

The Beatitudes

These texts were developed by two Secular Franciscans in the Atlantic Region, Doug Hagen and Sherrill Guimond. In a shorter form, they were presented at an Area meeting, and then, these texts became the basis for one of the retreats hosted by St. Francis of Assisi Fraternity, Cornwall, PEI.

We are using the version of the Beatitudes found in Matt 5:1-12.

First Beatitude: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven

The Beatitudes are a blueprint for what a follower of Jesus looks like.

The universal call to holiness is the same call we hear in the Beatitudes.

We can even match up the Beatitudes to the seven deadly sins – they are opposites.

This first Beatitude is really the prerequisite to prayer.

In many ways, it is the first key to the kingdom.

In Jesus' time, to be poor in spirit is to be humble-hearted.

Material poverty is never an end in itself.

The truly poor in spirit, the humble-hearted will always reach out to the poor – the materially poor to help and support them.

We are in fact called to have a preferential love of the poor, because that is where we can be Jesus to others.

If we want to find Jesus, spend some time with the poor, because that is where Jesus will be.

Absolute poverty – remember the widow who gave her last two coins? Now remember, the story of Lazarus at the door of the rich man where the dogs would lick his sores. This was abject poverty; he had nothing and he was born to the bosom of Abraham. This is the poverty of spirit Jesus is referring to. We have nothing – we are nothing apart from God. When we realize this, then, it is here that our hearts and our hands can be open to receive all that the Lord wants to give us. It is a spiritual disposition to be poor in spirit. It is the poverty that realizes our lack of power, our lack of resources to save ourselves. It helps us to loosen our grip on the things of this world. We refer to it as detachment from material things. A wise person advises to hold loosely all that is not eternal. Those

things which are eternal are: God, God's love, God's word, God's people. Everything else we should hold loosely.

Many Christians find this the most challenging of the Beatitudes.

The problem arises in trying to define poor. If you are a middle-class Canadian, or an Indian living on the streets of Calcutta, then the definition of poverty would be quite different. Each would define poor in terms of a particular culture and its economic conditions.

Another source of confusion arises from scripture itself. Who are the "poor" to whom Jesus addressed these words?

In Luke 6: 20-23, Jesus announces to the materially poor, the hungry, and the dispossessed of his day, that they are the recipients of God's blessings.

Isaiah had written that at the arrival of the long awaited Messiah, blessings would come to the little people, the seemingly insignificant.

Now Jesus is proclaiming that the promised kingdom had come. He looks on those who are like "sheep without a shepherd", and says that the time is now. "The Kingdom of God is yours." Luke 6:20.

By the time that Matthew wrote his gospel; however, the Christians community included those who were not materially poor. Certainly, the basic teaching of Jesus must be applicable to them too. After all, material poverty is not a good thing in itself. It is often a hindrance to full human living. A person can hardly be concerned about intellectual or spiritual things when every bit of energy is needed to obtain food and shelter. So what is Jesus saying?

The early Christian community realized that it was not the mere lack of material possessions that opened a person to God's reign. Rather, what Jesus saw in the poor around him and what he shared with them, was a condition of mind and heart, an admission of dependency. Thus where Luke writes: "Blessed are your poor", Matthew wrote: "Blessed are the poor in Spirit."

In other words, Blessed are those who know their need for God. This opens a new way of thinking about this Beatitude. Knowing one's need for God is acknowledging one's insufficiency, one's vulnerability. Francis was poor in Spirit. He stood before God empty-handed knowing that all is a gift from God. As Franciscans, we try to develop a non-possessive attitude, that willingly shares God's gifts with others, realizing that a human's worth, is worth more than any possession.

This implies a non-grasping approach to life and a conscious sense of actually depending on God for life, truth, love and freedom. Even our prayer depends on God. "Then he told them a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, "What should I do for I have no place to store my crops?" Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for

many years: relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool!’ This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.” Luke 12:16-21.

True spiritual wisdom – knowing what to hang on to and what to let go. Pope Francis seems to me to understand this principle. The fewer things we are attached to, the more freedom we have to love, to make our whole life a gift. This first beatitude makes us free, supple, and flexible beneath the action of the Holy Spirit. This beatitude invites us to come before God, holding out our hands – emptying ourselves so in turn, we can receive everything God wants to bring into our life. This holding out our hands means we are not only free to receive the gifts God wants to give us, but we are in a posture of giving.

Being poor in spirit calls us to be humble. We are called to do God’s will – to put God and others first. For most of us, this is a difficult garment to wear – a garment that takes a lifetime to break in – if we manage to break it in at all.

When things are really rough, we are well in tune with our own smallness, our dependence on God. However, if you are a parent and the children are passing viruses around like candy and you haven’t had a decent sleep in a week or more, when Murphy’s law kicks in, and the dishwasher and the car and the sump pump break in the same week, then it is hard not to cry out to God; it is hard to listen to that still faint voice saying: “My grace is enough for you.”

Now humility is not tolerating circumstances we cannot change while complaining about them. It is an act of will to be at peace when our gut reaction is one of helpless rage. It means accepting what we don’t want to accept, being gracious when we want to complain, and trusting that God has a plan, even if it makes no sense to us. Being poor in spirit rescues us from self-righteousness and pride. When, all of a sudden I became the main priority in my life (a false god), where is there room for the kingdom of heaven that Jesus promises? Pride toppled Lucifer and causes all kinds of trouble in human relationships. When God can be understood, that is a sign that we have tried to make him into our own image – instead of the other way round. To be poor in spirit means that we are at peace, trusting that God is in charge.

Pride is not the only false god we have to watch out for. I mentioned earlier that we must cultivate a detachment. Our entire economy is based on acquiring more and everyone suffers when consumption falls off. What we have to keep in mind is that all things are good, if they are used properly. We must be aware that the idols we worship may and often do, end up controlling us. Few of us are called to the kind of humility demonstrated by Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta. She chose to live among the poorest of the poor. Perhaps we can relate better to St. Therese of Lisieux – The Little Flower of Jesus. She dreamed of being a saint, of loving Christ to the best of her ability. But she was no Joan of Arc. She was a cloistered Carmelite nun, separated from the rest of the world by the walls of her convent. She knew she would never do great things. But she could do small things to the best of her ability. She regarded all her assigned work in the convent humble tasks, like cooking, laundry and cleaning as a way to show her love of Christ

through service. She taught us that ordinary doesn't mean unimportant. We know that family life offers daily opportunities to place others before ourselves.

Other than Christ himself, Christ's mother is the glowing example of poverty of spirit. Her unconditional "yes" to the will of God is a model for every Christian. "Be it done to me according to your word." Her advice to us is the same as her advice to the servants at the wedding feast at Cana: "Do whatever he tells us." We must remember – we must have faith that whenever we defer our will to the will of God, we open ourselves to God's transforming power, just as Mary did.

Many, many saints lived in fine houses; many more had absolutely nothing – St. Francis of Assisi read the Gospel literally and had nothing. But all the saints knew their need of God, seeking to know God's will in their lives and to live it. When we know our need of God, we seek to live God's will, rather than our own.

"Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." What does this mean? Jesus' apostles must have constantly asked him, because Jesus is constantly answering: "The kingdom of Heaven is like the king who wishes to settle accounts with his slaves....." The king forgives a debt and then learns that the slave had not done likewise. The point is – the kingdom of heaven exists wherever one person forgives another – from the heart – a child. It is wherever mercy rules – not vengeance. We enter the kingdom of God when nothing is more important than the absolute beauty of God.

Matthew's Gospel says that the Kingdom of God is like someone who sows good seed in a field and then his enemy comes to sow weeds. (Mt. 13: 24-30). The owner waits for the crop to mature and be harvested, then separates the good from the bad. We are living in the kingdom of God when we respect the lives of those around us, no matter what they are like.

When Francis embraced Lady Poverty, he came to the realization that there is no intrinsic reason for the existence of any aspect of creation. Although humanity is given a unique role in the order of creation, the existence of humanity is as gratuitous (unnecessary) as any other part of creation. It is in this fundamental poverty of being that Francis discovered the equality of creation.

But it doesn't end there. A Franciscan spirit of poverty, also reveals the self-giving love of God, which permeates all of creation. Creation, all of creation has been called a Sacrament, because it makes real, makes present the love of God. The realization that every creature is a sign, a sacrament of the love God who causes all things to be should also provide us with the motivation to reverence all creation. What greater motivation can we have to become ardent promoters of justice, peace, and integrity of creation?

Let us pause and ask for the grace of a deep awareness of our need for God.

"Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory." 1 Corinthians 2: 6-7.
"For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now

we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. “ 1 Corinthians 2, 11-12.

“You have put gladness in my heart more than when their grain and wine abound.

I will both lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.” Psalm 4, 7-8.

Realizing our need of God can change our day-to-day focus:

- We become sensitive to God’s action in our lives
- We put more trust in God’s loving care
- God’s unconditional love becomes more real
- We notice that we are not alone in life’s struggles
- Having this vision reduces fears, worries, tensions of our daily living
- This fosters a growing awareness of God’s presence in all the events of our lives

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**Second Beatitude: Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.**

Spiritual poverty recognizes that all we have and all we are is a total gift from God. We are totally dependent on God, a good and loving God, who is in charge of the universe and of our lives. We should not horde what we have been given as gifts. Rather, we should use our talents, intelligence, possessions, and the like to help others.

The first Beatitude, Poor of Spirit, is inseparable from Mourning. Jim Forest reminds us that “without poverty of spirit, I am always on guard to keep what I have for myself, and to keep me for myself” (pg.38). The consequence of “poor in spirit” is becoming sensitive to the pain and losses of people around us. Those who mourn know how little they are without God. In their sorrow, they will be comforted. Their sorrow helps them see the many around them who are much worse off – the poor, the abused, the hungry, the discriminated against, the victims of crime and war and disease and prejudice. Their

sorrow can move them to lend a helping hand to those who suffer and be Jesus' instrument of comfort to them.

Sister Helen Cecilia Swift. In her book, "How Blest You Are", states that our culture tells us just the opposite of this beatitude: How blessed we are to mourn. She says that "sorrow and sadness are seen as negative emotions – we strive to avoid these negative feelings. If you cannot escape certain events that cause mourning, you can at least try to pretend they did not happen. She mentions how at a funeral we will hear people say things like "how lovely she looks – she looks like she is just sleeping." She further states that every human life knows times of sadness and trouble. The crucial question is, "how do we handle these times?" (pg. 25-26)

Sr. Swift tells us that the human foundation for the 2nd Beatitude is the recognition of all our emotions. Jesus tells us we must accept all of our emotions as part of our humanity. God made us emotional beings and our feelings can be used to deepen our relationship with him; once we recognize and accept the feelings that are present within us, we then need only to ask Jesus how best to handle them (pg.27).

Jim Forest in his book, "The Ladder of the Beatitudes" uses the metaphor of the ladder to tell us about the second rung of the ladder after "Blessed are the Poor in Spirit". It is the sacrament of tears - the Beatitude of feeling and expressing grief not only for my own sorrows and losses but the sorrows and losses of others. You can hardly feel someone else's pain without poverty of spirit (pg. 38).

Carl Jung, the famous psychoanalyst, tells us that much unnecessary suffering is born into our world because people refuse to accept the "legitimate suffering" that comes from being human.

Mourning creates transparency in people. It tells people that we are in pain and that we have experienced some type of loss. It opens us up for others to know. There is the loss of a loved one that causes mourning but there is also the repentant woman who washed the feet of Jesus with her tears, mourning the damage her actions had caused others and herself; there are the tears of Peter when the rooster crowed after his third denial of Christ, mourning for Christ's suffering and for himself for having been a coward and a

liar. There is a great deal in our lives for which we all can only lament, do penance, and seek forgiveness. God grant us the gift of tears (Ladder of the Beatitudes - pg. 41).

Think about that two-word verse in the Gospel of John: "Jesus wept." The 17th-century poet and priest John Donne tells us that "There is no shorter verse in the Bible, nor is there a larger text." The gospel authors tell us of three times when Christ wept: as he stood before the tomb of his friend Lazarus; as he looked on the city of Jerusalem and foresaw its destruction; and as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane the day before his crucifixion. In mourning there is transparency—the body shows who you truly are. Christ is a very transparent person, able to communicate with his whole body, not just words. A child is transparent in the same way. Mourning makes us transparent to each other. The presence of Christ is revealed in those who mourn. Tears are very powerful. No prayer of absolution equals tears. We are mourning with the heart of Christ—mourning our sins and losses.

The second beatitude is “blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted”. Francis was a mourner. He mourned for Christ. Francis saw all of the suffering that Christ went through. Francis was able to identify with Christ’s sorrow and suffering. This persuaded him not only to mourn for Christ but to take it one step further. Francis wanted to be a martyr. He wanted to follow in the footsteps of Christ.

James C. Howell, in his book, “The Beatitudes for Today”, tells us that “Francis saw the world through tears and his mourning drew him into action” (pg. 97).

Richard Rohr tells us that “Jesus praises the weeping class, those who can enter into solidarity with the pain of the world and not try to extract themselves from it. That is why Jesus says the rich man can’t see the Kingdom. The rich one spends life trying to make tears unnecessary and ultimately, impossible ... The weeping allows one to carry the dark side, to bear the pain of the world without looking for perpetrators or victims, but instead recognizing the tragic reality that both sides are caught up in. Tears from God are always for everybody”(Jesus’ Plan for a New World; The Sermon on the Mound, pg. 133).

Richard Rohr, in his book, “Falling Upward”, tells us that “Holy sadness... is the price your soul pays for opening to the new and the unknown in yourself and in the world.” Rohr also tells us that “...Any journey of great love or great suffering makes us go deeper

into our faith and eventually into what can only be called universal truth. Love and suffering are finally the same, because those who love deeply are committing themselves to eventual suffering, as we see in Jesus. And those who suffer often become the greatest lovers” (pg.135).

Richard Rohr speaks about how in his working with men, he has found that in many men, there is an inability or refusal to feel their deep sadness and it takes the form of aimless anger. The only way to get to the bottom of their anger is to face the ocean of sadness underneath it ... Men are not free to cry, so they transmute their tears into anger ... (pg. 135).

The second beatitude touches deeply the reality of death in all its various forms. It addresses all the death forces that undermine health in our lives and world. No other Beatitude expresses more powerfully Isaiah 61:1-3a. This passage depicts the promise, the “year of the Lord’s favor,” which proclaims that the pain of the world one day will be reversed. It seems for every form of mourning there can be a comfort; such is the promise of Isaiah 61.

Fr. Michael Crosby, in his book, “Spirituality of the Beatitudes”, tells us that in “considering this Beatitude that blesses or honors those “who mourn” with “comfort”, it becomes clear that the great stumbling blocks to the consolation that is identified with being “comforted” revolve around the dynamics of denial and biblical “hardness of heart”. Denial keeps the process from moving into some kind of resolution. When we reflect on the 9/11 tragedy, we see a kind of fear-based hardness of heart. The pedophilia cases in the Catholic Church are another example of denial. Until we are able to admit the exact nature of what is wrong, the dynamics of death will control us” (pg. 64-65).

Fr. Crosby also states that “in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus voiced the depth of his hurt when he told his disciples, “My heart is nearly broken with sorrow” (Matthew 26:38). The disciples’ inability to grasp his pain, despite earlier professions of care failed to bring any comfort in his mourning. Comfort would only come in his understanding that he had been faithful to God’s plan by trying to heal a broken world. “My Father, if this cannot pass me by without my drinking it, your will be done!” (Matthew 26:42). By admitting his brokenness and frustration at society’s sluggishness of heart (13:14-15) Jesus could do nothing but mourn over his people. Jesus owned the grief yet felt comfort as he realized that he had remained faithful (pg. 66).

In his extreme distress Jesus turns to his Father. He puts his complete trust in the Father's will, knowing that the Father will give him the strength to complete his mission. When we know our need of God, the kingdom becomes present in our lives too. Jesus awakened his apostles and said, "Get up, let us be going..." (26:46). Entering into the sorrows of life, we too are strengthened so that we can get up and be on our way to new life.

Fr. Crosby also advises that today Jesus' spirit in us invites us to grieve, to mourn over the brokenness and alienation within our world.

Fr. Crosby asks us: "When was the last time our concern over globalization was translated into making a stand on behalf of its victims? When were we ready to pay a little more for coffee and other "fruits of the earth and work of human hands" so that those who grow and harvest them might be paid a sustainable living wage?" (pg. 74)

Healing will never come until we first admit the existence of the sins and cultural sins that contribute to our society's brokenness, and then mourn over them. Blessed are those who admit their mourning; they will be comforted with a new-found power that enables them to be restored to authentic life. If we don't change, then we will remain controlled. And if we remain controlled in our fears and mourning, we will never experience the hope and comfort of the resurrection of God's power in us that has been promised. (pg. 78)

Fr. Crosby offers the words of comfort in Isaiah 62:4: "You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your land Married;"

The only thing, Fr. Crosby says that will keep us from admitting "the exact nature of our wrongs" will be when we remain in denial about their destructive dynamics for people and our planet (pg. 78).

Richard Rohr says much the same thing: "in this Beatitude, Jesus praises...those who can enter into solidarity with the pain of the world and not try to extract themselves from it." (Jesus' Plan for a New World: The Sermon on the Mount, pg. 133)

There is an Arab proverb that states “All sunshine makes a desert”. There are some things that only sorrow can teach.

There is a blessedness in sorrow; there is a blessedness in taking the right way even when the right way is the hard way; there is blessedness in sorrow for the sins and sorrows and sufferings of people around us; and there is blessedness in sorrow which leads to confession before God and the seeking of His forgiveness. And when that forgiveness comes, there is an overwhelming feeling of comfort, trust, encouragement, stimulus and strength.(The Plain Man Looks at the beatitudes, Wm. Barclay, pg. 33)

Ron Rolheiser tells “that suffering and humiliation finds us all, and in full measure, but how we respond to them will determine both the level of our maturity and what kind of person we are. There is no depth of soul without suffering.” (taken from “Our Fundamental Option - a talk given by Rolheiser, May 19, 2013)

**Third Beatitude: Blessed are the meek,
for they shall inherit the earth.**

St. Francis was truly poor in spirit. He knew his need for God. He made this attitude a basic value of his life. He asked the Holy Spirit to develop this attitude. He made choices based on his awareness of his need for God – his poverty of spirit. He set an example for us as he set his fears and doubts in the hands of Jesus and placed his trust in the care of the Lord.

St. Francis mourned the pain and suffering and death of Jesus. He entered into the life of the poor and the lepers of his time.

As we reflect on the suffering of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, we should consider the unique opportunity the disciples had to be there for the suffering Jesus.

These beatitudes come together in the profound suffering of Jesus in the Garden. He puts His complete trust in the Father’s will, knowing that the Father will give Him the strength to complete His mission.

Jesus knew the people to whom he was preaching. He knew the books of the Bible so he knew how much their ancestors had suffered at the hands of more powerful nations. He knew that they wanted freedom from the oppression of ruthless rulers – Herod, for example. Would He dare to tell them that the meek, not the violent, would inherit the earth.

Francis too lived in tumultuous times. He knew first hand the results of man's inhumanity to man. Both Jesus and Francis knew that no matter how radical it sounded, they must pass on the message of the Kingdom of God. The earth would fall to the meek, the gentle-hearted.

To be meek may be to be a person who disciplines himself to be gentle, rather than severe, non-violent rather than violent. Aristotle saw meekness as the virtue that lies between opposing extremes of anger; cold cruelty on the one hand as evidenced by Hitler and his cohorts; for example, and burning wrath on the other. The meek person is neither too hasty nor too slow-tempered. That person bears reproaches and slights, is not bent on revenge, is free from belligerence and bitterness, possesses tranquility and steadiness of spirit. It has been used to describe a person who is aligned with God.

The word, meek, not only rhymes with weak, but for many people it indicates much the same thing. Although its actual meaning has nothing to do with cowardice but with showing patience, humility, gentleness.

Very few people aspire to humility. We say we are proud of our humble beginnings – through perseverance and hard work, we leave poverty behind and achieve things to be proud of.

Abraham was meek – at the command of God, he uprooted and travelled to a land he knew not – Genesis. Psalm 25 says that God “leads the humble in what is right and teaches the humble his ways.”

The most beautiful example of meekness may be in Mary's response to the Archangel Gabriel. “Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me as you will.” When we stop to think about it, there is no other act in human history that has had such significance. Through meekness, Mary gave birth to our Savior, nourished Him, cared for Him, raised Him, and became one of his disciples.

Another example of meekness in Scripture is the story of Isaac – a trusting “Yes, Father”, a quiet going along with God's will. We read in Genesis, Chapter 26, about his absolute trust in God and his non-violent attitude. His meekness led eventually to victory and prosperity.

Where does meekness come in, in our lives? We are with our families, our neighbors, our places of work.

Meekness says – you are not in danger. I will not bully you in any way. This a safe place to be.

A co-worker of mine, a fellow teacher, worked very hard to make his classroom a place where people would feel safe. He ate his lunch in the industrial arts lab and the students particularly those were what we would call “at risk”, soon began to congregate around him at lunchtime. They knew that they were safe and had a wise, discerning person who would listen.

A definition of meekness: a quiet and expectant bearing of destiny that is grounded in God: Jesus, St. Francis, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa.

St. Francis recognized and contemplated the meekness and humility of Christ at Greccio, at the Cross and especially in the Eucharist.

In his meekness, his humility, he was truly aware of the phrase: “The awesomeness of God.” Perhaps the Jews of Jesus’ time were more open to gentleness than we are. They were steeped in Old Testament spirituality. They knew how often meekness had been mentioned in the Psalms. Perhaps they recalled specifically Psalm 37:1-2.

“Do not strive to outdo the evildoers or emulate those who do wrong. For like grass they soon wither, and fade like the green of spring.”

In fact, verse 11 of Psalm 37 says: “But the humble shall possess the land and enjoy untold prosperity.”

We should not make the mistake of thinking that the person of gentle spirit never gets angry. If we look at Mark’s Gospel, Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers who were profaning the House of God. (Mk 11: 15-18).

Luke tells us that he got angry with the Scribes and Pharisees when they misled the people (Luke 11:52). We should note that Jesus got angry with those who oppressed the powerless and the poor, never because he himself was suffering injustice – such as when he stood before Annas.

Meekness is not apathy. Nor is it passivity that accepts injustice. Rather it implies the inner strength to take non-violent action even in the face of great injustice. There is a power in meekness that the violent cannot understand. Even after Jesus’ example of self-giving we find the Apostles arguing about who is the greatest. Two thousand years later, this spirit of competitiveness is prevalent in the secular business world. This competitiveness spirit and even ruthless aggressiveness seem to be the foundation of success in the business world.

Meekness, however, does not condemn a person to failure, nor does it guarantee success. It is a non-violent way of moving toward a goal, using truly human means that do not harm others – writing letters to government on torture, etc. Jesus leads us to look to the home as the place where meekness is taught and learned. Unfortunately, many homes today are filled with violence. Frustration and stress exist in our society, so it is essential for families to work out ways to relieve stress in a non-violent way.

The gentle cultivate the earth; they do not possess it. They use the resources of the earth sparingly knowing that resources are limited. Our land is symbolic of the kingdom fulfilled. The abundance and variety of living things are reminders of the richness we will share in the future kingdom. The promise of this future kingdom depends on learning from Jesus to be gentle and humble of heart.

Paul tells us: “Things beyond our seeing, things beyond our hearing, things beyond our imagining, all prepared by God.” (1 Cor. 2:9)

We may never be meek in the physical sense of destitution but we can try to separate ourselves from the things of the world and pursue a Godly meekness. Fortunately for us, the Spirit is waiting to give us what we need. When we admit that we are not God (poor in spirit), when we learn to weather hardship with grace (blessed are those who mourn), then we become fertile soil ready to inherit the blessings that the Spirit wants to share – the gifts and fruits of the Holy Spirit. The gifts of the Holy Spirit are character traits that shape the way we view and interact with the world. These virtues help us to recognize God’s presence (or absence) in the people, places and situations we face each day. They help us to discern and obey God’s will in our lives.

The fruits of the Holy Spirit are charity (love), joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness, modesty, self-control and chastity. These are gifts of another kind, things that others can sense in us through our actions. The list begins with charity for good reason. In contemporary use, this word is associated with helping the poor but the Church uses it interchangeable with the word LOVE. This puts an altogether different spin on it - not the kind of love that is expressed in movies and popular songs. In Godly terms, the definition of love is a series of actions. Kindness, goodness, generosity, gentleness, faithfulness – these attributes direct how we interact with one another, not only those close to us, but co-workers, store clerks, those we meet casually. Self-control is the key to resisting temptation. Modesty and Chastity ensure that we treat the temple of the human body with dignity. Chastity refers to much more than what we consider to be “sins of the flesh”, but we don’t have time to go into that right now. Peace and patience come from within. I am sure we all know people who embody these qualities. Their faith seems to permeate the world around them. They don’t have to hold up a Bible or shake a fist; their very presence is evangelization. We can learn from them. Better yet, we can be them. When we go to the store, how will the clerk remember us? Remembering the fruits and gifts of the Holy Spirit can help us embody a Christ-like meekness every day.

A Portrait of the Meek: They trust in God. Biblical meekness is rooted in the deep confidence that God is for you, not against you.

They commit their way to God. They admit that they are insufficient to competently cope with the complexities and obstacles of life and they trust that God is able and willing to sustain, guide and protect them.

They are quiet before God and wait for him. This doesn’t mean that they become lazy. It simply means that they are free of frenzy. Meek people have a quiet steadiness about their lives in the midst of upheaval.

They don’t fret over the wicked. I ask you to look at Psalm 37, vs. 3-11. Meekness has very much to do with God. It consists of a peaceful freedom from fretful anger. It is based on trust in God.

Characteristics:

1. Meekness is what St. Paul calls “a fruit of the Spirit”, given to us by God when we surrender ourselves totally and completely to Him.

2. Meekness is humility.
3. Meekness is to be thoughtful of others. The thoughtful person is always courteous and considerate of others and their needs. He never inflicts a needless wound. He always tries to lighten the burdens of others.

**Fourth Beatitude – Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be satisfied**

Now we come to the 4th rung in the ladder: from poor of spirit, to mourning, to meekness, and now hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

The “meek” are gentle people, not pushy, self-centered, or controlling. In humility, they treat others with utmost respect, understanding, and compassion. They do not gripe when hurting or when they are ridiculed for their beliefs. Rather, they identify with the Lord who suffered wrongs patiently and with forgiveness in his heart. They are good stewards of God’s good earth, treating creation with joyful and gentle gratitude. They will inherit the earth.

Jesus’ followers must have high ideals and goals and not be satisfied with mediocrity. The highest ideal of all is to desire above all else to put God’s righteous will into action and then work unceasingly with his help to grow in holiness, justice, and truth. Part of the striving to do God’s will is to realize that God teaches that we prove our love for him by taking care of each other, as Mother Theresa of Calcutta put it, “by doing something beautiful for God.”

Sister Helen Cecilia Swift, in her book “How Blest You Are”, tells us that Justice basically means having available for all people what is necessary to become fully human in the image of Jesus. She further tells us that just as our bodies crave food and drink, so our hearts should desire justice. This desire of justice should be a craving that demands to be satisfied and so it should lead to action.

Sister Swift tells us that hunger and thirst for justice has a way of heightening our spiritual awareness of our inner sinfulness that hampers our growth towards full humanity. Like the 2 blind men at the side of the road we need to call out to Jesus for light, recognizing our own helplessness and the power of Jesus to come to our rescue. We

move away from the false values that entrap us towards the values of Jesus that give us freedom. (pg.45)

We need to call out to Jesus to have pity on us. We need to talk to Jesus about our need for conversion. We then need to look beyond our own need for inner conversion, to see how those oppressive conditions in society interfere with all human growth. We see that some people cannot develop physically, psychologically or spiritually because they are forced to live in inhuman conditions. Lack of nourishing food, decent housing, adequate medical care and a solid education are conditions which keep people in virtual slavery. It is the work of justice to fight against these oppressions. This means more than giving Christmas baskets to needy families. Justice struggles to make it possible for everyone to work for a wage that ensures the necessities of decent human living. The basics of food, clothing, decent housing, medical care and education should be available to all people. (pg.46)

Sister Swift tells us that Jesus expects more from us than lifting up our hands in prayer. Jesus tells us to make justice our aim. We need to work towards changing any law or organizational way of doing things that discriminates against the poor, people of a certain race or nationality, women and children. In struggling for justice we try to change the structures that lead to this kind of injustice. Those who have heard the message of this Beatitude will produce action for justice. (pg. 47)

Jesus doesn't say "Blessed are those who *hope* for righteousness" or "Blessed are those who *campaign* for righteousness" but "Blessed are they who *hunger and thirst* for righteousness"—that is, people who want what is right as urgently as a person dying in a desert wants a glass of water. There is a saying, "Some people are so hungry that the only way God can appear to them is as a piece of bread." (Jim Forest, *The Ladder of the Beatitudes*, pg. 64)

The beauty is in the hungering, in the yearning. St. Augustine tells us, "the nagging hankering we feel inside is God's voice, calling us home, keeping us a bit "restless until we find rest in God".

Catholic Worker founder Dorothy Day, not only devoted her life to hospitality but kept asking the question, what is it about our society that produces so many people in *need* of

hospitality. The answer she kept coming up with was, "Our problems stem from our acceptance of this filthy rotten system". When we begin to share in the sufferings of others, we cannot help but notice that suffering is often either the consequence of injustice or is made worse by injustice. A society whose main story is summed up in the good-guy-kills-bad-guy Western seemed to her a far cry from the kingdom of God. The core of the spiritual life, she explained, is to see the image of God in everyone, especially in those we fear or regard as enemies. "Those who cannot see Christ in the poor," she wrote, "are atheists indeed."

Richard Rohr, in his "Collection of Teachings", speaks about Dorothy Day's, "dirty rotten system" saying that we are all complicit in it and enjoying the fruits of it – Where were your shirts and underwear made? What wars allow us to have cheap food and gas? Usually the only way to be really non-complicit in the system is to "choose to live a very simple life....that's almost the only way to stop bending the knee before the system."

Francis perhaps best lived out the fourth beatitude "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied." The salvation of souls was ever the burden of Francis' prayers and wishing moreover to make his beloved Portiuncula a sanctuary where many might be saved. Throughout his life and up to his last breath Francis sought righteousness.

Fr. Fernanda Ventura in his dossier on "Evangelized to Evangelize" writes that this beatitude expresses a willingness to go further; it is not enough to be "nice" ... it is not enough to cultivate the smile of political correctness – we need to make the struggle of others our own.

Ronald Rolheiser speaks about the story of a town built just beyond the bend of a large river. One day some of the children from the town were playing beside the river when they noticed three bodies floating in the water. They ran for help and the townsfolk quickly pulled the bodies from out of the river. One body was dead so they buried it. One was alive, but quite ill so they put that person in the hospital. The third turned out to be a healthy child, who they then placed with a family who cared for it and who took it to school. From that day on, every day a number of bodies came floating down the river and, every day, the good people of the town would pull them out and tend to them – taking the sick to hospitals, placing the children with families, and burying those who were dead. This went on for years; each day brought its quota of bodies, and the townsfolk not only came to expect a number of bodies each day but also worked at

developing more elaborate systems for picking them out of the river and tending to them. And the town itself felt a certain healthy pride in its generosity. However, during all those years and despite all that generosity and effort, nobody thought to go up the river, beyond the bend that hid from their sight what was above them, and find out why, daily, those bodies came floating down the river.

Rolheiser tells us that what this story highlights in a rather simple way is the difference between private charity and social justice. Private charity responds to the homeless, wounded, and dead bodies, but it does not of itself try to get at the reasons why they are there. Social justice tries to go up the river and change the reasons that create homeless, wounded and dead bodies. (The Holy Longing, pg. 168 - 169)

What Jesus tells us in this Beatitude is that happy will that person be when they long for righteousness the way a starving person longs for food, and the way a thirsty person longs for water.

Deep within each of us, God has planted an insatiable hunger and thirst to know him and to love him. Psalm 42:1 tells us that “As a heart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for you, O God” and St Augustine tells us “Our hearts are restless, O God, until they find their rest in thee”.

In spite of this, many people ignore the call and attempt to satisfy it in the wrong way. In this Beatitude, Jesus presents us with a challenge: we may either choose the way of righteousness or the way of unrighteousness. There is no middle road we can take if we wish to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

Martin Luther King Jr. placed the righteousness of God (which calls for justice, equality and freedom for all) above the unrighteousness of the Klu Klux Klan. When his home was bombed, and his family harassed, Dr. King chose the way of righteousness: “I have decided to stick with love, hate is too great a burden to bear.”

Jim Forest tells us in his book, “The Ladder of the Beatitudes”, that “the hunger for righteousness is the one appetite that Christ blesses – not to covet possessions or achievement or recognition, but to live, through every action and perception, the kingdom of God. He further states that Christian life is less our ideas about God than how we live

with those around us. To follow Christ and turn a blind eye toward the poor is a contradiction. He tells us that “we, as Christians, are obliged to see and respond to the real world with all its fear, pain, and bloodstains, to be a rescuer, to protect the defenseless, to participate here and now in God’s righteousness.” (pg. 65)

An Orthodox nun, Mother Maria on March 31, 1945, with the gunfire of approaching Russia troops audible in the distance, took the place of a Jewish prisoner who was to be sent to the gas chamber and died in her place. “At the Last Judgement, I shall not be asked whether I was successful in my life, nor how many prostrations I made, instead I shall be asked, Did I feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and the prisoners? That is all I shall be asked.”

The 1971 Synod of Bishops declared that “action on behalf of justice” is a “basic dimension of the preaching of the Gospel itself”. (document, Justice in the World – Introduction No. 6)

Fr. Michael Crosby tells us in his book, “Spirituality of the Beatitudes”, that “the 4th Beatitude expresses concepts faithful to the Old testament notion of justice.

The responsibility of the wealthy class toward the poor and needy people was described in Hebrew. When the prophets spoke of the need of the rich to hear the cry of the poor, they talked in terms of “righteousness” and “justice” rather than “charity” or “love.” He further stated that “Justice is the authority of God which must rule the world”. Hence, the goal of justice, people like Jeremiah believed, was to reorder the world’s chaotic alienation. Justice fulfills God’s whole plan for the world. Justice is essential to spirituality. Righteousness is a life lived in community with God’s will, adhering to God’s laws, a life of prayerful holiness. (pg. 101-102, 105)

Fr. Crosby also tells us that since our hearts have been made by and for God, they will never be satisfied until we dwell in God’s justice, until we are “right” with God.... We are to ask for justice in prayer, seek its power in reflection, and knock until we have opened for us ever-deepening experiences and understandings of this liberating presence of God-with-us. (pg. 107)

Matthew, in his gospel, presents Jesus as the one who bends the laws to serve justice and people's needs rather than the other way around, which was the way of the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus tells us in Matthew 3:15, "...Let it be so now; for it is proper for us, in this way to fulfill all righteousness." His very existence on earth was for the fulfillment of "all justice". (pg. 109)

Part of the striving to do God's will is to realize that God teaches that we prove our love for him by taking care of each other. Mother Teresa puts it this way: "by doing something beautiful for God".

Ron Rolheiser tells us that "to practice social justice is to examine, to challenge, to refuse as far as possible to participate in, and to try to change those systemsthat unjustly penalize some, even as they unjustly reward others". Rolheiser further tells us "that the Book of Genesis makes four major, interpenetrating affirmations that provide the ultimate basis for justice. (1) it affirms that God made all people equal in dignity and rights; (2) it affirms that the earth and everything in it belongs equally to everyone; (3) it affirms that all human beings, equally, are co-responsible with God in helping to protect the dignity of everyone and everything; and (4) it affirms that the physical earth itself has rights and needs to be respected in and of itself, and not just as a stage for human activity."

(The Holy Longing – pg. 174-175)

Ron Rolheiser makes this important point "ultimately, how we conceive of God will color how we conceive of everything else, especially justice and peace and the road that leads to them... We must try to bring about justice and peace as Jesus did, recognizing that the God whom Jesus called "Father" beats up no one." (The Holy Longing –pg. 184-185)

"Nobody gets to heaven without a letter of reference from the poor" is a quote attributed to James Forbes, an interdenominational pastor in New York City.

The great prophets of Israel had coined the mantra: The quality of your faith will be judged by the quality of justice in the land. And the quality of justice in the land will always be judged by how "widows, orphans, and strangers" are faring while you are alive. That phrase, "widows, orphans, and strangers" was code for the three weakest,

most vulnerable groups in society at the time. In Matthew's gospel text about the Last Judgment, Jesus tells us that at the end of day, when we stand before the great King on the day of judgment, we will be asked only one set of questions and they all will have to do with how we treated the poor: Did you feed the hungry? Give drink to the thirsty? Welcome the stranger? Clothe the naked? Visit the sick? Visit prisoners?

Jim Forest, in his book, "The Ladder of the Beatitudes" tells us that one of the dangers of attempting to live a righteous life is that self-righteousness is always just a breath away. How easy it is to list the sins we have not committed, and to catalogue the sins of others. This is the situation of the righteous man whom Jesus describes in the parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector. The Pharisee makes a great show regarding how hard he has worked to justify himself. The tax collector had to do no sums, but simply to admit that his results did not justify him, so it was up to God what happened next. (pg. 78)

In Isaiah 51: 7, 8, & 16: "Listen to me, you who know righteousness, you people who have my teaching in your hearts; do not fear the reproach of others, and do not be dismayed when they revile you ...(for) my deliverance will be forever; and my salvation (my justice) to all sayYou are my people."

