

Renew a Right Spirit within Me

Matthew 5:1-12

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According to the dictionary, a paradox is a statement or proposition that seems self-contradictory or absurd, but in reality expresses a possible truth.¹ It seems awfully paradoxical to say something like “Blessed are the poor in spirit... Blessed are those who mourn... Blessed are those who are persecuted...” To pair “blessed” with things like poverty of spirit, persecution, grief, and such, seems very out of place.

And yet that is precisely what Jesus does—he pronounces blessedness on these seemingly miserable conditions and traits. He takes situations and character traits that would appear to be negative, and he gives them special status: Blessed. In the end, these traits that nobody in the world wants are the very traits that Jesus commends to you and me, and all who would follow him. In the hands and heart of Jesus and his followers, these traits define who we are and transform our hearts to be like the heart of Christ. They are, it turns out, sacred paradoxes.

There is a line in the 51st psalm that has always resonated with me: Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. The psalm itself is a confession of sin made by David upon the bringing to light his affair with Bathsheba and the killing of Uriah the Hittite. The petition for the creation of a clean heart and the renewal of a right spirit is the cry of a heart that longs for a godly character. You see, as people who choose to worship God, as people who choose to follow Jesus Christ, there is within us the recognition of an incongruity between the way of God and the ways of the world. To cry out, “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me,” is to declare that we have chosen to live in the way of God.

The text from the 6th chapter of Micah, which was incorporated into our call to worship and our prayer of confession, makes it clear that what God wants from us is more than empty offerings and religious acts; what God wants from us must emanate from our heart: [The Lord] has told you what is good; and what does the Lord require of you, but to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?”²

Do justice, love kindness, walk in humility with God... A heart that longs for God will also long for the transformation of spirit and character that is indicative of a right relationship with God.

Create in me a clean heart, O Lord, and renew a right spirit within me.

And so when we come to the Beatitudes, we recognize that the types of character that Jesus commends are not simply eight marks of the Christian that has somehow reached perfection. Nor are they descriptions of eight different types of disciples, as if you could choose as to whether you would specialize in mourning, or mercy, or peacemaking. Indeed, the character traits that Jesus describes are the

¹Dictionary.com

² Micah 6:8

character traits that Jesus specifies for all who follow him. And so you and I and all who follow Jesus are to be poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungering and thirsting after righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, even persecuted for righteousness' sake and because of our allegiance to Christ.

More than simply a description of some elite spiritual group of people, the beatitudes paint a portrait of the kind of person you and I are called to be. And so we would do well to ask, Is this an accurate picture of who I am in Christ? Is this an accurate picture of the church of Jesus Christ?

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Let's look at the eight character traits Jesus commends of all his disciples, and as we do so, let's pray for God to move us closer and closer to being the kind of people he intends us to be: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me."

Blessed are the poor in spirit, says Jesus, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. There has been much discussion over this verse, because in Luke's account Jesus does not qualify the kind of poverty he is commending. He simply says, "Blessed are you poor..." And so the debate has been over whether or not Jesus is pronouncing a special preference for those who are poor over those who are rich. The answer in the larger context of the Bible is probably, "Yes," because Scripture repeatedly calls for special care to be given to the poor among us, as does Scripture also give special warnings to the spiritual perils of wealth. But at issue here is a special kind of poverty that anyone—poor and rich alike—would be capable of engaging. The poverty that Jesus calls for is an impoverishment of our spirit that recognizes that we are unable to save ourselves, that we must turn to God for our salvation. Anyone who believes he can save himself or earn her own way into heaven will not enter the kingdom of heaven; but those who realize their complete inability to live into God's standards of righteousness and turn to God for their salvation will be blessed with citizenship in the kingdom.

Lord, renew a right spirit within me...

Blessed are those who mourn, says Jesus, for they shall be comforted. Often we interpret this verse to mean that those who have lost loved ones will find comfort and relief for their grief. And it is true that the love and peace of Christ provides healing for the hurting heart that one won't find anywhere else. But that's not the kind of mourning to which Jesus refers here. The kind of mourning Jesus calls for is the lamenting of our sinfulness and the sinfulness of the world. Our Lord wept over the people who would not receive him. His heart was torn by those who rejected him.

The mourning that Jesus commends to you and me is mourning for our world and our own brokenness. It is very much like the response of the prophet Isaiah when he found himself in the presence of God, and God's glory made Isaiah acutely aware of how much Isaiah had fallen short of God's glory: Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell among a people of unclean lips.³ To mourn as Christ calls us to mourn is to bemoan the fact that our sinfulness has left us broken, and that the world is equally broken by sin. And the blessing we receive for our remorse and

³ See Isaiah 6:1ff

contrition is the assurance that when we acknowledge our brokenness God meets us with the forgiveness of Jesus Christ. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Lord, renew a right spirit within me...

Blessed are the meek, says Jesus, for they shall inherit the earth. This is one of the more countercultural of the beatitudes, for in our world it is not the meek and lowly that possess the earth, but the powerful and the strong. And yet Jesus commends the meek, and Jesus even described himself as meek and lowly.⁴ To be meek doesn't mean we put a big sign on our back that says, "Walk all over me." But it does mean that we live with humility; we are gentle and sensitive toward others, recognizing that they experience the same brokenness as you and I do.

Lord, renew a right spirit within me...

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be satisfied, says Jesus. On the one hand we mourn the sinfulness that has corrupted the image of God in us and in the world. The other side of that coin is that we long for justice and righteousness to prevail. Moreover, we actively pursue justice and righteousness in the world around us. Martin Luther put it this way: "The command to you is not to crawl into a corner or into the desert, but to run out... and to offer your hands and your feet and your whole body, and to wager everything you have and can do."⁵

It's not always evident that our pursuit of righteousness is making progress in the world. But the assurance and the promised blessing from God is that we will find satisfaction for our hunger and thirst. God's righteousness will prevail.

Lord, renew a right spirit within me.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall find mercy. Mercy is, quite simply, the working out of compassion for those in need. Show mercy to others, and you will be shown mercy in your own life.

Lord, renew a right spirit within me.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Most of us will define purity as an unobtainable condition. Purity is synonymous with moral perfection. And yet, Jesus calls us to purity of heart, so there must be something else to what he is commending us. The purity of heart that Jesus describes is more akin to sincerity, to integrity of life and faith. The pure in heart are utterly transparent. What you see is what you get. Let your yes be yes, and your no be no. Say what you mean, and mean what you say. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. It is when we are authentic, genuine, that we don't put up false fronts and facades that get in the way between us and others, and us and God. When we are pure in heart, there is nothing in the way of our seeing God.

Lord, renew a right spirit within me.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of God. This is where we are called to be imitators of Christ in his ministry of reconciliation. Our sin

⁴ Matthew 11:29

⁵ Martin Luther, cited in John R.W. Stott, *Christian Counterculture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), p. 45.

ruptures every relationship we have with others and with God; but in Christ we are reconciled to God and to one another. It is Jesus who gave his life for us so that we might have peace with God; in a like manner we are to give of ourselves for the sake of reconciling others to God and one another. In this sense, when we engage in the ministry of reconciliation, we are engaging in the work of Jesus, the son of God; and as such, we are called sons of God, for we are continuing the work that the Son of God began.

Lord, renew a right spirit within me.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake... Blessed are you when you are persecuted on my account, says Jesus. How will we know that we are being faithful to the spirit of Christ in our lives? We will know when we find ourselves at odds with the world. You see, Jesus takes the values of the world and turns them on their head. It is not the rich and the powerful and the influential and the shrewd ones who will be blessed, but the poor, the unassuming and humble and meek, the merciful ones, the pure in heart, those who pursue righteousness and peace over a win-at-all-costs attitude. The world does not sit well with the kind of life that Jesus commends. And so if you and I are going to be faithful as his disciples, then we will rock the boat, and we will ruffle some feathers, to the point that the world strikes back.

Are you sure you want to pray, "Lord, renew a right spirit within me?"

In the beatitudes Jesus gives us a picture of what every Christian should be. We should be on our knees, admitting our spiritual poverty and mourning the brokenness of our world; we should be humble and gentle, unassuming in our relationships with others; we should be yearning for a world where righteousness has conquered evil. We should be out among the people of the world, showing compassion and mercy upon people who share in the common brokenness and sinfulness of the human race; we should be transparent and honest in all our dealings; we should pursue peace and reconciliation in ourselves and with others, even as God has granted us peace and reconciliation in Christ. And yet we will not be thanked for being this kind of person; rather we will be mocked, insulted, rejected, even persecuted.

That's what a "blessed" person looks like.

Is it a picture of you?

Lord, renew a right spirit within me.