept over Jerusalem because those people were not being what God created them to be. But if when we see people in need, suffering, struggling and not being what God wants them to be our attitude is one of harshness or thinking, "Well, I would never do that" or "I've never done it," that's a good indication that we are probably not experiencing and manifesting as much of the mercy of God as we should be. Again let me say mercy is not cheap sentimentality; mercy is not doing away with justice. Mercy is love, compassion and sympathy combining to relieve the suffering and the need in someone's life.

MERCY IS IMPORTANT

Having said all of that we need to understand mercy is a necessary characteristic the Bible explains. Hosea preached and ministered in a society that was very religious. If we could go back in history, stand on the sidelines and watch what was going on, we would watch a group of people who had all their religiosity and religion down pat. We would be impressed with all they were doing in terms of religious symbols. But for the most part, it was just an external act because they were so corrupt that even some of the priests of that day were guilty of murdering people. So Hosea, speaking on behalf of God, says to this group of people who are religious but have lost sight of what is right, "I desire mercy not sacrifice. I desire a knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." Through Hosea, God is saying, "I'm not interested in your externals. I want to know who you are on the inside. Are you men and women of mercy?"

Jesus picks up the same thought when He says in Matthew 19:13, "Go and learn what this means." Could you imagine Jesus Christ here in physical form this morning saying, "Go and learn what this means?" We would all snap to attention. If Jesus feels so strongly about what He is going to tell us that He says "Go and learn what this means," we would pay attention. He continues, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice, for I have come not to call the righteous, but sinners. I desire mercy, not sacrifice." He's talking about a life that comes from the inside. The religious people of Jesus' day had the externals down. But He was concerned about the inside. Therefore, He said to them, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." I wonder how He would say it two thousand years later at Wayzata Free Church. I wonder if He might not say, "I desire mercy rather than you singing in the choir; I desire mercy rather than your leading a People-Builder Group; I desire mercy rather than your teaching a Sunday School class; I desire mercy rather than your preaching sermons every Sunday." We must make certain our spiritual life emanates from the inside.

We all are tempted to fall into the trap of the externals and lose sight of the fact that Christ is interested in what's going on inside. By inside, I am suggesting He wants us to be men and women of mercy. And mercy is when love, compassion and sympathy combine together to solve the problems and relieve the suffering in people's lives.

A good test of whether or not we have mercy is what happens the next time someone says something to us that we don't like. I don't know who did this, so I'm not gossiping in any way. It happened while I was praying a few weeks ago during Operation Desert Storm. I simply prayed, "Lord, help us to remember that Christ died for Saddam Hussein as well as the rest of us." It was reported to me later that some people got up, walked out and were vocal enough so that people sitting around them could hear that they didn't like my prayer. A good test of whether or not we are merciful is when someone says something we don't like. If we respond with harshness instead of softness, if we respond with harshness and a judgmental attitude instead of a sense of gentleness, we may well lack mercy. A person of mercy who thought I was wrong to pray for Saddam Hussein wouldn't stomp out and make a scene out of it. They would come at an appropriate time

and say, "I think your thinking is wrong. May we discuss this issue."

Now let me say this gently but firmly. One of the sins of the Christian church in America today is that we are much too harsh. When someone disagrees with what we think or say, we are much too quick to come down with a judgmental, harsh attitude instead of with an attitude of gentleness and mercy. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who are merciful for they shall receive mercy." You see, there's a guaranteed benefit here. Frequently throughout the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks in duplicates: "You will be judged as you judge. You will be forgiven as you forgive. You will be granted mercy as you extend mercy." If we allow God to work in our lives by taking the situations in our lives where we are harsh, unkind and un-Christian and remake us we have mercy towards people who hurt and injure us, He will extend mercy to our lives. He extends this mercy from Himself and from people with whom we interact on a regular basis. The closer we move to God, the closer He moves to us. The closer we move to God in mercy, the closer He moves to us in mercy

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy." Mercy is love, sympathy and compassion combined together to solve problems in people's lives and to relieve the suffering in their lives. Mercy is not harsh. Mercy is not cheap sentimentality. Mercy is justice. Mercy is love.

"Father, forgive us for being men and women who are not as merciful as we should be. And use these profound words from Jesus, 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy' to help us evaluate our lives as to whether or not we are men and women who combine love, compassion and sympathy to help solve problems and relieve the suffering in the lives of other people. We pray this now in the name of Christ. Amen."

CHAPTER SIX

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

Matthew 5:8

Spiritual Angioplasty

February 24, 1991

My brother is a cardiologist and a few years ago while on vacation I had the opportunity to be with him while he did an angiogram on a young man. It really seemed very simple as he laid the patient down on the table. Remember now, this is a lay person speaking. He made a small incision in his hip and ran a catheter up the vein to the heart. As I watched the television monitor, the inside of the patient's heart appeared. My brother probed around with the catheter to see where the heart wasn't functioning as it should function. This summer while on vacation I hope to watch my brother do an angioplasty where he makes the same kind of incision, runs the catheter up to the heart and removes any blockage by use of a little balloon at the end of the catheter to let the blood flow the way it should flow.

We understand this principle: the body needs blood in order to function. Some of you have experienced angioplasty and say that in a matter of moments you felt much better than you had felt in years because the blood flowed once again in your body the way God meant for it to flow. I think we can draw a parallel to angioplasty when we see Jesus saying, "**BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART, FOR THEY WILL SEE GOD.**" We recognize some of us may need spiritual angioplasty. That is, we have allowed impurities to come into our spiritual system. Now we need God to use His spiritual catheter to move up our veins into our hearts and pump up that little balloon at the end of the catheter. Then, once again, He will flow through our lives once again the way He wants to flow.

It's very important for us to realize Jesus is dead serious when He says, "Blessed are the pure in heart." We need to understand in Bible language and times the heart was the seat of all understanding. It was the base of the person. In Proverbs 4:23, Solomon says, "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." And we remember the geographical context in which Solomon said this. Wells were the lifeblood of those people. They would understand immediately when Solomon used the term "wellspring." The heart is a life source. It is to be guarded. We are to guard it from drying up and from being polluted.

King David takes the concept a step further in Psalm 51 when he prays, "You desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place; create in me a pure heart." We realize as the Bible talks about our heart, it is talking about our innermost place. The inward us. So much of what happens in our society is for other people: we dress for other people; we coif our hair for other people. But God is only concerned about what takes place inside us. So David prays, "You desire truth in inner parts; You teach me wisdom in the inmost place." Think with me what this demands of us. It demands we have proper and pure motivations in our relationship with God. It demands we be honest.

FOUR RESPONSES

There are four different ways we can respond to the challenge to be pure and proper in our motivations:

First, we can just out-and-out be dishonest with ourselves. We can lie to ourselves relative to what we are thinking or feeling about life, some other person or God Himself.

Secondly, we can be honest with ourselves but shade the truth from ourselves. By

way of illustration, suppose I am angry at you. But I'm not certain my anger is acceptable, so I rationalize to think I'm not really angry; I'm just a little irritated. Well no, I'm not even irritated. I understand you. I understand you had a bad day yesterday. And all of a sudden, I have moved myself from being honest with myself to shading the truth from myself.

Thirdly, some of us have become skilled at being quick to defend and protect ourselves. You've got to be a good friend to do this to someone, but a couple of weeks ago I said to a friend, "I think you and I need to grow in being thankful to God for the wives He has given us." My friend quickly said, "Well, I love my wife. My wife knows I love her. I do the dishes for her. I write her love notes. I send her candy." A litany came out of him so quickly I could hardly get in another word. When he finally gasped for a breath I said, "Wait a minute. I just said I think we need to be more thankful for the wives that God has given us." But instead of considering my words, he rationalized and defended his behavior. But we understand this, don't we? Let someone say anything that has a shade of appearance of criticism and we have learned to be immediately self-protective. Instead of saying, "In our inmost parts, is there an element of truth in this that I need to hear?" we move to protect ourselves.

Fourthly, we can be honest with ourselves but dishonest with other people or dishonest with God Himself. But God wants honesty in our inmost parts instead of our playing spiritual games so He can be working in us. But so often what happens is that we look at other people and judge them. We think about their sinfulness, sins and mistakes instead of looking at ourselves as to whether or not we are allowing God to develop a pure heart in us. No one says it better than Jesus. In Matthew 15:16-20, there is a little dispute going on because the Pharisees saw some of Jesus' disciples sit down to eat a meal without washing their hands. This was taboo in Jewish society, so they attacked Jesus verbally. Jesus responded, "Whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body, but the things that come out of the mouth come out of the heart and these make a man unclean, for out of the heart come evil thoughts-murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony and slander-these are what make a man unclean, but eating with unwashed hands does not make him unclean." You see, you and I have it backwards. We're so concerned about what's out there in society and making certain we are not polluted by it that we rarely focus on the fact that we've got a heart problem. We fail to realize our need for spiritual angioplasty so God can keep us in the process of becoming men and women with pure hearts.

SELF-DECEPTION

The phrase, "For out of the heart come evil thoughts," is rich in meaning. The words "evil thoughts" mean "self-dialogue with evil intent." Well, what in the world is "self-dialogue with evil intent"?

Well, think with me for a moment. Let's be honest, at least with ourselves. Have you ever been angry at someone and just had a little dialogue with yourself about that person? "He cheated me and he shouldn't have done that. I need to make it right. I'm going to get even." It can be years later and we're still self-dialoguing that situation in our minds. All of a sudden we begin to understand the rest of the list. Where does murder come from if it's premeditated? It comes from a person self-dialoguing about the fact that they need to get even. Where does adultery come from? It comes from a person in a marital relationship saying, "I'm not getting all out of this relationship that I should be getting out of it. I think I deserve a little more satisfaction. In fact, I'm going to go find that satisfaction." Where do false testimony or slander come from? They come from self-dialogue that says, "I'm right. I'm pure. You're wrong and you're impure." And so the first opportunity I get to slander you or to bring false witness against you, I bring it. Jesus is saying all of this type of evil comes out of our hearts. That's why we need to understand

our need for spiritual angioplasty.

Now, putting this all together for some understanding, we see the heart is the seat of our life: the intellect, the emotion, and the will. This is where decisions are made and where we react. And God wants to bore down in us, move beyond our performing for other people, to get right down to the heart of the matter to say to us, "This is who you are. These are your motivations that are wrong. This is where you are impure. This is where I want to be working in your life to be giving you a pure heart and pure motivations."

Which brings us to a point where we have to make a decision. The decision is how much are we willing to look at our heart? How much are we willing to let God look at our heart? How willing are we to be honest with ourselves relative to who we really are? But how often do we hear people trying to justify some behavior that is not pleasing to God? This is how we do it: "Well, that's who I am." "That's how I feel." "You don't understand how angry I was." They excuse their gossiping tongue by rationalizing. Frequently those of us around them should say, "I love you too much to let you get away with that," "Wait a minute; that's not right," or "I want to be part of God's instrument to cause you to look into yourself." But, sadly, far too often we don't love them enough to confront them and to encourage God to do spiritual angioplasty on their hearts.

Let me illustrate this with a bit of drama. Suppose I am angry at Gary Almquist who sits here in the audience today. I am angry because Gary used to be a wrestler. Whenever he is around me, he wants to wrestle, and he hurts me. He's kind of a jerk. But instead of saying, "What in the world are you doing gossiping about him?" you let me get away with it because that's the way I feel.

But let's take it one step further. This is a pot of hot, steaming coffee. I'm mad at Gary Almquist. This is the way I feel. I'm angry enough to want to pour this steaming, hot coffee on his head and hurt him. But now you are going to stop me and say, "Wait a minute. You'll hurt him." But the key point is this: Who delineates between doing physical harm by pouring the hot coffee on his head and doing emotional harm by gossiping about him? Isn't that interesting? You would stop me from pouring the hot coffee on his head, but you may not stop me from gossiping about him. But my heart is the same in both cases. My heart is impure. And I have deceived myself and not been honest with myself by rationalizing my behavior and my attitude by saying, "Well, that's how I feel." And yet Jesus is saying, "Be pure in heart, and then you will see God."

Jesus' understanding of a pure heart is having a heart that is unmixed in its devotion to God and in its motivation. This doesn't mean I can't ever get angry because, as a human being, I'm going to get angry. But instead of trying to rationalize my behavior when I have this unmixed heart, I will learn to become honest with myself to say, "This is not right. I'm gossiping about this person" or "I want to pour hot coffee on this person." And when I finally get to the point where I have this unmixed, pure heart, I will be honest with God when I stumble by saying, "God, this is how I feel. Now I need You to work in my life."

ATTAINING THE LIFE

Now, how do we achieve, attain, sustain and maintain this life? First of all, we have to humble ourselves. We have to quit looking at other people and simply deal with our own imperfection. Jesus was having another little verbal tussle with the Pharisees. "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus drew this parable." "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like all other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this

tax gatherer. I fast twice a week and I give a tenth of all that I get. The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'"

Let's look at this in twentieth century language: "The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself. 'God, I thank You that I am not like all other men, drug dealers, bank robbers, murderers, Baptists, Catholics, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, and other Evangelical Free Churches that don't do as well as we do.'" See how we get ourselves in the habit of evaluating other people and how they're doing instead of turning the focus back on ourselves to be asking ourselves the question, "Am I in the process of allowing God to do spiritual angioplasty on me so He is making my heart pure?" "The tax collector stood at his distance. He would not even look up to heaven; but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'" Jesus went on to say, "I tell you this man, rather than the Pharisee, went home justified before God. For everyone who absolves himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted." So the first step towards spiritual angioplasty is humbling ourselves, to quit looking at the sins and the faults of other people, and to allow God Himself to deal with the impurity in our hearts. Jesus said it to the most religious people of His day.

Secondly, we must be honest. None of us are perfect or have totally pure hearts. Solomon says it this way, "Who can say 'I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin'?" Who can say that? Who can say, "I have kept my heart pure; I am clean and without sin?" Why in the world would we spend the time looking at other people when Solomon is telling us that we haven't passed the test? Being honest with our own sinfulness is a necessary step to having God perform spiritual angioplasty.

Finally, we need God's love letter, the Bible, in our lives. Psalm 119:9-11 asks, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to Your word. I seek You with all my heart. I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You." Go back to the steaming coffee. I'm so angry; I want to make it right; I want to make it even; I want to get even with Gary Almquist. And you say to me, "Vengeance is mine, says God," or "Don't let the sun go down on your anger." Those are your gentle reminders from God's love letter to me that the way I'll keep myself pure is by allowing God's word, message and standard to seep their way into the inmost parts of my life. And once I begin to understand them and apply them to my life instead of rationalizing, "Well, that's the way I am" or "that's how I felt," then I begin that road to purity and having a pure heart.

Now then, just because I'm alive spiritually doesn't mean that I'm never going to be in need of spiritual angioplasty. All of us here this morning are alive physically and yet probably, if statistics are right, some of you are in need of physical angioplasty right now even though you don't realize it. Follow the analogy. Even though I am alive spiritually because I have invited Christ into my life doesn't mean that impurities won't continue to seep into my life unless I am living according to how God wants me to live. And that's why it is imperative that we ask ourselves the question, "Am I living a life that increasingly purifies my heart?"

The second side of the equation is, "Blessed are those who are pure in heart, for they will see God." How do I see God? Well, the more of myself that I jettison and the more of Christ that I let into my life, then the more of Christ will flow through my character and actions and the more of Christ that I'll see, "Blessed are those who are pure in heart, for they will see God." Where will I see God? I'll see God in my life. I'll see God in my life as you come to me and say, "I have watched you grow over the years." Where will you see God? You will see God in your life as He changes you and as we come to you and say, "We are watching God do beautiful things in your life." How does it happen? By making a commitment and letting God work His spiritual angioplasty in our lives. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God."

"Father, forgive us for tending to look at other people and thinking far too much about their imperfection rather than our own imperfection. Motivate us so we will allow You to purify our hearts. Motivate us so we will have as one of our highest priorities to be pure in heart, that we might see You in our lives. We pray this now in the name of Christ. Amen."

CHAPTER SEVEN

*"Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall be called the children of God."*

Matthew 5:9

Not Peacekeepers . . . Peacemakers

March 3, 1991

"BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS" not "Blessed are the peacekeepers." I'd like to tell you a true story that happened just a few weeks ago and doesn't involve anyone in our church. I'll change the names to protect the guilty. Let's call them Ken, Chuck and Jim. Ken and Chuck sat together for three hours, side-by-side, at a meeting. They exchanged pleasantries as the meeting began. They worked together throughout the meeting with some other people, had coffee break, and then said goodbye to one another. A few days later, Jim came to Ken and said, "Chuck is angry at you because of a decision you made some months ago."

Ken responded, "How do you know Chuck is angry at me?"

Jim answered, "I know Chuck is angry at you because Chuck told me he's angry at you." Ken asked Jim, "When did Chuck tell you he was angry at me?"

Jim answered, "Chuck told me about three weeks ago he was angry at you."

Now remember the scenario just a few days before. Ken and Chuck had sat together for at least three hours, side-by-side, at a meeting. Chuck had time to tell Ken he was disturbed over a decision Ken had made. He had already told Jim he was angry at Ken, but didn't tell Ken. So Ken went to Chuck and said, "What have I done that makes you angry with me and why didn't you talk to me about the decision I made that disturbed you?"

In that story, there are at least two wrongs and one right. Chuck was wrong to talk to Jim because he was gossiping about Ken. Chuck was wrong to be with Ken and not tell him he was upset with the decision. Probably Jim was wrong in talking to Ken instead of saying, "Chuck, I want to bring you and Ken together so this can be resolved." Ken was right in going to Chuck and, in fact, he followed the words of Christ as we will see in awhile.

But let's understand: Jesus didn't say "Blessed are the peacekeepers" but "Blessed are the peacemakers." The word "maker" has the connotation of construction, work, production and human effort. When Jesus tells us, "Blessed are the peacemakers," He is saying to us that peacemakers construct something that's not there when they begin their work. Peacemakers produce; peacemakers act. As peacemakers follow God's blueprint for solving conflict, human effort is involved.

A LACK OF PEACE

Let's consider why there is lack of peace in so many one-on-one or small group relationships. The most obvious reason is miscommunication. For example, I misstate myself and offend you. I state it correctly, but you misunderstand me and are offended. It really makes no difference whether one is right and one is wrong: the point is because we are human, there are times when there is miscommunication and the result is a lack of peace.

Secondly, there is poor behavior. Sometimes there is a lack of peace because people are selfish, aggressive or belligerent in their behavior. People are offended by what others do and that brings a lack of peace.

Thirdly, sometimes people's feelings are hurt, either legitimately or illegitimately. There is a lack of peace because people's feelings are hurt. But we must remember, hurt feelings will always hurt us in the end. Peacekeepers don't help people who have hurt feelings; peacemakers help people who have hurt feelings.

OUR RESPONSE

Now, how do we respond to a lack of peace? I suggest there are one of three ways we respond to a lack of peace. First of all and probably most obvious is we are silent. For example, you come to me this morning and share with me that you have a broken relationship with a third party, that you are upset with them, or that the relationship is not what it used to be. Basically, if I remain silent throughout your presentation, I give you, by my silence, every right to assume that I am affirming what you are saying about that third person who is not with us. I'm not saying it's right to be silent. I'm just saying sometimes we do remain silent.

Secondly, you may come to me as a friend and tell me about the fact that you have a broken relationship with a third party. Because I am your friend and not a friend of the third person, by my nature and by the nature of the relationship, I'm biased and partial toward you. I immediately assume what you are telling me is right and this other person has done it incorrectly. However, in my bias and in my partiality toward you, I'm violating the very words of Solomon where he says, "Hear both sides of the story before you make up your mind." So even though I am "being a good friend" as I take your side because of my partiality to you, I am violating the very words of the Bible that tell me to hear both sides of the story before I make up my mind. But let's be realistic. As your friend, it is easier, more convenient and more comfortable to assume you are telling me truth rather than saying to you, "We've got to get both parties together to know what really happened."

The third response is the right response. It's the response of impartiality. It's the response of not being biased. And we need to understand this is Who God is. The Bible says God is impartial. God is committed to truth. God is more committed to truth than He is committed to relationships. Therefore, if those of us who are His children do something wrong, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit will speak to us about what we've done wrong. Therefore, if you come to me and express that you have a broken relationship with this third person, I should be committed to being impartial and to the truth. My first response should be to try to help you figure out what is truth, not as you see it or as I see it, but what is truth. And it is at this point that Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Peacekeepers are people who remain silent. But Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Peacemakers have an abiding, unwavering commitment to truth.

I heard of a person who went to another person and said, "Why are you talking about me? I understand you are saying things that aren't true."

The person responded, "Well, someone I respect told me this."

The first person responded, "I think you're gossiping about me. You've violated the principle about not coming to hear both sides of the story."

Now if this person had been thinking relative to what we are talking about this morning, he or she could well have said, "You're not being a peacemaker. You are perpetrating something you don't know to be true because you are biased towards one person and biased against me!"

So you see it's so important we understand in a world that's imperfect, made up of imperfect people who will communicate imperfectly and who will understand

imperfectly, it is imperative we commit ourselves to being peacemakers. It's extremely important.

THE PEACEMAKER

To understand the peacemaker, we must understand what peace is. The Bible describes peace in two ways: one, a life of well-being and serenity; two, a life of right relationships. Usually the New Testament is referring to right relationships that are growing relationships. As you analyze it, since peace as the New Testament describes it is not only a relationship without disharmony but a relationship that's growing, then a peacemaker is one who brings people closer together. The one who doesn't make peace may well be responsible for driving people farther and farther apart.

Having said that, let's consider what a peacemaker is and is not. First, a peacemaker is not a peacekeeper. A peacekeeper is one who says, "Peace at any price, so let's cover up our feelings and our differences and pretend that everything is peaceful." Many of you say that is how your family relationships go; you never honestly discuss the pertinent issues in your lives with your parents, children or grandparents, so you keep peace, but you don't make peace. Secondly, peacemakers are not self-seeking or self-loving people. Since a peacekeeper is not one who seeks the truth, nor is the peacekeeper willing to stand up to friends and family members and not be biased, it follows that peacemakers are not self-seeking because they run the risk of rejection as they work for peace. Thirdly, peacemakers are obedient to God. We have to conclude that the Beatitudes are commandments to us. Therefore, when Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers," He is saying to us, "Be a peacemaker." Thus, not to be a peacemaker means to be disobedient to God. Think this through with me for a moment. If I said this morning, "The Beatitude we are going to study this morning is 'Blessed are those who don't steal,'" and I ask, "How many of you agree with that?" and you all would raise your hands. And if I ask, "How many of you commit yourselves never to steal again, or if you've never stolen, never to steal?" all would raise their hands. But the minute we read the words of Jesus, "Blessed are the peacemakers," we begin squirming, "H'mm, I wonder how that applies to my conflict with my mother-in-law or my brother, etc.?" We must understand, peacemakers are obedient to God. They are impartial. They take risks. They're lovers. They love people so much they don't want them to be in disharmony with one another. And they take steps to alleviate that disharmony.

What do peacemakers do? First, they seek truth. Secondly, they seek to rectify a broken relationship and are willing to face unpopular issues to do so. Thirdly, they are not willing to allow a person to come to them to complain about a third person and sit impassively in silence and, by their silence, affirm what the person is saying; nor by their bias do they agree with the person; they affirm the truth and move to rectify the situation. Finally, they risk a lot; they risk unpopularity. They risk people's anger and people gossiping about them. They risk being misunderstood. But remember, peacekeeping is not peacemaking. It is important to note that Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers."

PEACEMAKING PRINCIPLES

Let's look at four principles for peacemaking. The first is that peacemakers seize the initiative. Ken in our story seized the initiative. In Matthew 5:23-24, Jesus said, "Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar; first go and be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift." Well, two thousand years later, here we are at communion time this morning. We could say to one another, "If you're coming to communion time to think about Christ giving Himself so we can be reconciled to Him and remember your brother has something against you, leave the communion table, go to your brother, make it right and then return." This is the principle of initiation: I understand

someone is upset with me and I go to them. But some of us say, "But that's not right. If they're upset with me, they should come." That's right. But let's return to my opening story: Chuck should have come to Ken, but Chuck didn't come to Ken. But Jesus is so committed to our being men and women of peace that He says to Ken, "Even though Chuck should have come to you, I'm saying to you, because you have found out Chuck is upset with you, you go to Chuck."

Secondly, peacemakers mediate. The greatest example of mediation in all of history is Romans 5:8: "But God demonstrates His love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Verse 1 explains we were not at peace with God but "we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." So at one point, there was God and you and I and a chasm in between. Christ stepped into the chasm to mediate the differences between God and us. As people who are Jesus-followers, we should follow Christ's example and mediate. Thus, when a person comes to tell us they have fallen out of a relationship in some way with another person, we shouldn't sit silently and let them think we are affirming what they say. We shouldn't agree with them. We should say, "I'm going to bring you two together to reconcile this." Return to my opening story where I told you about one person who went to another person. I'm certain we are talking about a person who loves God and wants to be all that God wants him to be. But instead of saying to that person who was talking about the third party, "I'm going to bring you two together," he listened and then spread a rumor. That's not peacemaking.

There's something interesting about you and me. We will always tend to gravitate to the person whom we think will give us a gentle hearing and won't confront us. A dentist friend told me he practices painless dentistry. I reacted, "Come on! Painless dentistry-what is that?"

He responded, "Well, my drilling doesn't hurt. My pushing around in the patient's mouth doesn't hurt."

I said, "Tell me how you've pulled that one off."

He said, "Well, I shoot the gum with novocaine before I do the dental work."

I responded, "But the shot hurts."

He said, "Well, but I've got a little drug that I can just rub on your gum and it takes away most of the pain of the shot."

I said, "But I can still feel the needle for a second, plus you still haven't resolved the fear I have from the time when I get out of my car until I get to your chair."

He said, "Well, would you be happy if I said it's almost painless dentistry?"

But isn't that true? We want life to be without pain, so we gravitate toward the person who will immediately take our side when what we need is a mediator who will bring us together and say, "Let's get the facts out on the table. I want to hear both sides before I make up my mind."

Thirdly, sometimes there needs to be confrontation. Paul says in Galatians 6:1, "Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently." There are two pieces of action here. First of all, if we are going to be a mediator, we've got to examine ourselves to make certain we are living with pure hearts. But secondly, we need to act.

And finally, we need to be willing to understand we won't always be successful

in peacemaking. We've got to be decisive about divisive behavior. Listen to the words of Paul in Titus 3:10: "Warn the divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful. He is self-condemned." Sometimes we must go to a person and say, "Listen, we have given you one opportunity. We have given you two opportunities, and we are turning our backs on you until you grow up spiritually. You have a bad attitude. You are continuing to hang onto this resentment, to think about the past, and you need to let it go." Now one of the risks of peacemaking is realizing we have to turn our backs on people sometimes as a way of disciplining them and to help them understand the error of their ways. And the sad fact is we won't always be successful in peacemaking.

THE BENEFITS OF PEACEMAKING

There is a benefit, though, which we understand from the Hebrew language. In the Hebrew language there were no adjectives. When Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God," the phrase "of God" is actually the adjective. It's the highest compliment Jesus could pay us. He is thinking through a Hebrew mind: "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." He could have said, "for they will be excellent" or "they will be complimented." But the highest compliment He could pay us is "they will be called the children of God." They're "of God." Can you think of any greater privilege in life than to be a child of God and to be affirmed by Christ for being a child of God? And that happens not when we are peacekeepers, but when we are peacemakers. It happens not when we are silent when someone comes to talk about a third party. Instead of being biased towards our friends without digging to the truth, we're peacemakers when we say, "I'm going to bring you two together and we're going to get this resolved."

By way of personal application and challenge, let me encourage you with this. We live in an imperfect world. We live with imperfect people, and those imperfect people will come to us to have us side with them. We cannot make excuses for them. We must make the peace by being committed to the truth.

"Father, by our natures, we tend to be silent when we hear about conflict. By our natures, we tend to side with our friends. By our natures, we tend not to side with truth. But we've also made a decision to be Your kind of people. So motivate us to be peacemakers, to be more committed to truth and to serving other people by hearing both sides before we make up our minds. We pray this in the name of Christ. Amen."

CHAPTER EIGHT

*"Blessed are those who are persecuted because
of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*

Matthew 5:10

When Pain Feels Good

March 10, 1991

The political pollsters tell us President Bush's approval rating is at an all-time high. The country approves of him and how he is leading our country. It is this very popular president who has called us to be a kinder and more gentle nation and challenged us to be a nation with one thousand points of light. There are probably more laws against discrimination than at any other time in our nation's history. And yet, it seems as though discrimination against minorities is on the rise.

The question that confronts us is why discrimination happens. What is there about human nature that causes us to single out the nonconformist, the person who looks, acts or thinks differently, and the person who has a different value or religious system? What is it about human nature that causes us to look at that other person with suspicion?

Even more specifically, why is it that evangelical Christians are so frequently singled out for discrimination or unkind comments? And even more specifically, how are we to respond when that happens to us?

Jesus doesn't answer the question but He does give instructions about how we are to respond when people treat us that way. Last week we saw Jesus say, "Blessed are the peacemakers." This week we see Him saying, "**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE PERSECUTED BECAUSE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.**" It seems as though those two statements are in contradiction to one another, but as we look at them in detail, we see they are not.

THE PROPER PERSPECTIVE

As we talk about persecution this morning, we must remember we will look at it from an American perspective. Do you realize in the world last year there were over three thousand people, three thousand of our brothers and sisters in Christ, who were martyred for their faith? Juan Asais, a missionary and an evangelist in Mexico who has spoken here and who is a friend of our church, last year was beaten physically when he was preaching in a small town outside of Mexico City. In America, we don't suffer this kind of persecution. But even though we won't become martyrs for our faith in our country and we probably won't be beaten for our faith, nevertheless, Jesus lays out some principles of which we need to be aware.

At first glance, if we were cynics this morning, we would say, "Well, is Jesus a sadist? Is He looking for masochists to be His followers and to be His kind of people when He tells us we are blessed when we are persecuted?" Obviously not! He is just telling us something about Himself and about what happens when people genuinely make a decision to be His followers and live the way He wants us to live.

WHAT IS PERSECUTION?

Immediately after the Beatitude's statement, Jesus gives a commentary to help amplify what He means by "persecution." He says, "Blessed are you when people insult you." The word "insult" means to reproach or defame someone or to say things about them that are harmful. Even though the statements may be truthful, they are harmful. Jesus says to be persecuted is to be blessed. The word "persecuted" means to put out, to

drive away or to put to flight. We understand this because some of you are being isolated in your offices by people with whom you used to drink and get drunk before you came to faith in Christ. Because you no longer have that need and your lifestyle has changed as a result of your commitment to Jesus Christ, you have been isolated by former "friends." You understand what it means to be persecuted in the sense that you are being isolated from people whom you used to call your friends.

Jesus said we are blessed when people falsely say all kinds of evil about us. The word "false" means to deceive. People can say false things or be deceitful in at least three different ways. One, they can be malicious, outright lie and say things they know are not true. Two, they can gossip by sharing truthful facts in a harmful way. For example, if I share a sin in your life with someone who has no need to know of it, I am gossiping even though I am telling the truth about you. Third, people can make assumptions and then share those assumptions as though they are truth. In all three expressions, things are being said in a false manner.

Jesus says people will falsely say all kinds of evil about us. The word "evil" as Matthew uses it means something that's bad, worthless, causes pain or causes sorrow. Jesus puts this all together to say we are blessed when people say false things about us, whether it's a lie, gossip or the making of an assumption about us that is not true. Nevertheless, these statements are made in such a way that they are worthless, bad, harmful, stressful and sorrowful. That's the kind of persecution you and I will face in America. We are not going to be called upon to be martyrs. We're not going to be beaten physically for our faith or for preaching the Good News of Christ. We will be persecuted by being insulted; we will be persecuted by having people say malicious things about us; we will be persecuted as we refuse to bend our ethics for the sake of the corporation. Some of you have related to me over the years that you have endured those kinds of insults. Once you placed your faith in Christ and said, "My life will be different and my standards and ethics will be based on the ethics and standards of Jesus Christ," that has brought you into conflict with your company. Some of you have worked for companies that want you to distort the facts and distort the truth; anything for a sale. So you've paid the price for your faith.

WHY IS THERE PERSECUTION?

Why? Why would people be doing this to people who are committed to truth? Why would people be doing this to people who say, "My life is better since I met Jesus Christ and since I became a Jesus-follower?" It's a very pertinent question and we need to answer it. But before we do, let's take a closer look because we need to make certain we understand what this persecution is and why it happens. Notice as we take a closer look that Jesus says, "You are blessed when you are persecuted because of righteousness and because of Me." "Because of righteousness." We could say that another way: To be righteous is to live right, to be right with God. To be right with God means to have a relationship with Him. It means to know Him to relate my life to Him and allow Him to relate His life to me. To be righteous means to endeavor to walk in His light so as to live within the parameters He sets for my life. It means to endeavor to be as Christ was when He walked on this earth. Now understand again, Jesus says we are blessed when we are persecuted for righteousness. Righteousness is to be right with God. And to be right with God is to know God, to relate my life to Him, to allow Him to relate His life to me, to walk in the light of the parameters that He has set for me, and to be endeavoring to become as Christ was when He walked the earth. Thus, true persecution comes as a result of truly being a Jesus-follower – not for any other reason.

Jesus goes on, "You are blessed when you are persecuted because of Me." Who is Christ? Christ is the Saviour and standard-setter. As standard-bearer, He sets the rules. Over the years, I've had some people say some pretty unkind things to me by

calling me narrow, ignorant or naive. When they asked; "What do you think of my lifestyle of having sexual relationships outside of marriage?" I've said, "I believe the Bible says the sexual relationship is for marriage." Frequently the response has been, "You don't understand. You don't understand Christ. Christ is an accepting Christ. Christ is a loving Christ. You're narrow." When asked, "What do you think of drunkenness or getting high on drugs?" I've said, "I believe the Bible says it is wrong to be drunk or to be high on drugs." Frequently the response has been, "You don't understand. You're narrow. You don't understand Christ. Christ is a loving Christ. Christ is an accepting Christ." Suddenly we begin to understand people are telling Christ who He is and what His standards are. They want to make Christ's parameters and standards just as wide as they want them to be to accommodate their lifestyle. And yet we have to understand that Christ is the Saviour. Christ is the standard-setter. But society and the church in general are saying, "Don't make the standard too strict on me. Don't make the parameters too narrow." And yet Jesus Himself called it the "straight-and-narrow."

I remember when I was busting my noggin trying to get through my doctoral program. Susan's parents called and her father asked, "How are your doctoral studies going?" I responded, "I'm fed up. I'm tired of all of this work; I'm tired of being up late; I'm tired of being up early in the morning." He sort of chuckled on the phone and said, "If you weren't tired of it, it wouldn't be worth it. If it was easy, it wouldn't be worth it."

Follow the analogy. Christ says that following Him is to be on the "straight-and-narrow." If it was for everyone and we could live any way we wanted to live and do whatever we wanted to do, then it wouldn't be worth it. He wouldn't be our Saviour or standard-setter. There is a key point here and we must understand it. Jesus says, and don't let me misstate myself, we are blessed (that is, made happy) when we are persecuted for the sake of righteousness or for Him – not for any other reason. It's a key point! Yet as we look at evangelical Christians across our country, far too often we are reactive and not proactive. We are quick to know and state what we are against, but we rarely know or state that for which we stand. And so society begins to think we are a group of reactionaries because the only time they hear from us is when we are reacting to something.

A few weeks ago we put up a yellow ribbon on the church sign to say we are praying that our troops come home safely from the Middle East. A number of you came to me and said, "I am so delighted we did that." And I always said, "Why?" And you said, "Because it's nice to know our church is proactive. It's nice to know our church stands for something that relates to our society." That yellow ribbon wasn't a pro-war statement or an anti-war statement. That yellow ribbon was only communicating that we were concerned about soldiers in the Gulf conflict and wanted them to come home safely. But you see, for so long we evangelicals have been so reactive that we don't understand that we need to be proactive in life. So sometimes we are persecuted, not for the sake of righteousness or for the sake of Christ, but for how we conduct ourselves.

AN HONEST QUESTION

Now I've really wrestled with telling this story. Please listen carefully and don't assume that I am not pro-life. This is someone else's story, but it helps make the point. I have a friend who demonstrates every Friday at an abortion clinic. I haven't been led to do that, but I affirm him and what he is doing. I stand with him spiritually and I encourage him to do it. He has taken the view there are people there who need to come to understand who Christ is and how Christ can make a difference in a person's life. And so he has picked up on the head of security for this abortion clinic. He has befriended him, talked to him about Christ and told him about the difference that Christ has made in his own life. He has led this man to faith in Christ. Now you might say, "Well, if the man has become a follower of Christ, he shouldn't be working for an abortion clinic." My response

is, "God grows us at different paces. Give the man time." My friend called the other day and said, "I'm really weary of some of the people who are demonstrating. They call people murderers; they call people butchers. Sometimes I get a call from the security guard to say, 'Could you come down to calm these people down?'" My friend goes on to say, "I don't mind being persecuted for what's right, but when we call people butchers and murderers and make fools out of ourselves instead of demonstrating with the love and compassion of Christ, I'm not sure that's right."

Instead of attacking people, we should be coming to them with compassion and saying, "I'm broken-hearted over the fact you are not living the life God created you to live." We must understand there's a difference here. Christ is saying we are blessed when we are persecuted for righteousness' sake and for Him, but not for behavior that doesn't glorify Him. That's one distinction we must understand.

HOW PEOPLE PERSECUTE

How does this persecution come about? First of all, it comes about through gossip. People just gossip about people who are followers of Christ. Secondly, people are isolated – I've already commented on this. Some of you no longer feel the camaraderie at your office you used to feel since you've placed your faith in Christ. You've allowed Christ to change your value system. You don't have the loose values about physical relationships outside of marriage you once had. You don't have the values about alcohol and drugs you used to have. You don't have the lack of values about distorting the truth in order to make a sale that you once had. You're being isolated. That's a form of persecution. Thirdly, I think the most persecuted people in our country are single women who have said; "I am going to keep myself chaste; my body and the enjoyment of a physical relationship are only for the husband that God brings to me." And some of the nicest, choicest women in our country are being persecuted and isolated by men and other women who say, "Prude. What's wrong with you? One man, one woman – that's old-fashioned." It's a form of persecution. Finally, there are blatant attacks. People make fun of Christians. People call us intolerant. People call us judgmental.

Well, having said all of that, what is persecution not? First of all, persecution is not the price we pay for doing a poor job. It is just a fact of life – the moment we identify ourselves as Jesus-followers – people expect a higher standard of work from us. So tomorrow if your boss comes to you and castigates you for a job less than well-done, be mature; be willing to say, "This is not because I am a Christian; I'm not being persecuted. I'm being castigated because I'm not doing the kind of job this company is paying me to do."

Secondly, persecution is not the price we pay for being foolish. There are sometimes when we do foolish things and people criticize us. It's not because we are followers of Christ. It's because we have done a foolish thing and we need to be willing to bear responsibility for the consequences of our actions.

Thirdly, persecution is not the fact that we have taken some stance on some political issue, unless it is a Christian issue. Christians disagree on political issues. We need to understand that one of rules of the game in a free society is that when we take a stance on some issue, we open ourselves up to criticism. Let's not be paranoid and think that every time someone insults us it is because we have stood for righteousness.

Finally, sometimes people criticize us because of the way we have conducted ourselves. People have a right to say to us evangelical Christians, "Why are you so harsh? Why is there never any joy in your life? Why do you state your case without love?" Sometimes people just don't want to be around us because, frankly, we're not all that attractive because we are reactive instead of proactive. But this is not persecution...it is

an honest response to our wrong behavior.

A FINAL ANSWER

But there's Good News. Jesus says not only are we blessed, but also "ours is the kingdom of heaven and our reward is great in heaven." So the response of being persecuted for the sake of righteousness and Jesus is that we have ownership in the kingdom of God. But please understand the kingdom of God is both present tense and future tense. Think of the Lord's Prayer: "Your will be done, on earth as it's done in heaven." The kingdom of God is present tense and future tense. Being a part of the kingdom of God and experiencing the benefits of being a part of that kingdom aren't things that happen when we die and are in eternity with God Almighty. Kingdom benefits begin here on earth as well.

Jesus goes on to say, "Be glad. Rejoice." The two words actually mean "be glad" and "be glad." It's as though Jesus catches Himself and says, "No, be exceedingly glad." Jesus is saying when we are persecuted for the sake of righteousness and the sake of Christ, not only are there kingdom benefits in this life and in the life to come, but we should be glad; in fact we should be exceedingly glad about that. Actually, we should see persecution as a compliment. It's proof we are of the genuine stuff, and it gives us an opportunity to share with people why we're willing to take such a stance for our faith in Christ.

"Father, help us understand that simply because we are Your followers and say we are sinful and need a saviour, we will be targets for people who will want to ridicule. Lord, help us to understand if we live the kind of lives that are lives of righteousness and pleasing to You, we may well be persecuted. We ask You to empower us to respond to such persecution and have the attitudes that Jesus expressed in this Beatitude. We pray this now in the name of Christ. Amen."

CHAPTER NINE

"The Beatitudes . . . A Life Attitude"

The Beatitudes . . . A Life Attitude

March 17, 1991

All of us have memories from high school that we carry for the rest of our lives. And if you are a sports fan at all to the point that you read the sports page, you know the school Rochester Lourdes girls' basketball team has now won two state championships in a row. They won 30 games this year without a loss and last year won their last 19 games, including the championship game. If we interviewed these young women and asked them about the game they played last night when they won the state championship, the thing they would begin telling us about is the fact that the coach had a game plan. One of the reasons they won the state championship again last night is not because they are better players, but because they understood the coach's game plan and they followed the plan. They didn't deviate from it very much at all, if at all. In fact, they probably know that game plan so well that we could put before them different game situations and all five of those who would be on the court at one time would tell us where they were supposed to go and what they were supposed to do. That's why teams win championships. The coach has a game plan that works. The players understand the game plan. The players fulfill the game plan, and they win games.

If you follow the analogy, I want to suggest to you this morning that Jesus gave us a game plan when He gave us the Beatitudes. I don't mean to minimize for a moment the rest of Jesus' teaching, but with the Beatitudes we say, "This is the essence of what Jesus was talking about. This is the essence of what Jesus wants us to understand." And we would see, and we do see, that the Beatitudes are both profound and simple at the same time. Not simplistic, but simple. They are profound in that no one else had that kind of wisdom on earth. They are simple in that we can understand what He is saying; and they are profound in that they will change our lives if we give ourselves to being those kinds of people. If all we knew about Jesus Christ is what we know in the Beatitudes, we would know enough about Him to follow Him. If all we knew about Jesus Christ is what we know in the Beatitudes, we would know enough about Him to love Him. If all we knew about Jesus Christ is what we know in the Beatitudes, we would know enough about Him to serve Him.

And yet it seems to me that far too often, in spite of the fact that Jesus has given us the essence of life in both a profound and yet simple statement, we become much too encumbered with other things and other issues of life. We become encumbered with denominationalism and argue with one another about the fact we think our denomination is the right denomination. We become much too encumbered with our church traditions. And by that I'm not talking about some other church, I'm talking about our church. We become much too encumbered with political discussions and argue with one another over whether or not Jesus would be a Democrat or a Republican if He were in Twentieth Century America. We argue over whether or not the lifestyle that I have chosen for myself is the lifestyle you should choose for yourself. We spend far too much time encumbering ourselves discussing other people's faults. All of these discussions may be well and good, but what happens is they take our focus away from the essence of life which is the Beatitudes. I'm suggesting this morning, if we could cut out much of the extraneous things we focus on and focus on the Beatitudes to the point we come to understand them and commit ourselves to living them, we would be far different people and much more conformed to the image of Christ.

Over the last nine weeks, we've looked at the eight Beatitudes. I think it is fitting that we take a few minutes this morning to review them once again. What I have done is try to put them in three categories to help us understand them. By doing that, I've had to shift one into a different category, which does not mean to say that I know more about

the Beatitudes than Jesus did when He gave them. I'm just trying to say that I think this will help us understand them. The three categories are: the Inward Attitude where we simply think about ourselves in relationship to God; an Outward Attitude where we think about life and we ask ourselves the question, "How do we think our way through life as it relates to the Beatitudes and a Relational Attitude where we think about relationships because we are all relational people and are all involved with other people?"

THE INWARD ATTITUDE

Jesus said, **"BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT, FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN," "BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN FOR THEY SHALL BE COMFORTED," "BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART, FOR THEY SHALL SEE GOD."** (Remember, blessed means to be happy.) "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." The word "poor" here means to be destitute, to be impoverished. Jesus is saying we are blessed and will be happy when we come to the point in our lives when we can say and think of ourselves, "I am poor in spirit. I am spiritually impoverished. I cannot be the kind of person that I want to be and I most definitely cannot be the kind of person that Jesus Christ wants me to be under my own power. Based on my own stuff, I am spiritually impoverished. I need God's power in my life."

Well, just for a moment, let's be realistic with ourselves as Christians who happen to be living in America – an aggressive, achievement-oriented, accomplishment-oriented America. We begin to think more highly of ourselves than we should because of all that we accomplish in the secular realm. Far too many of us have spent far too long in the church and we begin to think, although we would never say it, that we are a little bit better than most other people. But I will just say to you flat out, if you observe my life for very long, you will find a life full of inconsistencies, a life full of imperfection, a life full of sinfulness. So if I am your standard for living, then you're in deep trouble. And if you are my standard for my life, I am in deep trouble. Nevertheless, if we base our Christianity and our Christian experience on one another's lives, then we are in good company because we can always find imperfection in the lives of one another. But what we must do is base our lives on Jesus Christ, the perfect One. Immediately when I get my focus off you and my focus on Jesus Christ, I realize that I am in another dimension. And when I quit looking at all I have done for the church and at all I've done in the church and I quit looking at other imperfect people in the church and begin focusing my attention on Jesus Christ, I then begin to understand I am spiritually impoverished. There is no good thing in me. As the Old Testament says, "All of my righteousness is as filthy rags." Those are difficult admissions for people who have been around the church for a long time and know (or think they know) all there is to know about church life. It's a difficult admission for Americans who are achievement-oriented, who have been educated way beyond our intelligence and who have achieved much more than our parents ever thought we would achieve. But what we do is take our focus off Christ and we put it on other people and, all of a sudden, we look very good. Jesus said we are blessed when we are spiritually impoverished and that happens when we judge ourselves according to Him.

He says, **"BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN, FOR THEY SHALL BE COMFORTED."** The word Matthew uses here helps us understand the concept of mourning. He uses a word that describes being pierced, in figurative language, to the heart of the matter, to one's spiritual and emotional heart because of the sorrow felt and experienced over one's sinfulness. This sorrow is felt because, even though I've been a Christian for a number of years, I still fail God. I still stumble along the way. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." But it's not easy to admit my sinfulness. It's not easy to acknowledge that I've stumbled along the way. It's not easy, particularly when I think I know all there is to know about the church, to acknowledge that I still sin. One of the negatives of living in our American culture is that we are becoming so pluralistic there are fewer values than there used to be. Consequently, there aren't the

kinds of values drawn around me anymore to draw judgments on what I do, particularly when I fail and I don't live the way God would want me to live. So it's easy to become very complacent about my sinfulness and no longer mourn about it but just flick it off by saying, "Well, that's the way I am. I'll do better the next time." Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." This is an awakening. It's a process. It's an awakening in a process. It doesn't just happen one time as though I mourned yesterday for my sinfulness and, therefore, I never need to mourn again. We are talking about relating our lives to a holy, perfect God. We are talking about relating our lives to Jesus Christ, Who when He walked this earth was perfect. As we relate our life to Him we begin to understand that this awakening is a process that goes on the rest of our lives. But it's the spiritually arrogant who no longer mourn over their sinfulness, because they think they've arrived. But, the moment we compare our lives to the perfect Christ, we can't help but understand our sinfulness and mourn over it.

Jesus says, **"BLESSED ARE THE PURE IN HEART, FOR THEY WILL SEE GOD."** All of us have been built with a defense mechanism-an automatic defense mechanism – so the moment when someone starts to criticize us or God begins to point out to us that we have slipped and failed along the way, our automatic defense mechanism kicks into gear. And its first intent is to protect us. It's not something we learn: it's just there...it's part of our nature.

There are two cousins in our church who are both under two years of age. I'll change their names to protect the identity of their parents and their grandparents. If you ever see these two little guys, you will see they really love one another. The other day, Jack's parents walked into the bathroom and saw that, as little two-year-old boys are want to do, he had drawn mommy and daddy a picture all over the bathroom wall. When they asked Jack, "Who wrote on this wall?" he immediately answered, "Jim did it."

The kids aren't even two years old yet but the automatic defense mechanism sprang into action when a criticism came. This example helps us see that we are impure in heart. If we were pure in heart, we would let the criticism come. We would think about it. We would cogitate on it. We would pray about it and ask the question, "God, is there any truth in this?" If you want to know if you are pure in heart, don't see how you respond the next time someone comes to compliment you but rather see how you react the next time someone says something to you that's of a critical nature or a little bit caustic. Jesus says the pure in heart are blessed and they will see God. Seeing God is proof of being pure in heart. Seeing God is not just something in the life hereafter. Seeing God is a promise for this life as well.

Part of seeing God is dealing with truth...as He deals with it. Thus, when we see God we do not shade the truth. We do not color the truth. We do not distort the truth. We deal with truth as it is. And as we deal with truth, we begin to understand more clearly that God is truth. The more we become pure in heart, the more we see God in this life...because God is truth.

THE INWARD ATTITUDE APPLIED

We can look at these three Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...", "Blessed are those who mourn..." and "Blessed are the pure in heart..." and say, "I can never achieve that. You've just put me under a guilt cloud. How can I live up to that?" Well, let me explain how we can achieve this with an example from my own life. Earlier this week Susan said to me, "I want you to know that beyond my faith in Christ, you are the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me." Obviously, I felt pretty good about that. She knew the moment was right so she continued, "Now having said that, let me tell you about..." and went on to tell me about an area of my life where she thinks I need to improve. But I think best in pictures. So I drew a picture in my mind of what happened in that time we were talking. I drew a picture of a circle-an unbroken circle; a strong

circle; a circle that she had drawn around me. The circle is the circle of her love for me. I'm confident in that circle of love so when she said, "There's one other thing I want to say to you," the circle of love motivated me to listen to her. It's the love that I sense from her that motivates me to want to be better when she points out areas where I need to grow.

Now, if we take these three Beatitudes, "Blessed are the poor in spirit....", "Blessed are those who mourn...." and "Blessed are the pure in heart....," we begin to realize that Jesus is not throwing rocks at us. He has drawn a circle of love around us; He's drawn a circle of acceptance around us; He's drawn a tough, strong circle that can't be broken. When in the middle of that circle of love He says with penetrating words, "be poor in spirit, mourn over your sinfulness, be pure in heart," instead of getting down on ourselves, we should be leaping forward to say, "If God loves me enough to draw that kind of a circle of love and acceptance around me in spite of my inconsistencies, imperfection and humanness, then I want to leap forward to allow Him to be in my life and make me the kind of person He wants me to be." It has everything to do with Him. It has everything to do with responding to Him. It has very little to do with us, except that we recognize we are in the circle of His love, so we respond to it.

THE OUTWARD ATTITUDE

Jesus discusses this outward attitude – the attitude that we have as we think our way through life. Jesus says, "**THE MEEK SHALL INHERIT THE EARTH.**" Immediately we respond, "Did He say, 'weak'?" In our American culture, if you say the word "meek," we think "weak." If you don't believe me, tomorrow, stop the first ten people you see and ask them this question, "The word 'meek': does it mean strength or weakness?" Nine out of ten people will say weakness. It's just what we think as Americans. But in Jesus' day, it meant just the opposite. It was a word of strength, power and character. It's the same word (and I've said this before) that in that day was used to describe a well-trained show horse who responded to the commands of its owner. So when Jesus said, "Blessed are the meek...." He's not talking about weakness. He's talking about character and strength. He's talking about the person who has made himself submissive to God so that anytime God wants to make a mid-course correction in one's life, we are willing to allow Him to do it. And once we have that attitude towards God, it flows out and into our relationships with other people. So the person who is meek is the person who allows God to control him, first of all, and then allows God to control him relative to how he treats other people.

Now let me be honest with you in a very blatant way. One of the reasons people who are not Christians don't want to be around us Christians at times is because we are so ornery. Some of us know more about what we are against than what we are for. We see something we don't think is right and we attack it. We see something we don't like, and we are quick to criticize it instead of remembering that Jesus said, "I've come that you might have life and that you might have life abundantly." Now that doesn't mean we don't make social commentary. That doesn't mean we don't comment on our society. But let's do it not only with the truth of Christ, but also with the grace of Christ. Let's be attractive, because being meek means not only that I have bent my knee to God Almighty, but it also means I treat other people the way God expects me to treat them.

He goes on to say, "**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO HUNGER AND THIRST AFTER RIGHTEOUSNESS, FOR THEY SHALL BE FILLED.**" The word "righteousness" means to be right with God. Jesus is saying to have a parched throat in the spiritual sense and so badly want to be right with God that we hunger and thirst after it. It's not something that just happens; we go for it. We make a decision that that's what we want in our lives. It's as though we are out in the desert, parched for water, and we see an oasis. We know that that oasis is a life-giving oasis and we move towards it. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness...." But immediately some of us begin to

say, "But you don't understand. You're a pastor. You're not in business. You don't work where I work. You don't know the pressure that my company puts on me." Maybe I don't. But it seems to me that if Jesus Christ says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness...." then I can't sit here today and say, "I don't have time to hunger and thirst after righteousness because I'm too busy," take me out of the equation. Forget I am here." Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness..." and your response is, "I'm too busy. Then Jesus must have been wrong. Not to be cynical, but Jesus must have been wrong. Jesus must not have known what He was talking about. Jesus must not have had infinite wisdom when He gave us the Beatitudes; otherwise, He would have said something different. You see, when you look at Jesus' words with that form of logic, there is no excuse – except our stubborn will – for not hungering and thirsting after righteousness.

The reality of life is that we go after what we want. I don't know how to unveil my soul to you any more than I'm going to do right now. But ever since I became a Christian as a sophomore in college, people have drummed into my head what God does to us is more important than what God does through us. Those of you who have been here for 13-1/2 years since I came on the scene know that I have said that time and time and time again. Our character development is more important than what we do for God. A couple of weeks ago, I was writing out a prayer early in the morning and it dawned on me that sometime in the past two or three years – I don't know when; I don't know how; I don't know why – I had flip-flopped those two principles and what I was doing for God became more important than what I was allowing God to do in my life. That's sobering when for 13 years you have been telling a group of people that what God does in your life is more important than what God does through your life. So I really don't think it makes any difference whether one is a pastor or person whose career is in the home or person whose career is in the business world or person who is a laborer – it doesn't make any difference. We all have the same temptations, and we all have the same tendencies. And that's why it is so profound that Jesus would say, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness."

THE RELATIONAL ATTITUDE'

Finally, He brings us to the issue of relationships. **"BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO ARE MERCIFUL, FOR, THEY SHALL BE SHOWN MERCY."** The word "mercy" means to combine love, compassion and sympathy to solve someone else's problem. Immediately some of us say, "I'm too busy. Jesus didn't live in the fast lane as I live or He wouldn't have said that." My response is that as He began His public ministry, Jesus was out in the wilderness for forty days and forty nights, in one-on-one conflict with Satan. Dr. Luke says that when Jesus was on His way back into society after that forty days and nights: "When Jesus had finished every temptation...." Now my understanding of that phrase "every temptation" is every temptation that you and I have ever experienced or will experience, Christ experienced it. If He didn't experience it, then how could He know what we live through as we endeavor to be His followers? He understood the temptation to say, "I'm so busy that I don't have time to be merciful." And He says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall be given mercy."

"BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS..." –not peacekeepers, peacemakers. Look at the word "make." It has the concept of building, producing or creating something. Peacekeepers don't stand for anything. Peacekeepers don't have values. Peacekeepers don't have convictions. Peacekeepers cover the truth to keep the peace. Peacemakers uncover the truth and say, "It doesn't make any difference who's right and who's wrong here. We are committed to truth. We're going to look at truth." So Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers...."

Finally, He says, **"BLESSED ARE THE PERSECUTED, FOR THEIRS IS THE**

KINGDOM OF GOD." He goes on to say that we are persecuted when people insult us for our faith, when they drive us away from groups, when they say all kinds of evil things about us with a false tongue. He goes on to say, "Blessed are you when you are persecuted because of me" and "Blessed are you when you are persecuted because of righteousness." He doesn't say – and it's very important for us to understand this – "Blessed are you when you are persecuted for doing stupid things, when you are indiscreet, when you are unkind or when you are unChristian." He says, "Blessed are you when you are persecuted because of Me..." or "when you are persecuted because of righteousness...."

SUMMARY

The Beatitudes! Jesus' game plan. We can break them down into three categories: (1) a self-awareness of our relationship with God; (2) a self-awareness of how we are to move through life; and (3) an awareness of other people with whom we interact. Let's pray together.

"Lord, make us aware of ourselves. Lord, purge us of ourselves. Lord, make us Christly. We pray this in His great name. Amen."

CHAPTER TEN

"A Final Thought . . . "

A FINAL THOUGHT*

Jesus says:

The really happy people are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of God is theirs.

Happy are the gentle people, for they shall inherit the earth.

Happy are they who know what sorrow means, for they will be comforted.

Happy are they who hunger and thirst for what is right, for they shall be filled.

Happy are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Happy are those who are honest and pure of heart, for they shall see God.

Happy are the peacemakers, for God calls them His own sons and daughters.

Happy are those persecuted for doing what is right, for they are members of the kingdom of God.

The World says:

Happy are the successful moneymakers, for they own the world.

Happy are those who throw their weight around, for they get whatever they want.

Happy are the hard guys who never let life hurt them, for they are considered "cool" and "tough."

Happy are the people who don't get involved, because they remain safe.

Happy are they who don't tolerate mistakes in others, for they are considered "efficient."

Happy are they who get away with whatever they can, for they know how to work the system.

Happy are the fighters for they shall be called powerful.

Happy are those who go with the WINNING side, for they always end up on top.

*Author unknown.