

Nine Days with the Beatitudes: **Blessed are You**

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A Retreat Experience

A retreat is a time out with self and God. It can be of almost any length and for Catholics Lent is a good time to make a retreat. This self-directed retreat is designed for busy people to be able to reflect on and renew their own lives and their relationship to both God and others. It is centered on the beatitudes of Jesus and is designed for a half hour to one hour of prayer and reflection over a span of nine days. It can be used by an individual or in small groups.

Since the retreat is designed around nine days it can also be understood as a novena. In Catholic spirituality and piety, a novena (from the Latin novum, meaning nine) is a public or private devotion repeated nine times.

Introduction

In the production *Fiddler on the Roof*, the rabbi is asked if there is a blessing for a sewing machine and for the Czar of Russia. He responds that of course there is. Jesus, himself a rabbi, utters a variety of blessings, the beatitudes. They are presented in both Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's Gospel (5:3-10) and his Sermon on the Plain in Luke's Gospel (6:20-26).

While the beatitudes tell us what our rewards will be if we live a life in accord with God we need to be cautious in our understanding of the word "blessed." In the beatitudes, "blessed" should not be equated with a particular emotion. To be blessed is not necessarily to feel good. The biblical understanding of being blessed is to be set aside for a specific purpose. It is to know that you are doing something right and in accord with God and to persevere in the midst of what may not always feel like blessedness or happiness.

In general, the beatitudes use two verbs: *are* and *will*. Each beatitude begins in the present tense—"blessed *are*..."---and moves to the future tense---"for they *will*..." The present tense indicates that the beatitudes are expressions of what is already true about the Christian community. The move to the future tense in the beatitudes indicates that the life of the kingdom must wait for ultimate validation until God finishes the new creation. So blessed are those who live this life now, even when such a life seems foolish, for they in the end will be vindicated by God.

Day One

Opening Ritual: Light a candle. Prepare the room for prayer. Quiet music can help. Open your Bible to Matthew Chapter Five. Trace with your thumb the sign of the cross on your open Bible and on your forehead.

Prayer

Loving and compassionate God help me to recognize and deal with my human limitations and realize that only you can provide for my eternal reward. Amen.

Theme For the Day: Recognizing Human Limitations

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”(Matthew 5:3; see Luke 6:20)

In uttering this beatitude, Jesus is not supporting a socioeconomic class, as if it were an automatic “in” to heaven. Nor is Jesus condemning every rich person or nation. He is not pronouncing blessed the people sleeping on grates, under bridges, in cardboard boxes or eating at a soup kitchen. Rather, Jesus wanted everyone to see their total dependence before God. Beatitudes are addressed to everyone who has thrown their lot in with Jesus. They too are poor in spirit; realizing and admitting that they are destitute before God and without God. They have nothing to give God, but God has everything to give them, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The “kingdom of heaven,” is not some far off place in the sky, but rather the indwelling presence and reign of God in the hearts and minds of those who seek to follow in the footsteps of his son Jesus.

The poor in spirit have a proper understanding of their human limitations and weaknesses and their inability to provide for their own eternal reward. In addition, “to be poor in spirit,” is to be willing to be self-giving for the sake of a greater good than my own. It is allowing me to give up something that I might otherwise enjoy, for the sake of the service to and care of others. The “poor in spirit” are neither self aggrandizing nor self centered but are at ease relating to the marginal people of the world.

Reflection Questions

How can I better recognize and live with my limitations?

Do I recognize my own dependence on God?

How am I preparing for God’s indwelling presence in my own life?

Closing Prayer

God, I thank you for this time spent with you. Help me to become poor in spirit by better relating to you and to everyone with whom I come in contact.

Day Two

Opening Ritual: Light a candle. Prepare the room for prayer. Quiet music can help. Open your Bible to Matthew Chapter Five. Trace with your thumb the sign of the cross on your open Bible and on your forehead.

Prayer

Jesus, you mourned when your friend Lazarus died and you mourned and cried over the city of Jerusalem. Help me to better understand and accept my own mourning as part of being your disciple. Amen.

Theme for the Day: Mourning is part of being human.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5:4; see Luke 6:21b)

The second beatitude speaks of comfort. This recalls the comfort the prophet Isaiah gives to the people of Zion when mourning the destruction of the temple (Isa 61:1-3). It also points forward in the Gospel of Matthew to the women who perform the rites of mourning for Jesus surrounding his death (Matthew 26:6-13; 27:55-56, 61; 28:1-10).

Jesus, being a Jew, prayed the Psalms. He knew that those basking in success are rarely as much in tune with their need for God as those who suffer and mourn. The psalmist says, “God is close to the brokenhearted and those who are crushed in spirit he saves” (Psalm 34:19). Those who mourn are typically more compassionate toward others. Jesus is talking about more than just mourning over a loved one’s death. He realizes that we need to mourn over lack of food for the starving, the injustices done to the powerless, the denial of human dignity through racism, bigotry, addiction, verbal and physical abuse. All of this we are called to mourn over and in our mourning God will comfort us.

People mourn all the time. People who are trapped in addictive behaviors mourn. People who lose loved ones, who live with chronic pain, who have lost loving relationships, mourn. People who have lost jobs, or who have been the senseless victims of circumstances like violent crime, automobile accidents or natural disasters mourn. Part of the very fiber of being human is to mourn. Part of the very essence of God is to comfort those who mourn. “Comfort, O comfort my people says your God” (Isaiah 40:1).

Reflection Questions

When do I mourn? For whom do I mourn? Why do I mourn? When have I failed to mourn? When have I felt God’s presence in times of mourning?

Closing Prayer

God grant me the comfort I need as I mourn and grieve the losses in my life. Help me to feel you wipe away every tear from my eyes. Amen

Day Three

Opening Ritual: Light a candle. Prepare the room for prayer. Quiet music can help. Open your Bible to Matthew Chapter Five. Trace with your thumb the sign of the cross on your open Bible and on your forehead.

Prayer

Ever present God, help me to discover what it really means to be meek.

Theme for the Day: Meekness is not weakness

“Blessed are the meek, they will inherit the land [earth]” (Matthew 5:5)

This Beatitude reminds us immediately of Psalm 37:11, “the meek shall inherit the land.” The beatitude does not teach disciples to be wimps or shrinking violets; rather the Greek word for meek *praeis* connotes those who are not overly impressed by their own self-importance. It carries the notion of people who are appropriately humble and considerate of others what might better be understood by the English word “gentle.” Truly meek people don’t throw their weight around. They are gentle, but with firm faith.

Jesus is the model of the one who is “meek and humble of heart.” Matthew sees Jesus fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah about God’s Servant (see Matt 12:19-20). Like God’s Servant in Isaiah and Jesus in Matthew, the meek can restrain their anger; they can be tolerant.

The meek, understood as the “gentle ones” know that this world is not all about “me” and what I can get and what I can take from others. The meek know that they live in the midst of others and not just all by themselves or for themselves. They understand themselves to be connected to a community that is bigger than self. No person is an island and it is a real blessing to be connected to others even if that becomes messy. The “land” that the meek inherit is not a piece of real-estate but rather a community of people, who are created in God’s image and likeness and who constitute the real holy land. It is in that land that the meek pilgrimage daily.

Reflection Questions

*Does being meek mean that I am powerless? What actions lead me to inherit the earth?
How will I practice those actions?*

Closing Prayer

God, allow everyone of my caring and loving actions today to be an example of the inheritance I have received from you. Amen.

Day Four

Opening Ritual: Light a candle. Prepare the room for prayer. Quiet music can help. Open your Bible to Matthew Chapter Five. Trace with your thumb the sign of the cross on your open Bible and on your forehead.

Prayer

God, you who satisfy the hungry and thirsty be with me in my parched and starving times. Fill me with your presence today. Satisfy my every hunger and thirst. Amen.

Theme for the Day: For whom do I thirst and hunger?

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”
(Matthew 5:6; see Luke 6:21a)

In the fourth beatitude there is an allusion to Psalm 107:5, 8-9 in which God satisfies those who hunger and thirst. Matthew adds here one of his key Gospel terms “righteousness” (see also 1:19; 3:15; 6:33), that is right relation with God, self, others, and all creation. Disciples are to actively “hunger and thirst” for righteousness as just described. Such hunger and thirst is sated by faithfulness to the demands of the covenant into which followers of Jesus have been incorporated through baptism.

God has been described as that toward which our deepest desires are oriented. Often the restlessness and longing we experience in life is a desire to be in touch with God. We then come to realize what a blessing is such a hunger and thirst. St. Augustine put it this way: “Our hearts are restless O Lord until they rest in you.”

Reflection Questions

For what or whom do I hunger?

For what or whom do I thirst?

Closing Prayer

God, I thank you for filling me with your presence today. Help me to constantly drink your life-giving water and eat your nutritious food especially at the celebration of the Eucharist. Amen

Day Five

Opening Ritual: Light a candle. Prepare the room for prayer. Quiet music can help. Open your Bible to Matthew Chapter Five. Trace with your thumb the sign of the cross on your open Bible and on your forehead.

Prayer

Merciful God, help me to practice mercy toward everyone I encounter today and throughout my life. Amen.

Theme for the Day: Developing the virtues of mercy and compassion

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” (Matthew 5:7)

Mercy belongs to the very nature of God in the Old Testament. God says: “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (Exodus 33:19). And again, “the Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious” (Exodus 34:6). But at the same time God expects people to forgive each other. Psalm 37:21 speaks of the just showing mercy. Mercy is the correct criterion for the observance of the Law (*Torah*) in Matthew. God wants mercy and not empty rituals (Matt 9:13; 12:7). Jesus lists mercy, as central to the proper interpretation of the Law (Matthew 23:23).

Mercy and compassion are two sides of the same coin. To be compassionate is to enter into suffering with another. It is not feeling sorry for them. Mercy and compassion call me out of myself, to forgive when I don't have to; to be present to those who need me when I could choose otherwise. Sometimes a person can suffer a lot precisely for being compassionate and merciful. Such a person may be accused at times as being “soft” or failing to exact proper punishment of the wrong doer. But this is the pattern that has been shown to us by Jesus who was killed for being merciful and forgiving.

Reflection Questions

When have I practiced mercy? When have I received it?

Closing Prayer

Gracious, compassionate and merciful God, help me to experience your merciful power today in my own life and in the lives of those whom I meet. Amen

Day Six

Opening Ritual: Light a candle. Prepare the room for prayer. Quiet music can help. Open your Bible to Matthew Chapter Five. Trace with your thumb the sign of the cross on your open Bible and on your forehead.

Prayer

God, you who know the movement of every heart move mine to be open to you daily. Amen.

Theme for the Day: Developing a swollen heart for God

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.” (Matthew 5:8)

The “heart” is the center of emotions, feelings, moods, and passions according to the Bible. A swollen heart breeds arrogance (Isaiah 9:9), which is in marked contrast to the gentle and lowly heart of Jesus. He says: “take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” (Matthew 11:29).

The “heart” from a biblical perspective also represents a formed conscience. To request for a pure heart is a desire for a new and more perfect conscience (Psalm 51:10). Within the heart, human beings meet God’s word (1 Samuel 12:24; Jeremiah 32:4) and thus it is the location where conversion takes place. Purity of heart is understood biblically as single-mindedness or sincerity, freedom from mixed motives. Psalm 24:4 states that “the clean of hand and pure of heart” are those who are not idolaters and who have not sworn falsely. They are the ones who are able to receive blessings and justice from God.

Reflection Questions

For whom does my heart pine? Do I turn to God when my heart is broken?

Closing Prayer

God, dwell in my heart and in the hearts of all the people who have blessed me in the past or who will bless me today. Amen.

Day Seven

Opening Ritual: Light a candle. Prepare the room for prayer. Quiet music can help. Open your Bible to Matthew Chapter Five. Trace with your thumb the sign of the cross on your open Bible and on your forehead.

Prayer

Jesus, Prince of peace, grant me the peace that the world cannot provide. Amen.

Theme for the Day: Becoming a peace maker

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” (Matthew 5:9)

In the ear of Matthew’s community who are Jewish-Christians, this beatitude would be evocative of God’s gift of *shalom* (peace). Peace does not mean simply the cessation of hostilities, but wishing people the best of everything. *Shalom* means to experience the fullness of the gifts of God: long life, faithful family and friends, success in living---all that makes for a good and happy life. *Shalom* means wholeness, an experience of well being and integration within the individual and society. The beatitude challenges everyone and every community to be whole, for peace exists when we are not divided.

The seventh beatitude assures those who devote themselves to peacemaking that they will be sons and daughters of God. As Jesus has been shown to be the Son of God in Matthew, so too are disciples who learn his ways and follow in his footsteps, share in the same intimate relationship with God. They are God’s children.

To the extent that one is peaceable rather than violent, one *will* not only be called a child of God, but one *is* a child of God right now. People whose reaction to perceived offense is not in the first instance lashing out or retribution or violence or fault finding, but an attempt to be reconcilers and peacemakers live by this beatitude.

Reflection Questions

How am I a peacemaker? To whom do I need to bring some peace?

Closing Prayer

God, you are the origin of all peace. Provide the world with the peace that only you can give. Amen.

Day Eight

Opening Ritual: Light a candle. Prepare the room for prayer. Quiet music can help. Open your Bible to Matthew Chapter Five. Trace with your thumb the sign of the cross on your open Bible and on your forehead.

Prayer

Oh God, come to my protection. O Lord, make haste to help me. Amen

Theme for the Day: Embracing the crosses of everyday life.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:10)

The eighth beatitude circles back to the fourth, mentioning righteousness again, and promises attainment of the reign of God, as does the first beatitude. The kinds of persecutions that Matthew’s original community most likely faced were economic harassment, conflict with Jews, who did not join them, as well as struggling with Hellenistic (Greco-Roman) culture. We face similar conflicts today in our own society. Further, Jesus himself was persecuted for ushering in the kingdom of heaven. The same fate will face his disciples. Jesus asked his disciples to take up their own crosses and to follow him. For a disciple, the crucified Jesus can be no stranger.

The kingdom of heaven is not something that is other worldly or will arrive only at the end of time; it has already arrived in the person and witness of Jesus Christ. So that when one is persecuted for righteousness as Jesus was, one is already participating in the kingdom. The reign of God in the hearts, minds, and souls of followers of Jesus is mysteriously, at least in this life, bound up with suffering for doing that which is good. Persons who are persecuted for righteousness are those who stand up in a violent and unjust culture and say no and are shouted down for that or arrested or ridiculed.

Reflection Questions

Have you ever felt ridiculed for the practice of your faith? How do you in your own life already participate in the kingdom of heaven?

Closing Prayer

O God, help me to work for justice every day and to stand up to the violence and injustices that I may encounter. Amen

Day Nine

Opening Ritual: Light a candle. Prepare the room for prayer. Quiet music can help. Open your Bible to Matthew Chapter Five. Trace with your thumb the sign of the cross on your open Bible and on your forehead.

Prayer

Ever present God, help me to endure any and all abuse that I may experience in my life the way Jesus endured in his life. Amen.

Theme for the Day: Being ridiculed is part of being a disciple of Jesus

“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; See Luke 6:22)

The ninth beatitude uttered in the second person plural is profoundly shocking for it speaks of rejoicing over abuse. Yet for the evangelist Matthew, disciples suffer the same abuse that Jesus does, who was both verbally and physically abused during his crucifixion. Verbal abuse is always stinging and false accusations compound the pain. Also, like Jesus, disciples are called to be prophetic, a life style that entails receiving both verbal abuse and rejection by some as Jesus did.

The reason the beatitudes are so jarring is that the culture in which we live and move has its own set of beatitudes. Jesus says: *blessed are the poor in spirit*. Culture says: blessed are the prosperous, for prosperity is a true sign of God’s favor. Jesus says: *blessed are those who mourn*. Culture says: blessed are those who ignore pain and think self-actualizing thoughts. Jesus says: *blessed are those who hunger*. Culture says blessed are the high achievers who never want to hunger. Jesus says: *blessed are the meek*. Culture says: blessed are those with high esteem. Jesus says: *Blessed are the righteous*. Culture says blessed are those who are secure in their “rightness.” Jesus says: *blessed are the merciful*. Culture says: blessed are those who aren’t limited by “bleeding hearts.” Jesus says: *blessed are the pure of heart*. Culture says: Blessed are the clever, street-wise and street-tough. Jesus says: *blessed are the peacemakers*. Culture says: blessed are the guns in our homes and our weapons of mass destruction that keep the peace. Jesus says: *Blessed are the persecuted*. Culture says blessed are the assertive and aggressive, who never let themselves, become victims. Our cultural beatitudes enshrine the status quo. Jesus’ beatitudes usher in the reign of God in the hearts, souls and minds of those who live by them, for they will inherit the kingdom provided by Jesus and God.

Reflection Questions

What did it feel like to be the recipient of abuse? To be falsely accused? To be ridiculed for not embracing culture’s values?

Closing Prayer

God of all blessings, bless me and let your face shine upon me and grant me peace all the days of my life. Amen