

The Journey to Freedom: A Fresh Look at the Beatitudes

The Beatitudes aren't isolated virtues, they're landmarks along a path of repentance that brings us near to the heart of God.

BY KAREN HINCKLEY

For most of the unbelievers I know, repentance conjures up an image of a thin-lipped man in a black suit pointing a bony finger and hissing, "Repent, sinner!" They see Christians as masochists groveling at an angry God's feet, flogging themselves bloody and staggering under impossible loads of responsibility. I've done my time in the grit-your-teeth school of repentance, so I understand where outsiders get their misconceptions. But how can I tell them what repentance really means?

The people to whom Jesus spoke knew the Pharisees, an exemplary band of teeth-gritters and finger-pointers. So when He began to proclaim, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near" (Matthew 4:17), He had the same barrier to overcome that I have. Repent — turn around, change your thinking, soften your heart—what does this mean?

A few verses later we find Jesus sitting on a hillside explaining. We call His opening summary "the Beatitudes," the blessings. Blessed, happy, highly favored are those who really manage to turn all the way around and change their whole way of thinking. The Beatitudes are a map of the landmarks on the journey of repentance.

BLESSED POVERTY

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

This is where the road begins. My spirit is the part of the inner me that relates personally to God and others. To be poor in spirit is to know that I am crippled or dead in my capacity to relate, that I am helpless to appease my cravings for love, importance, even mere survival. To be poor in spirit is to be desperate — and to know it.

Why is this wretched state blessed? Because the first step in turning is facing reality. All of us are spiritually bankrupt in ourselves, hopeless unless God intervenes. The poor in spirit are blessed because they have come to the end of their efforts to make it on their own and, having failed, are no longer too proud to admit it. They are desperate.

That's why Jesus says later, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24). It's not that rich people are especially evil or that God loves them less than poor ones. It's that rich people, having more resources, have to run down longer blind alleys before they are forced to admit their poverty.

Several of my friends are recovering drug addicts. It took one couple until they were broke and physically dying to give up the hustles and cons. One man I know needed to literally fall off the mountain he was climbing, lose his job, and be abandoned by his friends. For those of us with college degrees and professional positions, God sometimes has to take similar drastic steps to break our pride.

Self-sufficiency is the subtlest serpent in earth's garden. I came to God in the depth of spiritual poverty, but it didn't take me long to learn the jargon well enough to be accepted. I was successful at school, got a good job and a good husband — I was one of the "rich" before I knew it.

But a Christian never grows out of needing the sense of poverty that keeps us from trying to be our own gods. "Total dependence on God" can't become a cliché. For me it has taken a long illness, several shattered relationships, and having my car hit by a gravel truck to begin to restore me to poverty.

Poverty of spirit is the end of denial. Most of us have to be forced to face our bankruptcy, but this is just the beginning.

BLESSED GRIEF

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

One of my friends finally fathomed her poverty as she sat in a broken-down house in a strange city — no money, no friends, no hope. When reality hit her, she took the phone off the hook and spent the next week on her face, sobbing. She sclearned and begged God to either do something about her life or take it. She didn't eat; she barely slept; nothing was as important as breaking through to God. After a week, God answered.

God reminded her He loved her and had everything under control. He also reminded her of a church some friends back home had recommended, the church I belong to. She found our phone number and we connected her with the pastor. He dispatched my small group. We became "Jesus with skin on" to comfort the mourning. There are three kinds of mourning. The first is bitter, self-centered, and demanding: "God, I'm miserable and You owe me relief" The second is despairing: "It's no use, nobody loves me, I might as well be dead." The third is what Paul calls "godly sorrow" (2 Cor. 7:10). The first kind reflects arrogant pride, the second shows a pride crushed but not released, but the third is no longer interested in pride. From a broken heart it says, "O God, I have been hurt so much and I have hurt You and others so much in retaliation! Help me!" It's so easy — especially when we're still half-denying our poverty — to slip into false mourning. Or, worse yet, to refuse to mourn, to lock our grief in a box labeled "Praise the Lord for all things!" Hurt that drives us to godly sorrow and God's comfort is worth praising Him for; hurt left unfaced insults Him, for His purpose in it is defeated. Blessed are those who really mourn, for they — they alone — shall be comforted.

BLESSED MEEKNESS

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5).

Meekness has nothing to do with being afraid to stand up for what is right. Instead, it's an attitude toward God that says, "I have no hope but You for survival, so I will trust utterly in You."

It is hard to come out of mourning your poverty without acquiring a little meekness. Poverty of spirit is facing your desperation, mourning is grieving over it, and meekness is throwing yourself on God's mercy.

The barrier to facing poverty is pride, but the barrier to meekness is fear. Here is where I falter again and again. Is the Lord really wise and powerful enough to bring life out of this mess? Does He really care enough? Will He abandon me at some critical moment? Am I not too corrupt to be taken back? Is my failure not irretrievable?

Remember the prodigal son, who squandered fully half of his father's hard-earned wealth? "When he came to his senses," the story says, he set off for home rehearsing a speech about his unworthiness and his willingness to be a slave (Luke 15:17-19). "But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him" (his father was evidently watching) "and was filled with compassion for him" (Luke 15:20). The son didn't even get his speech out before he was welcomed and restored. His fears were groundless.

Addicts talk about "the wreckage of my past." Careers, finances, relationships, and health crumble while all attention goes to acquiring the chemical that takes the pain or boredom away. But when Christ comes to the meek, He rots the wreckage into fertilizer for a new garden. What can God do with my wreckage — decades of stale Christianity moldering behind a wall of self protection? Plenty. Pride ground to dust is a fine pesticide, and fear melted in the fire of love becomes courage.

When I'm tempted to doubt God's power to deal with my mess, I only have to look at what He's already done. I think about the cool, efficient, lonely businesswoman I could have been if He hadn't rescued me. When one couple I know starts worrying about God's power or forgetting His love, they drive around the part of town where the dope deals go down. They only have to look at the faces of the junkies to feel the flood of gratitude again. Facing your poverty again and again makes meekness almost easy.

The great thing about meekness is that it frees us from demands and bitterness. We've given up expecting people or circumstances to meet our needs, so we aren't devastated when they disappoint us. We can forgive others' failures because our survival doesn't depend on their faithfulness. We don't have to jump through their hoops to win their approval; God's approval is all that matters.

The things that used to obsess us — clothes, status, success, sex, possessions — have lost their appeal because we've found the real source of satisfaction.

BLESSED HUNGER

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled" (Matthew 5:6).

Blessed are those who no longer hunger for people's respect, for attention, or even for the pain to go away. Blessed are they because, having found the true Bread and the living Water, they crave only that right relationship to God that gives them access to these things. They thirst to see God's righteous will fulfilled in their lives and those of others.

Many people assume that drug addicts are somehow different (more depraved) from "straight" people. There are important cultural differences that need to be faced, but at the core we are all variations on a single theme. Even those of us who have never abused a chemical in our lives are recovering addicts. Our church is growing into a sort of "Sinners Anonymous" where approval addicts, success junkies, and substance abusers can pursue righteousness and freedom together.

Meekness — the knowledge that only God can fill our hunger and thirst-makes the pursuit possible.

BLESSED MERCY

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7).

Meekness also enables those who hunger and thirst for righteousness to give and receive mercy. The meek know that only God can faithfully and constantly meet their physical and emotional needs, so they don't get furious when people let them down. Disappointed, yes; hurt, yes. But bitter? No.

Having recognized their own spiritual poverty, they can have compassion on others. They don't hold others to standards they have given up trying to meet themselves. In fact, they are glad to forgive others, because that helps them accept the forgiveness God grants to them. Thus they begin to take on the righteous character for which they hunger the open heartedness of the Father who comforted them in their mourning and nourished them in their poverty.

If repentance stops with a cold hunger for righteousness, it becomes legalism. As it grows into mercy, it blossoms into God's full-bodied righteousness, which sent Jesus to die for sinners. As I thirst for righteousness in my own life, I find my heart more and more broken for the woman down the street who is still too afraid to face her poverty. It's a thrill to incarnate God's mercy for such people and to help them through mourning to meekness.

BLESSED PURITY

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

The heart is the core of a person, the source of emotions, thoughts, motives, and acts. As we hunger for righteousness and feed others with mercy, we are constantly seeking purer motives and attitudes in ourselves. God continually brings us back to face our poverty at a deeper level, repeatedly invites us to stop hungering for what doesn't satisfy.

The habits of the heart go deep, and we welcome the Spirit of God, the Purifier, to come with His scalpel to do heart surgery. The Word of God is that scalpel, so daily time in Scripture is no dry nicety if we long for God. Blessed are those who thirst to see God, no matter how much the process hurts.

Why can only the pure in heart see God? Because purity of heart is wanting only God's ways and God's glory from the core of my being. The impurities cloud my vision: I see Him through eyes distorted by fear, pride, wrong desire, or unforgiveness.

BLESSED WARFARE

When repentance has brought us to the last three beatitudes, we are full soldiers in God's army — strange army whose battle is to bring peace. *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God" (Matthew 5:9).* Peacemakers go out armed with righteousness, mercy, and purity to free others from their poverty, to bring them the good news that they can mourn without despair because God wants to make peace with them. We sneak into the enemy camp to tell frightened soldiers that if they come out with their hands up, the rightful King not only will pardon them but also will invite them to dinner!

A strange army with a strange mission!

But the battle and the enemy are real: *"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me" (Matthew 5:10-11).*

Here is the test of our heart's purity, the proof of whether we really hunger for righteousness or still crave comfort and approval, the trial of our meek dependence on God. Some people get hostile when our lives shine floodlights on their denial. Satan sets ambushes to waylay God's ambassadors. If we aren't grounded in the earlier beatitudes, persecution will inflict wounds too deep to bear. Blessed are you who are persecuted because you are peacemakers for the King.

We started with nothing, in utter poverty. We were comforted, filled, pardoned, purified, adopted, and commissioned. Our inheritance as sons and daughters is nothing less than the whole earth and the Kingdom of God. But the cost matches the gift: shattered pride, desperate mourning, terrifying trust, mercy toward abusers, heart surgery, insults, persecution, perhaps even death.

Is the prize worth the price? That is the choice of repentance.