



CHARACTER COUNTS

BY GEORGE O. WOOD



Eight principles from the Beatitudes

Just a few months after I became pastor of a then small and struggling church, Dr. Robert Frost, a leader in the charismatic renewal movement, prayed for me and the church: “Lord, help them to build foundations strong enough to bear the weight You will later place on them.”

That’s what Jesus seeks to do for us by giving a teaching in the Sermon on the Mount that we identify as the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). The eight qualities form the bedrock foundation for a life well built. The principles arise out of Jesus’ own character, and when we put them into operation we fulfill the biblical desire that Christ be formed in us (Galatians 4:19).

Rather than looking at these character foundations from old English, see them through the lens of self-affirmations. Jesus wants you to be able to say the following things about yourself — because when you live these statements, you are expressing the personality of our Lord.



The first Beatitude pronounces blessing on the poor in spirit.

There are two kinds of poverty: that of a student or minimum-wage worker just barely getting by, and that of a person so destitute he or she is totally dependent on others for food, shelter and clothing.

It’s that second kind of poverty Jesus refers to here — the destitute in spirit, a poverty never relieved by our own efforts.

Jesus tells us we must live with an attitude that says, “I need help.” The Christian life begins when we say, “Lord, I cannot buy salvation, forgiveness or eternal life. I am totally dependent on You for what I cannot give myself.” That attitude of “I need help” is meant to mark us for the length of our Christian journey.

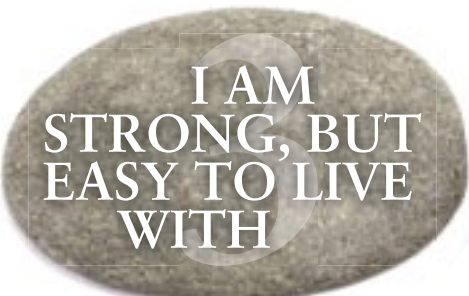
Jesus modeled this principle for us in the Garden of Gethsemane when He told Peter, James and John to watch and pray with Him because His soul was “overwhelmed with sorrow” (Matthew 26:38, NIV). He was honest about His feelings and plainly expressed to those closest to Him that He needed their help.

The starting place for all spiritual, personal, relational and emotional growth is poverty — the recognition that we need help. Jesus said, “Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). The “I need help” people get the Kingdom (Matthew 5:3).



The shortest verse in the Bible records, “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). He could have maintained a clinical detachment over the death of His friend Lazarus. But Jesus never got calloused or professional in dealing with the needs and hurts of others. He remained sensitive.

Thus, the Lord gives blessing to those who mourn (Matthew 5:4). We must be persons easily moved by the hurts of others. The hardhearted never know the comfort of the Lord.



The word *meek* has gotten bad press. We think of meek as weak, timid, spineless — a person who is a doormat spread out for others to walk on. But when Jesus says the meek are blessed, He uses a word that means three things: (1) a centered or balanced

person, (2) an individual under restraint or control, and (3) a man or woman of gentleness.

The word *meek* in Greek literature was used to describe a wild horse that was broken. It still had verve, power and speed — but its energies had been channeled.

Jesus wants you to be a person not given to erratic behavior or mood swings. He wants you balanced — not all work and not all play. He desires you to be gentle — notice how gentle He was even with little children. He also desires you to be disciplined — not living your life in chaos, but seeking to bring order, purpose, clarity and priority to your life.

No wonder the meek inherit the earth — they know how to run their own life, their family and work, and their world.

I WANT TO KEEP ON GROWING

Jesus blessed those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. There is never a time when we can say, “I have arrived. I know it all.” Nor can we ever say, “I have become totally like Christ.”

We must stay on the growing edge.

There are five great growth lists in the New Testament: the eight Beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12), the 22 life responses of Romans 12:9-21, the 15 qualities of love in 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, the nine fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22,23, and the seven “add-ons” to faith in 1 Peter 1:5-9. In all, 61 qualities from all five lists. These traits define what it is to live a righteous life. If you hunger and thirst after being this kind of person, you will be — as Jesus promised — satisfied!

I CARE

The Beatitudes are much like the locks on the Panama Canal. In order to move ships from one ocean to the other, engineers could not simply dig a channel and let the water run through. Instead, they had to devise an integrated system of large locks that lowered or raised the water so that ships could pass through in stages.

Notice the sequence in Jesus’ teaching. At the beginning you are not able to give help since you need help. So, the first Beatitude is about being poor in spirit. But as you develop the attitude of dependence upon the Lord, and as you become sensitive, strong but easy to live with, and grow in your Christian walk — transformation takes place. Now you are in a position to give help. You are ready for the fifth Beatitude.

The “I care” person possesses a quality in mercy that keeps one away from a spirit of harshness, coldness, judgmentalism and criticism. The “I care” man or woman chooses, like the Good Samaritan, to move out of their own concerns and duties into the hurts and needs of others. Mother Teresa wonderfully lived this quality and expressed it through this prayer: “Let every action of mine be something beautiful for God.”

MY CONSCIENCE IS CLEAR

How do you get a pure heart? When I was a little boy in

northwest China, the son of missionary parents, we had no running water. I only had to take a bath once a week. I’m embarrassed now to admit it, but my goal every Saturday night was to make the ring around the tub thicker than any previously! My mother practically had to use a Brillo pad to clean my ears!

I never let the grime build up now because I am an adult who showers daily.

Sometimes sin and unfor-giveness build up in our lives much like I used to let the dirt accumulate on me. How do we get clean?

Old King David, the adulterer and murderer, tells us in Psalm 32 how to clear your conscience when you have done wrong — through confession and repentance. It would be wonderful if for the rest of your life you never had a wrong thought or action. But we know that’s not the case. We must continually confess to the Lord the things we did that we ought not to have done, and the things we did not do that we ought (1 John 1:8,9).

The tear duct gland is to the eye what repentance and confession are to the heart — they wash away impurities.

LET ME BE YOUR FRIEND

The seventh Beatitude gives a blessing to peacemakers.

It’s much easier to blow up a bridge than to build one. Jesus asks us to be bridge-builders in two ways: Everyone needs to make peace with God and with others. Therefore, the peacemaker is both evangelist (bringing others

to Jesus) and healer (working to bring reconciliation in family, among friends and throughout society).

At many times in his ministry Billy Graham has been criticized for reaching out to include people whom some have wanted to exclude. He has responded on occasion by quoting this poem:

*He drew a circle that shut me out,
Rebel, heretic, a thing to flout.
But love and I had the wit to win.
We drew a circle that took him in.*

When you have the attitude “Let me be your friend,” God calls you His son. Why? Because even God’s one and only Son was called the friend of sinners (Matthew 11:19). “He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near” (Ephesians 2:17).

I WILL REJOICE, EVEN IN MY DOWN TIMES

The last Beatitude is the hardest one to master, and that’s why it’s last in the list: “Blessed are those who are persecuted. ... Rejoice, and be glad” (Matthew 5:10-12).

When you develop the first seven Beatitudes as integral to your personality, then the end result is a lifestyle shaped by Jesus himself. You will stand out. And there will be people who oppose what you now represent.

Whether our down times come as a result of outside opposition or tough circumstances, the Scriptures consistently tell us to rejoice. Writing from a prison cell, Paul tells believers, “Rejoice

in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4). Paul encourages us to “rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope” (Romans 5:3,4). James reminds us, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds” (James 1:2).

Rejoice in trials, tests and trouble? Yes! Exactly!

We are being asked to respond reflectively rather than reflexively to difficulties. What’s the difference?

When I go to the doctor for my physical exam, he taps me on the knee with an instrument that looks like a hammer. My lower leg immediately kicks out — something called a “knee-jerk” reaction.

Jesus tells us not to have the reflexive “knee-jerk” reaction to life’s adversities, but instead to put a space between the action against us and our reaction. That space is for reflection — and the desired reflection is an attitude of joy.

Like I said, this is the hardest Beatitude to learn! But, we can have joy because we know instantly the end result. The adversity, suffering or persecution is never the end of the story — it’s only the beginning. We see beyond the difficulty to the ultimate joy of God working out everything for good to those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (Romans 8:28).

FROM MIRACLE TO MATURITY

Have you noticed the segment of Gospel that immediately

precedes Jesus’ teaching on the Beatitudes? Look at the last few verses of Matthew 4. They record the wide sweep of Jesus’ healing and deliverance power, as well as the huge throngs from all places that crowded around Him.

If I were with Jesus at that moment in time, I would have urged Him to continue His ministry of miracles. Breaking away from that to teach risked losing the crowds and the momentum. But Jesus knows human nature better than His disciples or me. His miracles only change people’s external circumstances, but not their internal disposition of heart.

We must be careful that we not get so focused on Jesus doing something *for* us that we forget He wants to do something *in* us.

The eight attitudes of the Beatitudes instill into our minds and hearts the very personality of Jesus. When you pray to be like Jesus, tell yourself He desires you to say these things truthfully about yourself:

- I need help.
- I am sensitive.
- I am strong, but easy to live with.
- I want to keep on growing.
- I care.
- My conscience is clear.
- Let me be your friend.
- I will rejoice, even in my down times. **tpe**

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