

**The Road to Joy**  
South-Broadland Presbyterian Church  
July 12, 2009

First off, let me say, “This was soooo NOT my idea!” In a Session meeting a few months ago, it was pointed out that one of the duties of an elder is to preach when necessary. Since I was signing up other elders to preach, I was strongly encouraged to sign myself up as well. So . . . here goes!

One of my favorite Biblical passages is the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus packed so much quotable stuff into that passage. We’ve got the Beatitudes, the Lord’s Prayer, parables, lessons, admonitions, and just about everything else. Today, I’m focusing on just one little portion of this sermon - just ten little verses. But, oh man, do those ten little verses pack a wallop!

Let’s look at Matthew 5, verses 1 and 2. This is the introduction to the sermon. It gives the “back-story” if you will.

“Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them.”

In the verses preceding this, we are told that great crowds of people followed Jesus from Galilee and Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan. They were following Him, listening to Him, hoping to learn from Him. When he saw how many followed Him, he went where he could accommodate them. He went up a mountain and let them sit all around Him. The mountain was a great place for large crowds, but it also implies a loftiness of teaching, like a new Sinai. Like the great teachers of the time, he sat down, assuming the appropriate posture for a Jewish teacher. In the book of Acts, Paul says, “I am a Jew, born in Tarsus . . . but raised in this city and educated at the feet of Gamaliel . . .” Paul learned *at*

*the feet* of Gamaliel. It was very typical for a teacher to sit with his students seated on the ground around him.

This is what Jesus did on the mountain. He was seated, with His disciples at His feet and the multitudes around them. They recognized the fact that they were about to hear something profound. And profound it was. The first words he spoke were a poetic discourse that we know as the Beatitudes.

Let's read the Beatitudes now in the version we all recognize so well. Jesus said,

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

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

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

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

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

Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.

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

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, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Almost every translation of the Bible uses the word “Blessed.” That’s what we’re all familiar with. But the Greek word here says so much more. The word μακαριοι is used in the secular writings of the time to denote the highest stage of happiness, much as they thought the Greek gods enjoyed. It

implies a heavenly joy or a kind of Nirvana. Other English words that have been tried are Happy, which seems a little tepid; Ecstatic, which seems too “party-like”; and blissful or serene, which seem somewhat “ethereal.” The word I like best is “joyous” - filled with joy -- happy beyond human happiness.

But what leads to this joyousness? How does one get there? Jesus has it all laid out for us. He’s giving us a map for the Road to Joy. He begins by addressing the “poor in spirit.” The Greek word translated as poor is *πτωχοι*, which means one who has nothing and is completely empty. So the “poor in spirit” are those totally lacking in the Spirit of the Lord. Their poverty goes beyond the physical - it reaches all the way down to their soul. But Jesus isn’t talking about ALL who are without the Spirit. There also has to be an *awareness* of this spiritual poverty. The spiritually poor who will receive joy are those who recognize their poverty. They realize that something is lacking in their lives.

But that spiritual poverty doesn’t last. Jesus goes on to say of those who are spiritually poor that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This is a simple affirmation that those with spiritual poverty come to God with empty hands. They come lacking and are given much.

But just recognizing one’s poverty isn’t enough. Jesus continues our map of the Road to Joy. He next addresses those who mourn. He’s not talking about those who have recently experienced a loss or those who are depressed. This is a continuation of the former. It’s the next step on the road. Once one has become aware of his own spiritual poverty, his lacking of God in his life, he mourns.

This is a startling paradox. Joyous are the mourners? The world says, “Enjoy!” Christ says, “Grieve!” Jesus knew that grief is not joyous. The effects of mourning can be seen on any face of sorrow; it disfigures and stays. It’s *not* happy. But the grief and mourning that Jesus is talking about can *lead to* the ultimate happiness. Those who mourn are sorrowful for their own sins and those of the world, but also because the wickedness of the world oppresses their spirits. Those who mourn recognize their poverty, realize their need for something more, and mourn. Others are content with an unexamined life; sin is to them a trivial affair. But the “mourners” see God grieving in holy love. Their conscience is quick; “God be merciful to me a sinner” Luke says (18:13). They say with the Psalmist, “My sin is ever before me.” (Psalm 51:3) They begin to seek something more.

And Jesus promises it. He says, “Joyous are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” This sorrow finds comfort. The Greek word, παρακληθησονται, has the same root used when speaking of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the ultimate comforter. But this word means more than that. It means “to call to the side of.” This mourning summons the aid of God because it is akin to His nature. This comfort is no mere soothing; it is tenderness and reinforcement.

Joy is not the opposite of pain, or a respite from pain, or despite pain; it is *because of* pain, and *through* pain. Joy is sorrow accepted in contrite love, in admission of spiritual poverty.

But is comfort enough? Isn’t there more? Jesus doesn’t stop here on this Road to Joy. He next addresses “the meek.” When we think meek, we think weak, ineffectual, a Casper Milquetoast kinda’ guy. The English word

“meek” has such negative connotations that I hesitate to even use it. We tend to link the word “meek” with “little” as in “a meek, little man.” But that’s not who Jesus is talking about here. Jesus used the term Πραεισ which means humble minded or reverent obedience. The French Bible translates πραεισ as *debonnaire*, which immediately brings to mind Fred Astaire or Gene Kelly, or even James Bond. But that’s the Americanized version of *debonnaire*. In French, it retains its original meaning of innocent, or without guile.

Just as “poor in spirit” is the opposite of “proud in spirit”, meek, as Jesus meant it, is the opposite of aggressive (both in nature and in act). The meek are not harsh; not self-assertive, not covetous, not trampling in brute force; they are humble in the strength of reverence. Others claim their rights, but the meek are concerned about their duties. Others advertise; the meek walk in a quiet godliness. Others seek revenge, but the meek seek reconciliation.

In the secular literature of the time, the word πραεισ is used in reference to a horse that has been broken or tamed. It’s a creature under control. All of the strength, all of the power, all of the animal nature is still there, but it’s under control. It’s not one who has been subdued, but one who IS subdued. It’s not one who knuckles under, but one who accepts authority. It’s one who shows strength in his gentleness. Jesus is talking about one who has seen his own spiritual poverty, recognizes his need and seeks more, and who now sees that God is in control and accepts that. THAT’S what he meant by meek.

And what happens to those who acknowledge and accept God’s control?

They have an astonishing reward. Jesus says they “will inherit the earth.” This is such a reversal from the beliefs of the world. In the world, power belongs to the strong, to the violent. It is they who “succeed” - who “possess the earth.” But in the Kingdom, the earth will belong to the humble, to the peaceful, to those who put their confidence in God, to those who live without bitterness and without anger.

Look at that word “inherit.” The strong and the violent may “possess” the earth now, but Jesus says that this reward comes as a gift and a legacy; it comes because the meek and humble would never seize it. An heir is the “*true possessor*”! The aggressor is at odds with himself: there is something in his nature which his own cruelty offends. So, being divided within himself, his judgment becomes blind and he stumbles to his doom. But the man of reverent humility is intent on God. He is strong. Self-control for God’s sake is fortitude indeed, not weakness. God made the earth and his sovereignty is never usurped. By that, the humble inherit the earth, not merely in some distant heaven, but also now, in spirit.

What comes after this humility? Do we stop here and dwell in our meekness? Jesus doesn’t think so! The next step on this Road to Joy is in the next Beatitude. Jesus says, “Joyous are they who hunger and thirst after righteousness.” So it’s not enough to just recognize your own spiritual poverty and seek God’s inheritance. Now it’s time to take action!

We’ve all experienced hunger at some point in our lives. I’m sure not many of us have felt that deep, burning hunger that is akin to starvation. That’s the hunger Jesus is talking about. A hunger so deep it hurts. He also talks about thirst. That’s even more powerful. We can survive for quite some time

hungry. But thirst is a different matter. Only those who live in desert lands can understand the true pangs of thirst. In the time of Jesus, water cisterns or wells were a matter of life and death. But Jesus isn't talking about a physical hunger or thirst. He's talking about *spiritual* hunger and thirst. Jesus doesn't say, "Joyous are the righteous". They don't need his blessing. He's talking about those who desire righteousness with a desire so strong it encompasses them. These are the people who have seen their lacking, mourned because of it, put themselves under God's control and now seek something more. They seek God's will and God's guidance in their lives and in the world. They seek equity and humanity, the realm of the Christ spirit. Jesus saw (and still sees) people hungering, but not for righteousness, and especially not for *His* righteousness, which is justice held in love. Can we not assume that every hunger, bad or good, has its food? There are bread and water for physical hunger and there is light and beauty for the hunger of the eyes. Why should it be hard for us to believe that there is fulfillment for the hunger and thirst of the soul?

Consider hungers and their fulfillment. Some hungers are not to be filled in this life. Look at the hunger for an amputated leg to grow again or paralyzed limbs to move again. Some hungers, when fulfilled, are only mocked. They have their reward: they longed for adulation, they now have it--and they find it empty. Some hungers, when fulfilled, lead only to satiation, not to satisfaction.

Robert Louis Stevenson commented that "to travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive." Those who hunger after Christ and His righteousness both travel hopefully *and* arrive. Others find only a passing pleasure for their answer, but the man who thirsts after Christ and his righteousness finds joy.

Wasn't there a king in a legend who opened up for his people a triple fountain that gave water, milk and wine? Jesus gives a better joy; water of righteousness for the cleansing of sin; milk of righteousness for the sustaining of inner motive; and wine of righteousness - the zest and joy of eternal life.

So let's pause for a moment and see where we are on our journey. We've seen and acknowledged our spiritual poverty; we've accepted this and mourned; we've opened ourselves to God's control and leading; and we've sought more - we've felt that deep need for Christ-like living. It sounds like we've come a long way, but is it far enough? Is there more on the Road to Joy? Jesus doesn't stop here. He keeps going. Our road turns and changes direction a bit, but we keep going. We've been looking to the past and changed because of it. Now we start looking to the future and how our attitudes can affect the outcome.

Jesus says, "Joyous are the merciful." This beatitude hardly seems as revolutionary as the others, and is therefore easier for us to accept. But when it was spoken, it was as drastic as the others in its overturning of accepted standards. The Romans despised pity. The Stoics might offer relief, but they looked doubtfully at compassion. The Pharisees were harsh in their self-righteousness; they showed little mercy. The commonly accepted explanation for suffering was that it was the deserved punishment for sin. So Jesus took sharp issue with his world.

On this Road to Joy, this stop cannot be skipped. What is mercy? This question brings the Red Cross to mind, for mercy is the Red Cross spirit in the world. Mercy lays claim on us whenever and wherever there is suffering.



It lays hands, on the injustices and cruelties of war, slavery, and despotism. But mercy goes deeper, for it is no true mercy to restore a man's body and neglect his spirit.

The Hebrew word for mercy is *Chesed* - loving-kindness. It is more than a mere sentimentality, it means entering into the other person's skin, his very being, thinking with his mind and thus being with him and not against him. Loving-kindness and understanding with compassion enable us to comprehend the actions and concerns of another person. It is *practice*, not mere feeling or sentiment. Jesus required deeds of mercy held within prayers of mercy, and prayers of mercy held within the sacrificial pangs of the heart. If no deed is possible, words have power. If no words are possible, tears have saving grace. Jesus promised the merciful that they would obtain mercy. Shakespeare's lines have caught the truth of this benediction:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd.  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the plate beneath; it is twice blest;  
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:

Twice blest"! The merciful are too aware of their own sins to deal with others in sharp condemnation. Even when bitterness is visited on them, God deals with them as they deal with others. They obtain mercy, and have no fear of judgment. Being merciful is the logical progression on our Road. We see our poverty, we mourn because of it, we place ourselves in God's control, we seek something better for ourselves and our world and then we set about sharing this better thing. We've become the merciful and will ourselves receive mercy.

We can't stop here, however. It may seem like a great place to stop and make ourselves at home. But Jesus leads onward. His next direction in our map sends us to "Joyous are the pure in heart."

Pure in heart? Can any of us be pure? Does this mean that we are to become morally perfect? For most people this sixth beatitude is the "bright shining star" in the constellation. It also seems the most inaccessible. We hardly know which is more beyond us - the condition or the promise - purity of heart or seeing God.

Just what is purity of heart? In the Bible, heart means the whole personality. It involves both mind and will, not just the emotions. Purity, which is translated clean, means so much more than this. When used of linen, it means white linen; of gold, it means gold without alloy; of glass, clear glass. When referring to the heart two meanings are dominant - rightness of mind and singleness of motive. Chastity and charity were the marks of early Christianity. Chastity was as vital as charity. As for singleness of mind, that meaning is more central: Jesus said that "harlots" given to lust would go into the kingdom before the Pharisees - who were double-minded.

Jesus promised that the pure in heart would see God. This promise has long been the goal of both philosopher and saint, but this beatitude promises more than mere vision. Perhaps our deepest wish, if we could analyze our longing, is to see God. Tennyson left instruction that his "Crossing the Bar" was to be placed at the end of all his published works. It closes:

I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crost the bar.

James Reid says that to the impure man life is like a stained glass window seen from the outside, but that the pure man sees it from the inside—from a

true and single motive. God can cleanse the heart at the instant of a penitent prayer. Then we shall say with Saul Kane:

Out of the mist into the light  
O blessed gift of inner sight!

It seems like we've reached the end of our journey doesn't it? We've been promised that we'll see God. What more could there be? This must be the last stop on our journey. But Jesus was a bit like the Billy Mays of his time. This is where he'd say, "But wait!! There's more!" Just seeing God is not our final goal. This is but one short rest stop on the Road to Joy. We listen to Jesus and we set off on our life's journey again. We hear him say, "Joyous are the peacemakers."

Peacemakers . . . Wow, what a lofty goal! Wouldn't it be nice to have a magic wand and wave it over the Middle East, or over Africa, or China and suddenly have peace? But is this the kind of peace we're talking about? Just the absence of war? The lack of strife? As the psalmist said in Psalm 34, the peacemakers are those who "seek peace and pursue it". Peace in the Old Testament - *Shalom* -- means much more than just the absence of strife: it is a personal and social well-being in the broadest sense of the word. *Shalom* means "everything that makes for a person's highest good". Peace means the presence of every positive good.

The emphasis on peace and peacemaking is frequent in the teachings of Jesus. It was fitting that the angels who hailed his birth spoke of "peace on earth." John's Gospel tells us that his last bequest was peace: "My peace I give unto you." Jesus Christ is the Prince of peace - peace in the soul and peace among men. We're talking the peace known in the Bible; a peace that springs from trust, love and obedience toward God.

In all ages nations are at odds, trade and home are torn by strife, and the individual soul is alienated from God. From that deepest alienation, the separation from God, all other conflicts spring. Peacemakers are not just *peace-seekers*; they're *peacemakers*--makers of peace. Peacemakers, who to some appear cowardly, are certainly not popular. They are a heroic company. Those who assume that peace "just comes" or even that preparation for war is the best preparation for peace are simply *peace-hopers* or *peace-eulogizers*. Jesus *made* peace; he fashioned it from very life and sacrifice. So His peace is peace indeed; where what we call peace is not peace at all, but only smoldering grudges and exhausted hatreds.

So what is this work of peace? It's a preventive task. If poverty embitters the men and tends to war, the peacemaker works to banish unmerited poverty. If insecurity or discontent in work makes a man harsh or cruel in his home, the peacemaker strikes at the root of the problem. At times he may seem to be a troublemaker. Actually he's like a doctor - curing the disease instead of merely soothing the symptoms. His fundamental work is always to reconcile men with God. A humanity reconciled with God will know peace. To make peace is to be like God. Therefore the true evangelist is the greatest peacemaker; he pleads that men shall turn to Christ; who himself breaks down that "middle wall of partition" (Ephesians 2:14), thus making peace.

So the most important work of the peacemaker is to practice the presence of God and to share that with others. Through that communion with God the peacemaker can give peace from the overflow of his own peacefilled heart.

Jesus tells us that the reward of the peacemaker is that God acknowledges him as His own child. The world may not see this essential family likeness, but God sees it. The peacemakers are one in spirit with the Father, and therefore recognize all men as their brothers. The world sometimes calls them “sentimentalists” or “cowards,” but God calls them simply “my child;” and the names that God gives are the names that finally stand - the names that endure. God is a God of peace. Those who are the instruments of peace among men, and between God and men, bear the stamp of the Father.

When it was suggested to British tradesman and statesman Richard Cobden that his fame would allow him to be buried in Westminster Abbey, he replied that he hoped not. He said, “My spirit could not rest in peace among these men of war.” It is a tragic fact that the world has reserved its highest honors for the warmakers. But only God’s honors endure. They are kept, in family joy and warmth of home, for his children, the peacemakers.

So here we are, at the end of our journey. We’ve seen our spiritual need, we’ve mourned, we’ve put ourselves in God’s control, we’ve sought righteousness, we’ve shared mercy and seen God and now we’ve become the Children of God. We’ve made it!

But again, this is where Jesus pops up and shouts, “But wait! There’s more!”

Jesus goes on to say, “Joyous are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake” and “Joyous are *you* when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

Gee, that doesn't sound very joyful, does it? Joyous are the persecuted?  
Persecution is *joyous*?

This beatitude is not the echo of "battles long ago." Persecutions do occur today - often. But how many of us, secure here in the heartland of America have truly experienced persecution? We're lucky enough to have been born in a nation built on Christian principles. We may not always see those principles in action, but I don't think any of us have been chained, beaten, tortured, or even worse because of our profession of Christ. But many are!

Jesus told his followers to be glad in hardship and to "leap for joy" when persecution came. Could there be a more startling paradox? Jesus offered as a reason for this joy that the prophets were so persecuted. That fact seems to us a cause only for grief: the blindness and cruelty of the ages still disfigure our world. But Jesus plays havoc with that mood. He bids us rejoice. He implies that the prophets are a joyous company, welcoming their successors into a radiant fellowship.

So what follows this persecution? What more could we want? We've already reached that point on our journey where we've been drawn in to the family of God as God's own children. What else could there be?

Jesus tells us that "Joyous are the persecuted, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" and "Rejoice for your reward is great in heaven, just as the prophets". Does this mean that we must wait until we get to heaven for this joy? I don't think so. Our reward will be enjoyed in heaven as well as on earth. It is "laid up for man in heaven" and is thus guaranteed by a faithful God. Churches often give into the temptation to make reward in heaven a

matter of bookkeeping, but Jesus avoids this danger because he teaches that God's reward cannot be measured, that it is out of all proportion to the service rendered and that in the last analysis, it is a gracious gift from God to his children.

So do we seek persecution to guarantee a wonderful life after death? God doesn't make us earn any of His blessings. He doesn't withhold because we're not "good enough". His gifts are given freely, to anyone who loves Him, lives according to His goals, and has faith to accept the great sacrifice He made with the life of his beloved Son. This beatitude tells us that the outcome of Christ's way of life, of living a God-directed life, is written by God on a man's soul, and that it is at last an eternal "at-homeness" with God. "For so persecuted were prophets who were before you" may be a simple statement of fact, but it also implies blessings. The persecuted have the stamp of courage on their faces and in their hearts. They have joined a noble company - Elijah, Amos, Isaiah, Jeremiah. That company lives, not merely in memory, but in age long venture and in eternal life. The persecuted share the hardships of the prophets, thus joining the prophetic company: and the heaven they reach is one into which the prophets of old shall welcome them. A deeper blessing is hinted: the followers of Christ, members of an enduring company foresworn to God, see others redeemed through their sacrifice and so fulfill their calling.

Even without severe persecution, we are all called to God's side, to share in the rewards of heaven and the company and fellowship of all who have gone before. At that point we can say we've traveled the whole of the Road to Joy and we've reached our destination. And we rejoice!