

The Challenging Clarity of the Ninth Beatitude

I was reading something by a Christian author this week. She made this comment that made me think of the beatitudes: *"For the most part followers of Jesus Christ are satisfied with a life so conformed to the world, and so like it in almost every respect that to a casual observer there is no difference between the Christian and the pagan."*¹ The striking thing was that this woman made that observation over a hundred years ago. It reminded me of something John Stott once said in a sermon. He was a very influential Christian leader in England who had a worldwide ministry. He had been traveling in India, where he was told the story of a little Hindu girl brought up in a strict Hindu family who had come across some Christians. Somebody asked her what she thought a Christian was. She thought for a moment and said, *"As far as I can see, a Christian is somebody that is different from everybody else."* Stott paused and then said, *"Would that it were true."*²

As we saw last week in the beatitudes, Jesus is answering the great question. *How can we experience true human flourishing?*³ What's clear is he is saying you don't get it by going along with everyone else. The beatitudes call us to a wholly different way of living, different values, motivations, actions and joys. The ninth beatitude makes that clear. In Hebrew literature, a list is sometimes brought to a conclusion by repeating the last item in the list, but in a stronger way that directly addresses the listener and adds clarity. That ending statement sheds its clearer light on the whole list that led up to it. So today, I want us to look at the challenging clarity of the ninth beatitude. It's found in **verses 11-12**, *"Blessed, are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account."*¹² *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

There are three things taught in all the beatitudes and clarified in the ninth. The first is that...

I. JESUS CALLS US TO A PROFOUNDLY CHRIST-CENTERED NONCONFORMITY.

To the degree that you even imperfectly fit the description given in the beatitudes, you are *not* going to conform to the world or its values. That nonconformity is what brings the persecution in **verses 11-12**.

A. Christ Calls Us To The Unique Non-Conformity Of Christ-Centered Character.

Look at the beatitudes again from this perspective of difference.

1st. Verse 3 *“Blessed are the poor in spirit.* Pride is pervasive in our nature and culture. And the word *poor* here describes a beggar, someone who can’t get by without help. To acknowledge total dependence on God is the beginning of the ultimate nonconformity.

2nd. Verse 4 *“Blessed are those who mourn.* That’s different. In a “feel good” society. We pursue happiness like a drug. We think it is our right. To accept and feel deeply, the sorrow of our world is a kind of rebellion against the widespread insistence on feeling good no matter what.

3rd. Verse 5 *“Blessed are the meek.* That’s very different. Not the self-asserting who press for their will to be done as if they know best, but those people so firm in devotion to Christ they live for a more perfect submission to him, trusting his wisdom and living for his causes.

4th. Verse 6 *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.* Most people are hungry for security and recognition, pleasure, and possessions. But to follow Jesus mean to have a higher priority. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness. That's a dramatic nonconformity. *Is this what you hunger and thirst for?*

5th. Verse 7 *“Blessed are the merciful.* We tend to fall into a mindset of payback when we are injured. Mercy is an attribute of God’s. Is it an attribute of yours? If so you are living very differently than most.

6th. Verse 8 *“Blessed are the pure in heart.* Here Jesus makes clear what is implied in all the beatitudes. He wants the difference in us to come from deep within us. If all you do is manage your emotions and control your behavior, a lot of unhappy and lousy stuff stays inside. Even if you try to keep a lid on it the unresolved stuff within eventually manifests itself one way or another. In the meantime, that inner turmoil robs you of the human flourishing, Christ invites you to enjoy.

7th. Verse 9 *“Blessed are the peacemakers.”* Here is a rare and beautiful mission for life. This is the ultimate nonconformity in a world that feeds off of conflict and treats it as entertainment. Make it your goal to seek peace and work for it. It takes humility. It requires prayer and patience. It won't be easy. It is so different.

8th. Verse 10 *“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.”* You might think that if you could live the beatitudes everyone would love you. Not so. A lot of people will think you are just a fake, you aren’t being real. People will feel that you make them look bad somehow and that’s not welcomed. To live the beatitudes reflects a Christ-like nonconformity, and in the end, that itself provokes hostility.

Now, the ninth beatitude comes after all of this. How does it add a challenging clarity? Well, in the ninth beatitude....

B. Jesus Calls Us To The Deeper Nonconformity Of Christ-Centered Devotion.

In **verse 11**, he says *you are blessed when people persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.* The eighth beatitude talked about those *persecuted for righteousness sake*. Here Jesus makes it more personal and relational, *“for his sake.”*

For Jesus to say it is on his account means it is for him. The idea of living your life *“for Christ sake”* is all through the New Testament. Paul gets thrown into prison, and he rejoices. He lives the beatitudes. Why? **Philippians 1:21** He says, *“For me, to live is Christ.”* Can you say, *“I believe he died for my sin, and rose as my Lord. He saved me, he’s for me, and he’s with me, so in every area of life, I want this life to be shaped by what he wants?”* What this beatitude is talking about is nonconformity driven by devotion. It is beautiful to God, but it brings conflict with the world.

Living for him does not come easily. Maybe coronavirus, can help us consider how the values, emotions, and behaviors common in the world are all picked up just like a virus. It is in the air. It is transferred invisibly through culture, family, friends, and social media. In the popular television series *The Walking Dead*, there was a point in the story where all the survivors come to realize that they look fine and feel normal, but they are actually all infected with the virus that can turn living humans into the walking dead. If we are going hear the words of Jesus in the beatitudes in a way that deeply impacts us, we are going to have to see that we are all infected with a sickness of the soul. *We cannot minimize the danger or the contagion of the soul-sickness of this world.* We have to take it seriously and fight it with everything we've got. That means we have to be willing to be very different. Are you? How different are you really? Are you willing to be

a Christ-centered nonconformist in a sick world? Jesus calls you to a profoundly Christ-centered nonconformity.

Here's a second challenging truth the ninth beatitude makes clear.

II. JESUS CALLS US TO LIVE THIS CHRIST-CENTERED LIFE IN LIGHT OF ETERNITY.

Verse 12 *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.*

When Christ speaks of reward, it is a way of stressing the fact that God treats the believer as a loving Father treats his children. He encourages us by assuring us he sees, and rewards us. This doesn't mean we become mercenary with God. It means in our devotion to him, we have this encouragement; when we live differently than the world for Christ sake, it matters to him and he will reward us in the end.

To be clear to follow Christ brings many blessings in *this* life. But I think we have to say this: The reason Jesus talks about heaven is he knows the reality of the present world and the reality of the world to come.

Jesus knows the reality of this present world all too well. He knows that if you follow him, you will face hardship and feel sorrow. He prepares us for this in the ninth beatitude. We have all heard that goodness is its own reward. Well, sometimes it is, maybe even often. But sometimes, you can do good and only be faced with the scorn of the world and the shrieking of demons. Sometimes even the reward of inner peace, the satisfaction that you did the right thing can trickle through your fingers. Then, in those moments, when there is nothing certain you can hold onto in this life that you can clearly call a reward, it becomes vital to know you will be comforted. You will be satisfied. You will see God. Great is your reward in heaven. Jesus points you to the future because he knows the reality of this present world.

Jesus also knows the reality of the world to come. For Jesus, knowing what he knows, there is simply and absolutely no greater source of deep happiness to which he could direct you than this. Inheriting the Earth possessing the kingdom, seeing God, being satisfied, Jesus knows all the true breadth and depth, and height of meaning behind all of those words that we so easily recite. And I ask you; *What source of rejoicing or gladness is there to which Jesus could point us that would be greater than these things that the Father promises us?* That you and I flawed, fallen, mortal people should receive and enjoy all of that forever! Jesus points us to the future because there isn't anything greater to which he could point us ever!

And *if* you see this, it changes everything because his promise of future reward brings with it the greatest assurance of God's care and amazing grace right now. The nature, the measure and the staggering proportion of the reward offered and described becomes a kind of stunning statement and index of the extent to which God takes pleasure in you in Christ and rejoices to see that having received the grace of salvation through Jesus, you want to grow to be like Jesus.

There is a woman named Jenny Lamey who hired a moving company to help her move. When the morning for the move came, a police car showed up and dropped off one of the movers. It turned out this man Walter Carr lived fourteen miles away. The night before his car broke down. So at midnight, he left his home and started walking to her address. A police officer spotted him at 4:00 am and asked why he was walking. He told the officer he had a job; it was his responsibility, he didn't want to make excuses, and the woman needed help, so he was walking the fourteen miles to her house. The officer gave him a ride. Jenny was so moved (no pun) she wanted to acknowledge Walter's commitment and grit and thank him, so she posted the story on social media. It came to the attention of the CEO of the moving company. He was so impressed, he not only thanked Walter in person, he bought him a new Ford Escape. I read the story and thought it is so cool and refreshing to see good things acknowledged and rewarded. It doesn't always happen in this life, does it? What if – what if you could know that it will always prove true in the end with God? **Hebrews 6:10** says, *For God is not unjust so as to overlook your work and the love that you have shown for his name in serving the saints, as you still do. God will reward his children for everything, everything we do for him. How much does that enter into your calculations and your choices and even your emotions?*

So the ninth beatitude brings this challenging clarity. First, Christ calls us to a profoundly Christ-centered nonconformity. Second, Christ calls us to live this Christ-centered life in light of eternity. There is a third truth that should be embraced, and it brings us to the conclusion.

III. CHRIST CALLS US TO REJOICE AND BE GLAD IN THE MIDST OF ADVERSITY.

Verse 12 *Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. These are the only commands in the beatitudes. Jesus says choose joy and gladness now in light of eternity. Rejoice all the more in adversity.*

The issue isn't "can I" but "will I do that?" I remember once I had memorized a scripture about rejoicing, and it came to mind in the midst of a very angry mood. I thought, "How can I rejoice now?" But the thought came with some clarity was this: "*You can rejoice. What you believe and to be true about God and his promises is deeper than what you are feeling this moment. You don't have to figure everything out. You can entrust your concerns to God and wait for him to unfold his will. Because you have a Father to whom you can entrust your concerns and your self you can rejoice in that right now.*" And at that moment, with my heart in a knot, I realized I didn't want to pray, trust, surrender, and rejoice. I wanted to be angry. I once heard someone say, "Your emotions are a ticket to the here and now." I think what they were saying is that if you pay attention to your feelings, they give you access to the reality of your inner life in real-time. Then you have a choice to make. I felt compelled to make the choice to rejoice. So I did.

Rejoicing is often expressed in prayer. I prayed something like this: "Lord, I confess my unbelief and give up my control and trust in you. And I rejoice in you. (I spoke the words) I am thankful and glad for you and your promises." It was only when I did it that I found I could do it. The tightness in my chest loosened. I wasn't happy with the circumstances and yet my heart was lifted and better able to deal with the circumstances. I remember all this because I learned that we can rejoice if we will take that crucial step of faith. Words like "joy," "rejoice," "be glad," are found over 650 times in the Bible. God does not tell you to rejoice to condemn you when you are struggling. Jesus says *blessed are those who mourn* and to the same people he says *rejoice and be glad*. There is a kind of deep rejoicing that you can practice even when there is also deep mourning. Jesus tells you this because he cares about your joy. The joy of the Lord gives strength. And he knows that if you knew what he knows, you would find a cause for joy that is deeper than the circumstances of life.

Conclusion

All of this begins with the poverty of spirit that admits you need grace. You need a Savior. The grace of salvation is offered freely if you turn to Christ and trust in him. His death and resurrection are the payment and security for our salvation. You don't have to change your life to receive his grace and yet, the grace he freely gives you, if you receive it, it will change you. That's the goal. The ninth beatitude brings challengingly clarity. You are called to 1.) Christ-centered

nonconformity, 2.) to live in light of eternity and 3.) to rejoice even in adversity.

Amen.

¹ Hannah Whitall Smith, *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life*. Christianity Today, Vol. 32, no. 11.

² John Stott, "Christians: Salt and Light," *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 109.

³ Jonathon T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing*, (Grand Rapids, Baker) p. 14