

The Beatitudes

Rules abound in our lives. Yes, there can be too many or too harsh or even harmful rules, but I can't imagine living without rules. Even when we are alone we carry the rules we learned when we were young: you know, brush your teeth, eat mainly good food, keep yourself and your household clean, don't drink too much, be honest, work hard (and smart) if you want to get ahead. I'm sure you can add to the list.

But if you're like me you can't remember ever being given a list of rules by your parents. But I knew that if I broke one of the mainly unspoken rules I would hear about it on the seat of my pants. My mom must have believed the old saw that "cleanliness is next to godliness" because if nothing else, I learned from her the importance of cleaning and how to clean. I know, it's an overrated virtue. But Lori tells people living with me is like being in an assisted living home, and y'all at New Song also benefit from my compulsive attention to cleaning details. (And It's important to note that we learn most such rules by watching the behavior of others and often it's only when modeling is absent that these kinds of rules need to be made explicit.)

Most public rules are like the following list we saw on a beach park when we were in Florida in early January helping our son, Carl, move to West Palm Beach:



Notice that they are all negative, detailing what we should not do. This is true of most sets of rules and this strategy usually provides clear guidance that is easily understood. Traffic driving speeds are negative even though the signs do not say “don’t drive over 70 mph,” and they certainly don’t say you should drive this fast.

Happily many sets of rules are more positive, written in an attempt to get people to comply by implying that to follow them will be good for people and their communities. Preaching “thou shalt not” at every turn can sound hectoring and encourage non-compliant rebellion.

I’ve spent some time talking about rules because in some form or another that’s how we learn what we’re supposed to do (or not do). The Bible is filled with rules such as the Ten Commandments, and most religious institutions have rules as their very foundation (Rules of St. Benedict, for example).

Today we come to Jesus’ most famous and lengthy sermon wherein he begins with a set of blessings (beatitude means blessing) that look like rules (a list of 8) but are not. Implicit in most sets of rules is the background hope that if we obey them we will be a certain kind of person (if you don’t litter and do recycle, hopefully that means you’re the kind of person who cares about the environment). In the Beatitudes Jesus is linking character traits with blessings, and I think

it's important to see that the first five traits are spiritual rather than moral or social and lead to the last three moral virtues.

Most interpretations of the Beatitudes view them as a kind of liberation theology: Jesus and God are on the side of the meek, the poor in spirit, the pure in heart. Such people should be at the center of our concerns and moral actions as Christians. It's hard to find a clearer statement of how countercultural his message is: God does not favor the powerful, the rich and famous or even the middle class; he's on the side of the poor.

I wonder, though, if there isn't something else at play here as well. Jesus tells the Beatitudes to his disciples, not the multitudes the rest of the Sermon on the Mount is meant for; and he sits like a rabbi teaching rather than standing like a preacher extolling. If we believe that he is talking about a set of people, some of whom are peacemakers, others meek, and still others pure in heart we might well be missing his clearest instructions about the spiritual path he offers in the gospels. Viewed from the perspective of spiritual journey, they all fit each one of us.

We can't experience the kingdom of heaven unless we are poor in spirit. To be poor in spirit is to admit that we are far from spiritually centered and strong, which is why we must take up practices such as soul searching, prayer and meditation. I can't think of a person's spiritual journey that doesn't begin with "woe is me," "I am a sinner," or "I have strayed far from the path." The first step is a recognition of what we lack, of whom we are not.

To be meek is not to be weak. It is the proverbial spiritual realization of how ego-centered we are. We cannot take our proper places in the world, the order of things, if we have a false sense of our importance.

This beatitude shows how radical and countercultural Jesus' message is. We are encouraged from an early age to develop and satisfy our egos, that it is our birthright to be at the top of the social and ecological hierarchies and enjoy the benefits of our wealth. We are seeing more and more why this form of "inheriting the earth" is the source of our disintegrating environment and societies. And why it is anything but a spiritual path.

And then there are those who mourn. This doesn't sound like a spiritual stepping stone; instead, it seems like Jesus having mercy on those who grieve. This makes me think of a book I'm reading. It's by Stephen Buhner and is called *Earth Grief: The Journey Into and Through Ecological Loss*. Buhner (whose recent death I mourn--he has been a beacon of ecological wisdom for decades) believes that at some level in some ways we all grieve our loss of closeness to nature and other creatures, and that the first step in changing how we treat the world is to fully experience our grief. We need to mourn the terrible ecological devastation we are perpetrating and experiencing as the first step to healing our relationships with nature and each other. Such grief opens our eyes and diminishes our ego. We can only find comfort by living into our grief, be it for a person, plant or animal, a species, ecosystem or way of life.

The last three of the Beatitudes are labels that people can earn through their efforts: being a peacemaker, being persecuted for standing up for justice, and being reviled for being an active Christian. But note that people can't mount this kind of action if they haven't first done the kind of homework encouraged (blessed) in the first five

spiritual practices. From this perspective the Beatitudes are a bundle, neither separable nor applying only to select individuals; they are the central features of Christian spiritual practice that each of us is invited to undertake. The reward is to be ushered into the spiritual kingdom.

May we go forth in the coming days, including at our annual meeting next week, with a deeper understanding about how we are to live into the spiritual blessings Jesus teaches us by his example.