

Praying the Beatitudes of Jesus

*A Guide for Leading
Five Prayer Meetings*

Lois Barrett



Conference of Mennonites in Canada
Resources Commission

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Praying the Beatitudes of Jesus: A Guide for Leading Five Prayer Meetings is meant to serve as a resource for congregations in the Conference of Mennonites in Canada. A similar resource is published annually by the Conference's Resources Commission. This booklet is intended to serve as a guide for Prayer Week services in Mennonite congregations, which usually happen sometime in January.

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Foreword

For many, the year 1999 is like Advent. Although there is nothing magical about the turn of the millennium, it is still a time of anticipation. Many are anticipating chaos because of computer bugs. Others are concerned about global economic recession. Still others suggest that the new millennium will coincide with the return of Christ.

It is good to anticipate. And it is very good to do so by looking again at the world-transforming words of a carpenter from Nazareth. The simple yet profound words of Jesus in the Beatitudes are a powerful antidote to the fears of a coming chaos. The Beatitudes of Jesus drive us back to the basics. It is still the mission of the church to be salt and light—not to hide our good news under a bushel. It is still our mission to be doers of peace, to be merciful and forgiving, to be capable of mourning, to celebrate the continuing contribution of non-violence, to work on our relationships with God, and to hunger for justice. These continue to be the most urgent agenda for the church and the most critical needs of the world.

On behalf of the Resources Commission, it is truly a joy to offer these materials to our congregations. Lois Barrett, with the simplicity that characterize the Beatitudes themselves, leads us through praise, prayer, and reflection into the depths of the wisdom of Jesus' words. We pray that as God's people we will be inspired to make the Beatitudes our own, thus manifesting to our generation the continuing truth to which they point.

Robert J. Suderman
Executive Secretary, Resources Commission
Conference of Mennonites in Canada
October, 1998

Introduction

The focus of Prayer Week for 1999 is Matthew 5:1-16—the Beatitudes of Jesus and his commission to his disciples. We suggest that each pair of the Beatitudes and the commission be experienced in the context of prayer. In addition, we have chosen one or more Psalms to continue the theme. By looking at the Beatitudes together with the Commission that follows, the whole passage is also set in the context of mission. To pray the Beatitudes with our lives is to become the kind of Christian community that is salt and light in the world so that others also may give glory to God.

This booklet consists of five prayer services. They can be used in a variety of settings. A smaller, informal setting will be best for the discussion questions listed. Or the “Understanding the Scripture” and discussion sections could be the basis for a sermon for worship with the whole congregation. An adult or youth Sunday school class might not want to use the music. A prayer group might spend relatively less time in discussion and more time in prayer. In other words, take the elements here and adapt them to your setting. The essential sections are “Reading the Scripture,” “Understanding the Scripture,” “Praying the Scripture,” and “Living the Scripture.”

Some of the prayer services use a form of prayer known as “bidding prayer.” In the bidding prayer, the leader mentions a category of people or situation to pray for. Then there is a period of silence, during which all offer their silent prayers for these things. For example, the leader might say, “Let us pray for all those who mourn.” Then the worshippers would bring to mind persons who are mourn and pray silently for each one. There is also a time for spoken prayers.

In addition, to the hymns suggested here, you may want to use one of several musical settings of the Beatitudes in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* and elsewhere.

Lois Barrett

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Prayer Service 1



Praying for Forgiveness and the Grace to Mourn

Call to worship

(Leader:) As the deer longs for flowing streams,
 So our souls long for you, O God.
 (People:) *Our souls thirst for God, for the living God.
 When shall we come and behold the face of God?*
 O send out your light and your truth; let them lead us.
Let them bring us to your holy hill and to your dwelling.
 Then we will go to the altar of God
And will praise you with the harp, O God, my God.

Praise hymn

"O Bless the Lord, My Soul" *Hymnal: A Worship Book* 80 (*Mennonite Hymnal* 245), or
 "Oh, for a Thousand Tongues To Sing" *HWB* 110 (*MH* 104)

Reading the scripture

Psalms 42–43; Matthew 5:1-4

Understanding the scripture

Eight Beatitudes begin Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in the

Gospel of Matthew. Just as the Ten Commandments are a kind of summary of the whole law of Moses, the Beatitudes can be seen as a summary of the whole Sermon on the Mount.

But the Beatitudes are not phrased in the form of commandments. They are statements, not demands. They are blessings, not orders. Today we might say, "Congratulations to the poor in spirit..." The Beatitudes are a statement of the way things really are in the reign of God, a situation contrary to what most people in the world think. In each of the Beatitudes, Jesus describes a reality that flies in the face of common sense. Do people who are poor or in mourning really deserve congratulations rather than pity? In the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:1-12) and in the commission given to the disciples (Matt. 5:13-16), Jesus turns around the common understandings of the world and invites his followers to a new understanding of life in the reign of God. We will someday know this life in its fullness, but through the church we can begin to experience it here and now. It is a new way of living that is breaking in upon the old way of doing things.

The Beatitudes are a statement of the way things really are in the reign of God, a situation contrary to what most people in the world think.

The church is that group of people that has begun living the way of life of the Beatitudes now. Because we follow Jesus, we have begun living as if the reign of God were already here. And it is here in one sense because of Jesus' death and resurrection, even though we hope to experience the reign of God even more when Jesus comes again and God intervenes in history to set all things right and to give evil its final defeat.

Poor in spirit

We might think of each of the Beatitudes as a stepping stone in the spiritual life. Learning to live the first Beatitude helps us in living out the second Beatitude, living the second helps in living the third, and so on. So, the first step in the spiritual life is learning the blessedness of being poor in spirit.

What does it mean to be "poor in spirit"? Is it different from just being poor? To be poor in spirit is to have the spirit of the poor. An essential part of this spirit is knowing that we don't have it all together and that we need help. Those who are not poor in spirit think they can manage all by themselves. They

think they don't need God or other people. They consider themselves self-made men and women. They praise individualism. To be poor in spirit, on the other hand, is to recognize our need for each other and our need for God. Until we know that we need God we will not be open to living the life of the Spirit.

In the monastic tradition in Europe in the Middle Ages, the first step in the spiritual life was "purgation." Purgation means to purify or cleanse. In the context of the spiritual life, it meant to get rid of sin or evil, and of all else that would put a barrier between oneself and God. Thus poverty of spirit is a kind of emptiness before God. We confess our sin. We throw away everything that is not necessary for the spiritual life. We let our lives be stripped to bare essentials. We get rid of anything that would hinder life with God.

Sometimes this poverty and emptiness may not be voluntary. Others may have taken from us what was filling our lives, as when someone loses a job.

The first Beatitude promises that those who are poor in spirit can claim the kingdom of heaven, or the reign of God. They are part of God's people.

Those who mourn

It is a short step from being poor in spirit to mourning, from emptiness to loss. We mourn, or grieve, when we have lost something. We may have lost a family member to death. We may have lost a position of responsibility. We may have lost a relationship with someone we cared about. We may have experienced a natural disaster. We may have lost the certainty we once had. We may mourn vicariously for someone else who has experienced loss. Whatever the loss, we mourn. Our mourning may be expressed in depression or anger, but it is still mourning.

Those who mourn are to be congratulated because they are able to feel. They are willing to live through the depths so they can also experience the heights.

The dominant culture tells us that such losses are tragic. The dominant culture is the realm of happy-face stickers and "have a nice day." In contrast Jesus tells his disciples, "Blessed are those who mourn."

When we mourn we are in touch with our suffering and the suffering of others. When we mourn we are feeling our emo-

tions. In life, the higher the emotional highs we experience, the lower the emotional lows we experience. The choice is not between happiness and grief, but between feeling and numbness. Those who mourn are to be congratulated because they are able to feel. They are willing to live through the depths so they can also experience the heights.

The alternative is to try to wall ourselves off from anything that might expose us to suffering. It's a nice try, but it doesn't work. Suffering happens. How much better to accept mourning, because then we will be comforted, says the second Beatitude. In Hebrew culture, where the name of God was too holy to be spoken, the passive voice was often used when God was really the subject of the action. So when the second Beatitude says, "for they will be comforted," it probably means, "God will comfort them." With God's comfort, those who mourn are truly blessed.

Questions for discussion

1. How have you experienced poverty of spirit? How have you tried to take care of everything by yourself, without help from God or the church?
2. What do you need to empty from your soul in order to make room for God? What is getting in the way of your acknowledging your need for God?
3. What losses have you experienced that have led to grief and mourning? What has helped you through the time of mourning? How can the church help with the healing process for those who mourn?
4. Do you agree with the statement that the real alternatives are not happiness and mourning, but feeling and numbness? Why or why not? What has been your experience?
5. When has something good come out of loss and mourning? Often when people are in the depths of suffering they come to feel God closer to them than before. Why do you think this is?

Prayer hymn

"Come, Ye Disconsolate" *HWB 497 (MH 333)*

Praying the scripture

Let us offer our prayers of confession for the times we have tried to be self-sufficient and have denied our need for God. (Silence)

Let us confess those things which have got in the way of our relationship with God. (Silence)

Let us pray for grace to be poor in spirit and to lean on God and each other. (Silence)

Let us pray for all who mourn their losses. (Silence)

Let us pray for grace to mourn with those who mourn and to share their suffering. (Silence)

Let us give thanks that God is merciful and gracious, hears our prayers, and grants our requests made in Jesus' name. (Silence)

(Here may be a time of open prayer for worshippers to offer aloud their own petitions.)

(Unison:) *Lord God, forgive us all our sins, heal all our infirmities, comfort our sorrows, and through your Spirit bring us closer to you, the one who reigns for ever and ever. Amen.*

Living the scripture

During the coming days, write down your observations on the topic of poverty of spirit and/or mourning. What are the current issues in your life and in the life of the church?

Take time to experience and to feel the spirit of poverty, or to mourn with those who mourn, taking the presence of God with you into each situation.

Sending hymn

"My Life Flows On" HWB 580, or "Wonderful Grace of Jesus" HWB 150 (or "Marvellous Grace," MH 541)

Prayer Service 2



Praying for Gentleness and Righteousness that Lead to Justice

Call to worship

(People:) *We will be still before God and patiently wait for God to act.*

(Leader:) Do not worry about the wicked or be envious of wrongdoers,
for they will soon fade like the grass and wither like the green plant.

We will be still before God and patiently wait for God to act.
Commit your way to the Lord; trust in God, and God will act.
God will make the justice of your cause shine like the noonday.

We will be still before God and patiently wait for God to act.

The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord, who is their refuge in time of trouble.

God helps them and rescues them, delivers them from the wicked and saves them,

because they take refuge in God.

We will be still before God and patiently wait for God to act.

Praise hymn

“We Are People of God’s Peace” *Hymnal: A Worship Book* 407 (or “Hope of the World,” *Mennonite Hymnal* 295)

Reading the scripture

Psalm 37; Matthew 5:5-6

Understanding the scripture

The third Beatitude is usually translated, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” The problem with this English translation is that the word *meek* doesn’t mean what it once meant. These days, in the broader culture, *meek* often denotes reticence or letting other people use you as a doormat. But the words in the Old and New Testaments that are often translated “meek” have quite a different meaning.

The third Beatitude is actually a paraphrase of Psalm 37:11, “But the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity [literally, *shalom*, “peace”].” A look at the entire Psalm helps us understand what it means to be meek, or gentle. In verses 1-13 the theme is: Do not worry about evildoers; don’t take up vengeance yourself; let God take care of the wicked and bring justice. Verses 14-15 do not give us a full explanation of the wrath of God, but do give us a glimpse of how the wrath of God works—God lets the evil that people do boomerang back against themselves. The sword that the wicked intended to use against the innocent curves back around and destroys the wicked. The bows of the wicked are broken so that they can do no more harm. Verses 34-40 continue the theme of the first part of the Psalm: Wait for the Lord, and keep to God’s way; let God be the One who avenges injustices done against us; God will rescue us from the wicked if we take refuge in God.

In Psalms 10:12, 17-18; 69:32-33; 76:7-9; 147:6; and 149, as well as Isaiah 11:4; 29:19; 61:1, the same word is used, although it is variously translated “oppressed,” “humble,” “poor,” “afflicted,” and “meek.” In all these passages the context is the same. These meek folks are depending on God to bring justice for them and to pay back evildoers for the wrong they have done. The meek do not take matters into their own hands to deal with their oppressors violently. They wait for God to act on their behalf.

How does this non-violent meekness play out with actual people in the Bible? Numbers 12:3 says that Moses was very meek, more so than anyone else on the face of the earth. Moses?! The same Moses who confronted Pharaoh? The same Moses who led the Hebrew slaves to freedom and formed them into a people? Moses was meek because he was non-violent. He did not ask the Hebrew people to fight a war of freedom. Instead he told the people, “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today. ... The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still” (Exod. 14:13-14). The “battle” at the Red Sea was won without a single Israelite taking up weapons against the Egyptians. Under Moses’ leadership they let God act on their behalf.

Matthew 11:29 also calls Jesus “meek,” or in most modern translations “gentle”: “I am gentle and humble in heart.” Here, too, meekness or “gentleness” is consistent with Jesus’ refusal to take up arms against the Romans as did the Zealots of his day. Jesus refuses to let his disciples prevent his arrest by violence (John 18:11). On trial before the Roman governor Pilate, Jesus says, “If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would fight” (John 18:36). The Apostle Paul also notes the “meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:1).

This non-violent meekness was also expected of church leaders. In 1 Timothy 3:2 one of the requirements of bishops is that they be “not violent but gentle.” When required to defend yourself you should “make your defence with gentleness” (1 Pet. 3:15-16).

In this context we should probably think of the third Beatitude in this way: Congratulations to the gentle, the non-violent, for they will have the whole earth as their inheritance, their home. The gentle are the ones practising non-violence. They are waiting for God to set things right, not compromising their principles by using violence in order to make things come out right. They are depending on God to bring justice, if not in this age then in the age to come.

Thirst for righteousness

The fourth Beatitude blesses those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. This is quite different from the impression we get from watching television commercials. Advertisers try to increase our hunger and thirst for all kinds of things—from smelling good to driving a new car. Most of all, the dominant

culture entices us to hunger and thirst for wealth.

In contrast, Jesus congratulates those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. The word for “righteousness” could also be translated “justice,” or most accurately “being in right relationship.” Righteousness is a covenant word. In Hebrew culture, one was “righteous” or “just” with regard to another person when one was living so that the covenant between the two persons was upheld. A person was just or righteous toward God when he or she was living so that the relationship with God was right. Righteousness was not only a matter of following all the rules; it was living rightly in covenant relationship. The word translated by both “righteousness” and “justice” included both individual righteousness and social justice. The Bible does not favour one over the other. Both are part of living in right relationship with God and with others.

Biblical justice is not the same as the justice of our governments. Most of Western societies’ understanding of justice comes not from Jesus but from the Greek philosopher Aristotle, who defined justice as everyone getting what he or she deserves. Instead, biblical justice does look at what a person has earned, but what a person needs in order to live rightly and in right relationship. Biblical justice is closely related to *shalom*, “peace,” “well being,” having what one needs.

Jesus is pronouncing a blessing on those who want right relationships so much that it is like being hungry and thirsty. Those who do this will be filled—God will satisfy them.

We can see that the third and fourth Beatitudes are connected. And it is probably a good thing that the blessing on gentleness and non-violence comes before the blessing on those who desire justice. Some people say, “If you want peace, work for justice.” But we should also say, “If you want justice, work peaceably.” There is no peace without justice, and there is no justice without peace. In God’s scheme of things, what is right and what makes for right relationships with God and others are one.

Questions for discussion

1. For what do you hunger and thirst most? What would it be like to want righteousness, justice, and right relationships that much?
2. Where are people enemies? Or where are there situations without right relationships? What would make things right?

3. What would it mean to commit ourselves to work for right relationships (justice) with gentleness and non-violence?
4. How can we wait for God to act to bring about justice?

Prayer hymn

“Let There Be Light” *HWB* 371 (*MH* 455), or “Lead Us, O Father” *HWB* 359 (*MH* 317)

Praying the scripture

Let us offer our prayers to God, asking God to take away our anxiety, our fear of enemies and those who want to hurt us. (Silence)

Let us pray that God may make us as meek, gentle, and non-violent as Moses, Jesus, and the Christian martyrs who trusted in God rather than avenge wrongdoing. (Silence)

Let us ask God to strengthen our commitment to non-violence and peace. (Silence)

Let us ask God to give us a hunger and a thirst for right relationships. (Silence)

Let us pray that God’s love may be present in all situations where peace and justice are needed. (Silence)

Let us pray for all those who struggle against oppression in non-violent ways. (Silence)

(Here may be a time of open prayer for worshippers to offer aloud their own petitions.)

O God, we commit ourselves to your way of gentleness and right relationships, of peace and justice. Help us to trust in you to act on our behalf and on behalf of all those who suffer because of others’ wrongdoing. Hold before our eyes the example of Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Living the scripture

In the discussion time, you identified situations where right relationships were needed. Choose one of these and take a meek (gentle, non-violent) action that moves toward setting things right. Commit this situation to prayer that God also may act in setting things right.

Sending hymn

“I Bind My Heart This Tide” *HWB* 411 (*MH* 353), or “Strong, Righteous Man of Galilee” *HWB* 540

Prayer Service 3



Praying to Experience God and Show Mercy

Call to worship

(Leader:) Come, all you who seek God.
Come, draw near to God.
For God is good to the upright,
to those who are pure in heart.
(People:) Whom have we in heaven, but you, God?
And there is nothing on earth that we desire other than you.

Praise hymn

"Immortal, Invisible God" Hymnal: *A Worship Book 70 (Mennonite Hymnal 43)*

Reading the scripture

Psalm 73; Matthew 5:7-8

Understanding the scripture

The fifth Beatitude gives a blessing to those who are merciful. Their reward is that they, too, will receive mercy. To show mercy is to give others more than they deserve. To be merciful is to forgive.

To be merciful is to be like God. In Luke's Sermon on the Plain, Jesus' words about loving enemies end like this: "But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:35-36).

In addition, God's forgiveness of us is tied to our forgiveness of those who have wronged us. In Matthew's version of the Lord's Prayer, the phrase "forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors" is the part of the prayer that is expanded with a commentary (Matt. 6:12, 14-15): "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses."

What can these passages teach us about showing mercy and forgiving?

First of all, forgiveness is different from reconciliation. Reconciliation requires that both parties participate in forgiveness. Reconciliation means that two persons (or groups) that are offender and offended, or who have mutually offended, come to right relationship. In reconciliation, the offer of forgiveness and restored relationship has a positive response. There is confession and repentance. There may be restitution of some kind. Both parties work to make things right.

Forgiveness, on the other hand, can happen whether or not there is a positive response from the offender. In forgiveness I let go of the offense's hold over me. I choose to show mercy to my adversary, or the person who has wronged me, whether or not he or she has repented.

This does not mean that forgiveness comes easily. I may still have to go through several stages of forgiveness: denial, anger, depression. But I know that if I do not forgive, if I continue to harbour anger against the other or if I turn the anger in on myself, I cut myself off from others and from God. When I do not show mercy to those who do not deserve it, there is no room within me to receive God's mercy.

In the fifth Beatitude we are called to unilateral forgiveness and mercy, because that is what it means to be God-like.

In forgiveness I let go of the offense's hold over me.
I choose to show mercy to my adversary, or the person who has wronged me, whether or not he or she has repented.

Pure in heart

The sixth Beatitude continues the theme of being in right relationship with God. Those who are pure in heart are the ones who will see God. The word “purity” is not used much in today’s dominant culture. It is used mostly in relation to chemical purity, as in a substance being pure or unadulterated. We want to drink pure water.

The word used in Matthew 6:8 could also be translated “clean.” The Law of Moses had many regulations about what was clean and unclean. Look at Leviticus 11 and following for a sample. There was clean and unclean food. There was clean skin

and skin unclean from bodily discharges. Healthy was clean, diseased was unclean. But cleanness also had to do with morality. Stealing your neighbour’s sheep was unclean. Adultery was unclean. Other offenses also could make one unclean.

To be unclean resulted in being separated from the community of God’s people. To be clean was to be a full part of the people of God. To be

clean was to be in right relationship with God and neighbour. To be clean was to do the right thing.

Now, what about being pure in “heart,” as the Psalmist expresses in 51:10 and 73:13? In Hebrew thought, the heart was not the seat of the emotions, as it is in modern Western thought. The Hebrew people sometimes talked about emotions being in the liver! In Hebrew thought, the heart is the seat of the will. The heart is where one chooses to do right or wrong. So to be pure, or clean, in heart is to choose to do the right, to do the will of God.

So, if those who are pure in heart will see God, it means that those who are doing right are the ones who will have the spiritual experience of being with God. The sixteenth-century Anabaptist writer Hans Denck put it this way: Whoever would know Christ must follow him in life, and whoever would follow him must already know him. In other words, knowing Christ (as opposed to just knowing *about* Christ) is always connected with doing as Christ did. Knowing is not a matter of learning a list of doctrines about God. Knowing God isn’t some truth out there that anybody can see whether or not they are committed to

Christ’s way. We can only know God when we have committed ourselves to doing as God has commanded us. It is only as we do the will of God that we begin to see God more clearly.

Perhaps that is why Jesus kept talking about the “secret” of the reign of God. It’s not that Jesus was being arbitrary in wanting to keep his identity a secret. He understood that the secret can only be known by those who have already made a commitment to his way. Those who are pure in heart will experience God and really *see*!

Questions for discussion

1. What happens to us when we do not forgive?
2. How have you experienced forgiveness as a process, rather than an instant occurrence?
3. How has God showed mercy to us? What then is our responsibility toward others who do not deserve mercy?
4. How have you experienced the difference between knowing about God and knowing God? What brought you to a new level of experiencing God?
5. How have our Christian commitments helped us “see” God in a new way? What happens to our feeling of closeness to God when we do not act rightly?
6. What do these two Beatitudes say about real spirituality? Is it just an inner matter, or is it also connected to discipleship?

Prayer hymn

“Lord, I Am Fondly, Earnestly Longing” *HWB* 514 (*MH* 585), or “Breathe on Me, Breath of God” *HWB* 356 (*MH* 216)

Praying the scripture

Let us bring our prayers to God, that we might forgive as God forgives. (Silence)

Let us bring to mind those times when God and others have shown mercy to us. (Silence)

Let us pray that God will give us the grace to show mercy to those who do not deserve it. (Silence)

Let us pray that, when it is difficult to forgive, God will show us the beginning of the path to forgiveness. (Silence)

Let us pray that we might come with clean hearts before God and the church. (Silence)

Let us pray for the commitment to know the right and to do it.

Let us ask God to be with us always and to give us new understanding of what it means to see God. (Silence)

(Here may be a time of open prayer for worshippers to offer aloud their own petitions.)

Merciful God, as you have blessed us far beyond what we deserve, help us now to be merciful to others and to come with a pure heart into your presence. Amen.

Living the scripture

Identify someone whom you need to forgive, and decide on the first step in that process.

Some people are so concerned about doing that they forget about being. Other people are so concerned about knowing the right things that they forget about doing the right things. Do you belong to one of these groups? What step do you need to take to bring a balance in your life between knowing Christ and following Christ?

Sending hymn

"I Want Jesus To Walk with Me" *HWB* 439, or "Holy Spirit, Truth Divine" *HWB* 508 (*MH* 207)

Prayer Service 4



Praying for Boldness

Call to worship

(Leader:) For God alone my soul waits in silence;
from God comes my salvation.

(People:) God alone is our rock and our salvation,
Our fortress; we shall never be shaken.

Once God has spoken; twice have I heard this:

Power belongs to God, and steadfast love belongs to you, O Lord.

Praise hymn

"I Sing with Exultation" *Hymnal: A Worship Book* 438 (*MH* 40), or "In Thee Is Gladness" *HWB* 114 (*MH* 90)

Reading the scripture

Psalm 62; Matthew 5:9-12

Understanding the scripture

There is a sense in which each Beatitude builds upon the ones before it. The previous six Beatitudes might be seen as prerequisites for the action which is blessed in the seventh Beatitude:

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." We need to be in the presence of God (sixth Beatitude) to make peace rightly. Also, we will be true peacemakers when we

are poor in spirit, willing to mourn, gentle, hungering for justice, merciful, and clean of heart. The peacemaking of the children of God must have these qualities.

However, this Beatitude is different from the third (blessed are the meek, gentle, non-violent...). The third Beatitude is the more passive side of peace, refusal to use violence, being gentle.

This Beatitude promises that those who take the initiative for peace and reconciliation are like God when they do that.

The seventh Beatitude is the pro-active side of peace, initiating peace. Likewise, the seventh Beatitude goes beyond the fifth (“Blessed are the merciful...”) by calling not only for unilateral forgiveness, but for reconciliation of those who have been at odds with each other.

Literally, “peacemakers” in Matthew 5:9 are “peace-doers,” those who act in peace. It is not so much that these people are creating peace singlehandedly, rather they are taking action on behalf of peace, doing their part to bring about peace.

To be children of God, in Jewish thought, meant to be like God. A child of sorrow was a sorrowful person, for example. So those who are children of God are like God in some respect. This Beatitude promises that those who take the initiative for peace and reconciliation are like God when they do that. The early church believed that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself... and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Cor. 5:19). We are called to participate in God’s mission of reconciliation.

Congratulating the persecuted

But the ministry of reconciliation is sometimes risky. People who benefit from hatred, war, and animosity will try to stop peacemakers and will persecute them. The eighth Beatitude takes an attitude toward this persecution which is far different from that of the dominant culture. The dominant culture says that any form of persecution is a tragedy. Jesus says, that those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness (that is, right relationships with God and neighbour) are to be congratulated!

Jesus must have known his disciples would think this odd. This is the only Beatitude with a commentary (vv. 11-12). The commentary first spells out what is meant by persecution: people revile you, they say all kinds of evil against you falsely

on account of Jesus. Then the commentary goes beyond blessing and exhorts the disciples to “rejoice and be glad” about this persecution. Why? Because they will be in good company—the company of the prophets and as the Gospel story later unfolds, the company of Jesus himself, who was crucified.

How can it be possible to rejoice, be glad, and feel blessed because of persecution? Psalm 62 speaks of someone who has been assailed, battered, cursed, lied about, and robbed. But the Psalmist is not shaken because he puts trust in God and waits on God to act on his behalf. The Psalmist believes that eventually God will repay all according to their work, and that all power belongs to a loving God (vv. 11-12). God will take the side of those who are persecuted. We can rejoice because God will act for us.

Similarly, in Acts 3–4, Peter and John are called before the Jewish ruler, elders, and scribes because of their reconciling work of healing a man lame from birth. The Sanhedrin threatens Peter and John and orders them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus, an order which Peter and John publicly refuse to carry out. After their release, the prayer of the believers (Acts 4:23-31) is not so much for protection but for boldness in speaking God’s word.

Likewise in Acts 5 after the apostles are arrested and flogged for preaching and healing in the name of Jesus, “they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonour for the sake of the name. And every day in the temple and at home they did not cease to teach and proclaim Jesus as the Messiah” (vv. 41-42).

The good news about the reign of God, both now and in the future, runs so counter to the dominant culture’s accepted way of doing things that believers should expect to run into opposition. If we really have good news of an alternative community, of a holy nation, of a new peoplehood, those who are invested in the dominant community, nation, and peoplehood will be threatened.

All eight of these Beatitudes of Jesus do not conform to the world’s way of doing things. The Gospel of John says it this way, “If the world hates you, be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love

After their release, the prayer of the believers is not so much for protection but for boldness in speaking God’s word.

you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you, ‘Servants are not greater than their master.’ If they persecuted me, they will persecute you; if they kept my word, they will keep yours also” (John 15:18-20).

Persecution for the sake of righteousness and the reign of God means that the good news is being heard, even if not accepted by everyone. The seed of God’s word is being sown, and we need to trust God to bring it to abundant harvest.

Questions for discussion

1. How was Jesus a doer of peace? How was Jesus persecuted for righteousness’ sake?
2. How is it sometimes risky to be a peacemaker and to proclaim the message of reconciliation?
3. Where is peacemaking needed in your community? In the world? How can the church participate in this peacemaking, or how is it already participating in this ministry?
4. Have you had experiences of being attacked, lied about, insulted, or otherwise persecuted because you proclaimed or demonstrated the good news of the reign of God? Was it possible to “rejoice and be glad”? Did any good come out of these experiences? Did you feel the presence of God in these experiences?
5. What are the blessings of being persecuted for righteousness’ sake? Why does the kingdom of heaven belong to such people?

Prayer hymn

“Go to Dark Gethsemane” *HWB* 240 (*MH* 160), or “Stay with Me” *HWB* 242

Praying the scripture

Let us offer our prayers for peace in our community and our world.
(Silence)

Let us ask for boldness in acting and speaking in Christ’s name that others may find peace. (Silence)

Let us ask for awareness of the Spirit’s presence with us whenever we act for righteousness’ sake. (Silence)

Let us pray for all those who take risks for reconciliation. (Silence)

Let us pray for all church workers in North America and around the

world who are in dangerous situations. (Silence)

Let us ask for God’s help in discerning where we should be bringing the message of reconciliation. (Silence)

(Here may be a time of open prayer for worshippers to offer aloud their own petitions.)

God of power and love, we thank you for your work of reconciliation in Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. We pray for your presence with us as we share in that reconciling task. We pray for courage to discover your will for us and to do it, in spite of the risks. We are grateful that all power belongs to you, that yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Living the scripture

How is God calling you to participate in the blessings of making peace and being persecuted for righteousness’ sake? Watch for opportunities to bring reconciliation or take risks for the sake of the gospel.

Sending hymn

“Faith of the Martyrs” *HWB* 413 (*MH* 262), or “Take Up Your Cross” *HWB* 536 (*MH* 357)

Prayer Service 5



Praying as a People of the Beatitudes

Call to worship

(People:) Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

(Leader:) Let the nations be glad and sing for joy,
for God judges the peoples with equity
and guides the nations upon earth.

Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you.

Gathering hymn

"Here in This Place" *Hymnal: A Worship Book 6*, or "How Brightly Beams the Morning Star" *HWB 222 (Mennonite Hymnal 141)*

Reading the scripture

Psalm 67; Matthew 5:13-16

Understanding the scripture

Sometimes we focus so much on the so-called Great Commission of Matthew 28:18-19 that we forget the rest of Jesus' missionary commissions to his disciples. One of them is in this

portion of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5:13-16). "You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid.... Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven." In other words, the community of disciples (and by extension, the church) is a demonstration community, by its behaviour called to give witness concerning the reign of God and thus draw others to give glory to God and worship God.

Although most modern Bible translations put these verses under a separate heading from the Beatitudes, verses 13-16 do have a relationship to verses 1-12. By being poor in spirit, by mourning, by being gentle and hungry for right relationships, by being merciful and pure in heart, by making peace and suffering persecution, believers are the salt of the earth and the light of the world. By doing and being these things, the church is a city on a hill, a society in contrast to the dominant culture. It is light in a dark night, illuminating the truth about the world and the reign of God.

The different-ness of the church as the light of the world is not to be hidden under a bushel basket but lifted up so that everyone else can see it. The ways in which the church is an alternative to the surrounding society are to be celebrated and promoted, even if there are some who revile and persecute the church. The light is to shine, no matter how risky that may be.

Missional church

To be that church as an alternative society is an important part of what it means to be a missional church.

- The dominant culture says, "How fortunate you have your life under control and do not need anyone else." The missional church believes that the poor in spirit, who know they need God, are the really fortunate ones.

- The dominant culture says, "You will be happy if you avoid any situation that exposes you to suffering or mourning." The missional church says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they

In other words, the community of disciples—and by extension, the church—is a demonstration community... called to give witness concerning the reign of God and thus draw others to give glory to God and worship God.

shall be comforted.”

- The dominant culture says, “You will be happy if you can pay back those who are hurting you, no matter how you do it.” The missional church shows the world that real happiness lies in being gentle and non-violent.

- The dominant culture encourages people to hunger and thirst after material things. The missional church encourages hunger and thirst for right relationships.

- The dominant culture teaches that good relationships depend on performance (“I’ll love you if...”). The missional church demonstrates mercy and loving those who do not love in return.

- The dominant culture thinks that everyone is tainted somehow. The missional church single-mindedly and purely worships the one God.

- The dominant culture thinks you will be happiest if you stay out of the way of conflict. The missional church is full of peacemakers, helping people find reconciliation.

- The dominant culture says, “You will be happy if everybody likes you all the time.” The missional church joyfully accepts suffering as a consequence of preaching and living the gospel.

This missional way of living the Beatitudes does not come naturally. It may not make sense to those who have bought into the values of the dominant culture. It does not necessarily come naturally to people in the church. We have to be taught this new

This missional way of living the Beatitudes does not come naturally.... Churches need a plan.

way of living. We have to have opportunities to practice living this way. Churches need a plan, not only for contacting visitors or reaching out to new people in the community, but for training its members, new and old, in discipleship. This teaching is not only for those who have just made a first

commitment to Christ, but also for the continuing formation of Jesus’ disciples within the church.

By living the Beatitudes, the church is salt, light, and a city on a hill. By being a contrast to society, the church sticks out. The church is different enough from the world around it that people notice and begin to give glory to God. To be a people of the Beatitudes without hiding it is to be a people of mission

within the setting to which God has called us. To live the Beatitudes is to proclaim and to be a sign of the reign of God.

The reign of God will someday come in its fullness. But today, now, the church is a preview of that reign of God. It is the visible reminder in the world that power belongs to God and the destiny of history is in the hands of God and of Jesus Christ the Son through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Questions for discussion

1. How can we be a church of the Beatitudes?
2. How can Mennonites not hide our light under a bushel?
3. How can we as a congregation, as a wider church be missional within the setting of the dominant culture?
4. In what ways is this congregation a contrast society or an alternative community?
5. Why is letting our nonconformity to the world be public (flaunting it, even) a risky business?

Prayer hymn

“Veni, Sancte Spiritus” *HWB* 298, or “Obey My Voice” *HWB* 163 (or “Spirit of Holiness, Descend,” *MH* 213)

Praying the scripture

Let us offer our prayers for the church, that its saltiness may be restored. (Silence)

Let us pray for the church that its light may not be hidden under a basket but put on a lamp stand. (Silence)

Let us pray that we may increase our will to live as a people of the Beatitudes. (Silence)

Let us pray for those outside the church that they may see Christ’s light reflected in us. (Silence)

Let us ask God for guidance in discerning our call and knowing how we are to be different from the world around us. (Silence)

Let us ask for courage and joy to pray, to speak, and to act as if the world is watching. (Silence)

Let us pray that we may have God’s magnetic love for those outside the church that they also may give glory to God. (Silence)

Let us pray in hope for that day when all the earth will worship God. (Silence)

(Here may be a time of open prayer for worshippers to offer aloud

their own petitions.)
God, be gracious to us and bless us.
Make your face shine upon us,
that your way may be known upon earth,
your saving power among all nations.
Let all the ends of the earth worship you. Amen.

Living the scripture

What encouragement does the church need in order better to be a people of the Beatitudes? Discern one next step for you and the congregation.

Sending hymn

"You Are Salt for the Earth" HWB 226, or "Renew Your Church" HWB 363 (or "Lord of Light, Whose Name Outshineth," MH 436)

About the author

Lois Barrett, Prayer Week writer for 1999, is executive secretary of the Commission on Home Ministries of the General Conference Mennonite Church. She has previously served as a pastor and an editor. She is the author or co-author of six books, the most recent of which is *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Eerdmans, 1998). She has also written numerous magazine articles, articles for *Mennonite Encyclopedia V*, adult Sunday school lessons, and recently the study guide for *A Mennonite Statement on Violence* (Faith and Life Press and Herald Press, 1998). Lois and her husband, Thomas Mierau, live in Wichita, Kansas, and have three children and three grandchildren.

EVALUATION FORM

Help us for next year

Copy (or cut out) this page and submit it to the address below. Use additional sheets as necessary.

- 1. Indicate which sessions you used by checking the appropriate box.
 - 1. Praying for Forgiveness and the Grace to Mourn
 - 2. Praying for Gentleness and Righteousness
 - 3. Praying to Experience God and Show Mercy
 - 4. Praying for Boldness
 - 5. Praying as a People of the Beatitudes

In what setting did you use these sessions? _____

2. What did you find *most* helpful? _____

3. What did you find *least* helpful? _____

4. Which topics/themes in your group gave the most discussion? _____

5. Which topics/themes in this series gave the least discussion? _____

6. Please list some ideas of what you would find helpful in future prayer week studies. If at all possible, include the names of people (and their home churches) who would be able to write on these themes). _____

Please complete, and return this form to the following address:

Prayer Week Response

Conference of Mennonites in Canada
600 Shaftesbury Blvd. Winnipeg, MB R3P 0M4
Or call (204) 888-6781, fax (204) 831-5675,
or email asenns@confmenno.ca