

## THE MARKS OF DISCIPLESHIP

Scripture Reading: Matthew 5:6-12, RSV

If you have never done it, you should take time to examine some of the typical magazines that come to your home, especially the advertising. When you look at it I think you will pick up there more quickly than anyplace else the kind of society in which we live and what it values. I would like to quote from some typical advertisements:

A restaurant advertisement: "...Limited where beautiful people meet for a complete evening of enjoyment. Engulf your senses. Delight your palate and dance the hours away with Washington's finest live entertainment."

A cigarette advertisement: The picture is of a young woman in a yellow bathing suit; she is giving the eye to a dark-haired handsome man with his shirt open to his waist, a cigarette dangling from his lips. The ad reads, "One of a kind. While others follow maps, he follows his instincts and he never goes wrong. He smokes for pleasure and satisfaction. He gets both from ... cigarettes."

A clothing advertisement: The scene, an attractive blond dressed in tennis clothing, sitting at a table with a tennis net in the background. She is looking up at an athletically tanned man, dressed in a stylish ensemble. The ad reads, "Our Wimbledon blazer won't improve your tennis, but it may improve your score." Then in smaller print: "The well-dressed man always has a certain look that sets him apart from the crowd." Then the last sentence: "In our blazer you are bound to create a racket."

When I was living and working in New York City, I would read the society pages, especially "Susie's" column. It was very interesting to read what Susie would say about blue bloods—those who sparkle and glitter and smile with capped teeth, the Jet Set. These are the people who attend all the galas, who dine at the White House, who have made it big. If you shift over to other kinds of news about our society, such as the movie magazines, etc. the articles you read imply that happiness is always packaged with an attractive woman who is playing a totally unrealistic and meaningless role in a TV series and she is now a millionairess. Or the guy who finds his greatest experience in life driving his new \$100,000 sports car.

In these columns and stories, you read frequently about the parties they go to, who said what, and which swimming pools were jumped into by whom and how everybody at the party was vying for position next to the latest celebrity or power broker, whether it be Hollywood or Washington. In this week's paper I read about a party held by Henry Kissinger for Frank Sinatra and how Frank didn't want Barbara Walters to be invited. When I read that I said to myself, "Now, isn't that so important it should go into the newspapers. It is just critical that we know that there is a feud going on between these people!"

If you were trying to summarize what this culture was dedicated to and what it prized most, how would you do it? I want to share my "beatitudes" for our world:

Blessed are the poor in spirit? No. "Happy are those who feel complete in themselves, who sense they have arrived, for theirs is the kingdom of earth and we shall all worship at their feet."

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Happy are those who mourn? No. "Happy are those who don't let the problems and suffering in the world bother them, who get it away from themselves, who rise above it and who can handle their mistakes without getting hung up on guilt."

Blessed are the meek? No. "Happy are the self-assertive. Happy are the aggressive who trample anybody who gets in their way for theirs is the presidency of the company."

Happy are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness? No. "Happy are those who hunger and thirst after fame and fortune for theirs are the pleasures of life."

Blessed are the merciful? I'm sorry but it is, "Happy are the hardhearted and unsentimental for they shall have power."

The pure? "Happy are those who are at least a little risqué, a little dishonest, a little greedy, for they shall have many friends who identify with them. They shall be filled."

When Jesus was on earth he attended a lot of parties and he was accused of being a glutton and a drunk. Jesus went, however, because he 'wanted to mix with the people, he wanted to get close to them. If the upper classes invited him to a party he attended.

I would like you to imagine Jesus at a Georgetown cocktail party, to imagine him attending and receiving the attention as the latest celebrity. He is the one creating all the stir, the one about whom people are speaking. When Jesus speaks at the cocktail party he says, Happy are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. [Happy is a good translation of the word "blessed" but it still doesn't quite define it, because in the Greek it really means, "Oh, the bliss of," or, "Oh, the joy of the poor in spirit," etc.] That statement there is a tongue-stopper: "Oh, the joy of those who mourn for they shall be comforted." By the time Jesus finished reciting these beatitudes, what would have happened to the tone of the party. We would call him a party-pooper, wouldn't we? What Jesus would have said and these people would have understood clearly, would be a total reversal of everything for which they have given their lives; a total reversal of the way they think, feel and act.

Spending time in these cocktail parties, most of which are boring if you listen to the people who attend them, seems so empty, so superficial. Even those of us who call ourselves his disciples are very tempted to pick up values, atmosphere and thinking of this world in which we live, which should be alien to us. I don't want to exaggerate the difference between disciples and other people, but I don't want you to minimize how extreme the difference is. For most of us the distinction between ourselves and the world is blurred; it is unclear. If you read church history, when the distinction was clearest (in a healthy sense) the church shone the brightest. I'm not talking about superficial things like the way we dress or the way we eat. I'm talking about basic values. What the beatitudes say to us is that the kind of person most admired by the world is very often least admired by God.

I have tried to think in my own life of how Jesus' beatitudes have fitted circumstances in which I have been placed. I would like to go through some of these with you.

He says, Oh, the happiness of the poor in spirit: Those who sense their limitations, their emptiness, their need, and who because of their awareness of need are stimulated to achieve

great things spiritually. It may be that physical poverty is here but primarily it is a spiritual lesson.

When I first became a Christian I had an uncle who was a very successful engineer. He was making lots of money back in the fifties. He was designing and blazing roads in South America as many of the countries were beginning to develop their interiors. I remember him telling me once that if I would give up this business about going into the ministry and would promise him I would go to an engineering school or some other professional school, he would pay my way through college. He felt complete. He saw me going into the empty life. He saw me having the need while his life was full. If he could only give that to his nephew, it would be a tremendous gift that he could give me. Not many years later, however, he had to watch his marriage collapse. As a result of all those weeks in the jungle without his family, he drank excessively and he died of cirrhosis of the liver. He felt no poverty of spirit. How different it is when Jesus speaks!

Oh, the bliss of those who deeply grieve over their sin, who deeply grieve that they are not more compassionate, more tender, more loving, more sensitive to moral evil, more sensitive to other people's concerns. Jesus says these people shall be comforted.

I have only met a few people in my life who in no sense of the word mourn this way. I think almost everybody can be hit with something difficult and severe enough that they begin to feel at least a tinge of what is happening to other people and perhaps what is happening to themselves.

I did meet one person who apparently has never had this kind of feeling. It is almost frightening to see a person who has no capacity to mourn in this way. When I was working at the Greater New York Academy, the students and I were out fundraising (ingathering) at Times Square. It would get tremendous crowds around our singing group; it was right before Christmas and there were large groups out and they seemed to respond to our appeal. When we would get back to the school to count the donations, we would have only \$6 or \$7 and I couldn't believe the amount was so small. This went on for several nights and I was getting discouraged. We were singing in bad weather and really working hard for such small amounts. The following week some students came to see me because they were so upset. Even though they were reluctant to "rat" on their fellow students, they had learned that two of the students who had been helping to do the fundraising had been stealing part of the money. In addition to that, after the rest of the students had returned to the academy and then gone home, these two boys were going back to the downtown area and were stealing radios, etc. They were bringing these stolen goods to the school and were selling it to the students. I was angry first of all about their taking the funds we had been raising for charitable purposes, and doubly angry that they then had the nerve to steal material from the proprietors that we had just solicited. Selling the stolen items to the students was the last straw!

The principal was gone and I was in charge. I called in the first fellow and told him what the other students had reported to me. The minute I hit him with the fact that he had been discovered, he broke down and wept and begged us not to tell his mother. I told him it was too late for that and that he was up for suspension. We had to notify his parents why we were suspending him. At least this fellow reacted with mourning for what he had done.

The next young man who came in had the most unbelievable attitude. He sat there, as cold and as

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placid as he could be, and denied it. I started building my case. Finally, when the evidence had all been presented, he did admit he had done the stealing. But there was no remorse! I asked myself, "Can this be the first totally amoral person I have ever met? None of what he has done seems to touch him at all."

Many people today would think his attitude was a virtue you can cheat on your income tax, ride roughshod over other people's feelings, etc. That is not what Jesus said. Even now this second young man has no goals, no clear values, no direction in life, and he flits from place to place and problem to problem and has never gotten a handle on his life.

The other fellow has. Sure, he made a dumb mistake, but he had the capacity to mourn and to accept comfort.

To the ordinary mind all of these ways of dealing with our lives and our problems are recipes for failure. Here is where the radical character of Jesus' teaching becomes most obvious. Jesus is telling us that what is most acceptable to us, most familiar, most immediate and most common, is usually the least trustworthy. That means that we have got to discipline ourselves to think very differently than we usually do if we are to have the mind of Christ, as Paul puts it in Philippians. That is why when you go through the Beatitudes and come to the last two in our Scripture lesson, the end result of all of this is a certain kind of persecution. We run against the grain! When there is no offense or stress against the world, when there is no feeling that we are at odds with the world, I begin to wonder about the quality of our discipleship. These words of Jesus call us to a high ideal and judge us, not in the condemnatory way to dump guilt on us; they judge us in the sense that they summon us to a higher commitment and a deeper spiritual life.

Recently I was told a story that dramatized how anyone who says I am going to be a disciple at all costs can, under certain circumstances, be asked to pay this deep price. Elder Neal Wilson told us about his visit to Rhodesia. He met some of our members who are still suffering through this guerilla war. One woman's story particularly impressed him. Some of our believers have been burned, drowned, hanged, tortured, etc. This woman's husband had been buried alive before her eyes. Those who had done this to him had warned him before that he was not to continue his activities as local elder and to visit his members and encourage them. They didn't want him to be praying with people or reading the Bible with them. He told them that he couldn't heed their orders. He said it was his responsibility as a follower of Christ to continue his work. For disobeying them, they buried him alive. Regardless of whether you think he was right or wrong about pushing that issue, it says something about the quality of his devotion.

While his wife was standing there watching them bury her husband, they turn to her and say, "Now we hope you have learned a lesson because what has happened to him is going to happen to you if you do this." She said, "Well, I'm sorry, but I'm going to pick up where my husband left off. We are a community of people and we will pray and study together." Apparently they haven't followed through on their threats to her. When I heard that, however, I thought how Jesus' descriptions in the Beatitudes have come to fruition in this woman and her husband. You move from the beginning of accepting Jesus' call to discipleship down through and the end result very often is persecution. You run against the grain of the world and cause friction. It is unavoidable.

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But Jesus says to such people, "Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven." The true disciple says, "If I am to die then let me die not because of stress making money or because of eating too much improper food. If I am to die, let me die for Christ. Not for the company. Not for my appetite. Let me die for Christ."

Oh, the bliss of those who love the Lord Jesus.