

POINTS TO PONDER

"Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief.
Act justly now.
Love mercy now.
Walk humbly now.
You are not obligated to complete the work,
but neither are you free to abandon it."
— *The Talmud*

"He has told you, O mortal, what is good;
and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice,
and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God?"
— *Micah 6.8*

"Micah was writing at a time in which the Hebrew people were actually prospering as a nation – at least politically and economically. The problem was that they were becoming corrupt, self-centered, and arrogant. Well, at least those with power and influence. They had turned their egalitarian religious faith in which emphasized community to a capitalistic national faith which emphasized wealth and influence. In doing so, they made religious faith to be a matter of ritual rather than just relationships, and of pious practices rather than compassionate care for one another. In essence, it is pretty much where we are at in the USA today. Micah's words ring as true for us as they did 700+ years before Jesus."

— *Bret S. Myers, 1/30/2019*

"O God, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?
Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart;
who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends,
nor take up a reproach against their neighbors...but who honor those who revere God;
who stand by their oath even to their hurt."
— *Psalms 15.1-4*

"God wants integrity from us more than oblations, and desires virtuous conduct over praise.
American Christianity, like the Hebrew people in the time of David, has focused on the latter.
To get back to our religious roots, we need to focus on the former."

— *Bret S. Myers, 1/30/2019*

"When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain;
and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them "
— *Matthew 5.1-2*

"Jesus came to speak to the people; but not constantly. Like the rest of us, he needed to draw some boundaries with his work. We frequently see him retreat to mountains or waters when he needs a rest from the very people he came to edify. We burnout if we don't take care of ourselves; for there is always more to do. Jesus' example of taking time to rest from our important work is a healthy model for our own lives.

When Jesus goes up the mountain, those he lives with, his disciples, go with him. In this more intimate setting where he is among those he knows and has selected to be with him in this ministry, Jesus continues to preach; but now with very counter-intuitive words that would likely not resonate with, and might even cause anger with, the larger crowds that have come to hear him and to receive healing.

In this setting of those he trusts, Jesus preaches a message that we have come to know as the Beatitudes. They are values and ideas that directly contradict the values and ideas of empires. They are revolutionary; and, if followed, would be a reversal of the values of the Romans; under whose rule they are oppressed.

The Beatitudes are not simply spiritual sayings that require a deeper understanding to learn their truths; they are a recipe for overturning the world's values and political systems for God's values and egalitarian ways. By identifying with the people who are most oppressed, Jesus offers not only compassion for those who have been most beset with injustices, but simultaneously critiques those, and the system, that oppress them.

This is political discourse of the most extreme; identifying Jesus as a dissident of the state, as one opposed to nationalism, and one who teaches his followers about how to be insurrectionists – not with violence, but with their principles, lifestyles, and opposition to Rome's Pax Romano. The peace Jesus seeks is not won with overwhelming violence and the use of irresistible force, the recipe of the Romans; but rather with overwhelming justice, and the practice of unconditional love.

Jesus seeks to turn the value system under which he lives upside down; and thus will come to be perceived as the polarizing gadfly that he was considered to be by those in power, and those who were complicit with perpetuating the values of those in power."

— *Rev. Bret S. Myers, 1/25/2023*

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kin-dom of heaven."

— *Matthew 5.3*

"The poor in spirit are those who are systemically oppressed in their society.

They are the victims of injustice, violence, poverty, and powerlessness.

And they are the ones who resist the culture of empire and influence.

They are the broken-hearted due to vile values of their society.

Jesus wants to reverse the values of empire where greed is rewarded and power esteemed.

Compassion not domination, and kindness not control, are how we are to live in relationship.

To those committed to these counter-cultural values, they are blessed;

not in the physical conditions in which they live,

but in the spiritual peace of knowingly living by God's values –

something in which they can respect within themselves against all odds;

a spiritual home that nurtures their hearts and fulfills their souls."

— *Bret S. Myers, 1/30/2019*

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

— *Matthew 5.4*

"It is implicit that the mourners are not mourning the inevitable hardships of life; but rather the unnecessary ones – the ones brought about by systemic injustices, which are created by the rich and powerful to maintain control over the poor and weak.

Those who mourn their and others' oppression will be comforted;

not, for now, in any observable way to the eyes of the world,

but in the knowledge that life's frustrations and cruelty will not have the final word.

The tears of the oppressed reveal that they still care about life;

and to remain caring means that the world's malice has not broken their spirit.

Simply recognizing this fact is an act of defiance and a testament to hope;

and tears are an indictment against the heartlessness of their oppressors.

But the poor in spirit are also blessed by their faith

that the oppressive reality they experience now will come to an end;

and a new Eden, where all share the bounty of the earth and have enough, will be recreated.

The 'kin-dom' is a society of equals,
where all are treated in accordance to the needs, not the wants, of each one.
Their faith is that this paradise will come to pass when all see the beauty and blessing
of everyone treating one another as they want to be treated.
When this happens, there will be no more unnecessary things in which to mourn;
though natural hardships and tragedies will, of course, remain."
— *Bret S. Myers, 1/30/2019; 1/25/2023*

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."
— *Matthew 5.5*

"The meek do not see themselves as more worthy than anyone else.
Nor do they see themselves as less worthy.
They do not seek to be advantaged over others,
or to possess privileges in which others do not share.
The meek simply want everyone to be treated equitably.
Their earthly inheritance is, in part, the respect
they receive from all who recognize their purity of heart.
They are revered for not trying to get a competitive edge over anyone else,
and by treating all people as their equals.
They are trusted by others, and that is a beautiful inheritance.
Yet, more deeply, if their way becomes the way of all peoples,
then they, and all people, will literally inherit the earth;
for it will be shared by all, and not owned by the few.
For Jesus, the meek represent the egalitarian ideal by which all people are to live;
no one trying to get more, be superior, or control anyone else."
— *Bret S. Myers, 1/30/2019; 1/25/2023*

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."
— *Matthew 5.6*

"Jesus is not referring to the 'nice' people who wish everyone well;
but rather to the staunch advocates of justice for all –
the vocal and engaged protesters against tyranny and oppression.
They avidly desire, hunger and thirst, for a new world order that is opposed to what they know.
They are not silent "well-wishers", but are fervent "do-gooders" –
healing the afflicted, forgiving the debts of the financially encumbered,
and giving hope to those who have only known a life filled with injustice;
while calling out, and bringing to accountability, those benefitted by the current unjust system.
We recall that righteousness is not ritual piety, but a matter of character and passionate endeavor.
Righteousness and justice are often used interchangeably in the Bible.
One shows character when one wants the same justice for others as one wants for oneself.
Those whose appetite is for goodness, and whose thirst is for virtue,
not only will be filled in the future with that in which they yearn,
but are already receiving the blessings of these traits
by placing that which matters most as most important in their lives.
When their values become the accepted values of the society,
then they, and everyone, will be filled –
with enough, not with more than enough."
— *Bret S. Myers, 1/30/2019; 1/25/2023*

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy."
— *Matthew 5.7*

"To be merciful is to be spiritually awakened (i.e., woke) and virtuously fulfilled.
It is the epitome of character development;
supererogatorily going beyond what societal mores, justice, and moral duties require,
and empathetically seeing the dignity and worth of one who is suffering,
without regard for how they came to be in the place they are,
while helping them to see their own inherent value as one deserving of compassion.
The merciful do not take advantage of another's hardships,
whether caused by themselves, or caused beyond their control;
but instead seek to bring them back to a place of equity where their needs are filled.
Their extravagant forgiveness, generosity, and loving-kindness is not expected;
and so they themselves are the recipients of seeing their magnanimous deeds being appreciated.
This is the echo of mercy that when given to another comes to be received by one's self.
And when the world becomes just,
they will, in turn, be treated as mercifully by others as they gave to them.
It is a karmic reciprocity of receiving back again what one has planted in the lives of others."
— *Bret S. Myers, 1/30/2019; 1/25/2023*

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."
— *Matthew 5.8*

"The pure in heart are those who seek to do good for the sake of doing good.
There is no ulterior motive which they foresee as helping them out in any way.
They want to help others, and they do not look for any benefit in return.
In their altruistic benevolence and unconditional love, they mimic God;
and in that they mimic God, they are able to see the beauty and goodness of God's ways firsthand. They
know God's Spirit because that same Spirit resides in them.
They see God in the most important way: in their own way of being in the world."
— *Bret S. Myers, 1/30/2019*

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God."
— *Matthew 5.9*

"Peace is not something that happens to us, but that which we create/make.
Peace does not result from passivity, but requires our diligent activity.
Perhaps we should translate 'peacemakers' as 'shalom-makers.'
This is not simply about being anti-war and pro-peace,
but creating and transforming the entire society
to be one in which peace is the natural outcome of how we are in just and right relationship
with all others – humanity, and creation.
It is about systematically creating a world in which all are treated as equals in worth and dignity.
It is about coming to the aid of all who are in need,
and calling out any who look out for themselves rather than the whole.
It is the vision Jesus had for the world he urged us to create in accordance with God's Will.
It is the incarnation of the Great Commandment and the Golden Rule;
and that is how we are all truly the children of God – when we live by God's own virtues.
In Biblical parlance, to be a child of God is to emulate the values of God
– the child reflects/refracts the image, virtues, character, and Spirit of the parent."
— *Bret S. Myers, 1/30/2019; 1/25/2023*

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kin-dom of heaven."
— *Matthew 5.10*

"Jesus makes it clear that the blessings he is saying will be ours are not the blessings that are considered to be blessings by those who follow other ethics than that of God. Persecution is not seen as a blessing by anyone who is not spiritually enlightened and ethically glorified. Jesus knows that following his way of love, peace, and justice will result in abuse by those complicit with empire. They will have to live in defiance of unjust laws, speak against all uses of violence and abuse, and call out hatred and fear-mongering as the evils that they are. This will certainly result in punitive measures by those whose values are the antithesis of God's. Jesus wants to give words of encouragement to his disciples for when they will suffer unjustly at the hands of empire. To be persecuted for doing the right thing, and advancing God's ways, is a badge of honor. It reveals where one's true home is – not in earthly empire, but in heavenly community.

In your own life, are there values you'd rather live by and be persecuted for than to live in contradiction to those values and yet live a comfortable life? What matters more to you; your values, or your comfort and safety?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 1/30/2019; 1/25/2023*

"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."

— *Matthew 5.11*

"Who wants to be reviled and persecuted, and have people lie about you in order to bring you down? Not many want to sign up for that, but this is precisely what Jesus is saying will happen if you follow his ways. And he is undeniably right on this, as people devoted to compassion/mercy, forgiveness, debt relief, peace and nonviolence, loving-kindness, gentleness and tenderness, and just and equitable relationships have discovered throughout history.

And the reason is clear; you can't be truly for these values unless you are against the opposite values. And being against the opposite values will inevitably bring you in conflict with those who live by those opposite values. Silence, going under the radar, collaboration with evil by playing along, or being complicit with injustice by refusing to speak truth to power and advocating for the oppressed, etc., are not options for a faithful person.

If you are for egalitarianism, you have to be against capitalism. If you are for peace, you must be against war and violence in all their manifestations – personally, socially, politically, and nationally. If you are for justice, you must speak out against injustice and those who profit by injustices done against others. If you are for debt relief (cf., the Biblical concept of a Jubilee Year), you have to be against profiteers who get rich on fees, interest rates, and other tactics of keeping people indebted. If you are for living wages and wage equality, you not only have to raise the minimum wage but have to lower the wages of the wealthiest so that all make the same amount no matter what work they do or for how long (which was precisely Jesus' point about the parable of the workers who started work at different times of the day and all got paid the same living wage – which at that time was a denarius); or even get rid of the monetary system entirely. If you are for gentleness and tenderness, you have to be against retribution and punitive measures. If you are for forgiveness, you have to be opposed to vengeance. Spiritually and ethically speaking, if you are for something, you have to be against something else. That results in conflicts of interests with those of contrary values. Trying to straddle the fence, or choosing not to choose, is itself a choice for the status quo and against creating a better system.

People oddly wonder why Jesus was tortured and crucified since they imagine, in accordance with their own way of thinking, that he was only about positive things like loving one another (as if that were merely a feeling or belief that one had); discounting entirely how he also critiqued and condemned those who didn't love others as they loved themselves by acting peacefully and practicing justice in all of their relationships (i.e., the central point of the parable of the good Samaritan; where he didn't only imply praise upon the Samaritan, but also condemnation on the Scribe and the Pharisee). Everything he was "for" meant he had to be "against" the opposite values. This is why he was extraordinarily political. He affirmed

God's values, which meant he had to rebel against Caesar's values. As he said, you can't serve two masters. You have to choose one, and oppose the other; love one, and hate the other.

If this is true for Jesus, it also has to be true of Jesus' followers. There is no escaping these choices; though many, particularly American Christians, falsely convince themselves that they don't have to choose.

What does this mean for our lives? It means that we must not only profess and live by values we claim are ours, but also oppose, call out, and demand a change of behavior by those whose values advantage them over others by unfairness within the system. And when we do this, do we really think those with other values won't go on the attack? If we affect the financial "success" and social/political/religious status of those who benefit by keeping others in debt, in prison, in unfair wages, in working conditions which are determined by the employer rather than by the workers, and so on, or who don't want their religiosity questioned or changed, will we not suffer the consequences of their wrath?

Many Americans have tried to synthesize American values with Jesus' values, and the two are in direct contradiction – for American values are far more similar to Roman values than God's values. Many have distorted Jesus' message and tried to create a religion based on beliefs rather than virtues; in complete opposition to Jesus' own way. This is what theologians today call "American Christianity" – a belief-based religion that makes faithfulness about having the right beliefs, and not about how we live in right relationship with others. In other words, American Christianity has become the polar opposite of Jesus' own values; yet American Christians claim Jesus is their "Lord and Savior," which they don't see as a contradiction because they see faith as being about what they "believe in their heads and with their hearts" rather than what they "practice and live by their lives."

To follow Jesus is not a matter of believing certain things. It requires a wholesale life transformation. When you are living with so much integrity that your values are unnerving the powers that be such that they become retaliatory and punitive against you, this means you are getting to them and affecting their consciences. You make it clear to them and to all observers that they are in the wrong. The backlash will be inevitable from anyone with a hardened heart, and from those who would have much to lose if your protests became successful and the power structures of society were changed. They will lie, sabotage, and use any other means to change you, or get rid of you.

But to remain steadfast to God's values despite their torment towards you is to be blessed. Your integrity cannot be bought at any price, and your values cannot be undermined with fear or cruelty. Physically, emotionally, and psychologically, you will likely suffer greatly for your opposition. But spiritually you will be blessed, for the greatest asset you have is a virtuous spirit; and no one but you can ever take that away from you.

Are we willing to be reviled and persecuted by our culture, and even our churches that have gone astray, for living by the values of Jesus? Do we understand this as the cost of discipleship?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 1/30/2019; 1/25/2023*

"Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,
for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

— *Matthew 5.12*

"On the surface, it may appear that Jesus is saying to ignore all the heartache and suffering you will have for living by God's ways, and simply celebrate that while this life is filled with strife you will later be compensated in a life to come. I suspect this is not what he is saying or meant at all. Rather he is likely avowing that we should count our spiritual integrity as more important than our physical viability, and that we should esteem our ethical and moral character more than the emotional turmoil to which we are subjected.

Heaven, in this view, is not a place we go after we die; but is an eternal state of being in which we live when we have adopted God's virtues and values and have allowed the Holy (i.e., Sacred) Spirit to be the decision-maker in our lives. Living by this Spirit brings us spiritual joy.

It is not that we are to be all happy and blissful about all the abuse we receive at the hands of those who we oppose as being against the values and virtues of God, but rather that we are to respect our spirit and honor our character more than we fear such persecution. Others may revile us, but God will respect us for remaining faithful. Others may harm us, but God will heal our spirits because we lived by sacred values rather than profane values.

The prophets suffered and died for being faithful, and the same may be true of us as well. But consider that it is those very prophets whom both the righteous and God most respect and honor, and we understand that though we may not make it to the jutting mountaintop of justice, the shining peak of peace, or the beautiful col of compassion, we have seen them, like Moses, from a distance. Our faith remains in the world God wants us to live in, not the one in which empire forces upon us. We revere the prophets for their moral resolve and spiritual tenacity. We, too, will be honored by the host of those who exemplify and follow God's values over human values.

What is the way you want to be remembered?"

— *Bret S. Myers, 1/30/2019; 1/25/2023*

"For some reason, the most vocal Christians among us never mention the Beatitudes (Matthew 5). But, often with tears in their eyes, they demand that the Ten Commandments be posted in public buildings. And of course, that's Moses, not Jesus. I haven't heard one of them demand that the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, be posted anywhere. 'Blessed are the merciful' in a courtroom? 'Blessed are the peacemakers' in the Pentagon? Give me a break!"

— *Kurt Vonnegut, 20th century*