

PREScription FOR JOY

By Rev. Will Nelken

Presented at Trinity Community Church, San Rafael, California, on Sunday, June 1, 2008

God is interested in our joy! (Though not always our happiness.) In the Bible, He offers an 8-part prescription for overflowing joy. While these same instructions can be found elsewhere in the Bible, they are brought together in elegant summary by Jesus as the introduction to His Sermon on the Mount.

*NIV Matthew 5:2 Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*⁴ Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.*

*⁵ Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.*

*⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.*

*⁷ Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.*

*⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.*

*⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called sons of God.*

*¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

¹¹ "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Beatitudes

These are known as the Beatitudes, a word that means *supreme blessedness*. It was the joy of the wise men from the Far East, when they again saw the guiding star leading them to Bethlehem:

NKJV Matthew 2:10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.

It is the joy that is otherwise only known to God Himself, as described by Jude:

NKJV Jude 24 Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.

In this famous message about living in the Kingdom of God, Jesus conveyed this *supreme blessedness* to all those who follow Him purposefully. Observe its application:

Supreme blessedness comes to:

Those who are poor in spirit. Not to the haughty, who imagine they have all they need, but to those who recognize their spiritual need and ask God for more. Heaven's resources are theirs.

Those who are mournful. These are not indifferent or callous, but sorry for the negative impact that their ways sometimes have on others, and mourning the ways the world's systems are at odds with God. Divine comfort is theirs

Those who are meek. These are not arrogant, but submitted to God's leadership in their lives. God gets to call the shots and they follow His lead. As a result, they will outlast all others.

Those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness — first with God, and also with their fellow man. These are not self-righteous, but seeking to understand, to grow, and to trust. For this, they will be fed and filled.

Those who are merciful. These are not begrudging, but forgiving. They stand ready to mend fences and build bridges. They are considerate of others, even to the point of making allowances for them. They will receive mercy.

Those who are pure. Not a word that means perfect, instead it means simple, as in focused (like the light of a laser beam). These are not connivers, who seek to get the advantage of others, but open-hearted souls. They will see God.

Those who are peacemakers. They are not troublemakers, but pacifists. While not ignorant of the troubles in life, they look for ways to turn it to peace. They are called God's children, because, in this respect, they are like Him, who is the world's greatest Bridge-BUILDER and Reconciler.

Those who are persecuted. They are not appreciated, but it is more than that: they are faulted for their goodness. Their kindness is rebuffed and their good deeds are called evil. I believe this is the pinnacle of the beatitudes — the highest level of testing and the "supremest" blessing of them all. Heaven's greatest reward is theirs.

In contrast to the Fruit of the Spirit, which are outward expressions of inward grace, the beatitudes are the inner impressions (imprints) of the Spirit's work. These are the motivations of life's behaviors. They dwell deeper than and come before actions (as others have noted, they are called BE-attitudes, not DO-attitudes).

These are cultivated in the secret place with God, in the private and personal center of who you are. And because they are inward, they are lasting, resilient, persistent.

In the 18th century, a man named Bédicor drilled wells in the province of Artois, in the north of France, which, he discovered, did not require pumping. The water, under internal hydrostatic pressure, once released, rose to the surface on its own. They are known today as artesian wells ("the wells of Artois").

The Beatitudes describe the "artesian wells" of the Spirit in an individual's life. Once released, they rise by their own power to the surface to refresh those around them.

As I said, these are cultivated in the secret place with God, in the private and personal center of who you are — through reflection, confession, repentance, self-discipline.

Take Time to Reflect

In our over-stimulated, over-informed, and over-active Western culture, reflection does not come naturally. You must carve it out of your schedule purposefully. If you fail to do so, you will confine yourself to superficial, reactive living, no matter how many church meetings you attend.

Reflecting on our circumstances, our actions and reactions, and the applicable words of Scripture is how we till the soil of our soul, breathing air and life into it again.

Dig In with Confession

Confession often has a negative connotation, given its application to criminal justice, but biblically, it simply means “agreeing” or “saying the same thing as” — specifically, saying the same thing as God says.

When we *confess* our sins we are saying the same thing God says about them: they are indeed sinful and separate us from God’s fellowship. Likewise, when we confess our faith, we are saying the same thing as God says about Himself: He is almighty and loving and faithful and real.

With respect to these beatitudes, it also involves confessing our need, our lack, our desire, our hope — that God will produce these characteristics in our hearts. Confession digs a hole in the soil of our hearts in which seeds may find their rest and be protected as they grow.

Get Down to Repentance

Repentance is often confused with remorse. It is true that unremorseful apologies are hollow and meaningless, but it is possible to show remorse, yet make no effort to change. Repentance is first and foremost a decision to change; it is a spiritual about-face, following a genuine confession.

The *power* to change, of course, comes not from within but from above. Good intentions are just that: intentions. They are not achievements. Repentance must lock on to God’s power through faith in order to accomplish its objective. Right here is where many fall short.

Wishing to change (or be changed) is not the same as leaning on God from moment to moment to gain the power you require to keep your promises. When we take the first step, but fail to take the second also, we earn the tag of promise-breaker or hypocrite.

Repentance is the actual planting of the seed, grasping a word from God that not only reveals our need but provides the power to change.

Move Ahead with Self-Discipline

Now the sprout of holiness has become visible above the surface of the soil of our hearts. But there is still much growing to be come. Developing the beatitudes requires much reflection, plus, confession, plus repentance, plus self-discipline.

Fortunately, self-discipline is a fruit of the Spirit. Therefore, I am not speaking of self-determination, but of yieldedness to the Spirit’s promptings to live at Jesus’ side, instead of reclaiming the steering wheel for ourselves.

In these ways dormant spiritual soil becomes productive again. These are the ways by which the Kingdom life becomes our own. These are the means of grace.