

Happy Hunger: Revisiting the Sermon on the Mount

By J. Brent Bill

"It's ancient history!" whines Chris.

Nick says, "Yeah, I like some of the stories, but what's it got to do with today?" "Sure, I know Jesus said some good stuff. No, I don't know exactly what, but it was good," adds Jill. "Well, I think it's just a bunch of do's and don'ts – mostly don'ts," Bernice concludes.

Such responses are typical teen honesty regarding the Bible. You know what the Bible is and that it's important, but at times it doesn't seem very relevant. After all, what does the Bible have to do with homework, hanging out with friends or cruising the mall?

Quite a lot, actually. But to find out, first you have to read it. And a good place to start is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount – especially the Beatitudes (see Matthew 5:3-10). You know which ones those are; they all begin with "Blessed are..." and cover uncomfortable territory like being poor and hungry.

Jesus' words are timeless. They inspired people in the 10th century and probably will challenge twenty-first century residents. And they are ageless, in the sense that they apply to all of us regardless of age. Times have changed since Jesus lived, but people really haven't. So Jesus' words are for all people at all times – even twenty-first century teenagers in the U.S.A.

Some people don't want to read the Bible because they think it is full of rules. The Scriptures do contain a lot of rules – rules that can scare people off. After all, none of us likes to be told what to do. We want to run our own lives. 'I've got parents and teachers telling me what I shouldn't or have to do all the time," you may think to yourself, "Most of the time I don't like them bossing me around.. Why would I want to read the Bible? I don't need anything else telling me how I should live." I've got good news for you. There is one great biblical chapter in particular that isn't all "don'ts." It isn't even all "do's." It deals a lot more with attitudes than actions, though actions will result from your attitudes.

Youth Update takes a look at the Beatitudes now to see how they apply to today's teens.

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

What would it be like to be poor in spirit? Is being poor in spirit related to material poverty? Is it possible for the Donald Trumps of this world to understand this Beatitude or does Mother Teresa of Calcutta have one up on them here?

Jesus is not implying that Mother Teresa has more worth than Donald Trump. Both of them are God's children. What Jesus is saying is how you act is more important than what you have. Being a part of God's kingdom is important.

Being poor in spirit means keeping your worth in perspective. What makes you valuable to God is not what crowd you run with or what kind of car you drive, but rather that you are God's child. That's good and something to be pleased about.

Everyone else is God's creation as well. That's also something to celebrate. As far as God is concerned, everybody is equal.

Take a minute now to think of people you know whom you consider to be “poor in spirit” – people who have their worth in proper perspective. Make a list of attributes they possess.

You describe them as:

- humble,
- kind,
- forgiving,
- considerate,
- helpful.

Then consider the attributes you have that match up with those on your list. You may be surprised how many you can claim – especially if you review your typical behavior. Everyone has good qualities. Recognize yours and then exercise and nurture them. These gifts will help you further understand what it means to be poor in spirit.

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

It’s good to know that comfort is coming, because we all have times in our lives when we mourn. You may lose a grandparent to death. You could be separated from a parent through divorce. You may lose touch with a best friend if you have to move to a new town during your junior year.

This Beatitude says that it’s O.K. to grieve. It’s natural, even. Everybody does it. Life seems to hand out plenty of reasons for weeping. The good news is that those who cry will be comforted. How, you may ask?

God, through the Holy Spirit, consoles us. If you quiet yourself, become still and allow for the Spirit’s presence that is. Many a person who has been dealt a bad blow by life has felt God pick him or her up when no human was around. God’s spirit was speaking.

Those who mourn also receive comfort from other people. Whenever someone reaches out to you in love that really is God acting through that person. We need to remain open to the solace that God offers through our friends, family and the Church.

You can be one of those people who reach out and comfort the mournful.

- Send a sympathy card or a note to someone who has experienced the death of a friend or family member.
- Smile at someone who seems lonely.
- Call a friend whose parents have separated.
- Write a letter to someone in the armed forces who’s stationed far from home.

In this Beatitude, Jesus is telling you that sadness is part of life, but so is comfort. Just as you need others to comfort you when you are sad, you can be there for others, too.

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

When we hear the word meek, the image of a human doormat often pops into our minds, a cartoon drawing of someone who lets others walk all over him or her. Is Jesus suggesting that you have to let people use and abuse you? **No.**

One of the main biblical understandings of the word “meek” is patient. For some, being patient is about as appealing as letting people wipe their shoes on them. Impatient people like to be always in motion, on the go. Who wants to be slow, plodding, patient?

But be honest. Don't you feel like you live too much of your life on the run?

You get up at the last minute, hurry to school, then to track practice, then to Pizza Pete's, then to work, then back home to watch MTV and do homework, then to bed, then up at the last minute the next morning. You speed through life looking like a DVD on continuous fast-forward.

In this Beatitude, Jesus tells us that it pays to be patient. Slow down. Take your time.

- Look around – ahead and behind, left and right. Where do you find beauty or cause for wonder?
- Notice something new about a friend – the color of that friend's eyes, for instance, or which hand he or she prefers to use.
- Check out the sky. What color is it today?
- Listen to a favorite album – without doing anything else.
- Start reading the book that's been gathering dust by your bed for six months.
- Daydream – on purpose – for five whole minutes.

Take a few minutes now. Put this lesson aside and slow down. Think of some areas where you need to be more patient. What are other ways in which you can slow down, make your life less hectic?

Maybe that's what Jesus meant about inheriting the land. It will be yours if you take time to slow down and become a part of it. Otherwise you are too rushed to notice that it's yours already.

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

“I know what it's like to hunger and thirst for a Whopper and a Coke,” you say. “but what's it like to hunger and thirst for righteousness?” It's a lot like your Whopper and Code cravings. Most everyone wants to do what is right. When you hunger and thirst for righteousness, you need to do right – just like you need to eat when you're hungry or drink when you're thirsty. Spiritual hunger and spiritual thirst won't lead to the nearest drive-through, but it will push you into action.

If this Beatitude catches on, you'll find yourself wanting to:

- avoid doing drugs or abusing alcohol;
- study enough that you won't even be tempted to cheat on a big test;
- show up at your after-school job early so no one will have to cover for you;
- pray for guidance when you're in some sort of a jam.

Jesus is talking here about more than generic goodness. He's saying that you'll find your life richer if you really strive to do right. That's not just avoiding what's wrong. It's really looking for what is the best and right way to live and act.

This Beatitude is one way to say that, while it's important to fill the body with good food, it's even more important to hunger for the right way of life.

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

Ever been around someone who was being picked on? Have you ever just stood by when you could have helped? That would have been a good time to show mercy, to intervene on that person's behalf. You have many chances to show kindness toward people who lack something you just happen to have – something concrete or, possibly, a talent or skill.

- Invite that new classmate who eats alone in the corner of the cafeteria to join your group for lunch
- Talk to the person in your class who doesn't seem to belong to any group.
- Help someone who hasn't caught on to the latest chapter understand the homework assignment.

There are many ways to demonstrate mercy. Make your own list of ways you could "show mercy" to others. Likewise, there will be times in your life when you'll need the mercy of others. You might find yourself the new kid in school or in the neighborhood. That's when you'll find out the true meaning behind this Beatitude. Others will see the kind of person you are and have been, and will treat you the way you've treated them. They will mirror your own behavior back to you.

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

Have you ever had a really messy room? Has it been so cluttered you could not find something you really needed – like the other red sock? Sometimes hearts get that way – they are so cluttered with spiritual equivalent of unmatched socks that it's hard to find God there.

This Beatitude states that when you work toward housecleaning your heart, you will see God. Just as you find things you had forgotten you owned when you clean up your room, so too can you find God when you sweep and dust off your interior self. Just like keeping a room picked up seems like a full-time job sometimes, so does keeping a heart cleaned up. You might need a to-do list.

- Get rid of hateful feelings toward the person in English class who started a nasty rumor about you.
- Throw out feelings of selfishness about letting a younger brother or sister borrow any of your clothes.
- Sort out whether your current feelings toward your boyfriend or girlfriend are actually love or lust.
- Dust off your Bible and read it (especially Matthew 5).

Spend time today planning your spiritual clean-up. What things would need to be put away? or thrown away? Do you need to just tidy it up, or wash it out with a fire hose? List what you need to do to ensure that your inner self stays in order.

Maybe that will give new meaning to the old cliché that “cleanliness is next to godliness.”

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

“How can I be a peacemaker?” you may ask. “I’m not the President or a senator or even a voter who can help to shape the nations of the world. I’m a teenager.” Yes, you are – and this alone has probably started several battles, if not a whole war. Even so, you have plenty of opportunities to play the role of peacemaker at home, at school, at sports events or at work.

Being a peacemaker is not something passive but active. You are called to put your selfish interests aside and help to resolve some conflict.

- Bring together two friends who have disagreed and help them find a way to resolve – or accept – their differences.
- Refuse to join in the heckling of the other team’s fans at Friday night’s game.
- Avoid arguments with your parents – even when you know you’re right.
- Say “I’m sorry” to your younger brother or sister.

There are many other ways you can bring peace – if you put your mind (and heart) to it. Peacemakers are sorely needed in a world that is far from peaceful. Jesus realized that all true peace begins with peace between individuals. That’s why he calls us to work hard as peacemakers.

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

Not many teens ever feel persecuted for righteousness’ sake, right? Right!

Of course that may be because teens aren’t a very righteous bunch. Compared to some of the early Christians, at least, you haven’t been thrown in prison or put to death for the faith. And that’s what you think of when you hear the word “persecution.”

Perhaps the definition is too narrow. While you might hesitate to compare the day-to-day trials that come from living your faith to those experienced by martyrs, you still face your share of persecution. You do, that is, if you stand for the things you believe in. You may face verbal persecution if:

- you won’t go to certain movies;
- you choose not to listen to raunchy, tasteless music;
- you decide to save sex for marriage;
- you do your own homework.

People have been known to make fun of others who act differently than they do – especially if they say it’s because of their belief in God. That type of persecution is real – and it hurts. In spite of that, you’ll find you’re at peace with yourself when you stand up for what’s right. Jesus says that’s because it comes from knowing you are a member in good standing of the kingdom of God.

So you see, the Beatitudes have a lot to do with being a teenager – right now. They can be summed up as attitudes, something you can be. If you will be all these things – humble in spirit, free to grieve, patient, striving to do the right thing, merciful, clean of heart, a peace maker and willing to stand up for

what you believe – your goodness will “give light to the whole house” as Jesus promises in the same sermon that contains the Beatitudes.

And that’s good since we all live in that house – our world – together. Living these attitudes results in some very real choices as you do the things and become the person Jesus asks you to be. Through the Beatitudes, Jesus tells you that there is a better way of living: It’s a life of goodness, comfort, peace, and love towards all people. And this way of life is not for adults only.

*J. Brent Bill is on the staff of United Way of Indiana. He is an ordained Friends pastor and has authored many books for teenagers published by Fleming H. Revell Company, including **Stuff Your Guidance Counselor Never Told You.***