



DR. JIM DENISON





## **Also by Dr. Jim Denison**

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*Eight Ways Christians Change Culture*

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## Acknowledgments

Thomas à Kempis wisely advised us: “Do not be influenced by the importance of the writer, and whether his learning be great or small, but let the love of pure truth draw you to read. Do not inquire, Who said this? but pay attention to what is said.”

While I certainly agree that you should not be influenced by my “importance” (whatever it may be), I want you to know about those members of our ministry team whose contributions have been vital to “what is said” in this small volume.

Ryan Denison, my oldest son and research assistant, contributed concepts and helpful critique to the introduction and several of the chapters. Blake Atwood edited my words once again with incisive excellence. Minni Elkins provided stellar proofreading, as usual. Melissa Tjarks has overseen the project from conception to completion with grace and professionalism. Emily Tomasella provided graphics support that transformed my word documents into the attractive volume in your hands. And Chris Elkins, my chief of staff, directed our team with his usual servant heart and outstanding leadership.

It is a great honor to partner with them in this ministry.

And to share our collective work with you.

*Soli Deo gloria.*

Jim Denison  
Summer 2019  
Dallas, Texas



# Introduction

Pick an issue in the news. Whether you thought first of abortion, racial prejudice, the LGBTQ agenda, poverty, euthanasia, or something else, now ask yourself: Is our culture moving closer to or further away from God's word on this issue?

Consider racial discrimination.

Five decades after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 ended segregation in public places and banned employment discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, we might think American society is making great progress toward racial equality. But according to a recent Pew Research Center poll, a majority of Americans believe race relations in the United States are bad. Of those, about seven in ten say things are getting even worse.

What about poverty?

We might think that the longest stock market expansion in American history would translate into good news on this issue. While the percentage of Americans living in poverty has declined from over 15 percent in 2010 to 12.3 percent in 2017, the poverty rate for all infants rose from 17.2 percent in 2016 to 20.2 percent in 2017. For black infants, the rate escalated from 28.5 percent to 34.4 percent. Minorities had higher poverty rates than non-Hispanic whites, and child poverty is among the highest in the industrialized world.

What about abortion?

We might note the report from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that abortions in the United States have dropped to their lowest level in ten years. However, this “lower” level still reflects the deaths of more than 638,000 babies. And the movement to legitimize and even celebrate abortion continues to escalate.

When we turn to issues such as pornography, sex outside of heterosexual marriage, religious liberty, and euthanasia, our moral descent is even clearer.

What is the answer?

## **A movement of culture-changing Christians**

In his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus declared to his followers: “You are the salt of the earth... You are the light of the world” (Matthew 5:13, 14).

- *You* is plural, including all Christians.
- *Are* is in the present tense, describing a fact, not a prediction or a supposition.
- *The* makes it clear that we are the *only* salt and light of the world.

Salt purifies; light dispels darkness.

From our Lord’s statement, we can know that if our culture is decaying and darkening, the answer is for God’s people to become the change agents he intends us to be. In short, what America needs most is a movement of culture-changing Christians.

Denison Ministries exists to be a catalyst for such a movement. Each of our ministry brands uniquely contributes to this calling:

- **First15** leads believers into a daily, empowering encounter with our Lord at [First15.org](http://First15.org).
- **Christian Parenting** equips parents to raise children to know and love the Lord at [ChristianParenting.org](http://ChristianParenting.org).
- **Janet Denison’s** teaching ministry helps believers apply God’s word to their lives at [JanetDenison.org](http://JanetDenison.org).
- **Denison Forum** equips Christians to discern news differently by engaging cultural issues with biblical truth at [DenisonForum.org](http://DenisonForum.org).

Our collective purpose is to “equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:12) so they can use their influence to change the culture for Christ.

When I discuss this mission, however, people often ask me: What does a culture-changing Christian look like? What characteristics define someone God is using to impact the culture for Jesus?

Before our Lord defined our calling as salt and light, he first gave us eight statements that answer our question. The Beatitudes tell us precisely how Christians who are changing the culture live—the values and commitments that motivate and inspire them.

As we explore these timeless principles together, our purpose is simple: to align our lives with these eight principles so fully that they define our character and empower our influence.

When we do, we will be the salt and light our Lord desires and our culture desperately needs.

## **The sermon that changed the world**

One of the primary emphases in Matthew’s gospel is helping Christians learn how to be better followers of Christ while guiding others to do the same. To that end, he bookends Jesus’ teaching ministry with two passages: The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7) and the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20). The God who inspired Matthew’s writing was clearly concerned with reminding

us that his Son came to accomplish even more than securing our eternal salvation.

The day we trust Christ as our Savior and Lord is the start of a relationship that will extend throughout all of eternity. Too often, though, we make the mistake of thinking that eternity doesn't start until we get to heaven. The truth is that we are called to invest in our relationship with our Father in this life as well as in the life to come, which means becoming more like Christ every single day.

What does such a lifestyle look like?

It has often been said that Christians are meant to represent God's hands and feet to the world around us. Yet that mission is doomed to fail if we cannot represent his heart and mind as well. The religious leaders in the time of Christ placed the utmost importance on the observance of God's laws and created safeguard upon safeguard to ensure that people would not transgress them. The gospels, however, are filled with examples of how God desires more from his people.

Fortunately, he also left us with a clear guide on how to serve him with our hearts and minds as well as with our actions.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus essentially gives us his systematic ethic for how to be his disciples. And whether one believes it was given as one sermon or is rather a summary of his teachings, it represents the core of what he taught across three years of public ministry.

The sermon covers a wide range of topics that encompass nearly every facet of what Jesus expects of those who claim to follow him. As St. Augustine notes, the Sermon represents "a perfect standard of the Christian life."

To this end, it's fitting that Matthew began his record of Jesus' teaching ministry with this sermon. He wanted his readers to see this message as the lens through which we should understand the rest of our Lord's teachings and to note that it lays the foundation for understanding all that follows.

It must have come as a shock when Jesus began his sermon by stating, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." When he continued with a series of seven additional blessings, all of which were countercultural to the society of his day (and ours as well), it would have been impossible to avoid the



response of those who first heard him: “The crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” (Matthew 7:28–29).

You see, contrary to the way in which the Law was presented by most religious leaders of his time, Jesus began his moral instruction by focusing on *character* rather than commands. Until we understand why, we’ll never fully grasp the gravity of all the instruction that comes after.

Even if we somehow managed to keep every command found in this sermon but did not exhibit the characteristics described in its first twelve verses, we would never fully experience the blessing of God in our lives. Nor would we become the salt and light our culture needs.

### **“Blessed are the . . . .”**

Let’s begin by noting the manner in which Jesus states the “Beatitudes” (from the Latin phrase for “blessings”). While I doubt many will read this book hoping for a grammar lesson (I know I wouldn’t), there are a few key pieces of information that are vital if we want to understand fully all that Christ teaches in these verses.

First: What Jesus offers us in the Beatitudes is a guide to the kinds of blessings only God can provide. It’s a blessedness that transcends our circumstances, a joy and peace that the world can neither give nor take. We’ll learn more about those blessings as we look at each verse in greater detail; but, from the start, we must acknowledge that what the Lord offers is something only he can deliver.

Second: Jesus says, “Blessed are.” He does not say “Blessed were,” when times were better. Nor does he say “Blessed will be,” when your current troubles pass. He says, “Blessed are.” The blessings that God uniquely offers are available to you each and every moment of your life. Those who live with the character described in these verses will know and abide in a kind of blessing that too often we mistakenly believe is reserved for heaven (or, at least, for our more peaceful times on earth).

Third: Jesus states, “Blessed are *the*.” In seven of the eight Beatitudes, Jesus begins by using some form of this definitive article to describe those who are blessed, the only exception being when

he personalizes those who are persecuted in the final Beatitude. By starting with some variation of “Blessed are *the/those,*” Jesus demonstrates that these characteristics form the *only* path to the blessing God wants us to have.

There is no other way because there could not be another way. The remnants of our fallen nature make it too difficult to otherwise live every day with the kind of character Jesus describes in these verses.

So, we’ve seen that Jesus was emphatic about both the uniqueness and the necessity of these characteristics for those who want to experience the kind of blessing only God can provide. But are all of them necessary, or can we experience enough blessing to get by if we just focus on the few that come easiest to us?

## **A systematic ethic**

It’s human nature to gravitate toward that which we feel adequate to accomplish. Given that the idea of shaping our character to conform with each of the traits espoused in the Beatitudes is an inherently overwhelming task, it will take a conscious effort to avoid focusing on those that come more naturally while paying less attention to those that require more effort on our part.

It’s important to note, however, that Jesus did not intend to give us this option. When Christ began by stating, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3), he laid the foundation upon which the other Beatitudes would be built. We will discover more about why this is true when we discuss verse 3, but the same general principle is true of all the Beatitudes. Each of them describes a component of the Christian life without which our character will fall short of the standard to which Jesus has called us.

Moreover, we cannot consistently practice some of these traits to the exclusion of the rest. For example, those who mourn can only be comforted if they are poor in spirit and therefore open to the kingship of Christ in their lives. The pure in heart will see God because they hunger and thirst for righteousness with a meekness that enables them to entrust every facet of their lives to the Father. Those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake can find the

strength to rejoice and be glad because they have learned to see themselves as members of God's kingdom and family.

Such examples could be given for each of the Beatitudes, and this principle will become self-evident after studying each blessing in turn. For now, it is vital that we approach this section of God's word convinced of the absolute necessity of each characteristic Jesus chose to include.

The Beatitudes truly form a systematic ethic for what it means to be a disciple of Christ. Absent this holistic approach, we cannot fully appreciate the kind of life to which we are called.

## **The nature of blessing**

As we've noted, living in accordance with the characteristics described in the Beatitudes is necessary for positioning ourselves to receive the blessings Christ promises. Yet, to fully appreciate this fact means a brief word must first be said as to the nature of these blessings. The same Teacher who offers them also warned us: "In this world you will have tribulation" (John 16:33). Clearly, he did not promise a life free from struggle.

In truth, being blessed as Jesus describes in these verses is not essential to living a happy life. Millions of Americans who have no personal relationship with Jesus would nonetheless say they are happy. At times, living by the Beatitudes can even be counterproductive to a feeling of happiness.

But such a life is not what Jesus wants most for us. Rather, he promises a life of purpose and fulfillment, a sense of well-being that transcends circumstances and makes a genuine difference in the world. In short, what the Beatitudes promise are the necessary blessings to be a force for the kingdom in our culture. If we're honest with ourselves, isn't such significance what we really seek most?

We can momentarily satiate our desire for happiness and peace in any number of ways, many of which are neither wicked nor sinful. Yet, when this brief joy fades, the yearning for something more, for the kind of life Jesus describes in these verses, will always return. The only way to end this cycle is to devote our lives so completely to our Lord and his ways that every moment is saturated with his presence.

Fortunately, such a life is exactly what the Beatitudes are meant to produce. They are, in a sense, Christ's vision for what our lives could be like if we let him be our king. This is not a life of ease, and it will require the kind of self-sacrifice that does not come naturally to us. It is, however, the only way to know the kind of lasting joy and purpose for which we were created. And it is the only way to be the salt and light that will change our culture for God's glory.

# CHAPTER 1

## DEPEND ON THE SPIRIT

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* —Matthew 5:3

Archimedes famously declared, “Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum on which to place it, and I shall move the world.” The ancient physicist and engineer (288–212 BC) would need a very long lever.

Our planet is estimated to weigh around 13,170,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 pounds. To move it even one-millionth of a meter, it’s been estimated that Archimedes would need a lever 8.45 light-years long. Earth is just one of approximately 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 planets in the observable universe. And yet, our Creator measures the entire universe in the palm of his hand (Isaiah 40:12).

To change our secularized, post-Christian culture seems a task too daunting for us to accomplish. Reading the news each day can be discouraging and even demoralizing. We’re right—you and I

cannot convict a single sinner of a single sin or change a single soul. We cannot change even one person, much less our culture.

But God can.

The same Spirit who created the universe (Genesis 1:2) stands ready to recreate any fallen human who turns to Jesus in faith (2 Corinthians 5:17). Our Father will forgive every sin we confess (1 John 1:9) and transform every person who is yielded to his power and purpose (Romans 8:29).

To join him in changing the culture, we must submit our lives to the only power that can change the culture. The first Beatitude is Jesus' invitation to precisely such an empowered, transformative life.

### **The power of *ptochos***

Greek is a fascinating language. Its vocabulary is considered the richest in the world, with more than five million words. (By contrast, the twenty-volume Oxford English Dictionary contains entries for 171,476 words.)

For example, Greek has two very different words that are translated into English as "poor." One is *penes*, which describes a person who has nothing to spare. This is the family living hand-to-mouth, surviving paycheck to paycheck. But this is not the word in our text.

The first Beatitude employs a different Greek word: *ptochos*, which describes a person who has nothing at all. This is the family that is starving to death, who has no idea where their next meal is coming from.

Translating his words directly, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who are starving to death spiritually." *The Message* puts it: "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope." The New English Bible says, "Blessed are those who know their need of God." This is the exact opposite of how Jesus' culture and ours measure success.

The Jews of Jesus' day believed that material prosperity was a direct sign of divine blessing. Romans believed the same. People in both cultures wanted as much financial means as they could possess, seeking to be as wealthy and healthy as possible.

None would say that a spiritually starving person is blessed. But that's exactly Jesus' claim.

How is this possible?

Those who recognize their absolute need for God and are not dependent on their own circumstances are the only people positioned to receive blessings from God.

When we note the good in our lives and focus on the role we played in attaining it, a fundamental part of its blessing is the sense of pride and accomplishment we feel as a result. However, such an approach focuses on us more than on our Lord. And it keeps us from making him the king of our lives (more on this in a moment).

By contrast, those who are truly poor in spirit see every blessing through the lens of God's role in their lives. Every bit of good leads them back to his throne, and every experience of blessing fills them with gratitude for their Lord.

They do not ignore the role they played in the process of attaining such good, but the primary emotion they feel is gratitude rather than self-satisfaction. This is a fine line, but its importance cannot be overstated.

Jesus definitively states that the poor in spirit will be blessed because only the poor in spirit have fully embraced the reality that a strong relationship with the Lord—one in which he is the king of their lives—is the greatest blessing we can ever receive.

So, what does such kingship entail?

## **Recognizing God as King**

Friedrich Nietzsche claimed that the “will to power” is the basic drive in human nature. In his view, everything we do is motivated by a quest for more power over the world, others, and ourselves.

Nietzsche was right. The essential temptation in human experience is the first temptation in human experience: “You will be like God” (Genesis 3:5). Each of us wants to be our own god. We want to be king of our kingdom, ruler of our world.

It is only when we recognize how broken we are and how desperately we need God that we turn from ourselves to him. Only when we are spiritually starved will we get off the throne of our hearts and elevate him there. Only when we are desperate will we become dependent.

And when we are dependent, we position ourselves to receive all that our Father wants for his children. When we are dependent, we will follow his leading into his “good and acceptable and perfect” will (Romans 12:2). When we are dependent, we will yield to his Spirit’s power and direction (Ephesians 5:18).

The kingdom of heaven cannot be experienced in any other way.

This kingdom is referenced more than thirty times in Matthew’s gospel. Jesus gave us its most succinct definition when he taught us to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10). God’s kingdom comes when his will is done. His kingdom comes when he is king.

The poor in spirit recognize that they need God above everything and everyone else. As a result, seeking his will becomes their highest priority because they see doing so as essential to their spiritual survival.

By contrast, at the heart of our moral trajectory today is our culture’s drive to be our own god. Postmodern relativism has taught us that there is no such thing as absolute truth (which is an absolute truth claim, by the way). Rather, many believe that truth is what we believe it to be. “No one has the right to force their beliefs on us” is the mantra of the day.

In such a culture, the Bible becomes a diary of religious experiences and God becomes a hobby. Faith moves from being central to society to being peripheral and irrelevant. Some even claim that belief in God is dangerous today.

As a result, we should not be surprised when the kingdom of heaven seems little more than a distant hope for another life.

And while we should expect the lost to embrace such a secular mindset, the greatest tragedy is when this mindset is found within the walls of the church.

Remember that when Jesus first stated that the poor in spirit would be blessed, he spoke most directly to those who claimed to follow him. The Sermon on the Mount has wisdom for all people, but its target audience is us. If we want to see the kingdom of heaven made a more present reality in our culture, then this movement must start with every believer choosing to embrace the kingdom in his or her own life first.

How can we do that today?



## **Four steps to a solid foundation**

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” is foundational to every beatitude that follows. If we do not admit our need of God, we will not obey the words that his Son gave us. We will not heed his principles and live out his truths. And we will not embrace the kind of countercultural mindset that will allow us to experience any of the blessings he longs to give.

So, let’s take a look at four practical steps we can take to better embrace the mindset of the poor in spirit.

### **First, submit to the power of the Holy Spirit.**

God’s word commands us to “be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18). The Greek could be literally translated: “Be continually being controlled by the Spirit.” Every Christian is to submit every day to the Spirit’s control and empowering.

I want to urge you to begin each day with this commitment. Ask the Lord to bring to mind anything in your life that is hindering his Spirit, then confess what comes to your thoughts. Pray through your plans for the day, asking the Spirit to take control of them. Invite him to lead you, empower you, and use you.

Then walk into the day believing that you are “filled” with the Spirit. When you face temptations or challenges, ask the Spirit for his help. If you fall to temptation, ask the Spirit to forgive you, cleanse you, and restore you. When you face decisions, ask the Spirit to guide you. When you experience victories, thank the Spirit for blessing you.

The single most important decision culture-changing Christians can make is to be filled with the Spirit each and every day.

### **Second, measure success spiritually.**

Unlike Jesus’ culture and ours, the Lord knows that material success is fleeting but spiritual success is eternal. He knows that our souls outlive our bodies, that eternity is longer than today, that heaven is more important than earth. He calls us to measure success by his definitions, not ours.

Determine success by the degree to which God uses you today. Look for work only his Spirit can perform. Seek ways to join him at work in circumstances and in the lives of others. Value the eternal over the temporal, the relational over the material, and that which glorifies God over that which glorifies us.

### **Third, measure spirituality by dependence on God.**

The more we are “poor in spirit”—the more we admit our desperation for God’s wisdom, direction, healing, forgiveness, and grace—the more we will have what we need. Reject the cultural lie that you can do anything if you’ll only get up earlier, stay up later, work longer, and try harder.

Instead, allow God to direct your time and efforts in a way that maximizes your impact for the kingdom without depleting you in the process.

### **Fourth, measure dependence by obedience.**

When we are truly “poor in spirit,” we will do the will of God at any cost. Obedience to his commands will become the only food that truly satisfies our souls and the lens through which we perceive every choice we make. Then we will advance the kingdom of God and make Christ our King.

## **Conclusion**

Of all the beatitudes, this one is not only the most foundational, it is also the most surprising and countercultural—then and today.

So, here’s my question: Are you “poor in spirit”?

Do you know how much you need Jesus? Or are you separating Sunday from Monday, the spiritual from the secular, religion from the “real world”? Are you confining the Lord of the universe to part of your life, or are you seeking his will and word for every dimension of your life?

We can get there in one of two ways: through our problems or through our potential.

We can let our challenges drive us to God, getting so far down we have nowhere to look but up. Or we can envision what our lives could be like if we were truly dependent on our King, if his omniscience led us and his omnipotence empowered us.

Think of the difference we could make in our culture if the God of the universe were in complete control of us. Think of the souls that would be saved, the lives that would be changed, the ways God would be glorified if we were “poor in spirit.”

C. S. Lewis: “It would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”

Are you?

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What personal challenges do you face in being “poor in spirit” today?
2. In what ways does our culture make submission to the Holy Spirit difficult?
3. Why is being “filled with the Spirit” vital to your cultural influence today?

# CHAPTER 2

## REDEEM SUFFERING

*“Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they shall be comforted.”* —Matthew 5:4

My father was a Sunday school teacher before he fought in World War II. He did not attend church services again. He could not understand how a loving God could allow the horrors he’d experienced.

I lead study tours to Israel several times each year. Being in the Holy Land is one of the highlights of my ministry. I love the Jewish people and love being in their country. But I grieve for the millions who still grieve for family members lost to the Holocaust and who do not believe in God as a result.

If we are to be culture-changing Christians, we will be forced to confront the greatest single obstacle to faith for many: the ever-present reality of evil and suffering.

Christianity teaches that God is all knowing, all loving, and all powerful. Why, then, did he allow the Holocaust? Or my father’s war experience? Or the pain you are facing today?

This is not a book on apologetics (i.e., methods of defending the faith). If it were, we would pivot to resources intended to equip Christians for responding to the challenge of evil and suffering with biblical truth and practical compassion. (For more here, see my book, *Wrestling with God*, and my website article, *Why does a good God allow an evil world?*)

Instead, we will focus in this chapter on the kind of faith and character we need to show our suffering world that God’s knowledge, love, and power are relevant to their deepest needs. When we trust God with our pain and experience his transforming grace and strength, we can then offer others what we have received.

Let’s claim God’s promise: we will mourn, but we will be comforted. And let’s learn to model its assurance for our skeptical culture.

## Seek to be “blessed”

We’ll begin with some background.

When Jesus launched his public ministry, “his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan” (Matthew 4:24–25).

In response, “seeing the crowds, he went up on a mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them” (Matthew 5:1–2). This happened in the area marked by the Church of the Beatitudes, a Franciscan chapel completed in 1938. Somewhere on this hillside, Jesus preached the most famous sermon of all time.

As we saw in the previous chapter, his first beatitude laid the foundation for all the others: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3). To be “poor in spirit” is to know how desperately we need God. When we admit that fact, we make God our king and advance the “kingdom of heaven.” Then we are “blessed” with God’s best.

The second beatitude begins in the same way: “Blessed.” This is a translation of the Greek word *makarios*, meaning “a sense of well-being that transcends circumstances.” Our culture offers happiness based on our happenings, but Jesus offers blessedness based on his grace. Our culture offers us what our circumstances can give, but Jesus offers us what no circumstance can give or take.

Don’t settle for happiness. Don’t settle for what the world can steal. Don’t settle for anything but God’s best.

How do we experience it? Admit how much we need God, how much he could do with our lives if he were fully our king. Envision what it would be like to be led by his omniscience and empowered by his omnipotence. Then make him king of every dimension of our lives.

## **Expect to mourn**

But such blessedness does not insulate us from suffering. The opposite is true, in fact. The second beatitude does not say, “Blessed are those who might mourn” or “who happen to mourn,” but “who mourn.” The implication—and the fact—is that everyone will mourn.

“Mourn” translates *penthountes*, which describes a kind of grief so deep that it takes possession of the entire person and cannot be hidden. The Greek translation of Genesis 37 uses the word to describe Jacob’s grief upon learning of the supposed death of his son, Joseph (v. 34).

What causes such mourning?

### **We mourn our losses.**

The death of my father at the age of fifty-five is still the great loss of my life. He died ten days before Christmas in 1979. He never saw me married or heard me preach. He never met my sons. He would have been a wonderful grandfather.

What losses are you mourning today?

## **We mourn our failures.**

We all have mistakes in our pasts we would pay a high price to correct. Things we did but should not have done; things we did not do but should have done. People we hurt; opportunities we missed.

I had a friend in high school who took his own life. I will wonder for the rest of my life what I could have done to help him.

What failures are you mourning today?

## **We mourn our sins.**

These are moral failures, things we thought, said, and did that violated the word and will of God. After David committed adultery with Bathsheba and then arranged for the death of her husband, he later said to God, “I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me” (Psalm 51:3). We all know the feeling.

What sins are you mourning today?

## **Expect to be comforted**

So, we’ve seen the mourning side of our beatitude; now let’s move to the celebrating side: “for they shall be comforted.” The Greek literally means “they shall be encouraged” or “they shall be invited in.”

Note that this statement is unconditional: not “they may be comforted” but “they *shall* be comforted.” This is a future indicative, the promise of an absolute fact.

And yet, so many in our world mourn but are not comforted. How can God make this promise?

Here’s the key: the first beatitude empowers the second. When I admit how much I need God, I bring my grief to him. I don’t try to handle it myself. I don’t ask other people to do what only God can do. I bring it directly and unconditionally to God. I make him the king of it.

I give him my grief over my father’s death. I trust him with my failures and mistakes. I ask him to forgive my sins and transgressions.

And when I do, I “shall be comforted.”



Here's the catch: we must give our mourning to God to receive his comfort. His word teaches: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:6–7).

Have you done this?

Have you named your grief, your failure, your sin, and made him the king of it?

Have you put it in his hands and left it there?

If you will, God *will* comfort you. His Spirit will speak to your spirit, giving you the "peace of God." He will work through circumstances to bring you strength and help. His word will give you guidance and hope. He will lead people to bring you his wisdom and presence.

I don't know all the ways God will comfort you when you give him your mourning, but I promise you that he will. Scripture confirms his comfort:

- "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me" (Psalm 23:4).
- "Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the LORD has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted" (Isaiah 49:13).
- "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit" (Psalm 34:18).
- "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28–29).

Dwight Moody was right: "God never made a promise that was too good to be true."

## **Look for ways to comfort others**

Expect to mourn. Then, when you trust your mourning to God, expect to be comforted.

One last principle: look for ways to comfort others. One of the most significant ways God comforts us is by using us to help others.

I believe that God redeems all he allows. One way he redeems our suffering is by using it to help us help other people who are suffering.

His word is clear: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Corinthians 1:3–4).

When our oldest son was diagnosed with cancer, people who had dealt with cancer could help us as others could not. When you have faced tragedy and struggles, people who have been where you are were God’s instruments of healing.

Now we are called to pay it forward, to help others as we were helped, to be wounded healers.

Ask God to guide you to someone who is going through what you’ve been through. Ask him to open your eyes and heart to people he wants you to serve. Ask him to redeem your mourning by using it to comfort someone who is mourning. Ask him to use your experience of grace as an example to your culture.

And know that he will.

## **Conclusion**

A. B. Simpson noted, “You will have no test of faith that will not fit you to be a blessing if you are obedient to the Lord. I never had a trial but when I got out of the deep river, I found some poor pilgrim on the bank that I was able to help by that very experience.”

Consider some culture-changing examples.

Augustine was one of the most unrighteous men of his generation. He drifted from mistress to mistress, satisfying every lust and desire he felt.

Here's how he later described his condition: "I was held fast, not in fetters clamped upon me by another, but by my own will, which had the strength of iron chains. The enemy held my will in his power and from it he had made a chain and shackled me. For my will was perverse and lust had grown from it, and when I gave in to lust habit was born, and when I did not resist the habit it became a necessity. These were the links which together formed what I have called my chain, and it held me fast in the duress of servitude."

His "chain" held him until the day he took up the Scriptures, read of God's salvation in Christ, confessed his sins, and gave his heart to Jesus. And Jesus made him the greatest theologian after Paul in all of Christian history.

Gordon MacDonald was a successful pastor when he engaged in an extramarital sexual act. Immediately, he confessed this sin to his wife and congregation and resigned from his pulpit and the ministry. He entered into a long process of counseling and accountability, with no plans ever to reenter the pulpit ministry.

Then a church asked him to consider their pastorate. He said that he was too broken to come. They said, "We're broken people, too." And through them God restored the repentant, broken, mourning preacher to his ministry. And through his ministry, God showed the world that he can restore all who trust in him.

Corrie ten Boom's story is familiar to you, I hope. She and her family harbored Jews in their home in Holland. For this, the Nazis arrested their family. All but Corrie died during the Holocaust. Years later, she returned to Germany. In her best-seller, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie describes what came next:

It was at a church service in Munich that I saw him, the former S. S. man who had stood guard at the shower door in the processing center at Ravensbruck. He was the first of our actual jailers that I had seen since that time. And suddenly it was all there—the roomful of mocking men, the heaps of clothing, [my sister] Betsie's pain-blanchèd face.

He came up to me as the church was emptying, beaming and bowing. “How grateful I am for your message, *Fraulein*,” he said. “To think that, as you say, He has washed my sins away!”

His hand was thrust out to shake mine. And I, who had preached so often . . . the need to forgive, kept my hand at my side.

Even as the angry, vengeful thoughts boiled through me, I saw the sin of them. Jesus Christ had died for this man; was I going to ask for more? Lord Jesus, I prayed, forgive me and help me to forgive him.

I tried to smile, I struggled to raise my hand. I could not. I felt nothing, not the slightest spark of warmth or charity. And so again I breathed a silent prayer. Jesus, I cannot forgive him. Give me Your forgiveness.

As I took his hand the most incredible thing happened. From my shoulder along my arm and through my hand a current seemed to pass from me to him, while into my heart sprang a love for this stranger that almost overwhelmed me.

And so I discovered that it is not on our forgiveness any more than on our goodness that the world’s healing hinges, but on His. When He tells us to love our enemies, He gives, along with the command, the love itself.

Now, the comfort to forgive your pain, the comfort in mourning Jesus gave to Corrie, he offers to you. And to the world through you.

The day after my father died, a friend from college named Ricky Wilcox drove across Houston to stay with me. I don’t remember that he said anything at all. He was just there. And I’ll never forget his kindness and the presence of Jesus I sensed in him.

I didn't see him again that semester, then I graduated from school, got married, and moved on to seminary. I have not seen him since. I don't know where Ricky is today.

But I know this: he was God's gift to me that day. I want to pay that gift forward to you today.

Now it's your turn.

## Discussion Questions

1. What losses have especially marked your life?  
What made them so significant for you?
2. When you think of a hurting person who needs your ministry, who comes to mind first? What will you do to serve this person today?
3. How is such ministry relevant to your public influence?

# CHAPTER 3

## SUBMIT TO THE LORD

*“Blessed are the meek,  
for they shall inherit the earth.”* —Matthew 5:5

If you replaced all the parts of a car, would it still be the same car? To get more personal: since human cells regenerate approximately every seven years, if you’re more than seven years old, is your body still the same body?

Consider the statement “This sentence is false.” If it is true, then it must be false, which means that it’s true. But it cannot be true since it claims to be false.

From the logical to the practical: Do you understand how talking into the rectangle we call a cell phone connects you to people on the other side of the world? Or how that device can download the entire internet to your hand?

Do you know how WiFi actually works? Do you know why it’s called “WiFi”? (It’s not short for “wireless fidelity,” though most people think it is.)

Living in a world as complex as ours is a humbling thing. And that's a good thing, actually. A. W. Tozer: "For the Christian, humility is absolutely indispensable. Without it there can be no self-knowledge, no repentance, no faith and no salvation." St. Augustine: "Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility."

C. S. Lewis adds: "A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you."

To see the Someone who is above you, choose humility. Jesus said it this way: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Matthew 5:5). As we will see, being meek is indispensable to becoming culture-changing Christians. Let's learn why.

## Value humility as God does

"Meek" translates the Greek word *praus*. It has several hues within its spectrum of meaning, but it reduces to the idea of humility before God. Such humility is consistently enjoined by Scripture:

- "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you" (1 Peter 5:6).
- "When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom" (Proverbs 11:2).
- "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (James 4:10).
- "Before destruction a man's heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor" (Proverbs 18:12).
- "Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves" (Philippians 2:3).

Jesus promised that such people will "inherit the earth," being blessed by God in every way—not just part of the earth, but all the blessing God might give. No conqueror has ever won what God promises here.

But we try. We try to inherit the earth through our performance, possessions, and perfectionism by trying harder to do more, have more, or be more. And so, genuine humility is hard for many of us.



Like many people I have known over the years, I am a performer by nature. It is my natural personality to want you to like me, to be impressed by me, to affirm me. Many of us are this way. We live in a performance-dominated culture, where we are rewarded for what we can produce. But it's hard to want to impress people and be humble at the same time. Performing makes biblical humility hard.

On the other hand, many of us also struggle with self-esteem issues, making the wrong kind of humility easy. Consider this profound statement by psychologist Paul Tournier:

I believe there is a great illusion underlying both the despair of the weak and the unease of the strong—and the misfortune of both. This great illusion is the very notion that there are two kinds of human beings, the strong and the weak. The truth is that human beings are much more alike than they think ... All ... in fact, are weak. All are weak because they are afraid. They are afraid of being trampled underfoot. They are all afraid of the inner weakness being discovered. They all have secret faults; they all have a bad conscience on account of certain acts which they would like to keep covered up. They are all afraid of other men and of God, of themselves, of life, and of death.

Many of us feel badly about ourselves, leading to a self-punishing, demeaning kind of humility. A performance-centered society and low self-image both make biblical humility hard for us.

But listen to what Jesus said about such humility. He described himself as “gentle and humble in heart” (Matthew 11:29 NIV). He promised us, “Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:4). He warned us, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:11). And he taught us, “Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you” (John 13:14–15 NIV). The blunt fact is that we cannot be “blessed” by God unless we value humility as he does.

## See yourself as God sees you

But valuing humility doesn't mean we know how to experience it. Here's the second biblical step: see yourself as God sees you.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones defines *praus* or “meek” as “a humble and gentle attitude to others which is determined by a true estimate of ourselves.” To be “meek” or “humble,” develop a “true estimate” of yourself. Learn to see yourself the way God does.

So, how does God see you? As a redeemed sinner. A person who sinned and fell short of his glory; a person whose sins cost his Son his life; a person worthy of eternity in hell. And also a person he loves so much he gave his Son to die in your place, to pay for your sins, to purchase your salvation. A sinner redeemed by his love.

A rabbi once said, “A man should carry two stones in his pocket. On one should be inscribed, ‘I am but dust and ashes.’ On the other, ‘For my sake was the world created.’” Both inscriptions are true.

Imagine yourself a condemned criminal on death row, scheduled for execution. All appeals are exhausted; the final hour has come. You are strapped to the gurney and tubes are inserted in your arm. The doctor is just about to administer the lethal injection—then the phone rings. The governor of the state is coming over.

When he arrives, something unprecedented occurs. He does not pardon you. He insists that your sentence be carried out. But he then orders the guards to remove you from the table. He takes off his coat and lies on your gurney. He rolls up his sleeve and orders the doctor to connect your tubes to his arm. He receives your injection; he takes your punishment; he dies for you.

For the rest of your life you will be a ransomed sinner, a condemned criminal. But you will also be someone loved beyond words by someone of great standing, of enormous power, of the highest significance.

This is exactly who you are. When we see ourselves as God does, our twin problems with humility are solved. We are set free from performance anxiety, the intense drivenness to impress people with our value, because we are valued by the Lord of the universe. And we are set free from debilitating, demeaning, demoralizing humility because we are valued by that same Lord.

You are a person of indescribable worth, not because of who you are but because of whose you are. See yourself as God does and you'll be freed for genuine humility.

### **See others as God sees them**

Value humility as God does and see yourself as God does. Now you're ready for the third step to biblical humility: see others as God sees them.

Greek scholar Fritz Rienecker has this definition for *praus*: “The humble and gentle attitude which expresses itself in a patient submissiveness to offense, free from malice and desire for revenge.” To be “meek” is to “submit to offense” no matter how others have offended you.

To do this, we must see others as God sees them: as people of infinite worth, for they are the creation of God, and as sinners just like us, saved by God's grace as we are. To be humble before others, do not judge them as better or worse than you are. Choose to pardon them when they hurt you, for God has pardoned you. Release your anger, or need for revenge, or pain.

When we do this, we are free to be humble before every person we know—not just before those we judge to be superior to us or those who humble us with their abilities or success. But also before those we consider inferior to us, those we judge and criticize and condemn. When we see him as God does, we can be humble before the lowest sinner.

Consider two assertions: “Only God is in position to look down on anyone” and “Any experience that makes me feel superior to other people is not of the Lord.” See others as God sees them and you'll be humble before every person you know.

### **See your gifts as God sees them**

Here's the last step: see your gifts and abilities as God sees them.

James Montgomery Boice defines *praus* as strength under control. He illustrates the word this way: a powerful stallion, strong and fast, completely bridled and submitted to the control of its

master. To be “meek” is not to depreciate the stallion’s strength, speed, or abilities. It is to submit them to the control of their master.

How does God see your abilities? As his gifts, entrusted to you to be used for his glory.

It is not biblical humility to debase yourself. Neither can you be humble when you exalt yourself.

It is biblical humility to embrace and affirm the gifts, abilities, opportunities, education, and experiences God has given to you, and then use them to glorify your Lord. Develop them fully and engage them completely.

One of my mentors said to me, “The Holy Spirit has a strange affinity for the trained mind.” Develop fully all that God has given to you. But yield it to the control of God and use it for the glory of God.

Mother Teresa, the tiny Albanian nun, became the world’s most famous Christian next to Billy Graham. But her goal was just the opposite. From the time she first entered ministry, her life purpose never changed. In her words, she wished only to be “a tiny pencil in the hand of God.” And what he wrote with her gifts changed the world.

## Conclusion

Why must we be *praus* to be culture-changing Christians?

The fact is, you and I cannot convict, save, or sanctify others. We cannot heal a marriage or spiritually transform a family. Only the Spirit of God can do these things.

But he cannot do through us what we try to do for him. If we do not humbly admit our need of his guidance and power, we will not experience his guidance and power. If we do not yield ourselves to his control, he cannot control us (cf. Ephesians 5:18). If we do not ask him to make us culture-changing Christians, we cannot become culture-changing Christians.

Do you value humility today as Jesus does? Do you see yourself as he does—a redeemed sinner, loved for whose you are? Do you see others as he does—fellow sinners, equal in value with you as your sisters and brothers? Do you see your abilities as he does—gifts to be used in his will for his glory? Are you completely submitted to his purpose in his power for his glory?

Then you are *praus*, “meek.” And you are “blessed.”

Here is one of the finest faith commitments I know, from a Muslim who became a Christian and prayed: “O God, I am Mustafah the tailor and I work at the shop of Muhammad Ali. The whole day long I sit and pull the needle and the thread through the cloth. O God, you are the needle and I am the thread. I am attached to you and I follow you. When the thread tries to slip away from the needle it becomes tangled and must be cut so that it can be put back in the right place. O God help me to follow you wherever you may lead me. For I am really only Mustafah the tailor, and I work at the shop of Muhammad Ali on the great square.”

Whose “thread” are you?

## Discussion Questions

1. How does our culture define humility? How does Jesus?
2. Is it hard for you to love yourself as unconditionally as Jesus does? Why?
3. What gifts and abilities are especially relevant to your cultural influence? How will you submit them to Jesus today?

# CHAPTER 4

## VALUE INTEGRITY

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they shall be satisfied.” —Matthew 5:6*

I saw some interesting signs recently:

- On a plumber’s truck: “We repair what your husband fixed.”
- At an optometrist’s office: “If you don’t see what you’re looking for, you’ve come to the right place.”
- Outside a muffler shop: “No appointment necessary. We heard you coming.”
- Seen at a café: “If our food, drinks, and service aren’t up to your standards, please lower your standards.”

We’re talking about success in this chapter.

What drives you? What defines success for you? If you could be anything in the world, what would you be? What *should* you be? Let’s ask Jesus.

## What do you want?

“Blessed are the ones hungering and thirsting,” Jesus begins in the literal Greek. Our Lord assumes that we all hunger and thirst for something. He doesn’t say, “Blessed are you *if* you hunger and thirst . . . .” He knows that we do. And of course, he’s right.

In his day, people knew physical hunger and thirst every day. People died without food or water. Droughts weren’t a nuisance for the lawn but a threat to life itself. Crop failures didn’t mean debt but death. While our society has passed that place, we’re no less hungry and thirsty for the things that matter to us. We’re all driven by something.

Theologian Paul Tillich was right: we each have an “ultimate concern,” something or someone that matters more than anything else to us. There’s something in your life that means success and significance to you.

That could be:

- raising successful children
- becoming president of your company
- retiring at fifty-five
- publishing best-selling books
- getting into the right school
- making the right grades
- having the right friends
- becoming a famous artist or doctor or lawyer or scientist or singer or teacher
- being “happy”

What drives you? What should? How can you be sure that when you climb to the top of the ladder, it’s not leaning against the wrong wall?

What constitutes success with God?

What makes us “blessed” by God?

For what should we “hunger and thirst”?



## What should you want?

“Hunger and thirst after righteousness,” Jesus continues. The Greek word translated *righteousness* reduces to the idea of uprightness, of doing what is right. But there’s more to the term.

First, there’s an **internal** sense here—personal character and morality. Not just what you do, but who you are.

Dwight Moody said that your character is what you are in the dark. It’s been said that what you are when no one is looking is what you are.

“Righteousness” here requires personal, intimate holiness—a person whose attitudes and motives are just. The word means to be the same thing in private that you are in public, to be godly in character in both places, every day.

One reason to value such righteousness is that what we are in the dark is usually exposed to the light.

We read daily of business leaders who lied about the bottom line, fabricated profits, misrepresented in shareholder reports, and have to “take the fifth.” But there’s no fifth amendment with God.

A friend once said to me, “Happiness depends on circumstances; blessedness depends on character.”

Righteousness is first internal and second **horizontal**. It points to our actions with others. The word means to practice uprightness and justice with all we know.

Abigail Adams, wife of our second president, once wrote to her sister Elizabeth, “To be good, and do good, is the whole duty of man.”

Such horizontal righteousness is vital to our society. Speaking about corporate dishonesty, President George W. Bush made this eloquent and perceptive statement: “All investment is an act of faith, and faith is earned by integrity. In the long run, there is no capitalism without conscience; there is no wealth without character.”

Righteousness is internal, then horizontal. And it is **vertical** as well: being right with God.

We are to be righteous in the sense of keeping God’s commandments, living by his word, fulfilling his will. And by confessing our sins when we commit them, being sure nothing is wrong between us and our Father, and walking close to him.

Jesus makes this the key to character, the attribute for which we

must “hunger and thirst” each day, the pathway to “blessing.” If you can be only one thing, be righteous.

Niccolò Paganini was in concert with a full orchestra when a string snapped. He continued, improvising his solo. But a second string snapped, then a third. Three limp strings hung from Paganini’s violin. He finished the difficult piece with one string, then held up the violin and said to the crowd, “Paganini and one string!” Then he played an encore on that one string.

What should your “one string” be?

Jesus makes the answer clear.

## **How do we achieve righteousness?**

So, here’s the practical question: How do we achieve righteousness with ourselves, others, and God? How do we play our lives on this string?

### **First, we must want to be righteous.**

Decide that you will be godly in character, actions, and faith if you are nothing else. Choose holiness above everything. Hunger and thirst for it.

Settle for nothing less than righteousness as the central attribute of your character. Seek it with desperation and passion. Then you can receive it from God: “They will be filled,” satisfied completely. If you hunger to be righteous, your hunger will be satisfied. But you must hunger first. You must want this food before you can have it.

### **Second, admit that you are not righteous without God.**

Here’s what God says of us: “There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, there is no one who seeks God” (Romans 3:10–11 NIV). This is the biblical doctrine called “total depravity.” It means that every part of our lives is affected by sin.

The cancer has metastasized throughout the body of the patient. The patient can still read the paper, drink coffee, even go to work perhaps; but the disease is everywhere, and death is inevitable.

In the eyes of a holy God, “there is no one righteous.” Think about your last sin. That one sin alone is enough to keep you out of God’s perfect heaven. So, admit that you cannot be righteous without the help of God.

### **Third, seek the righteousness of God by faith.**

You cannot make yourself righteous. That’s why Jesus’ beatitude is in the passive tense: “They will be filled.” Not “they will fill themselves,” for we cannot. This is not a call to try harder to be better. It is not works righteousness. We can do better for a while, but, ultimately, we’ll fall and fail again. I’ve tried. So have you.

Instead, accept this fact: “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21 NIV).

Christ is our righteousness. He will impart to us his Spirit, his holiness, and his character. This is the exchanged life. Believe that Christ lives in your heart, by faith. Ask him to make himself real through your character, your personality. Ask him to help you exhibit the righteousness of God.

Give him time to do so. Meet him in Scripture so he can transform your mind. Meet him in prayer so he can transform your spirit. Meet him in worship so he can transform your soul. Let the carpenter work with the wood, molding and shaping it into his own image. And believe that he is.

So, where do you need to be righteous today? Where are you grappling with sin or temptation—with yourself, with others, with God? Identify that issue right now.

Hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God.

Admit to him that you cannot make yourself righteous.

Be sure you’ve made Christ your Savior and Lord.

Ask him for his character, his holiness, his power, and his righteousness.

Spend time with him, allowing him to transform you into his image.

And you will be “blessed” indeed.

## Conclusion

Our culture says good enough is good enough. So long as you're as moral as the rest of us, you're as moral as you need to be. Don't stand out—don't be different. Go along to get along.

Jesus says that if you want to live your best life, you must hunger and thirst for the righteousness only God can give. You must settle for nothing less than his character and his integrity, his Spirit powerfully working in and through your life. You must seek to be so much like Jesus that others see Jesus in you.

Why is such righteousness essential for culture-changing Christians? We cannot give what we do not have or lead where we will not go. If others do not see a difference in us, why would they want what we have?

Conversely, the more our culture morally deteriorates, the more obvious our character becomes. The darker the room, the brighter the light.

To change the culture, we must be “poor in spirit,” asking the Holy Spirit to control our lives daily. Then we must mourn for our sins and failures, asking God to transform us and make us an example to others. We must be “meek,” submitting every day to his Spirit's transformational leading and use.

And we must ask God to make us examples of what we are inviting others to experience. We must be the change we wish to see in others.

Are these imperatives your commitments today?

A group of American ministers once visited England to hear some of her famous preachers. On a Sunday morning, they attended the renowned City Temple. Some two thousand people filled the building, and the pastor's forceful personality dominated the service. His voice was powerful, his message biblical, and the Americans left saying, “What a wonderful preacher is [name]!”

That night, they heard Charles Spurgeon at the Metropolitan Tabernacle. The building was much larger and the congregation more than twice the size. Spurgeon's voice and oratory were the finest they had ever heard.

But the Americans soon forgot all about the building, the congregation, and the voice. They even overlooked their intention to compare the two preachers. When the service was over, they found themselves saying only, “What a wonderful Savior is Jesus Christ!”  
What will people say about you this week?

## **Discussion Questions**

1. What is your “ultimate concern” today? What should it be?
2. How does our culture make it difficult to live with godly integrity?
3. How is your personal character relevant to your public influence?

# CHAPTER 5

## CHOOSE TO PARDON

*“Blessed are the merciful,  
for they shall receive mercy.” —Matthew 5:7*

There was some strange news as I wrote this chapter:

- A man built a pyramid from 1,030,315 pennies, setting a Guinness record. It took him three years.
- A man in Spain sold a block of blue cheese for \$16,142.41.
- Another man fit 146 blueberries in his mouth, setting a Guinness record.
- And veterinarians removed nineteen pacifiers from the stomach of a bulldog named Mortimer. Following surgery, Mortimer is fully recovered.

Much of what makes headlines this week will be forgotten next week. If you want to do something unforgettable and life-changing, put today’s beatitude into practice in your life.

Jesus declared: “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (Matthew 5:7). Giving and receiving mercy leads to blessing we will never forget, on earth or in heaven.

Who is the person who has hurt you most deeply or recently? Who is the person you think of first when I ask you for someone you need to forgive?

Let’s ask Jesus to help us do just that.

## What is mercy?

Let’s begin with the question: What is “mercy”?

Here’s the short answer: grace is getting what you don’t deserve; mercy is not getting what you do deserve. It’s mercy to be forgiven. It’s mercy to forgive. That’s what mercy is.

Now, what is mercy *not*?

Ethicist Lewis Smedes offered these answers:

- Forgiving is not forgetting. God can forgive our confessed sins and forget them. In fact, he does: when we confess our sins to him, he promises that he “remembers your sins no more” (Isaiah 43:25 NIV). But you and I cannot do this. Human beings cannot simply reformat the disk or erase the tape. You can pull the nail out of your soul, but the hole remains
- Forgiving is not excusing the behavior that hurt you. The person chose to do that which hurts you today.
- Forgiving is not pretending you’re not hurt. You can carry on, but the pain remains and often grows.
- Forgiving is not tolerating. You may have to tolerate your employer, or your sibling, or your son-in-law. That doesn’t mean you’ve forgiven him.

To forgive is to pardon. It is to refuse to punish, even though you have every right to do so.

It is the governor pardoning the criminal: he doesn’t forget about the crime, excuse it, pretend it didn’t occur, or tolerate the behavior. He simply chooses not to punish, though he could.

So, who needs your pardon today?



As Smedes observes, you may need to pardon a parent who died and left you. The birth mother who gave you away. The “invisible ghost” in the organization who fired you, or mismanaged your investments, or cut your son from the squad or your daughter from the drill team. Someone who appears not to care if you forgive them or not.

Maybe God. Maybe yourself.

## **Why should you be merciful?**

Why issue such a pardon?

**First, to stop your personal cycle of pain.**

This beatitude promises that the merciful will be “blessed” by God. This “blessing” transcends your pain. God offers you a ticket off the roller coaster of hurt.

But you must extend mercy to receive it.

If you give back what others give to you, you are constantly their victim. They pitch; you catch. You’re trapped by your circumstances. Your soul is a genie in their bottle. How they rub it determines who you are.

If you refuse to pardon the person who hurt you, he hurts you still. Every time you plot your revenge, you feel your pain again. Every time you nurse your pain, you increase it.

The person who hurt you may not even know you’re harboring your grudge and wounding your soul. He or she may have gone on with life. You’re hurting no one more than yourself. But you can stop today.

Frederick Buechner: “Of the Seven Deadly Sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the prospect of bitter confrontations still to come, to savor to the last toothsome morsel both the pain you are given and the pain you are giving back—in many ways it is a feast fit for a king. The chief drawback is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is in you.”

## **The second reason follows the first: pardon to receive mercy.**

Jesus promises the merciful that “they will be shown mercy.”

This is not a transaction, a legal arrangement, as though my mercy obligates you and God to be merciful to me. Mercy is not a means to your end, but a free gift you choose to give.

But when you give it, a miraculous thing happens: You put yourself in position to receive mercy from God and others. Not because you earned it, but simply because now you’re willing to receive it.

People who are the most legalistic with others are usually legalistic with themselves. If I won’t forgive you until you’re punished, I won’t forgive myself until I’m punished. If I won’t show mercy to you, I won’t receive it myself.

I was once hurt by a deacon and his family in a church I pastored. The pain was real and deep. Every time I saw him in worship, I felt my anger well up in my soul. I became short, irritated, on edge with others—and especially with myself. Intolerant of my own mistakes and failures.

But the day I released my anger and chose to pardon that man, I found a new freedom with myself and a new willingness to be loved and forgiven by God.

If life must be fair and every injustice punished, we cannot forgive others—or ourselves.

## **Here’s a third reason: pardon to break the circle of revenge.**

If I must return your hurt, then you must return mine. And I must return yours. It has been truly said: You can no more win a war than win a fire.

But when you pardon me, the cycle stops. There’s nothing left for me to do but to receive or reject your pardon. I have no cause to hurt you and abundant reason to love you and learn to love myself as well.

## **Here’s a fourth reason: to show others the love of Christ.**

Jesus identified one characteristic as a guarantee that others will know we love him: “By this all people will know you are my

disciples, if you have love one for another” (John 13:35). Forgiving, pardoning, and releasing love proves that God’s love in us is real.

During the depths of the Cold War, people in a particular East German town began throwing their trash over the Berlin Wall into the West German town on the other side. The West Germans, for their part, responded by tossing food and clothes to the East Germans—with this note: “Each gives what he has.”

## **How can you be merciful?**

Let’s turn now to the practical question I hope you’re now asking: How can you be merciful? How can you do as Jesus teaches here so that you stop your pain, experience mercy, break the cycle of revenge, and show others his love?

What practical steps can you take to offer mercy to the person who most needs it from you?

### **First, admit the reality of your hurt.**

Name it honestly and specifically. Describe in words how you feel about it and the person who caused it. Describe even what you would like to do in revenge. Get your feelings out, as openly and transparently as possible.

You may want to put them on paper. Write a letter to the one who hurt you, then tear it up. You may want to talk to a friend you trust or a Christian counselor. Most of all, admit it to God. As someone said, “Tell God on them.” Pour out your pain and hurt. You must admit the cancer exists before the surgeon can help you.

### **Second, ask God to help you pardon the one who hurt you.**

You are not expected to be “merciful” without Jesus’ help. That’s why these Beatitudes are addressed to believers, followers of Christ. And why they are sequential. If we admit our need of God and mourn for our own sins, living under the control of the Spirit and seeking to be righteous in every relationship, then we can be empowered to extend to others the mercy we have received.

Turn to the Holy Spirit who dwells in your heart and soul. Ask him for the power and pardon of God. Ask him for the ability to see this person as he does. And to see yourself as he does—both of you redeemed sinners. Ask him to help you give to your enemy the mercy God has given to you.

And act as though he has. Don't feel yourself into a new way of acting; act yourself into a new way of feeling. Step out by faith. Every time the pain wells up inside your heart again, tell yourself that you have released this person from the prison of their sin. The ink on the pardon is dry, the deed is done, the forgiveness made.

### **Third, initiate restoration.**

With God's help, act in courage. Jesus taught us to go directly to the person who sins against us (Matthew 18:15). Tell the person honestly what they did to you and how much this pain has hurt you. They may not even know their injustice or comprehend its severity. If I hurt you, I want to know it. I want you to talk to me, not about me. And I to you. Go to the person in question, with honesty.

Tell this person that you have pardoned him. He may not understand what you mean, or believe it, or accept it. She may never reciprocate what you have done. This is not yours to decide. You must begin the process of healing the relationship, whatever your partner in restoration decides to do.

And find an honest way to a new relationship. To forgive is not to be naïve. It is not to allow an unrepentant, unchanged person to hurt you yet again. Neither is it to assume that they will never change. Seek a wise balance with the wisdom God gives to know what and where you can trust. You may never have the old relationship, but you can have a new one by the mercy of God.

### **Last, be realistic.**

We humans forgive slowly, a little at a time, usually with anger left over. Remind yourself that you have forgiven as many times as the pain comes back. Over time, it will come back less. And, one day, perhaps not at all.

## Conclusion

To forgive, you must first be forgiven. You cannot give what you have never received.

Have you asked Jesus to forgive your sins, to pardon your failures, to be your Savior and Lord? He's waiting to do just that for you, right now. And to help you give his forgiveness to the person most in need of this gift from you.

Why is such forgiveness essential for culture-changing Christians?

If we will not forgive those who hurt us, how can we expect them to believe that God will forgive them? Conversely, if we offer them pardon in grace, we show that such grace from God is possible as well.

When the great astronomer Copernicus lay dying, a copy of his magnum opus, *The Revolution of the Heavenly Bodies*, was placed in his hands. But he was not thinking of his brilliant scientific discoveries or the universal acclaim they won him. His mind was on a far higher plane.

As one of his last acts, he directed that this epitaph be placed on his grave: "O Lord, the faith thou didst give to St. Paul, I cannot ask; the mercy thou didst show to St. Peter, I dare not ask; but Lord, the grace thou didst show unto the dying robber, that, Lord, show to me."

Every person can come to God under these terms. And every person can give them to others. Even us. Even now.

Take a little quiz with me: Name the wealthiest person in the world. Name the last two Heisman Trophy winners, or the last winner of the Miss America pageant, or the last recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize.

When you truly forgive someone for what they did to you, you will never forget it. Neither will they. And your culture will take note, to the glory of God.

## Discussion Questions

1. When you envision those who have hurt you, what person comes to mind first? What is the most challenging aspect of pardoning this person?
2. Would you ask God to help you offer forgiveness? Would you ask him to lead your next step toward restoration and reconciliation?
3. How is pardoning others significant for your public witness?

# CHAPTER 6

## LOVE GOD AND PEOPLE

***“Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they shall see God.”*** —Matthew 5:8

*There are three tame ducks in our back yard,  
Dabbling in mud and trying hard  
To get their share, and maybe more,  
Of the overflowing barnyard store.  
Satisfied with the task they're at,  
Eating and sleeping and getting fat.  
But whenever the free wild ducks go by  
In a long line streaming down the sky,  
They cock a quizzical, puzzled eye,  
And flap their wings and try to fly.*

*I think my soul is a tame old duck,  
Dabbling around in barnyard muck,  
Fat and lazy with useless wings.*

*But sometimes when the North wind sings  
And the wild ones hurdle overhead,  
It remembers something lost and dead,  
And cocks a wary, bewildered eye,  
And makes a feeble attempt to fly.  
It's fairly content with the state it's in,  
But it isn't the duck it might have been.*

I don't want to be a tame duck. You don't, either. You want your life to have purpose and passion, a reason for being that transcends the humdrum routine, the workaday world. You want to believe that your life counts for something bigger than yourself, that you are more than a dot on the screen of the universe.

How do we escape the barnyard? And why is a life of purpose essential to changing our culture for the glory of God?

## **Choose to have a life purpose**

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,” Jesus assures us.

Greek scholar Fritz Rienecker defines “heart” as “the center of the inner life of the person where all the spiritual forces and functions have their origin.” Here, “pure” means to have integrity, to be consistent, to be of one mind.

So, to be “pure in heart” is to have a single purpose to your life. Kierkegaard was right: “purity of heart is to will one thing”—to choose to have a single life purpose.

Not everyone believes you can. Many believe that life has no real purpose or meaning.

Philosopher Martin Heidegger says you're an actor on a stage with no script, director, audience, past or future. Courage is to face life as it is.

“Postmodernism” says there's no absolute truth, which is itself an absolute truth claim. Life has no real purpose, just what you make of it. Life is chaotic, random dots produced by the coincidence of evolution and the chance occurrences of life.

Why not share this chaotic worldview? Why seek to be “pure of heart,” to have a single purpose?



## **One answer is practical.**

Greatness is only possible through commitment to a single purpose.

Winston Churchill in June of 1941: “I have only one purpose, the destruction of Hitler, and my life is much simplified thereby.” Brilliant scholar and author William Barclay: “A man will never become outstandingly good at anything unless that thing is his ruling passion. There must be something of which he can say, ‘For me to live is this.’”

## **A second answer is logical.**

If the universe were chaotic, without purpose or meaning, you and I would never be able to know it or say it.

Think with me for a moment. If reality were truly chaotic, there would be nothing we could “know.” Red today would be green tomorrow. Stand before a Jackson Pollock painting, splotches on the canvas, and tell me what it “means.” Or before a Mark Rothko, a canvas painted all a single solid color. Again, there is no intrinsic meaning.

If the world were chaos like their paintings, there could be no objective truth, not even the objective statement that there is no objective truth. And we couldn’t speak of truth, for language could have no common meaning between us.

## **A third answer is biblical.**

Jesus made this statement about human experience: “No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Matthew 6:24).

James added this command: “Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded” (James 4:8). To purify our heart, we must not be “double-minded.” We must have a single life purpose.

## **A fourth answer is spiritual.**

We must be “pure in heart” to see God. Jesus’ beatitude makes this fact clear.

We cannot see God with our physical eyes: “You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Exodus 33:20). But we can “see” God spiritually. Hebrews 11:27 says of Moses, “he endured as seeing him who is invisible.” Exodus 33:11 states, “The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.”

We can know God this intimately. But only if we are pure in heart: “Without holiness no one will see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14 NIV). But Jesus promises: if we are “pure in heart,” we will.

## **Choose the right life purpose**

So, how do we become “pure in heart”?

Assuming that these practical, logical, biblical, and spiritual arguments are compelling, what do you do next? What single life purpose will lead us to “see God”?

We’re not the first to ask Jesus.

Remember the lawyer’s trick question: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” (Matthew 22:36 NIV). In other words, which of our 613 commandments will you neglect so we can convict you of breaking the law?

And remember Jesus’ answer, summarizing all the law and the prophets, all the word and will of God: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind . . . . love your neighbor as yourself” (vv. 37, 39).

The two are one in Jesus’ answer to the lawyer’s request for the greatest single commandment in God’s word. They are two wings of the same spiritual airplane, both essential for the soul that flies into the presence of God. Examine them for a moment.

### **Love the Lord “with all your heart,” by walking in the will of God.**

Remember that your heart is the center of your life, the origin of your will and actions. The Bible instructs us, “Flee the evil desires of youth, and pursue righteousness, faith, love and peace, along with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart” (2 Timothy 2:22 NIV). Flee evil, pursue righteousness. Walk in the will of God and you’ll be “pure in heart.”

## **Love the Lord “with all your soul,” by practicing the worship of God.**

Love the Lord with your spiritual life, your daily worship: “Give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name” (Psalm 86:11 NIV). To “fear” God is to reverence him, to honor him, to worship him. The “undivided heart” is the pure heart. Love God with your daily worship, as you commune with him, walk with him, praise him. And you’ll be “pure in heart.”

## **Love the Lord “with all your mind,” by knowing the word of God.**

Know and obey his revealed truth: “Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth . . .” (1 Peter 1:22). Know and obey the truth of God’s word and you’ll be “pure in heart.”

## **And love the world as God does.**

“The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart” (1 Timothy 1:5).

Share God’s love by living your faith. As Francis of Assisi purportedly suggested, preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words. Share God’s love by caring for hurting souls. Show them God’s love in yours. Share God’s love by explaining your faith. Share with them God’s salvation and urge them to experience his grace.

And you’ll be “pure in heart.”

## **Conclusion**

If you and I have the singular purpose of loving our Lord and loving our neighbor, such a radical passion and compassion will impact those we influence. They will see in us a joy they will want for themselves. They will find in us a simplicity and sincerity of life that will challenge and encourage them. In short, they will want to love our Lord if we love him and we love them.

A crash once closed a road leading to the Denver International Airport. Google Maps offered drivers a quick way out of the traffic

jam. However, the route it suggested took them down a dirt road that rain had turned into a muddy mess. Some vehicles couldn't drive through the mud and became stuck. About a hundred others became trapped behind them.

They were sincere in trusting the app, but they were sincerely wrong.

This beatitude offers us the only path to a life God can bless. So, choose to have a single life purpose, for practical, logical, biblical, and spiritual reasons. Choose Jesus' purpose: love the Lord your God with your heart through his worship, with your soul through his will, and with your mind through his word. Love others as yourself and you will be "pure in heart."

And you will see God.

Your soul can be a tame duck. Or it can be a wild eagle. The choice is yours.

## Discussion Questions

1. Finish the sentence: My ministry is \_\_\_\_\_.
2. In what ways does our culture make it difficult to love God and others?
3. How is such a life purpose relevant to your public influence?



# CHAPTER 7

## SEEK PEACE

*“Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they shall be called sons of God.”* —Matthew 5:9

A friend sent me these first-grade proverbs. The teacher gave the kids the first half of the sentence, and they supplied the rest:

- “Don’t bite the hand that . . . looks dirty.”
- “If you lie down with dogs, you’ll . . . stink in the morning.”
- “A penny saved is . . . not much.”
- “Laugh and the whole world laughs with you, cry and . . . you have to blow your nose.”
- “Better to be safe than . . . punch a fifth grader.”

Even first-graders know that peace is valuable. And they’re right. It has been estimated that in the last 3,400 years, humans have been entirely at peace for 268 of them, constituting 8 percent of recorded history.

Clearly, our world needs peace. Where do you? With whom are you at odds today? Where do you need a relationship to be healed? Where do you need peace?

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God,” Jesus promises. The Hebrew word for peace is *shalom*: peace with God, self and others. Let us now learn from God’s word where we find such peace for ourselves, and then how we can give it to the person with whom we need it most.

## **Make peace with God**

Where can you find peace for your own heart, soul, and mind?

The Bible says, “May the Lord give strength to his people! May the Lord bless his people with peace!” (Psalm 29:11).

Jesus promised us, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (John 14:27). Later he said, “I have said these things to you that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33).

Peace is one of the “fruit of the Spirit” (Galatians 5:22). It is the result of the Spirit’s work, not human ability.

Clearly, we cannot create peace ourselves. We can only receive it from God. How? Here are some answers from God’s word.

### **First, if you want peace, accept the love of God.**

Actress Sophia Loren told *USA Today*, “I should go to heaven; otherwise it’s not nice. I haven’t done anything wrong. My conscience is very clean. My soul is as white as those orchids over there, and I should go straight, straight to heaven.”

Listen, by contrast, to the word of God.

- The prophet said of Jesus, “But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah 53:5).



- Paul added, “For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility” (Ephesians 2:14).
- When we accept Jesus’ forgiving love by faith, we receive God’s peace: “Therefore since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1).

We cannot be at peace with a perfect God and live in his perfect heaven unless we are made perfect ourselves. This is why Jesus died on the cross: to pay the penalty for our sins, to purchase our forgiveness. We can only be at peace with God by accepting his love, by making Jesus our Savior and Lord.

If you’re trying to be good enough for God—religious enough, moral enough, successful or significant enough—know that you’re not succeeding. Imagine what it would take for a human being to impress the God of the universe. But we can accept the atoning love of Jesus and be made right with God. This is the first step to true peace.

### **Next, obey the word of God.**

Musician Paul Simon once told an interviewer, “The only thing that God requires from us is to enjoy life—and love. It doesn’t matter if you accomplish anything. You don’t have to do anything but appreciate that you’re alive. And love, that’s the whole point.”

Note the contrast between his statement and God’s word.

The Psalmist prayed, “Great peace have those who love your law; nothing can make them stumble” (Psalm 119:165). God said through his prophet, “Oh that you had paid attention to my commandments! Then your peace would have been like a river, and your righteousness like the waves of the sea” (Isaiah 48:18).

God’s word gives the guideposts we need to live successfully. Here are the signs that point us to our destination and keep us out of ditches and dead ends. These principles are for our good, and they give us God’s peace.

So, meet God every day in the Scriptures. Measure your every decision by his truth. Obey his word, and you’ll have his peace.

### **Third, receive the forgiveness of God.**

Dwight Moody gave a Bible to a friend but first wrote these words on its flyleaf: “The Bible will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from the Bible.”

When we obey the word of God, we judge ourselves in its light. We see ourselves as God does. The closer we are to God, the further away we realize we are. Then we seek and receive his forgiveness for our sins, and we have his peace.

God told the prophet, “There is no peace for the wicked” (Isaiah 48:22). He added: “But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud” (Isaiah 57:20 NIV). And he warned: “The way of peace they do not know, and there is no justice in their paths; they have made their roads crooked; no one who treads on them knows peace” (Isaiah 59:8).

His word is clear: “Be sure your sin will find you out” (Numbers 32:23). So, confess your sins to God if you want to have peace with him. He is waiting to forgive you, cleanse you, and set you free. He loves you that much. But you must ask.

### **Fourth, trust the will of God.**

Advice from the Book of Job: “Agree with God, and be at peace; thereby good will come to you.” (Job 22:21). Paul agreed: “And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful.” (Colossians 3:15).

Trust the will of God and you’ll say with the prophet: “You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.” (Isaiah 26:3).

Are you at peace with God today? Have you accepted his love? Are you obeying his word? Have you received his forgiveness? Are you trusting his will?

H. G. Wells was right: “If there is no God, nothing matters. If there is a God, nothing else matters.” God promises you his peace and tells you how to receive it. The decision is yours.

## Make peace with others

Now, how do we give this peace we receive from God? How do we become “peacemakers” with others? With whom do you most need peace today? Think of that person and take these biblical steps toward the peace you need.

### First, initiate pardon.

As we learned from the fifth beatitude, we are to choose not to punish whatever wrong has been done to us. God’s word instructs us, “If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” (Romans 12:18–19).

Later, the apostle adds, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21). Initiate pardon and you will be a peacemaker.

### Second, seek reconciliation.

Jesus teaches us, “So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that *your brother has something against you*, leave your gift there before the altar and go. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matthew 5:23–24, emphasis added).

If someone has something against you, whether you believe their anger is justified or not, go to them. Seek reconciliation and you will be a peacemaker.

### Third, choose peace.

Whether the person accepts your pardon or receives your attempts at reconciliation, choose peace. Give them to God and choose his peace.

The Bible says, “God has called you to peace” (1 Corinthians 7:15). It exhorts us: “Be at peace among yourselves (1 Thessalonians 5:13). Our Master tells us, “Welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you” (Romans 15:7).

God commands us: “Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no ‘root of bitterness’ springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled” (Hebrews 12:14–15).

When we have God’s peace in our heart, we can give it to others. And when we give peace to others, we find it in our own heart. As we love God, we love our neighbor. As we love our neighbor, we love God.

And then we “will be called sons of God.” Jesus does not say that we *become* sons of God—that would be works righteousness. But people will know that we are God’s children as we give his peace to them: “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35).

## Conclusion

Is your soul at peace with those who matter to you? Would you seek peace with God and with them?

Why is being at peace with God and others essential to becoming culture-changing Christians? Because a world of conflict and chaos will always take note of people who are at peace.

Consider John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and one of the most significant Christian leaders in history. He went to America as a missionary but was not himself converted. He wrote in his journal, “I went to America to convert the Indians, but oh! who shall convert me?”

Then he encountered Moravian missionaries on board a ship bound for America. He notes in his journal that, one day, the group had just begun to sing a psalm of worship when “the sea broke over, split the mail-sail in pieces, covered the ship, and poured in between the decks, as if the great deep had already swallowed us up. A terrible screaming began among the English. The Germans [Moravians] calmly sung on. I asked one of them afterwards, ‘Was you not afraid?’ He answered, ‘I thank God, No.’ I asked, ‘But were not your women and children afraid?’ He replied mildly, ‘No; our women and children are not afraid to die.’

“From them I went to their crying, trembling neighbours, and pointed out to them the difference in the hour of trial, between him that feareth God, and him that feareth him not. At twelve the wind fell. This was the most glorious Day which I have hitherto seen.”

Wesley later testified that the Moravians’ peace contributed directly to his conversion.

Who will see the peace of Christ in you?

Francis of Assisi was riding on horseback down the road that went by a leper colony far from his home. He had recently sensed God leading him into a life of spiritual service, but he was still caught by the lure of wealth and glory.

Historian Arnaldo Fortini picks up the story: “Suddenly the horse jerked to the side of the road. With difficulty Francis pulled him back by a violent jerk at the reins. The young man looked up and recoiled in horror. A leper stood in the middle of the road, a short distance away, unmoving, and looking at him. He was no different from the others, the usual wan specter, with stained face, shaved head, dressed in gray sackcloth. He did not speak and showed no sign of moving, of getting out of the way. He looked at the horseman fixedly, strangely, with an acute and penetrating gaze.

“An instant that seemed eternity passed. Slowly Francis dismounted, went to the man, took his hand. It was a cold emaciated hand, bloodstained, twisted, inert and cold like that of a corpse. He put a mite of charity in it, pressed it, carried it to his lips. And suddenly, as he kissed the lacerated flesh of the creature who was the most abject, the most hated, the most scorned, of all human beings, he was flooded with a wave of emotion, one that shut out everything around him, one that he would remember even on his death bed.

“As the leper withdrew his hand, Francis raised his head to look at him again. He was no longer there.”

When young Francis of Assisi gave a hurting soul the peace of God, he found it in his own heart.

So will we.

## Discussion Questions

1. In what ways is it challenging to live at peace with God, others, and yourself in our culture?
2. With whom do you need greater peace today? What steps will you take in response?
3. How is being at peace with God, others, and yourself important to your cultural influence?

# CHAPTER 8

## SERVE CHRIST WITH COURAGE

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” —Matthew 5:10*

Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world, according to a recent report. The study cites bombings of churches in Egypt, Pakistan, and Indonesia; the torture of Christians in North Korean and Eritrean prisons; social persecution in North Korea, Saudi Arabia, China, and other countries; and attacks on Christian minorities in India, China, and other nations.

According to Gary Bauer, a commissioner on the US Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF), “Christians are the most persecuted religious group in the world and it’s accelerating.”

While 30 percent of the world’s population identifies as Christian, 80 percent of all acts of religious discrimination around the world are directed at Christians. One scholar estimates that 90 percent of all people killed on the basis of their religious beliefs are Christians. The USCIRF has identified sixteen countries where “heinous and

systematic” offenses, including torture, imprisonment, and murder, occur against religious communities. The only religion under attack in all sixteen countries is Christianity.

According to Jesus, we should not be surprised when we face opposition for our faith. Those who hate our Father will hate his children. This is just as true in America as it is anywhere else in the world. When atheist Sam Harris claims that “science must destroy religion,” he speaks for many who claim that religion is not just irrelevant but dangerous.

How should we respond when we are attacked for our faith? How can God redeem such attacks by using them to help us change the culture today?

## **Expect persecution**

Jesus’ beatitude can be literally translated, “Blessed are the ones who have been and now are being persecuted for the sake of righteousness.” He knew his followers would suffer for their commitment to him. And they did.

They were “reviled” (v. 11), the objects of gossip, slander, and ridicule. Enemies of Christ said “all kinds of evil” against them. Because they shared a meal that symbolized the body and blood of Christ, they were accused of cannibalism. Because they called this meal the “love feast” and welcomed prostitutes into their churches, they were accused of sexual perversion. Because they would not bow before a bust of the emperor and say “Caesar is Lord,” they were accused of atheism and sedition.

Persecution was a daily fact of life for them.

Before he was crucified upside down, the apostle Peter wrote: “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice insofar as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed” (1 Peter 4:12–13).

Jesus warned his disciples, “When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next” (Matthew 10:23).



William Barclay:

All the world knows of the Christians who were flung to the lions or burned at the stake; but these were kindly deaths. Nero wrapped the Christians in pitch and set them alight, and used them as living torches to light his gardens. He sewed them in the skins of wild animals and set his hunting dogs upon them to tear them to death. They were tortured on the rack; they were scraped with pincers; molten lead was poured hissing upon them; red hot brass plates were affixed to the tenderest parts of their bodies; eyes were torn out; parts of their bodies were cut off and roasted before their eyes; their hands and feet were burned while cold water was poured over them to lengthen the agony. These things are not pleasant to think about, but these are the things a man had to be prepared for, if he took his stand with Christ.

Persecution has remained a fact accompanying the Christian faith across all the centuries from their day to ours.

Seventy million believers have been murdered across Christian history for no reason except that they would not renounce their faith in Jesus. More believers were martyred in the twentieth century than the previous nineteen combined.

Totalitarian regimes cannot tolerate our commitment to Christ as Lord. Secular culture does not understand our convictions.

And Satan hates us. Jesus called him “a murderer from the beginning” (John 8:44). Peter warned us: “Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

Six centuries ago, Thomas à Kempis observed, “The devil sleepeth not, neither is the flesh as yet dead, therefore cease not to prepare thyself for the battle, for on thy right hand and on thy left are enemies who never rest.”

He is still right.

## Evaluate your courage

If you're like most of us, you may be a bit uncomfortable right now. It is a biblical fact that Christians should experience persecution for their faith, but many of us reading these words do not.

People at school may make fun of us if they learn we are believers. Coworkers or clients may shun us if we don't join in ungodly activities. We may lose money or status when we refuse dishonesty or immorality. But, by and large, American Christians live in communities that expect us to be nominally Christian. Nothing extreme or intolerant, of course. But religion in moderation is accepted and even welcomed.

So, I've asked myself a hard question: Why don't I face more suffering for my faith? If indeed my fallen world is opposed to my commitment to Christ, and if Satan is my mortal enemy, why doesn't my faith cost me more? In the spiritual battle being waged for the souls of humanity, why don't we suffer more?

Here are the reasons which seem clear to me.

### **One: Some of us have withdrawn from the battle.**

Many of us don't know many non-Christians. We spend so much of our time in the huddle that we have little contact with the other team.

At one of my pastorates, our church was preparing for "Friend Day," a Sunday when each member would bring a guest. But the chairman of our deacons objected: "I don't know anyone who doesn't go to church." And the other deacons nodded in agreement.

We're no threat to Satan unless we get on his turf.

### **Two: Some of us look like the enemy.**

Jesus called us the "salt of the earth" and "light of the world" (Matthew 5:13–16). But if we lose our "saltiness" or hide our candle, the world doesn't feel our salt sting or see our light shine.

We can be one person at church but another at school, at work, at home, or with friends. We can stand with a foot in both worlds. We can speak church language and world language. We can employ church ethics and world ethics. We can wear church masks and

world masks.

When we look like the enemy, we cost Satan nothing. He'd rather leave us where we are.

### **Three: Some of us are not willing to take a risk.**

Many of us are regularly engaged with nonbelievers, and we are willing for them to know of our faith. But only to a point.

Only if they won't be offended if we share Christ with them or invite them to church. Only if they won't think us strange for our spirituality. Only if we can still be included in the social group we value or still make the money we want or still achieve the social status to which we aspire.

We don't suffer in the battle because we won't go to the front lines.

## **Choose to risk**

Here's the relevant question today: Why change?

What are those of us who don't risk anything for our faith missing?

Jesus' last beatitude tells us.

### **First, suffering believers experience great joy.**

According to Jesus, those who suffer for their faith will be "blessed"—the word refers to joy transcending our circumstances. Jesus told risk-taking Christians to "rejoice." There is joy in facing persecution for Jesus.

He also told us to "be glad," words that translate a Greek term that means to leap much with irrepressible joy.

He was right. There is great joy in suffering for Christ. The apostles felt it: "When [the authorities] had called in the apostles, they beat them and charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name" (Acts 5:40–41).

Early martyrs felt it. There is an ancient tradition that states that Nero would walk at night on the Coliseum floor, examining the bodies of slain Christians left there. And wherever a body had a face, the face was smiling.

Justin, one of the earliest martyrs, wrote to his accusers: “You can kill us but you cannot hurt us.”

### **Second, suffering believers receive a great reward.**

Paul was sure of it: “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Romans 8:18). Martyr Jim Elliott wrote in his journal: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

*Revelation* promises those who suffer for Christ: “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Revelation 7:16–17).

### **Third, suffering believers join a great fraternity.**

At the end of the beatitudes, Jesus said, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, *for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you*” (Matthew 5:12, emphasis added).

The book of Hebrews described those who suffered for serving the one true God: “Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth” (Hebrews 11:35–38).

Every disciple but John was martyred, and John was exiled and imprisoned. Seventy million Christians have died since for following Jesus. When we suffer for Christ, we join a great fraternity in the faith.

## **Last, suffering believers inherit a great kingdom.**

“Theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:10). The first beatitude made this promise; the last repeats it. When we suffer for Christ, we prove that he is our king. And then we join him in his kingdom.

Second Timothy 2:12 promises: “If we endure, we will also reign with him.” Revelation 20 describes those who stood faithful to Christ in the face of extreme persecution: “They came to life and reigned with Christ” (v. 4).

We will suffer for a short while and then reign with Jesus in his kingdom forever.

## **Conclusion**

Why is courage in facing persecution vital for culture-changing Christians?

One reason is that the more we seek to influence the culture for Christ, the more we can expect the culture to reject us and Satan to oppose us. When we move onto the enemy’s turf, the enemy fights back.

A second reason is that when we suffer for Jesus, secular people take note of the sincerity of our faith. The *Epistle to Diognetus* (AD 130) described early believers: “They are evil spoken of and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honour; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life.” Their willingness to suffer for Jesus greatly empowered their witness.

So, here’s the question: Are you suffering for your faith today?

Choose to be faithful, and you’ll forever be grateful.

Conversely, are you refusing risk and suffering for your faith?

It’s not too late to be faithful to the One who is faithful to you.

Sundar Singh was one of India’s most famous Christians. He lived from 1889 to 1929, enduring extreme persecution for his courageous faith.

His family tried to poison him when he became a Christian. He was stoned and arrested numerous times, roped to a tree as bait

for wild animals, and sewn into a wet animal skin and left to be crushed to death as it shrank in the hot sun. He disappeared while on a missionary journey. Indian Christians consider him their Francis of Assisi.

Here's the statement by Sundar Singh that drew me to him: "From my many years' experience I can unhesitatingly say that the cross bears those who bear the cross."

Will you bear yours?

## Discussion Questions

1. Are you facing cultural opposition for your faith today?  
Why or why not?
2. Will you ask God for the courage to be faithful to your Lord in every circumstance today?
3. How is such courage relevant to your public influence?





# CHAPTER 9

CHANGED PEOPLE  
CHANGE THE WORLD

I preached my first sermon in the fall of 1976. If I could have somehow read a copy of today's *New York Times* or *Dallas Morning News*, I would have struggled to believe what I found.

By 1976, nearly four million babies had been killed following the Supreme Court's ruling in 1973 legalizing abortion. Today, the number in America exceeds sixty million.

That year, gay rights protesters took to the streets at the Democratic National Convention in New York City. Few watching their protests imagined that same-sex marriage would one day be the law of the land and those who affirm biblical sexual morality would face escalating opposition from the culture.

In 1976, the New Jersey Supreme Court decided the first "right to die" case, ruling that patients have the right to decline medical

treatment. Today, one in five Americans has access to physician-assisted death.

When I preached my first sermon, who would have predicted that the American Psychological Association would one day launch a “Consensual Non-Monogamy Task Force” for the purpose of promoting “awareness and inclusivity about consensual non-monogamy” such as “polyamory, open relationships, swinging, [and] relationship anarchy”? Or that a movie about a sexual relationship between a man and a dolphin would win “Best Documentary Short Film” at the Los Angeles Film Festival?

Who would have predicted that the percentage of Americans with no religious affiliation would triple from 1976 to today? Or that those who describe themselves as Protestants would fall from 60 percent to 35 percent?

No matter which direction we turn, it is clear that our nation needs a transformative movement of culture-changing Christians. However, we must be what we wish others to become. We must model what we ask others to emulate.

So, what does a culture-changing Christian look like? What values and commitments define such followers of Jesus?

In studying our Lord’s beatitudes, we have discovered eight priorities that define and empower us as the “salt and light” Jesus intends us to be.

To review what we’ve learned from Matthew 5:

1. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3): We begin every day by submitting to the Holy Spirit, seeking his empowering and leading through our life and service.
2. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (v. 4): We stand with those who suffer, showing God’s love in our compassion.
3. “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (v. 5): We submit daily to God’s control, trusting him to use our gifts and opportunities to advance his kingdom.

4. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (v. 6): We seek to be people of personal integrity so the Spirit can use us and others will see Christ in us.
5. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” (v. 7): As an example of God’s grace, we choose to pardon those who have hurt us.
6. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (v. 8): We live for the singular purpose of loving God and others with passion and joy.
7. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God” (v. 9): We choose to be at peace with God, others, and ourselves so as to offer God’s peace to our fallen world.
8. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 10): We face the opposition of our culture with courage and joy.

Which of these values is God’s call to you now?

The Chinese theologian Watchman Nee made an assertion that has marked my life since I first encountered it:

A day must come in our lives, as definite as the day of our conversion, when we give up all right to ourselves and submit to the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. . . . There must be a day when, without reservation, we surrender everything to Him—ourselves, our families, our possessions, our business and our time. All we are and have becomes His, to be held henceforth entirely at His disposal. From that day we are no longer our own masters, but only stewards. Not until the Lordship of Jesus Christ is a settled thing in our hearts can the Holy Spirit really operate

effectively in us. He cannot direct our lives until all control of them is committed to Him. If we do not give Him absolute authority in our lives, He can be present, but He cannot be powerful. The power of the Spirit is stayed.

Is today that day for you?





## About the Author

Jim Denison, Ph.D., speaks and writes on cultural and contemporary issues facing our world today. He is a trusted author and subject matter expert in areas where faith and current events intersect. His free Daily Article is distributed by email to thousands around the world and provides leading insight for discerning today's news from a biblical perspective.

Whether it's through the Daily Article, speaking engagements, website articles, or social media, Denison Forum is a go-to resource to help readers discern the news differently.

Dr. Denison is the author of seven books and has taught philosophy of religion and apologetics for over thirty years with four seminaries and in multiple countries. Currently, he serves as Resident Scholar for Ethics with Baylor Scott & White Health, where he addresses issues such as genetic medicine and reproductive science. He is a Senior Fellow with the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative, where he addresses issues related to politics and religious liberty. He also serves as Senior Fellow for Global Studies at Dallas Baptist University's Institute for Global Engagement. In addition, he chairs the DBU Advisory Board, teaches doctoral seminars, and frequently speaks on campus.

Prior to founding the Denison Forum in 2009, Dr. Denison served as pastor of churches in Dallas, Atlanta and Midland. He earned a Doctor of Philosophy and Master of Divinity from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, and received a Doctor of Divinity from Dallas Baptist University.

Jim and his wife Janet live in Dallas, Texas, and have two sons and four grandchildren.





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## CHAPTER 9

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