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The Ideal Disciple

Blessed are you . . .

MATTHEW 5:11

It is more than a coincidence that whereas the last word of the Old Testament, which enshrines the Old Covenant, is “curse,” the first word of our Lord’s first recorded sermon under the New Covenant is “blessed.” This latter word is the keynote of His kingdom.

The Old Covenant of law could pronounce only a curse on those who failed to fulfill its demands. The New Covenant, which was sealed with Christ’s blood, does not reduce the law’s demands but imparts the desire and the dynamic to fulfill them. The “thou shalt, thou shalt not” of the Old is replaced by the “I will, I will” of the New.

In the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3–12), Jesus set forth the characteristics of the ideal subjects of His kingdom—qualities that were present in perfection in the life and character of the One who announced them. It is a fascinating exercise to match each of those virtues to the life and ministry of the Lord.

In His Sermon on the Mount Jesus addressed His words primarily to His disciples but did so in the hearing of the crowd (v. 1). “His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.” So this is a message for disciples.

He directed their attention away from the idea of being satisfied with mere outward presentability to an immeasurably higher and more demanding lifestyle. The standard He set is so high that no one can live the life depicted in the Sermon who is not the one depicted in the Beatitudes. The whole Sermon is revolutionary, but nowhere more so than in these verses. They cut right across the popular idea of the definition of blessedness and happiness.

Many think that if they had abundant wealth, absence of sorrow and suffering, good health, a good job, unrestricted gratification of appetites, and kind treatment from everyone, that would be blessedness indeed. But Jesus completely reversed that concept and substituted many of the very experiences we would like to sidestep—poverty, mourning, hunger, thirst, renunciation, persecution. True blessedness is to be found along this path, He told them.

The word *blessed* can be rendered “O the bliss!” or “to be envied, to be congratulated,” and it is applied to eight conditions of life that divide into two groups.

FOUR PASSIVE PERSONAL QUALITIES

Christ begins by calling four passive personal qualities blessed.

Spiritual Inadequacy. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3), or “O the bliss of those who feel inadequate!”

On the surface those words have a hollow ring to those whose

lives are plagued by that debilitating condition. Of course it is to the poor in spirit that our Lord is referring here, not to the poor in pocket. There is no virtue in poverty per se; it is certainly not an automatic blessing.

There are two words for “poor” in Greek. One means someone who has nothing superfluous; the other, one who has nothing at all, is bankrupt, and has no resources. It is this second meaning that Jesus referred to. The lesson is clear. The person who is to be envied is the one who, in consciousness of his spiritual bankruptcy, is cast back on God and draws on His limitless resources. As Luther said, “We are all beggars, living on the bounty of God.” But such poverty leads to spiritual affluence. “Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Spiritual Contrition. “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (v. 4), or “O the bliss of the penitent!”

This is another paradox. It is as though one said, “How happy are the unhappy!” This quality is the product of the poverty of spirit of the first beatitude. It is not bereavement that is primarily in view, although that need not be excluded. The word *mourn* conveys the idea of grief of the deepest kind. It is mourning over sin and failure, over the slowness of our growth in likeness to Christ—mourning over our spiritual bankruptcy.

There are two mistakes that the disciple may make. One is to believe that Christians must never be happy and laughing; the other, that Christians must always be happy and laughing. As a wise man said, “There is a time for everything . . . a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance” (Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4).

No one attains full maturity without the experience of sorrow. There is room for the disciple to mourn over the slowness of his growth and the paucity of his spiritual attainment altogether apart from any actual sin in his life.

Mourning and bliss are not incompatible, for Jesus said, “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh” (Luke 6:21). The blessedness is in the comfort God gives, not in the mourning itself. “They will be comforted.”

Spiritual Humility. “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth” (v. 5), or “O the bliss of the humble!”

Humility is an exotic flower in our sooty and smoggy world. It is no native of earth and is little esteemed by man in general.

The word *meek* is more than amicability or mere mildness of disposition. Its meaning has been weakened by the line in the children’s hymn “Gentle Jesus, meek and mild.” He was meek but was far from mild. The impression the hymn leaves is that Jesus was rather weak and ineffective. In fact, He was the very reverse of weak.

Was it mildness He displayed when, alone and with uplifted whip, He drove the materialistic traffickers with their sheep and cattle out of the Temple? He was anything but servile and spineless. When He asked the disciples who men said that He was, they replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah”—two of the most rugged characters in the Bible! The word *meek* was used of a horse that had been broken and domesticated, giving the idea of energy and power, controlled and directed.

In heaven, the seven angels sing the Song of Moses and the Lamb (Revelation 15:3)—Moses, the meekest man on earth, and Jesus who said, “I am meek and lowly in heart” (KJV). But both could blaze with sinless anger when the interests of God were at stake. Meekness is no spineless quality.

This virtue challenges the world’s standards. “Stand up for your rights!” is the strident cry of our day. “The world is yours if you can get it.” Jesus said, on the contrary, that the world is yours if you renounce it. The meek, not the aggressive, inherit the

earth. The meek have an inheritance. The worldly have no future. “They will inherit the earth.”

Spiritual Aspiration. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (v. 6), or “O the bliss of the unsatisfied.”

The blessing promised here is not for mere wistfulness or languid desire. It is for those who have a passionate craving not after happiness alone but after righteousness—a right relationship with God. The truly blessed person is the one who hungers and thirsts after God Himself, not only the blessings He gives. David knew that aspiration when he wrote, “As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, O God” (Psalm 42:1).

The discovery that happiness is a by-product of holiness has been a joyous revelation to many. We should therefore “follow after holiness.” God is eager to satisfy all the holy aspirations of His children. “They will be filled.”

FOUR ACTIVE SOCIAL QUALITIES

The ideal disciple will have four active social characteristics.

Compassionate in Spirit. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (v. 7), or “O the bliss of the merciful!”

It is always to the undeserving that mercy is extended. If it were deserved, it would no longer be mercy but mere justice.

It is possible to have a passion for righteousness and yet lack compassion and mercy for those who have failed to attain it. Mercy is the ability to enter into another’s situation and be sympathetic toward his plight or problem. Like meekness, this is a distinctively Christian grace. We are naturally geared more to criticism than to mercy.

Pity can be sterile. To become mercy, it must graduate from mere emotion to compassionate action. Although mercy does not condone sin, it endeavors to repair its ravages. Mercy encourages the one who has fallen to begin again.

Our personal experience will be the rebound of our attitudes and reactions. Just as in physics, where action and reaction are equal and opposite—those who are merciful will be shown mercy, and if we are shown mercy, we will be merciful. “They will be shown mercy.”

Pure in Heart. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God” (v. 8), or “O the bliss of the sincere!”

Cleanness of heart brings clearness of vision. The emphasis here is on inward purity and reality in contrast to external respectability.

The revelation of God envisaged here is not granted to the mighty intellect unless that is accompanied by purity of heart. It is more than an intellectual concept that is in view; it is not a matter of optics but of moral and spiritual affinity. Sin befogs the vision. The word *pure* here means “unadulterated,” free from alloy, sincere, and without hypocrisy. “They will see God.”

Conciliatory in Spirit. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God” (v. 9), or “O the bliss of those who create harmony!”

It is not peace lovers or peacekeepers who qualify for this beatitude, but peacemakers. Nor is it those who maintain an existing peace, but those who enter a situation where peace has been broken and restore it. The beatitude speaks not of a pacifist but of a reconciler.

Very often peace can be made only at a cost to the peacemaker himself. It was so with our Lord. He made peace by the blood of His cross (Colossians 1:20). He achieved it by allowing His own

peace to be broken. The disciple is to follow in His train. To be a lover of peace is good. To be a promoter of peace is better. “They will be called sons of God.”

Unswerving in Loyalty. “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven” (vv. 10–12), or “O the bliss of the sufferer for Christ.”

What was done to the Savior will be done to the disciple. But even insult, reviling, injury, and persecution can work blessing—not in the persecution itself but in the divine compensations it brings.

The tense of the verb conveys the sense, “Blessed are those who *have been* persecuted.” The blessing is in the results that flow from it. Suffering is the authentic hallmark of Christianity. “Even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed,” said Peter (1 Peter 3:14).

But not all persecution is blessed. Sometimes Christians bring it on themselves through unwise and unchristian actions. For persecution to bring blessing, there are three conditions:

1. It must be for righteousness’ sake, not as a result of our angularity or fanaticism or tactlessness.
2. The evil-speaking must have no basis in fact; it must not be something that is the outcome of our sin or failure.
3. It must be for Christ’s sake—suffering that arises from our consistent loyalty to Him.

“Great is your reward in heaven.”

FOR REFLECTION

What does it mean to you that the Old Testament delivers a message of “curses” and the New Testament delivers a message of “blessing” (p. 11)?

Give yourself a progress report on a scale from 1 to 10 (10 high) for each of the four passive personal qualities of discipleship (pp. 12–15).

Which of the four social qualities in the Beatitudes are you most tempted to ignore? Why?

Conditions of Discipleship

Anyone who does not carry his cross and
follow me cannot be my disciple.

LUKE 14:27

As usual, Jesus was surrounded by the thronging crowds, who were listening to His every word. “Large crowds were traveling with Jesus” (Luke 14:25), fascinated by the novelty, winsomeness, and challenge of this new teaching, for it was still in the days of His popularity.

The situation presented Him with a unique opportunity to capitalize on their feverish interest. The whole nation was looking for a charismatic leader who would help them throw off the galling Roman yoke—and here was someone superbly qualified for the task. All He needed to do was to perform a few spectacular miracles and then lead them in a great insurrection.

Did He flatter them, offer some inducement, perform some miracle to win their allegiance? It seemed as though He were intent on alienating their interest and actually discouraging them from following Him. He began to thin their ranks by stating in the starkest of terms the exacting conditions of discipleship.

The line Jesus took with the impressionable crowd was the exact opposite of much evangelism today. Instead of majoring in the benefits and blessings, the thrills and excitement, the adventure and advantages of being His disciples, He spoke more of the difficulties and dangers they would meet and the sacrifices that would be involved. He placed the cost of being His disciple very high. He never concealed the cross.

Robert Browning captures this aspect of the Lord's message in one of his poems:

*How very hard it is to be a Christian!
Hard for you and me,
Not for the mere task of making real
That duty up to its ideal,
Effecting thus complete and whole
A purpose of the human soul,
For that is always hard to do.*

It is a well-proved fact that dynamic leaders in all ages and in all spheres have always met with the best response when they confronted people with the difficult challenge rather than the soft option. The appeal to self-interest inevitably draws the wrong kind of follower.

In the early stages of World War II, when the highly mechanized German armies were sweeping forward almost unchecked, the French resistance collapsed. Great Britain was left alone with its "contemptible army" on foreign soil to face alone the German colossus.

I well remember a speech by Prime Minister Winston Churchill at that critical juncture. It outlined in starkest terms the ominous situation in which the nation was placed, with inadequate weapons, weak defenses, and the possibility of an invasion imminent.

He uttered no soft words of comfort but challenged the whole nation to rise to the occasion.

*We will fight them on the streets;
We will fight them on the beaches . . .
All I offer you is blood and sweat and tears.*

Instead of depressing them, his words galvanized the nation into a superhuman war effort that turned the tide and won the day.

Why did Jesus impose such stringent terms? Had He been prepared to soften His conditions of discipleship the crowds would have swept along behind Him, but that was not His way. He was looking for men and women of quality; mere quantity did not interest Him.

In His message to the crowds concerning the conditions on which they could be His disciples, Jesus employed two illustrations:

*Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it? . . . Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Will he not first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand?
(Luke 14:28, 31)*

Jesus employed these illustrations to demonstrate His disapproval of impulsive and ill-considered discipleship. Like the builder, He too is engaged in a building program—"On this rock I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). Like the king, He too is engaged in a desperate battle against the devil and the powers of darkness.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLESHIP

In this building and battling, Jesus desires to have associated with Him disciples who are men and women of quality—those who will not turn back when the fighting grows fierce. Are we disciples of this caliber?

The message Jesus proclaimed was a call to discipleship—not to faith alone but to faith and obedience. Jesus gave a solemn warning: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 7:21). Obedience is evidence of the reality of our repentance and faith. Our obedience does not achieve salvation, but it is evidence of it.

Present-day preaching finds little place for repentance, yet without repentance there can be no regeneration. Many have been encouraged to believe that because they have come forward to an appeal or signed a decision card, or prayed to receive Christ, they are saved—whether or not there is any subsequent change in their lives.

It needs to be reiterated, as John MacArthur wrote, that “saving faith is more than just understanding the facts [of the gospel] and mentally acquiescing. It is inseparable from repentance, submission, and a supernatural eagerness to obey. The biblical concept of saving faith includes all those elements.”

It is sad but true that whenever the way of the cross and its implications are preached, superficial believers, whose conversion experiences have been shallow, fall away.

There are three indispensable conditions for true discipleship:

AN UNRIVALED LOVE

The first condition of discipleship is an unrivalled love for Christ. In the realm of the disciple’s affections He will allow no rival.

The reader will have noticed that in Luke 14:25–33 one state-

ment is repeated three times: “he cannot be my disciple.” Each occurrence of the clause is preceded by a condition to which there is no exception.

*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters—yes, even his own life—**he cannot be my disciple.*** (v. 26; emphasis added)

Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. (Matthew 10:37)

The use of the word *hate* here has been the cause of considerable misunderstanding. The word Christ used is far removed from the normal connotation of the word in today’s usage. He does not tell us in one breath to love and honor our parents and then in the next to hate them. Jesus was using the language of exaggerated contrast. *Hate* here means simply “to love less.” So the disciple is a follower of Christ whose love for Him transcends all earthly loves.

But note that because we love Christ supremely does not mean we will love our relatives less than we love them now. Indeed, the very reverse can be the case; for when Christ holds first place in our affections, our capacity to love will be greatly expanded. Romans 5:5 will then have a fuller meaning for us: “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.”

Sometimes a clash of loyalties arises at this point, and the disciple must choose which love will prevail.

When the China Inland Mission (now Overseas Missionary Fellowship) had to withdraw from China, one of the countries to which they transferred operations was Thailand. The mission was assigned several provinces with a population of about four million in which there were no churches and no missionary work.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLESHIP

In one town, the first to be converted was a high school girl named Si Muang. Her heart opened to the gospel as a flower opens to the sun. She soon realized that she had to confess her faith in Christ to her parents, who were ardent Buddhists. She was under no illusions as to the possible outcome.

Overcoming her fears, she confessed her faith to her mother. Her mother was furious and told Si Muang that she must either renounce this new religion or leave home—a painful dilemma for a young girl to face, especially as she was the only Christian in the town. The conflict was fierce. Would she give Christ an unrivaled love and “hate” her father and mother, brothers and sisters? That is what she did, and she was turned out of her home. The Lord did not desert her, and some months later she was received back.

There was yet another area that came under this condition of discipleship: “Yes, even his own life.” The disciple’s love for Christ is to be supreme over self-love. We are not to hold even our own lives dear. Love of self is soul-destroying, but love of Christ is soul-enriching. If the disciple is not prepared to comply with this condition, the words are categorical: “He cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

AN UNCEASING CROSS-BEARING

*“Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me **cannot be my disciple.**”* (Luke 14:27; emphasis added)

*“Anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is **not worthy of me.**”* (Matthew 10:38; emphasis added)

To understand what Jesus meant by His command to carry the cross, we must think what that expression would have meant to the people of that day.

What is the cross of which Jesus spoke? Those words were said before He went to the cross. In common parlance people speak of some physical infirmity, some temperamental weakness, some family problem, as their cross. One woman referred to her bad temper as her cross.

“Oh, no!” was the reply. “That is the cross of the unfortunate people who have to live with you.”

Those are not the circumstances the Jews would have associated with a cross—they are just the common lot of man. Crucifixion was an all too familiar sight to them. They would have thought of the cross as an instrument of agonizing suffering and eventual death.

What did the cross mean to Jesus? It was something He took up voluntarily, not something that was imposed on Him; it involved sacrifice and suffering; it involved Him in costly renunciations; it was symbolic of rejection by the world.

And it is to cross-bearing of this nature that the disciple is always called. It involves a willingness to accept ostracism and unpopularity with the world for His sake. We can evade carrying the cross simply by conforming our lives to the world’s standards.

Contrary to expectation, taking our cross and following Christ is not a joyless experience, as the saintly Samuel Rutherford knew: “He who looks at the white side of Christ’s cross, and takes it up handsomely, will find it just such a burden as wings are to a bird.”

If the disciple is unwilling to fulfill this condition, Jesus said, “He cannot be my disciple.”

AN UNRESERVED SURRENDER

“Any of you who does not give up everything he has cannot be my disciple.” (Luke 14:33)

The first condition had to do with the heart's affections; the second with life's conduct; the third with personal possessions. Of the three, the third condition is probably the most unwelcome of all in our covetous and materialistic age. Did Jesus mean what He said to be taken literally? Everything?

What was the Lord really asking for? I do not think He meant that we are to sell all that we have and give it to the church, but He was claiming the right of disposal of our possessions. He has given them to us only as trustees, not as owners.

This was the test Jesus put to the young man who came inquiring about eternal life: "Jesus answered, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. *Then come, follow me*'" (Matthew 19:21; emphasis added). He had to choose between Christ and his many possessions. He flunked the test, and because he was unwilling to forsake all, he disqualified himself from being a disciple of Christ. Christ must be given preeminence over all earthly possessions.

There are two ways in which we can hold our possessions. We can hold them in our clenched fist and say, "These are mine to do with as I like." Or we can hold them with our hand inverted, the fingers lightly touching, and say, "Thank You, Lord, for loaning me these possessions. I realize I am only a trustee, not an owner. If You want any of them back again, tell me, and I will let them go." The latter is the attitude of the disciple.

Our attitude toward our possessions is a clue to the reality of our discipleship. When we are thinking of our stewardship of money, what is our attitude? Is it, "How much of my money will I give to God?" Or is it, "How much of God's money will I keep for myself?"

In view of the stringency of those conditions, it may be asked, "Has the Lord the right to demand them as conditions

of discipleship?” The answer is that He is asking nothing that He has not first done Himself.

Did He not love His Father supremely, more than He loved mother, brothers, sisters, and His own life also?

Did He not carry and die on a literal, agonizing cross to secure our salvation?

Did He not renounce all that He had as heir of all things? When He died, His personal estate consisted of the loincloth that the soldiers left Him after gambling away His outer garments.

*Jesus, I my cross have taken,
All to leave and follow Thee;
Destitute, despised, forsaken,
Thou, from hence, my all shalt be:
I will follow Thee, my Saviour
Thou didst shed Thy blood for me,
And though all the world forsake Thee,
By Thy grace I'll follow Thee.*

(H. F. Lyte)

FOR REFLECTION

Describe something difficult Jesus has asked you to do. What did you learn in the doing?

What does “saving faith” mean to you?

How observable are the “three indispensable conditions for true discipleship” in your life (pp. 22–26)?