

BLESSED  
*at the*  
BROKEN  
PLACES



*Reclaiming Faith and Purpose  
with the Beatitudes*

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*Blessed at the Broken Places:  
Reclaiming Faith and Purpose with the Beatitudes*

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## INTRODUCTION

NO MORE SUFFERING  
OVER SUFFERING*The Beatitudes as Pathways Through Emotional Pain*

*When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:*

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

*"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 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 5:1–12

## THE AUDACITY AND REALISM OF THE PROMISES

Suppose you are unhappy, and a healer tells you that by virtue of your unhappiness, your joy is guaranteed. Suppose you are lost, and a teacher tells you that you are therefore on the right track. Suppose you feel like a loser, and a prophet tells you that, as a loser, your victory is assured. Suppose your life collapses, and a sage tells you to expect roses at rock bottom.

Much as you might wish these promises were true, you might easily write these hopes off as nonsense. Even as you harbor a painfully dark outlook on yourself, on others, and on your future, you deem this bleak vision more in line with reality than the impossible dream of a reversal of your fortunes. Even as you badly want assurance of a happy ending, these promises seem too gratuitous, too much out of your hands for you to trust in them. They change the rules for becoming happy, and that spins life even more out of control.

Yet, such are the Beatitudes of Jesus Christ.

If he means anything to you, face it: He challenges the familiar darkness with morning light, “realism” with reality beyond our wildest dreams. Not that he offers a reality without suffering: Indeed, he promises that those who follow him will suffer with him. He offers no pie-in-the-sky deal, no bargain struck in a foxhole, but a deeper realism that embraces hope.

Jesus challenges our yearning to escape anxiety by retreating into a cocoon and invites us instead to join the adventurous course of a loving but mysterious God. He does not offer a reality without anguish; rather, he promises that those who follow him will face conflict and loss. He tells no wish-fulfilling fiction, hands us no remote control by which we can ensure the happy ending of our dreams. But he invites us to accept the only love that cannot fail to comfort us in the end.

## ACCEPTANCE OF SUFFERING

As a psychotherapist, I often find myself in a paradoxical position with my patients. They come to me, as they should, to find relief for their suffering. But that often requires me to help them accept their suffering first.

Entrenched in anguish, they find that none of the traditional solutions offer them sufficient relief. In time, the source of their pain becomes clear: They not only suffer, but they also suffer over their suffering. Perhaps they berate themselves for depression because they see clearly on the news that

others have a worse lot than they do, or because their inner critic calls them lazy. Some criticize themselves for anxiety because they believe they should “suck it up” and not let mere feelings overcome them or because that suggests a lack of faith. So they fight their feelings, only to find that their feelings fight back with equal or greater force. If I listen to and respond well to this paradox, I do so only because I remember all too well my own exhausting treks on this treadmill and occasionally find myself back on it.

Shame and guilt over emotional suffering have serious spiritual and psychological consequences. Scholar and spiritual guide Roberta C. Bondi elaborates:

Telling myself that my depression or irritability or perfectionism or fear of loss is sinful and an offense against God for which I must repent does not help me deal with them, and it certainly does not help me pray. Rather, such self-judgment tends only to undercut me and drive me away from God. It increases my sense of helplessness one more time when I discover that, as one of the early monastic teachers used to say, “Violence will not drive out violence.” Though I, or any of us, may learn to control our behavior, it is very rare that we can simply get tough with ourselves, repent, and stop being the way we are. On the other hand, acknowledging depression, perfectionism, and fear of loss to be the wounds that they are gives us the wide space and the long time we need to do the work of healing and to live in the expectation of God’s grace.<sup>1</sup>

Where does this suffering over suffering come from? Our shame and guilt over our own suffering do not come from a faulty connection in our brains. They arise largely out of a culture of competition and mastery. Here in the United States and most of the Western world, we take for granted staggering technological and medical advancements, amazing accumulations of wealth, and a seemingly endless store of information for our practical and leisure use. So if we have a problem, we assume that we should be able to solve it. Quickly. In our worldview, we should be able to control through cunning, force, hard work, or even virtue all threats that can suddenly bankrupt us, alienate us from our families, jeopardize our jobs, or lead to other unthinkable outcomes. We believe that if such things happen, we

must have screwed up, because anyone with sense should have the savvy and skill to avoid such calamities.

We allow the media to play a major role in building our defenses against a mature and open acceptance of our suffering. Advertisers aim to keep us insecure enough to think we need products to overcome our supposed deficits, from bad breath to an inadequate financial portfolio. The news and relentless portrayals of violence and disaster keep reinforcing our evolutionary need to find real or imagined threats and respond to them. Powered by the highly combustible fuel of fear, and assuming we should control our own destinies nevertheless, we work harder and worry more in search of a grand solution, or at the very least some kind of insurance that will guarantee that we'll have a cushion to keep our lives from getting unbearably bad. We work angles all the time, even in our sleep.

The mountain of possible problems and solutions overwhelms us. Exhausted and lacking the spiritual resources for serenity, we resort to numbness and even anger. As Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen and his colleagues explain:

We might ask ... whether mass communication directed to millions of people who experience themselves as small, insignificant, powerless individuals does not in fact do more harm than good.... Massive exposure to human misery often leads to psychic numbness. Our minds cannot tolerate being constantly reminded of things which interfere with what we are doing at the moment. When we have to open our store in the morning, go about our business, prepare our classes, or talk to our fellow workers, we cannot be filled with the collective misery of the world.... But there is more. Exposure to human misery on a mass scale can lead not only to psychic numbness but also to hostility. Human suffering, which comes to us in a way and on a scale that makes identification practically impossible ... evokes more disgust and anger than compassion.... Numbness and anger are the reactions of the person who says, "When I can't do anything about it anyhow, why do you bother me with it!"<sup>2</sup>

We pile responsibility on ourselves to have it all figured out, to get ahead of the curve. So shame over not knowing what to do about a perfectly

normal sadness crushes us. In our fix-it culture, the normal suffering of life feels like failure.

Psychiatrist and spiritual director Gerald May calls this widespread cultural phenomenon “the happiness mentality”:

The basic assumption of the happiness mentality—in spite of considerable hard evidence to the contrary—is that if one lives one’s life correctly one will be happy. The corollary of this assumption is that if one is not happy, one is doing something wrong. These two beliefs form the foundation of a system that has become so rampant in recent years that many people now feel any sign of unhappiness in their lives is a symptom of psychological or spiritual disorder.... The happiness mentality causes people to repress or deny many of their own negative feelings. It prohibits the rich experience of living through painful situations, of fully feeling and being in the sadness, grief, and fear that are natural parts of human existence. It fosters a pastel quality of life, with limited ranges of emotion.<sup>3</sup>

This cultural trend has only accelerated since May made those comments.

As a college counseling center director, I observe a caricature of this happiness mentality in the “culture of silence” discussed by journalist Katherine Sharpe. In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* article titled “Prozac Campus: The Next Generation,” she reported on interviews with students, researchers, and college counseling professionals and concluded that today’s college students, having grown up in a world with pills to address bad feelings, automatically assume that if they feel sad or anxious, they must be sick. So in the midst of the increasing pressure to compete, more of them seek to appear flawless, withholding more of their feelings from conversation lest they appear “sick.” Therefore, they suffer in silence among other silent sufferers, thinking that they alone hurt when, in fact, other sufferers surround them, keeping up the same façade. This inner pressure cooker and isolation contribute to the rising severity and intensity of mental health issues among college students. Acceptance of normal sadness, respect for feelings, destigmatization of emotional problems, and a community of listening friends and mentors would reverse this trend.<sup>4</sup>

## THE GOOD NEWS OF THE CROSS

Widespread shame over suffering concerns me as a psychotherapist and as a mere mortal, trying to muddle through. But it concerns me even more so as a Christian because this shame not only makes us miserable, it kinks our faith like a garden hose until the water of life cannot flow through. It breaks our Bible-reading glasses, and we miss the central symbol of our faith, the cross upon which our Savior suffered not only for us, but with us. God's Son suffers. God suffers. Should God be ashamed, too?

No. I think we gut the good news of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection in our defensiveness about suffering, our sense that suffering means we made a foolish mistake. We miss the call to abide here and now in God's loving reign over our hearts and in our broken world, a way that passes through suffering as God does.<sup>5</sup>

Yes, we often suffer as a natural consequence of moral error, bad judgment, or a mental lapse. And, yes, individual responsibility is important: We must own our errors, be accountable for them, and resolve our problems. We suffer, in part, because we cannot see the whole landscape as God does, and maybe if we did we might avoid a few wrong turns. But the conclusion that our foolishness and personal responsibility finish the story of our suffering only separates us from God because Jesus never asks us to avoid all suffering. Jesus challenges us to take up a cross and follow him. That means that oftentimes we will suffer for doing the right thing. It also means that even if we suffer from our own errors, we suffer with God, and faith entails trusting God to transform our suffering into glory—even when we have sinned. That is life under the reign of the God who is love.

This does not mean that God likes for us to suffer. God does not affirm suffering. God affirms the sufferer. And suffering faithfully means trusting that God will use our suffering, in whatever form and for whatever reason, to make us more loving, more like God.

Gerald May writes, "What may seem to us a severe weakness or incapacity may turn out to be a great strength when all the spiritual data are in. One would do well to remember the beatitudes in this regard."<sup>6</sup> That, in a nutshell, is the purpose of this book. Jesus starts his great Sermon on the Mount in Matthew with peculiar blessings not upon the clever, wealthy, or powerful folk who live in the illusory world that we call political and economic reality, but upon the humble, the compassionate, the



ones who have nothing or know that all they have amounts to nothing, that they utterly need God. He blesses those who know they don't have all the answers, those bereft of dreams or loved ones. He blesses those who suffer. It must have jolted his audience two millennia ago. If we really take it to heart, it should astonish us ten times more.

In this book, I offer meditations on the Beatitudes as they address the crucial paradox of living through our suffering on the way to joy, as the Beatitudes validate us in our suffering and invite us to find meaning by taking up our crosses and following Jesus Christ. The Beatitudes comprise a fine diamond with many facets, each facet sparkling brilliantly and exposing the deepest truths of Jesus's teachings. There are many other very good books on the Beatitudes, and I am indebted to their authors. Those books bring out how the Beatitudes open our eyes to Jesus's vision of God's kingdom, how society under God's reign should and will look. Others suggest that the Beatitudes form Christ's self-portrait, which we can keep before us as we try to imitate him. Still others find in the Beatitudes keys to a meaningful life. All these readings are completely valid. This book modestly places under the jeweler's lens one small facet among the many larger facets that other authors address so well—the small facet that reveals our identities as creatures bearing God's image even as we suffer. It reveals our dignity when we feel least dignified. Jesus cut that facet. I hope this book blows some of the dust off it.

For this book to do that, you, the reader, must join me in embracing a paradox about the Beatitudes: On the one hand, they hold before us the qualities of saints or of people who live faithfully in much more challenging circumstances than most of us know. I think especially of the final Beatitude that blesses those persecuted for righteousness's sake, for Jesus's sake, and we must admit that for most of us in America, such persecution is subtle if we experience it at all. In the face of this and the rest of the Beatitudes, we might with proper humility draw back from claiming their blessings.

On the other hand, God created us in God's image. I believe that in the Beatitudes Jesus calls something of that image out of us, calls us to claim the God-like goodness buried deep in some and near the surface among many. In his discussion of the Beatitude "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matthew 5:8), St. Gregory of Nyssa writes that in the

inner journey of faith, as we let go of the habits, addictions, and rebellions that impede our knowing God, we will find the image of God, will “see God” within ourselves.<sup>7</sup>

I suspect the author of the Letter of James has something like this in mind when he implores readers to “welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls” (James 1:21). The term “word” packs much meaning and power. It implies the good news of Jesus Christ’s saving acts, since it is often used synonymously with “gospel” in the Christian Scriptures. It implies that the Holy Spirit’s word that created the world (Genesis 1:1–2:4; John 1:1–18) resides in you, forming you and empowering you to love and serve. James urges you to “do the word,” as opposed to taking it for granted “like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like” (James 1:23b–24).

I believe that the Beatitudes describe your image, and if you dwell with them as you might a fine painting, you will see the truth of Jesus’s blessings for you. If you search your heart, you can find at least rudimentary elements of Christ-like poverty of spirit, or authentic mourning, or mercy, or even faithfulness in the face of adversity, that you may find yourself too unheroic to claim. This book will challenge you to find those elements within and to open your heart to God’s continuing creation of you as the blessed one you are. The following chapters will do that both through imagery and examples to sensitize you to those elements and through questions at the end of each chapter specifically designed to prompt reflection and perhaps discussion of the image of God within.

But can you do that in a state of emotional brokenness, when the mirror looks cracked and distorted? Ironically, the Beatitudes imply that your brokenness paves the royal road to knowing your fullness as God’s beloved child, created in God’s image. Your suffering, of which you may feel ashamed, for which you may blame yourself all too readily, will prove an avenue to joy if you respond to it with the courage and hope of faith. Henri Nouwen writes that this response to your brokenness has two components: “befriending” it and “putting it under the blessing.” Befriending it means not resigning yourself to pain as your fate, but accepting whatever you suffer at the time as part of your life or your very self. Moreover, it means trusting that God is doing something good through it, “that

everything we live, be it gladness or sadness, joy or pain, health or illness, can all be part of the journey toward the full realization of our humanity.”<sup>8</sup> You best take the journey with a spiritual companion who listens to you and respects both your pain and your faith.

“Putting our brokenness under the blessing” is the opposite of “living our brokenness under the curse,” which occurs when “we experience our pain as confirmation of negative feelings about ourselves,”<sup>9</sup> the shame and self-critical thoughts that keep us from hearing God calling us “Beloved,” Christ calling us “Blessed.” Nouwen continues:

But when we keep listening attentively to the voice calling us the Beloved, it becomes possible to live our brokenness, not as a confirmation of our fear that we are worthless, but as an opportunity to purify and deepen the blessing that rests upon us.... [G]reat and heavy burdens become light and easy when they are lived in the light of the blessing. What seemed intolerable becomes a challenge. What seemed a reason for depression becomes a source of purification. What seemed punishment becomes a gentle pruning. What seemed rejection becomes a way to a deeper communion.<sup>10</sup>

This harkens back to Gregory of Nyssa’s point that in the often painful work of relinquishing, detaching, and repenting, you clean the glass that reflects God’s image within you, and Nouwen implies that you don’t have to be an ascetic to do that. You can start with the suffering that life and faith give you, befriend it, and allow God to draw you nearer as you let go of alternatives and trust more and more in God’s blessing. Again, Nouwen notes:

And so the great task becomes that of allowing the blessedness to touch us in our brokenness. Then our brokenness will gradually come to be seen as an opening toward the full acceptance of ourselves as the Beloved. This explains why true joy can be experienced in the midst of great suffering. It is the joy of being disciplined, purified, and pruned. Just as the athletes who experience great pain as they run the race can, at the same time, taste the joy of knowing that they are coming closer to their goal, so also can the Beloved experience suffering as a way to the deeper communion for which they yearn. Here joy and sorrow are no longer

each other's opposites, but have become the two sides of the same desire to grow to the fullness of the Beloved.<sup>11</sup>

Jesus, I believe, offered the Beatitudes for a rich array of uses, one of which is to help us befriend our suffering and allow "blessedness to touch us in our brokenness." Think of this book you hold as a humble commentary and me as a companion once removed in using the Beatitudes for befriend-ing suffering and ushering in blessedness.

## BEING BLESSED

But what is this blessedness that Nouwen, and Jesus two millennia before him, bid us allow ourselves? What does it mean to be "blessed"? First of all, notice that it is a passive term. One receives blessing. One does not make it happen. Many read the Beatitudes as commandments to achieve poverty of spirit, meekness, mercy, and so forth, so one can claim the blessings that accompany them. Indeed, many read Matthew, which supplies our primary text of the Beatitudes, as a gospel that portrays Jesus as a second Moses and the Sermon on the Mount, opening with the Beatitudes, as his proclamation of the new law. Certainly, doing what we can to cultivate the virtues is a proper response to the Beatitudes.

Yet, I don't believe Jesus is asking us to start from scratch. I think he looks at his disciples and the crowds and sees many exemplars of the virtues he blesses. I think he sees the unabashedly needy, the grief-stricken, the humble, those starved for justice, and so forth, in the crowd, and he sees images of God before him, however fractured. So he declares them blessed, and offers his blessing free of charge.

Today he offers those blessings to you free of charge, and if you find that you fall short and need his help qualifying for the blessings, you've already arrived at the first one: You are poor in spirit, and he blesses you with nothing less than citizenship in God's kingdom. The only way to miss with the Beatitudes is to dismiss them. You need only loosen your grip and let the virtues within breathe, let your hands receive. The main obstacle to doing that is incredulity: How can anyone believe that the Creator of the universe actually wants to give all those blessings to me, not to mention all eight billion of us?

The short answer is that God is love, and God christens you, the beloved. In *Life of the Beloved*, Nouwen contrasts blessing with the curses that replay

in most of our minds all too often, clever questions and assertions that undermine our openness to believing in and receiving God's love.<sup>12</sup> Resignation in the face of the torrent of bad news in the media, impossible standards we proudly and bitterly require of ourselves in half-truths like "You are not special," and countless more thoughts and attitudes curse us by keeping our fists clenched as God offers love, and bestows our true identity as God's beloved. Nouwen asks, "How to hear and claim the blessing?" He answers with the practice of prayer that listens in silence for God and the practice of gratitude. Neither practice answers the question with something discursive we can store among our ideas, but with something that awakens us to the lived experience of God's love and blessing upon us.<sup>13</sup> We will discuss such practices in each chapter.

If our human experience of love reflects God's love at all, then God wishes us well. Love wishes well. That is another dimension of what blessing means. In the Beatitudes, Jesus carries to us the message that God wishes us well, and that is no small thing. God doesn't have to do that. Yet, scripture repeats time and again that "God's steadfast love endures forever," and while mystery shrouds God and God's love, we cannot imagine love without well-wishing, and we cannot imagine Christ's life, death, and resurrection without his obvious well-wishing.

Beware of reducing well-wishing to mere sentiment, to a greeting card that brings a smile before we promptly throw it away. Well-wishing carries freight. Consider your well-wishes for those you love, and if it seems like a while since you experienced that, try closing your eyes and wishing well someone you like, then someone you don't like, then yourself. Buddhists call this compassion meditation, and it only bolsters Christian faith to practice it. It might seem silly or embarrassing at first, but it pumps your soul with healing power.

Then consider the healing power of receiving the well-wishes of someone else, if you dare. If you find receiving well-wishes too embarrassing or threatening in some way, take a deep breath and receive them anyway because if you cannot receive the well-wishes of a mortal, you will have even more difficulty receiving them from God. Think of the people in your life whom God sends to wish you well, and let yourself receive. That will prepare you to receive God's well-wishes in the Beatitudes.<sup>14</sup>

Well-wishes are subjective—not *merely* subjective, as if well-wishing accounted for little, but richly subjective in the sense that they do more than convey pleasant notions. Blessings make things happen and give us perspective to see the results, however dimly, upon hearing or speaking the blessing. We ask a religious leader to bless our child or our house, and we believe something happens; the nature of the child or the house changes in some mysterious way. The blessing leaves God’s stamp, marks it for God’s care in a special way.

So this is an additional dimension of blessing: Blessing changes things, alters reality, makes something or everything new. Jesus blesses one who mourns, and the comfort he promises will come even if it doesn’t come right away. He plants the seed for comfort, and he waters it with himself, the Water of Life. Disbelief in this objective quality of blessing stems from an assumption that the reality defined by secular interests, the powerful, and those anxious to secure their lives by their own hands is the only reality. Embracing God’s blessing through the Beatitudes takes the courage of conviction that God’s reign is the deep reality of our lives, the reality that lasts, the reality in which we are loved despite all appearances to the contrary.

To the sufferer, to those in emotional pain, God’s blessings in the Beatitudes carry the good news that healing is underway. It is real, planted, growing in God’s time. We can receive God’s well-wishes and let them revive and heal us moment by moment. And we don’t have to do anything to qualify for them but admit that we need God’s blessings and can only gain them by asking, not by achieving.

Blessing carries more implications for the sufferer. When Jesus said “Blessed,” the Hebrew Scriptures undoubtedly affected his meaning. One Hebrew term for blessed is *ashre*, which implies not only good fortune, but being on the right track.<sup>15</sup> In the world of competition, acquisition, and escape, the qualities Jesus praises in the Beatitudes might make us feel off track. The meek see the wicked prosper and wonder if they are off track themselves. Mourners wonder if they should love again. Peacemakers see ongoing violence and wonder if they are wasting their talent and energy. But in these blessings, Jesus assures us that we are on the right track in God’s reality, even if we seem hopelessly lost in the reality defined by worldly success.

Blessed are those who feel weak and defeated, for they are on the right track. Audacious? Maybe. But for Easter people, seizing that promise amid emotional pain is more than therapeutic. It is the first step out of the empty tomb and into a new life.

## THE PARADOX OF SUFFERING AND JOY

So the paradox of the Beatitudes deepens: the promise that God most blesses those least likely to seem blessed in this world's terms, that those with the most reason to feel insecure have the most solid security, and that those who feel most off track walk the right track. Being blessed runs much deeper than being happy; indeed, "happiness" connotes the pleasures that come with good circumstances. Translations of the Beatitudes that replace the word "blessed" with "happy" water them down. We'd best reserve the term "happy" for the pleasure we can gain at the moment in secular life. It doesn't last, and it doesn't satisfy our deepest yearnings. If you suffer emotionally and berate yourself for lacking happiness, perhaps expecting too little out of life—expecting happiness instead of blessedness—contributes to the problem.

The Beatitudes promise more than mere happiness. They promise joy. Gerald May elaborates on the distinction between happiness and joy in his discussion of the happiness mentality. Insofar as we may succeed temporarily in living up to the standard of happiness by repressing or avoiding emotional pain, he writes,

Some shallow condition of "happiness" may be achieved in this way, but joy is altogether out of the question. Most of us know that prohibiting agony in the experience of life must also prohibit joy. To try to accomplish one without the other is to dilute both the experience and the meaning of life. But the happiness mentality can overcome this knowledge, convince us that sadness is unhealthy, and cause us to bridle all our feelings. At best, this watered-down existence takes on a "Pollyanna" atmosphere, denying the negativity of life. At its worst, it sinks into apathy, denying life itself.<sup>16</sup>

If you suffer emotionally, you can numb the pain and find creature comforts, temporary happiness. That is not always bad in itself, but if you suffer

with faith, the Beatitudes serve notice that your suffering can actually open a window of opportunity, a chance to know God and discern God's will more clearly. The Greek term for "blessed" in Matthew's text is *makarios*, which the Greeks used to describe the immortality of the gods and their invulnerability to fate. In *The Ladder of the Beatitudes*, Orthodox writer and peace activist Jim Forest writes, "In Christian use, *makarios* came increasingly to mean sharing in the life of God, the ultimate joy, a happiness without the fault lines of happenstance running through it. There is no higher gift."<sup>17</sup> Joy comes in communion with God, and God meets us in all of reality, not selected parts. Specifically, God touches us through all of our emotional experience, not just the pleasant feelings.

A great and powerful mystery of Christian experience is how Christ meets us in our suffering, how we see the face of God precisely when it seems that God must not exist or at least must not really love us. In fact, God's coming to us in our anxiety predates the Christ event, as when anxious Jacob sees the face of God in that of his forgiving brother, Esau (Genesis 33:1–12) and when God ministers to Elijah in his depression (1 Kings 19:1–18) and speaks to him in a still, small voice (v. 12 RSV). But the Beatitudes tell us that God does not just visit patriarchs and prophets, but even the humble, the nameless, those who bear burdens of emotional pain.

Yet, God does not call us to retire to our rooms with a small consolation of blessedness. God calls us to face our pain together and to meet the world with the assurance that God sends us to show our light, not hide it under a bushel basket. We do not receive the blessings of Christ gratefully if we wallow in self-absorption. We receive the blessings of Christ if we nurture them by loving him, by loving his children, and by joining his disciples in following him. The virtues will not thrive without love.

So the paradox of the Beatitudes for faithful people in pain comes full circle. Whatever wound you carry, God blesses you through it. God makes you strong. Not one to speak of God or endorse anything smacking of religion, the novelist Ernest Hemingway, amid dark musings, nevertheless coined a well-known phrase that intimates this mystery when he wrote in *A Farewell to Arms*: "The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places."<sup>18</sup> I have always been grateful for those harsh words of hope. For those who believe in God, they are no less true, but we add a word stronger than "strong": When life breaks us, we are "blessed" at



the broken places. Jesus spells out that blessing in the Beatitudes. Think of this book as a fellow traveler's footnotes on his words.

When the "thorn in his flesh" brought him to his knees, Paul made the point as crisply and succinctly as possible, quoting Christ: "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). Name your pain, be it need, grief, humiliation, injustice, loneliness, conflict all around, a dark night, or persecution. Dare to claim the blessings that Christ offers. Follow him. A power from beyond you will move you, and you will find your true self and live God's purpose for your life.

## Reflection Questions for Claiming the Blessing Within

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1. The Beatitudes offer Jesus's pithy and counterintuitive promises that those who feel lost are on the right track, those who feel weak will find strength, those who feel alienated will arrive home, and so forth. Without looking at the Beatitudes themselves, imagine a hopeful promise from God, the fulfillment of which would astound you, fill you with gratitude, and make you eager to give the same to everyone else. Write it down and keep it tucked in this book, perhaps on a scrap-paper bookmark. After reading each chapter and doing the exercises:
  - a. Read that promise and mentally note or journal on how you feel about it in light of the Beatitude. What do the similarities and differences between your initial hope and the promise in the Beatitude say about your spirit? What changes do you see in that initial hope—whether deepening it, revising it, or rejecting it? What do those changes mean to you?
  - b. Did you find it difficult to imagine such a promise to you from God? Too difficult to do 1.a above? Reflecting on your inner obstacles and naming them can be even more fruitful. Note mentally or in a journal those inner obstacles. Name them and keep those names tucked in this book. After each chapter, review those obstacles and journal or reflect on how they have changed. As you find them loosening their grip, go back and try 1.a.
  - c. If you do this exercise in a group, it is better to check in with people on their experience with this after reading each chapter. Do not

pressure participants to share the hopeful promises they imagine unless they are ready, and do not try to fix or change anyone's response. This is a very introspective exercise, so respect everyone's privacy.

2. Coming to terms with painful feelings in a culture that often pressures us to avoid them is a critical challenge of this book.
  - a. Recall a time when you found it difficult to accept your feelings of distress. What attitudes did you perceive in others that contributed to the rejection of your feelings? What attitudes of your own contributed to that rejection? What was your experience of God then?
  - b. Now recall a time when you felt open to your feelings of distress. What attitudes of others may have helped you feel safe to feel them? What attitude of your own helped? What was your experience of God then?

Explore in your journal or in group discussion the differences and similarities between your answers in 2.a and 2.b. If you do not feel comfortable sharing with the group the situations that gave rise to the feelings, you need only name the feelings, the attitudes toward them, and your experiences of God. Simply listen to each other without seeking to fix or challenge another's perspective.



## 1

# THE BEGGARS WILL HAVE IT ALL

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## POVERTY OF SPIRIT AND THE PRACTICE OF GRATITUDE

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### Reflection Questions for Claiming the Blessing Within

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1. This chapter begins with three exemplars of poverty of spirit: the recovering addict Mark, who daily admits his powerlessness over alcohol and his need for God to restore him to sanity; blind Bartimaeus, who from his blindness, poverty, and low status cries out to Jesus for help; and the father of the epileptic boy, who not only asks Jesus for help in an impossible predicament but for help in overcoming religious doubt. With whom among these characters do you most identify? Reflect on someone else you know whose awareness of her dependence on God sets her on the path of a closer walk with God. How are you like that person?
2. In his examen prayer, which we will discuss more in chapter 4, St. Ignatius of Loyola prescribes starting the examination of the day by thanking God for very specific blessings that come to heighten our sensitivity to God's love. The contemporary psychologist Robert Emmons recommends a daily practice of making a gratitude list for its therapeutic effects. If you already formally practice gratitude daily, by setting aside such a time, how has it changed you? If you do not, give it a try for a month. Reflect, journal, and discuss with others how it influences your daily experience of God.
3. This chapter critiques rigid cultural expectations for individual self-sufficiency as being an obstacle to grateful recognition of your dependence

on God. How have those expectations from others and yourself played out in your life? Recall times when you let go of those expectations in major or minor ways, and discuss or simply reflect on how that felt. How did God respond?



## 2

# RESPECT YOUR SUFFERING

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## MOURNING AND THE PRACTICE OF TELLING YOUR STORY

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### Reflection Questions for Claiming the Blessing Within

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1. Reflect and journal on your recovery from a significant loss, preferably one from which you have had time to gain perspective. How did it influence your life story? How did it challenge or nourish your faith? What grieving challenges, if any, remain?
2. Recall Kathleen O'Connor's observation that Daughter Zion in Lamentations cries out for witnesses to her pain. Consider the loss in question 1. What witnesses respected and tried to validate your experience? Search your memory for other losses and painful experiences, and recall those who served as respectful, validating witnesses. If necessary, expand further to your imagination, and include well-known saints of compassion like Mother Teresa or others known only to you. Imagine all these people gathered with you in a comfortable room. Imagine them one by one telling you how they understand your suffering and how you bless them with your response to your pain. What are they teaching you about your faith? What do they say that comforts you?
3. Review this chapter's comments about and retelling of the stories of Elijah, Job, Daughter Zion and the strong man in Lamentations, and Jesus's passion. In light of the loss and recovery you explored in questions 1 and 2, how does your experience resonate with the experience of

these archetypal biblical figures? What do their stories reveal about the sacredness of your story?



## 3

# THE HUMBLE MAKE IT HOME

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## MEEKNESS AND PRACTICES OF WILLINGNESS AND GENTLENESS

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### Reflection Questions for Claiming the Blessing Within

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1. On page 39, we discuss humility as knowing “our limitations next to the unlimited God, our poverty next to the abundance of God, our sinfulness next to the relentless and unconditional love of God,” as well as knowing “ourselves beloved next to the God who is love, gifted next to the God who made us good, and Christ-like next to the God who dared share our predicament through the Son.” Open to two facing pages in a notebook, and write this heading on the left page: “Limitations, Poverty, and Sinfulness.” On the right page, write the heading “Beloved, Gifted, and Christ-like.” List aspects of yourself on each page appropriate to the page’s heading. (If you wish, you may experiment with naming a personal quality on the left that corresponds as the flip side of a quality on the right.) You may choose to return to this several times as you come up with new ideas or corrections. Show your list to a trusted person or two in your life, and if you are doing this in a group, you may share it with the group if that feels appropriate. On which side did you find it easier to list personal qualities? Do you struggle to accept feedback from others? If so, name the emotions and describe the experience of that struggle. Finally, take time to pray with this list, offering each listed quality to God with the phrase, “Here am I, Lord, your beloved. Have mercy on me.” Afterward, write in your journal any insights or significant experiences you recall from this prayer.

2. This chapter offers a yoga instructor (Lydia), nonviolent resisters (like Martin Luther King Jr. and his followers), a solid citizen committed to a life of service (Fred), St. Francis of Assisi, and Jesus as understood through the servant songs of Isaiah of the Exile as exemplars of meekness who live in alignment with God by exercising their strength with disciplined gentleness. Who sets this kind of example in your life? How do you follow that example?
3. Recall Frederick Buechner's words, quoted on page 47: "I also know the sense of sadness and lostness that comes with feeling that you are a stranger and exile on the earth and that you would travel to the ends of that earth and beyond if you thought you could ever find that homeland that up till now you have only glimpsed from afar." If this statement resonates at all with you, what situations prompt that sense in you? At those times, what deep value (or values) of yours does that sense express? How does this value strengthen your alignment with God?





4

# THE DESIRE TO PLEASE GOD WILL PLEASE GOD

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HUNGERING AND THIRSTING  
FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS AND THE  
PRACTICE OF DISCERNMENT

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## Reflection Questions for Claiming the Blessing Within

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1. On page 60, we examined the paradox that hungering and thirsting for righteousness are in one sense, the easiest virtues to find in yourself and in another sense, the hardest. It is easy as long as you can recognize what James Howell calls, “this hollowness inside,” what Augustine calls, “restlessness until we find rest in God.” It is a yearning to more fully commune with God, a yearning to feel closer. Recall a recent situation that alerted you to that restlessness or hollowness. What did you feel? How did you respond? How does it feel to consider that restlessness or hollowness “being filled”? Does reflection on that situation and your feelings about it shed light on any resistance you have to desire God more? Share your experience with trusted friends and ask them to share similar experiences. You will likely find that you are not alone.
2. Job was discussed as a prototype for the righteous person whose outward rightness sprang from an inner stance of humility and poverty of spirit before God. That inner stance came out into the open only when all rewards for rightness were lost and Job found himself emotionally abandoned by his wife and his friends and confronted by God. In contemporary

parlance, we might say he hit rock bottom and God met him there. Whom do you know—and it could be you yourself—who landed in that place? Having read the understanding of righteousness laid out in this chapter, how do you see righteousness come to light in that person’s story? If the person is not you, what similar response to God do you see in yourself?

3. Try praying the examen once or twice daily, and journal your experience for a week or so. While Ignatius of Loyola developed the prayer, here is my summary:
  - a. Open your heart to God’s loving presence. It may help to pray, “Lord, have mercy on me” or “I come before you in the light of your love.” Savor whatever sense may come of God’s love for you.
  - b. Recall at least three blessings of the day, or since you last prayed the examen, and thank God for them. This will heighten your sense of God’s love.
  - c. Recall a moment during the day when you felt closer to God than usual, often a moment of inner peace (consolation). It could be in a conversation, a moment of silent peace, a sad or beautiful sight, whatever comes. (The gratitude list often helps with this.) Accept it as a touch from God, and reflect on what God may have been saying to you through it.
  - d. Recall a moment when you felt more distant from God, perhaps a moment of irritability or harsh judgment, a moment of doubt or fear, almost always a moment of inner discord when you didn’t feel quite yourself (desolation). Name a temptation or test you may have been facing, and if you believe in an enemy to your beloved self, consider what lie that enemy may have been telling you. Turn in prayer to God for guidance, in the truth and the light of God’s love for you.
  - e. Consider the implications of God’s leading from your reflection on blessings, consolations, and desolations, always keeping in mind that God loves you and will never leave you. Resolve to walk more closely with God in light of what you learned.

Again, you may wish to journal your answers to these questions for a week or so, and then try the prayer silently only when the rhythm of it becomes natural for

you. What obstacles do you face as you follow this prayer process? What freedom do you find? How does it affect your relationship with God?



5

# COMPASSION WILL ECLIPSE ABANDONMENT

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## MERCY AND THE PRACTICE OF DEEP LISTENING

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### Reflection Questions for Claiming the Blessing Within

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1. A quotation of Henri Nouwen in this chapter concludes:

Keep reminding yourself that your feelings of being unwelcome do not come from God and do not tell the truth. The Prince of Darkness wants you to believe that your life is a mistake and that there is no home for you. But every time you allow these thoughts to affect you, you set out on the road to self-destruction. So you have to keep unmasking the lie and think, speak, and act according to the truth that you are very, very welcome.<sup>25</sup>

Recall a time (perhaps now) when thoughts of being unwelcome plagued you. Write down those thoughts. Imagine that a friend confesses those thoughts to you. How do you imagine yourself helping your friend “unmask the lie” and realize that she or he is “very, very welcome”? What makes it more difficult to do that for yourself? What do you need to overcome that obstacle?

2. Jesus’s words, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40), moved Mother Teresa in her great ministry among the poorest of the poor in Calcutta and moved me in my fledgling ministry in telephone

counseling as a teenager. The verse suggests that we encounter Christ in extending mercy to the very suffering people whom a competitive society marginalizes, the least likely people to go to if we want face time with a “king.” Recall some of the most surprising places where you found yourself sensing Christ’s presence and people with whom you shared that experience. What part did mercy play in those experiences? What spiritual desire did you bring to the situation? And what did you take away?

3. The final sections of this chapter explore deep listening as a spiritual practice that nourishes the listener, even as the listener ministers to another. The listener grows more contemplative through letting go of judgmentalism, of ego, and of fixing. Recall a recent or especially memorable instance of your letting go as you listened to another. Or if you experience such letting go in exercising another ministry skill, consider a recent or memorable instance of letting go as you offered that care. How did the experience nurture your soul? How was it like prayer?

## 6

# LET GO TO GET WHAT YOU WANT

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## PURITY OF HEART AND THE PRACTICE OF CENTERING PRAYER

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### Reflection Questions for Claiming the Blessing Within

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1. Complete this sentence with three to five answers: I don't know what I would do without my \_\_\_\_\_. The answers could be material possessions, personal qualities, relationships, rights and privileges, anything you cherish. Imagine for each how you would relate to God without it. What would you pray? How would you live your faith? Next come back to where you are in life, claiming these things as yours. How can you love God in the way you relate to them?
2. Recall James Howell's words: "The phone rings in the middle of the night, or the doctor informs you that 'it is malignant,' or someone runs a red light. Suddenly your calendar, which loomed over you as a relentless taskmaster just moments before, flies out the window and nothing else matters but the one thing.... Purity of heart is to will one thing." Recall a crisis event in your life when "suddenly your calendar ... flies out the window and nothing else matters but the one thing." What did you learn about yourself in that situation? What did you learn about your capacity to love?
3. The practice of centering prayer received much attention in this chapter as a practice of clearing away mental dross and returning to a single-minded intention to forge a connection with God. But other ways were mentioned, such as confession of sins, quiet self-examination,

ongoing attention to God in daily activities, or mantra prayers like the Jesus Prayer. All of these prayers, in various ways, are purifying and centering. If you have ever regularly practiced such a prayer, what drew you to it? What made it difficult to sustain, whether you continue the practice or not? Considering the whole of the practice or significant moments in it, what blessing or learning did you receive from God? If you have never practiced such a prayer, what intrigues you about it? What concerns you?





7

# REACHING OUT FROM LONELINESS

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## PEACEMAKING AND THE PRACTICE OF FORGIVENESS

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### Reflection Questions for Claiming the Blessing Within

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1. Recall times when you felt lonely or, if not lonely, then stressed or in any kind of pain. Specifically, recall a time when you addressed the distress by seeking absence of conflict by going to a relaxing place or savoring an indulgence. Then recall a time when you addressed the distress by reaching out to another and made a connection through reconciliation for support. Compare and contrast these experiences. How did the relaxing place or indulgence help? If it fell short in any way, how? How did reaching out help? If it fell short in any way, how? Considering both of these experiences, complete this sentence in your own words: I know I found peace when \_\_\_\_\_. Use that sentence to consider how to respond to a lonely or otherwise distressing predicament you face currently. If you are studying this with a group, share with others your way of knowing you found peace and how you intend to apply it.

2. Recall a time when you stepped out of your comfort zone to support an individual or class of people whom you could easily ignore with no social consequence or judgment from others. What drew you to their need? What doubts or fears did you face? What resistance, if any, did you face from others? How did the experience change you?
  
3. Reflect on the three peacemakers presented in this chapter: my mother, who reached across wide economic and racial lines to forge relationships in a Southern community a half-century ago; the patriarch Joseph, who forgave his brothers for selling him into slavery; and Jared, who forgave and reached out for my forgiveness and my friendship. Briefly write down or tell the story of a peacemaker you know. How does this person ease the stress of conflict? How does this person restore relationships? How does this person's example affect your choices and actions?



8

# COSTLY GRACE FOR THE REST OF US

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## FACING THE FIRE IN A LIFE OF LOVE

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### Reflection Questions for Claiming the Blessing Within

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1. This chapter opens with reflections on how I experienced the decline and fall of my first marriage. Despite much hard work and loving intentions, it seemed the harder we tried, the more we suffered. Think of a predicament that you could not bring to a good resolution despite your best efforts and intentions. What did you learn from that experience? How did your faith change? What did God do in that situation? Or if that is not clear, what do you hope God is doing?
2. In your own words, write in a sentence or a brief paragraph answers to these questions:
  - a. What is my truth, the truth for which I am willing to die?
  - b. What is the peace for which I hope, and how do I imagine it?

Take your time, days if necessary. Write answers, put them away, and come back to them later to see if they still work. When you are satisfied that you have the answers that work for you now, explore the relationship between your answers. Do they seem related or unrelated? How? When have you lived your truth most fully? How did you experience peace and conflict then? Under what circumstances did you hold your truth back, if you ever did? How did you experience peace and conflict then?

3. Bonhoeffer teaches that God assigns every person who follows Christ a cross. For some, that cross entails subtle sufferings in daily life, while for others, it entails violent death, as it did for Jesus. But through detachment and forgiveness, we can practice this dying daily and experience a little more freedom. Reflect on your experiences of detachment and on other experiences of forgiving others. Does one come easier for you than the other? Why? How do you experience freedom? How do you experience love?

## CONCLUSION

# TAKING UP YOUR PAIN AND FOLLOWING CHRIST

## Reflection Questions for Claiming the Blessing Within

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1. The first question I posed in the Reflection Questions in the introduction suggested that you “imagine a hopeful promise from God the fulfillment of which would astound you, fill you with gratitude, and make you eager to give the same to everyone else.” It further suggested that you write that hopeful promise down, keep it tucked in this book, and revisit it with each chapter, noting how you and your hope changed as you read. Also, you were encouraged to note difficulties you faced in this process and what you learned about yourself through them. Now that you have reached the end of this book, write a final statement of that hopeful promise and a brief narrative on how you see yourself in light of that promise and the Beatitudes. Did reading this book and working with the questions enhance the original hope or change it altogether? How? Did it enhance your image of yourself or change it altogether? How? Share your answer to these questions with your study group or an individual you trust who supports your faith.
2. Early in this chapter you read examples of lies about you that each Beatitude counters. Those lies discourage respect for your suffering and make you feel unworthy of God’s love and special calling for you. As you read that list or as you read the book, what lie or lies sounded most familiar to you? Which Beatitude or Beatitudes answer those lies for you? What spiritual practice or practices can help you take that answer to heart every day?
3. This chapter concluded with an imaginary account of people Jesus saw in the crowd as he delivered the Beatitudes. It suggests that the people

standing before him who were actually poor in spirit, mourning, meek, and the like prompted him by their presence as he spoke. With which character in the crowd did you identify most? Why? Close your eyes and imagine Jesus looking at you with love and speaking the Beatitude he spoke to that character. What feelings arise? If insights arise with them, note them. Share your experience with a group or someone you trust who will listen without trying to discount or challenge the experience.

