

FINDING SPIRITUAL STRENGTH IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The four Rest Stops for the month of November revolve around Matthew's famous sermon, found in chapters 5-7. These chapters are typically viewed as great scripture for discipleship training, but rarely do they find their way into many spiritual disciplines or rituals. Why? Perhaps because the Sermon can make us feel ... overwhelmed. Guilty. How can Christians do what the Sermon calls us to do?

One of the gifts of the Anabaptist spirituality stream is its insistence that Christians can follow the Sermon on the Mount, and even more, that Christ calls us to this obedience. It is possible, without watering down the words, to live by such standards as loving our enemies and refraining from worry and praying and fasting for the right reasons. The Sermon is not for some far-off dispensation or the rules for our lives together in heaven. The Sermon is our calling—and good news—right now.

Perhaps that is the secret—seeing the Sermon on the Mount as good news. In the middle of all those “You have heard that it was said,” and “do not store up for yourselves treasures,” are words of grace like, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” and “Ask and it shall be given to you; seek and you shall find.” When Jesus tells us not to worry about our lives, we can apply that not only to our physical needs, but our spiritual ones as well.

“If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children ... how much more will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask him.”

REST STOP #1: Blessed are ... you

What do you say to a homeless person? “God bless you? Hope you find a warm place to sleep tonight?” What do you say to a murderer, doing life behind bars? “Well, I bet you probably would have done that differently, in retrospect ...” What do you say to a person who just discovered she has terminal cancer? “Wow, Jesus can heal you.” To be honest, I'm half scared to say that, not because I don't believe Jesus can heal her, but I'm not sure he will. So, I pray and say very little.

I feel more comfortable telling the murderer that Jesus will forgive him. But there's another part of me that wants to say, “Hey, what you did was awful.” Part of me wants to say to the homeless man, “Get up, it can't be that bad.” And part of me knows better, knows that it's far more complicated than that, and that those other feelings of mine only further victimize him.

Not only do I not know what to say, but sometimes I feel like the homeless person and the murderer and the cancer patient, because I'm just as – scared. I feel like a spiritual nobody. I read my little Christian magazine and somebody else just had victory in Jesus. Oh yippy. And then I feel guilty because I'm supposed to be happy for them. But I'm not happy. Why didn't someone protect me? Where was God when I got hurt? Where is God now? And then I feel guilty because—I reason—it's probably my fault anyway.

I feel like a spiritual zero.

I think there's a verse in the Bible about spiritual zeros. I think it's in the Beatitudes, the first one. “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs in the kingdom of heaven.” I want to be blessed, so this is an important verse for me. But I'm not sure exactly what the verse means. I'm not sure how to get there.

So I've thought a lot about this. Are the Beatitudes a system of rewards or a reversal of good fortune? Or something else? What does it really mean to be poor in spirit?

Let's go back to the scene of the crime—so to speak. Jesus, in Matthew 4:23-25, has been healing people—people sick to death with terrible diseases, people who are clueless, maybe who are desperate, who are not special to Matthew—they don't have any special understanding of Torah, or God, or anything. Maybe they are following Jesus just for the miracles and food, I don't know. Then, seeing the crowds, Jesus goes up on a hill so people can see and hear him better. He does not, as some people think, go up there just to be with the A+ Bible students. Because at the end of the sermon, it is the crowd who responds. No, this stuff is for everyone ...

Even the spiritual nobodies. Maybe especially the spiritual nobodies. And hey, they were probably mourning and grieving and the meek of the earth too. They were like some of us, floundering around, unable to make heads or tails out of this religion stuff. Now I don't know this for sure, but what if it's true? What if Jesus was speaking to the people he just healed?

Blessed are the spiritual zeros, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Now we're uncomfortable with this, because we're uncomfortable with a God who would say that spiritual nobodies are blessed. So we change the meaning and we say, "Blessed are the humble-minded," which is saying something very different. The first edition of the New English Bible, for example, says "How blest are those who know that they are poor." That is very different than saying, "Blessed are the spiritual zeros." Barclay's translation says something similar, but if the Greek language wanted to say that, there were ways to say that, and the Greek used here doesn't say that.

Rewards for humility or a reversal of fortune for spiritual zeros?

I can surely argue against the spiritual nobodies theory. Jesus did not say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit because they are poor in spirit." He did not think, wow, what a fine thing it is to be completely spiritually destitute in every way. What a fine thing it is to be stingy and greedy and depressed and mean-spirited and bitter and full of hate. Spiritual impoverishment—being a spiritual zero—has no merit in itself. We all know people who are poor, hungry and grief-stricken and who have remained as ungodly as sin itself—appropriate compassion for them notwithstanding. And we all know people who have this blessing without remaining in poverty or mourning or anything else. Something is different about them. They trust Jesus with all their hearts and they love and serve their neighbors in his name. No, the poor in spirit are called blessed by Jesus not because they deserve a reward for being bad or sad—but because—well?

Maybe it does mean we should be humble. Blessed are the humble-minded. That has a nice ring ...

Except for the works-righteousness part. Except for the overwhelming-guilt-I-feel-when-I'm-not-perfectly-humble part. Not that there's anything wrong with appropriate guilt. Who needs Jesus, just get humble and get that blessedness cornered. Now we still have egg on our face—you have to acknowledge your sin to be humble—but at least we know it, and wear it proudly, wear it like a badge of honor. And aren't all good people humble? So all good people have the kingdom of heaven! And how handy to tell people how to get into the kingdom—just be humble-minded. Shoot, maybe some of them are already there. So here we have, full-blown, if not salvation by works, than salvation by attitude!

So maybe it's not humility. The Beatitudes are not teachings on how to be blessed. They're not. They are not instructions to do anything. If that were really true, then we need to

immediately get ourselves poor, crying, seeking persecution, etc. Usually people don't do that. If the Beatitudes are how-to's, then they aren't good news. They are just a new legalism. OK, so if they aren't rewards for being humble or anything other good deed, and if they aren't rewards for being slimy with sin and down on your luck, what are they? If the Beatitudes don't talk about reward or reversal, then what do they talk about? What is going on?

I don't think it is about rewards or reversal. I think it's about a new reality.

I think people are blessed—on the mountain and on the streets and everywhere—because Jesus is here. Jesus is loose in the world. Jesus is loose in the world! When Jesus is around, you are going to be blessed! You are going to get help! No human condition, no matter how bad, excludes blessedness. (And no amount of righteous humility can gain it either). God can help you. God does help those who cannot, or perhaps just do not, help themselves.

That's good news. Jesus is on the loose. The kingdom is among you. There is true hope—in Jesus.

Let's say you can't quit lying about everything, or you can't quit pornography, or you can't quit drinking, or you can't start tithing or you can't say yes to God's call or you can't get yourself to be brave enough to do what God is asking you to do. You can't. There's nothing blessed in that. But you know what? Jesus is here. Maybe you hold pain inside yourself that nobody in the world should have to face, hurts that are heavier than the whole world. You haven't sinned, you've been sinned against, and it feels so overwhelming. Blessed are you, not because it's good to be hurt, but because Jesus is here. Blessed is everyone, everyone because Jesus is here, and he doesn't need you to be rich or all cleaned up or halfway decent for you to get help—to get what you need. To get what none of us deserve, but what we need. Now, in other verses in the gospels, we get the sense that some people understand this better, and can accept this easier than others. You've heard the verse "the first shall be last, and the last first." Why? Not because being last is precious and valuable in and of itself, but because "last type people" see the help that lives in Jesus earlier, see their own desperateness sooner.

We're all spiritual zeros. Or at least we were till we met Jesus. And sometimes we get zeroed out again. We need to reconnect. We're the crowd on the hill and we need help. Blessed are you tired youth ministers who just botched your last youth group meeting. Jesus is here.

Perhaps I'm wrong about the other Beatitudes. Perhaps receiving God's mercy is a reward for being merciful. Perhaps peacemakers deserve to be called the children of God for all their hard work. But in my own life I have found that I can't be merciful or peaceful or pure in heart until I first begin to experience the overwhelming love and grace of God. And there have been times when I was the scum of the earth, foundering in sin, and in the midst of that, mercy was there for me too. All of this is good news to me because Jesus was there for me, and is still there for me.

It is important to be humble, and strive for righteousness and justice. It's okay to "work" at these things. But no amount of effort on our part can wholly do the trick. We must be changed from the inside out. That is the good news of the Beatitudes. That is the good news of the gospel.

I don't know what to tell you when the help doesn't seem to come right away. I have no answers. I do know Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is here—now. I do know that Jesus doesn't want you to be sad or sinful. And I believe that when the time is right, and even

before the time is right, Jesus will mend whatever needs mending in your life. You are blessed, yours is the kingdom, because Jesus is here—now.

Blessed are the spiritual zeros. Not because being a spiritual zero is something to be desired. And not because we're supposed to be humble and that will make us righteous. But we are blessed because Jesus is here.

It's going to be okay. It's going to be okay.

Rest Stop #2: Praying the Lord's Prayer with St. Ignatius

St. Ignatius, a Catholic monk, writer, scholar and saint, taught his followers a unique way to pray the Lord's Prayer, found in Matthew 6:9-13. Taking this most well known prayer, he directed them to ponder and pray one word at a time. Starting with "our," the first word, his disciples prayed and meditated on each word. Some spent much time on "Father," others on "daily" and still others on "forgive."

Try to pray the Lord's Prayer in this way. Follow these simple guides.

- Find a quiet place to pray. Spend time in silence, before you pray, to help you focus on God.
- Pray in a way that is meaningful to you. If you like to write or if writing helps you focus, then write out your prayer. If you like to use your imagination, then picture each word of the Lord's Prayer floating before you. Then see and hear Jesus speaking to you through that word. If you like to draw, then write out the word you are praying on a blank piece of paper. Then start to draw images that correspond with that word. Perhaps you like praying with clay. Shape the clay into "our" and then let the shape be transformed into "Father." Continue on until you are finished praying.

Remember that it's okay if you don't make it through the entire prayer. It's fine to linger for an hour on just one phrase.

Rest Stop #3: There's a log in my "I"

"Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own I?" I looked at the paper I was holding and read these words again and laughed. I was grading a paper from one of my classes. It was a simple and understandable mistake, to be sure, but it was worth a chuckle. What a great pun! The log in your own I.

Then I stopped, stopped like I was hit with—well, a log! What if there was a connection between condemning and criticizing others and my "I?" I started to think about all the times that I judged people harshly, too harshly, times when I criticized outwardly or mumbled to myself inwardly. Was I so judgmental, in ways that Jesus clearly points to as sin, because I was having problems with ... me?

I scratched my "I's," my false selves that love to cause spiritual blindness. The self that loves to get praise. The self that worries about what other people think of her. The self that never likes to admit she's wrong. All those selves find their energy in the false understanding that good identities are a scarcity, so I need to fight to get mine. I need to find myself by proving my own worth, because there's just not enough love to go around. What if people knew how little I really knew about the Bible? What if they knew how scared I was at times? What if they knew ... my sin?

Feeling so unworthy, feeling my own identity so threatened, I lash out at others. In the book *Our Many Selves*, Elizabeth O'Connor points out that it's quite possible that what we criticize in others, we would also find in ourselves, if we dared to look. As I dared to look, I saw how very true those words were for me.

Henri Nouwen, in his book, *The Way of the Heart*, talks about these false selves, these compulsions that drive us crazy. "There are two evils to the spiritual life—anger and greed." These twin compulsions gather up steam when our identities are found in things other than God. "Why would I need to get angry, unless my identity depends on what others think of me? Why would I be greedy, unless my identity is wrapped up in what I own?"

Finding my true identity—in God—is the key factor in overcoming my harsh condemnation of others. When I find myself beloved, that is, when I take the log of self-hatred and unworthiness out of my "I," then I find I'm not nearly so bothered with what others do or don't do. I don't have to put them down to build myself up. I don't have to critique them to beat them to the punch. Probably, with the log out of my own eye, I'm so happy I don't even care about their specks.

But it's more than that. Finding my true identity in God is the only thing that can defeat my false selves. Who I am is not what they say I am or how many medals I earn or whether or not I look good. Who I am is found in God. Once I know this, or even just begin to experience a piece of knowing this, then I can rest. I am God's beloved. I don't have to fight anymore.

So, with God's help, I'm taking the log out of my "I." And I see the world differently. And my "I" feels so much better.

Our Many Selves, Elizabeth O'Connor, New York: Harper and Row, 1971, pp. 71-83.

The Way of the Heart: desert spirituality and contemporary ministry, Henri JM Nouwen, New York: Seabury Press, 1981, p. 17.

Rest Stop #4: Prayer for a seeker

Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord ..."

Lord?

Yes?

What did you mean just then?

Not everyone who calls me Lord really obeys me as Lord.

So talk is cheap?

Very cheap.

So just because you say the right words ...

You enter the kingdom of heaven? No.

Okay. But if you do the will of the Father then you're okay. Right?

Well ... yes.

You hesitated.

On that day many will say to me, "Lord, Lord"—

I understand that saying the right words don't necessarily cut it—

Listen! They say, "Did we not prophesy in your name and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?"

Did they?

Yes, they did.

And that wasn't good enough?

Then I will declare to them, "I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers."

Now hold on there. Isn't that a bit harsh? Casting out demons is a pretty intense thing. I would think that if you could cast out demons, not to mention the other things—well—

You must have it.

Yeah. You must be—in.

Nope.

Okay. So it isn't about saying the right words. And it isn't about doing really cool things in your name.

That's right.

It's deeper than what you confess ...

Yes.

It's deeper than our wonderful actions ...

At least for awhile you can put up a front.

Lord?

Yes?

I don't know what to think. I don't know what to do. Help me.

Welcome to the kingdom.

Based on Matthew 7:21-23