



# **A DIFFERENT CHARACTER**

Sermon series by  
*Leo Douma*

Based on the Sermon on the Mount  
Matt 5:1-16

October & November 2019

## Matthew 5 <sup>1:16</sup>

**5** Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, <sup>2</sup>and he began to teach them.

He said:

<sup>3</sup>"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup>Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup>Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup>Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

<sup>8</sup>Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup>Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup>Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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

<sup>13</sup>"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

<sup>14</sup>"You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup>Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. <sup>16</sup>In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

## **CALLED TO BE DIFFERENT**

### **Matthew 5:1-16**

Over the coming weeks I want to look at Jesus' 'Sermon on the Mount'. John Stott wrote a book on it in which he writes 'The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus ... It is the nearest thing to a manifesto that he ever uttered, for it is his own description of what he wanted his followers to be and to do. To my mind no two words sum up its intention better or indicate more clearly its challenge to the modern world, than the expression 'Christian counter-culture'. Why is it important to understand this manifesto of Jesus, to accept the call to be different? Well, we live in a time when social commentators, such as Hugh Mackay, make it clear that there is a rising tide of anxiety in our culture. The 'Safe as Churches Conference' I attended in Brisbane last week made clear the plight of those abused. Not just the sexually abused, but the elderly, the disabled, indigenous people, those suffering domestic violence. They are all looking for a voice. They are anxious to be heard and believed. School children have gone on strike over climate change. They are anxious that their future is secure.

It could well be that in all of this, is the activity of the Holy Spirit. Before he is the 'Comforter', he is the disturber. He is the one creating a hunger for something different. He is the one who drives the longing for justice, for respect, for hope. But too often the tragedy is the church shows no viable alternative. John Stott remarks 'No comment could be more hurtful to the Christian than the words 'But you are no different from anybody else.' It is a stinging rebuke when Christians are accused 'You may go to church, read the Bible and pray. But apart from that you are no different to the rest of us. In your business dealings you can be brutal. Your marriages and family life can be as broken as the community average. You Christians can also be selfish and materialistic. And when it comes to abuse, well, we'll say no more.' The church must face the fact it often deserves the criticism it gets. But what is far worse than a loss of face in the community is the loss of hope giving to the community. If Christians in their daily lives do not appear to be different: gentle, generous, gracious, hope filled, why should people come to them for answers?

But is it fair to suggest that Christians should be different? After all, we are human beings as well. We go through the same difficulties in life as everyone else. We struggle daily with our sin and brokenness. Before God we are no better than anyone else. That's why we trust Jesus, that we are saved by grace alone. This is all true. But we can't just leave it there and say being counter cultural is unrealistic. That fails to recognize the central theme of the Sermon on the Mount. It fails to pick up on Jesus' manifesto,

which is another way of stating the central theme of the Bible. God's purpose, in all of salvation history, has always been to call out a people for himself. And of that people he said, time and time again "Be holy as I the Lord your God am holy". They were called to be 'set apart' from the world. That is, they were called to be different. The whole purpose of the people of God was to be true to God. They were to be different in their thinking, in their speaking and behaviour. In other words, counter cultural. That is precisely God's point as he spoke to the people of Israel, soon after he rescued them from the slavery in Egypt (Leviticus 18:1-4) *"The LORD said to Moses, "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'I am the LORD your God. You must not do as they do in Egypt, where you used to live, and you must not do as they do in the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you. Do not follow their practices. You must obey my laws and be careful to follow my decrees. I am the LORD your God.'" Notice this appeal of God begins and ends with the statement "I am the Lord your God". They were to follow his commands, not the ideas and standards of those around them. But saying they were to be different did not mean they were to stick to themselves in a holy huddle. It was not a case of 'We are different because we are better. We don't want to have anything to do with others.'* They were to be different so that they would stand out. They were to be different to cause a difference. They were to be like a beacon shining in the darkness. They were to show the nations around them the way of hope. As God said (Isaiah 9:6) *"I will give you to be a light to the nations that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."* But throughout the centuries the people of Israel kept forgetting their uniqueness as the people of God. They forgot their calling. As the Psalmist complained (Psalm 106:35) *"They mingled with the nations and learned to do as they did."* So, God sent his prophets to remind Israel who they were. They pleaded with Israel to return to following God's ways. But as we know from the Old Testament, time and again Israel failed to do that. So, God's judgement came upon Israel and, 150 years later, on Judah. The reason for that is clearly laid out (2 Kings 17:7-8, 19-20) *"All this took place because the Israelites had sinned against the LORD their God, who had brought them up out of Egypt from under the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. They worshiped other gods and followed the practices of the nations the LORD had driven out before them, as well as the practices that the kings of Israel had introduced...So the Lord was very angry with Israel and removed them from his presence. Only the tribe of Judah was left, and even Judah did not keep the commands of the LORD their God. They followed the practices Israel had introduced. Therefore, the LORD rejected all the people of Israel..."* What is so sad about this failure of Israel is not only that they were rejected from God's presence. But also, the nations around were deprived of their light. They were deprived of the hope that was meant to be given by God's people.

Now this theme in the Old Testament is carried on in the New Testament. We see that especially here in the Sermon on the Mount. This theme of being 'Called to be Different' is essential in understanding this sermon by Jesus. The sermon comes early in Matthew's gospel. Jesus had been baptized by John in the Jordan, which was his ordination to ministry. He has been tempted by the devil in the desert, which was his standing firm where Adam and Eve had failed. Jesus had been preaching and healing the sick. Large crowds had been following him. And as he preached to them, his main message was (Matthew 4:17) "*Repent for the kingdom of God is at hand.*" Jesus had come to bring about the kingdom of God as promised in the Old Testament. In Jesus' arrival a new age had dawned. He would inaugurate the kingdom. That's the context in which we see this Sermon on the Mount. It describes the repentance needed to enter the kingdom. It describes the righteousness, the difference of those who belong in the kingdom. To 'repent' (Greek *metanoia*) means to do a complete turnaround. It's to have a complete change of heart, a shift in mindset. It's not just about being sorry. But being different to how you were. The Sermon on the Mount describes what life and community look like when people repent and are changed, when they live under the grace and rule of God.

What does such a life look like? Well just reflecting on the Beatitudes, we see the distinct character of the citizens of God's kingdom. Note what we see here: blessed (or how happy) are the poor, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted. Now how different is that? Promoting such characteristics would have been incomprehensible to the Romans of Jesus' day. It's also strange language in our assertive, competitive, status and money hungry, violent culture. Too often we get the message: blessed are the rich, the powerful, the tough and assertive. They have it all. They are happy. But Jesus says his kingdom followers should take their cue from him. Not the others around them. In a sense the key verse in the Sermon on the Mount is (Matthew 6:8) "*Do not be like them...*". It is the same call of the Old Testament to be different. To "be holy", set apart. Right through this sermon that theme comes out again and again. (Matthew 5:20) Jesus' followers are to be "*...the light of the world*". Their love was to be "*...greater than that of the pagans.*" The pagans loved and greeted their own, but God's kingdom citizens "*... are to love your enemies*". There is hardly a paragraph in this sermon where there is not a contrast. The scribes may do such. The pagans may do that. (Matthew 5:22, 28, 32, 34, 39, 44) "*But I tell you...*" says Jesus. Constantly the theme rings out 'You are to be different.'

Jesus says the kingdom of God's citizens are to be different to the pagans. That is, different to unbelievers. But he also said they were to be different to the scribes and

pharisees. These were the religious people. They were outwardly pious, but inwardly spiritually dead. As Jesus put it (Matthew 23:27) *“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean.”* We might say it refers to those who make out they are religious, but they don't have the heart of Christ. There is hypocrisy, that terrible lack of integrity that gives religion such a bad image. Jesus is saying in this Sermon on the Mount that the citizens of God's kingdom should be fair dinkum in their spiritual life. There is integrity between what people say they believe and how they behave. We see this from the fact the sermon deals with many aspects of life: the Christian's character, their marriages, how they speak to each other, how they treat each other, their prayer life and piety, their ambitions and their use of money. In other words, it refers to a complete lifestyle that lines up with their religion. The sermon describes a way of life that challenged the norms of the time. And still does today.

Why such a stress on being different? So the citizens of the kingdom of God can be the 'salt of the earth' and have a positive effect and stop the corruption in the world. So Christ's followers can be 'the light of the world' and show the way to grace and hope. So they can bring praise to God by their good works. As Jesus put it (Matthew 5:13-16) *“You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”*

Now I realize that we mostly don't like standing out and being different. We just want to quietly blend in with the culture around us. The thing is though, we are really like turtles. We can't make progress unless we stick our neck out. And we do need to. Think about our children. How will they find faith? With the baptism we all said yes to the questions: Do you promise so to order your life and witness as a congregation that Ava may grow up in the knowledge and love of God, and be surrounded by your Christian example and influence? Think about our communities. How will they find hope unless they get a glimpse of the kingdom from us? Letting our light shine before others doesn't necessarily mean we are all big spotlights. It may be that we are but a flickering candle in the wind. But in utter darkness such a little light can show the way home and bring hope. A key learning at the Safe as Churches Conference was the deep need for the abused to be listened to. To be given a voice, to be heard and believed was the number one factor to healing. Listening like that requires a servant's heart. It requires

the characteristic of those who mourn over the sin done against others. It requires those who hunger for justice. It requires those who meek, who are strong, yet so gentle. It requires those who are merciful and gracious. It requires those who are willing to be persecuted themselves to ensure justice is done. Such care is so different to how many of the abused have been treated and it stands out. It reveals the loving heart of God as seen in Jesus.

In the coming weeks we will 'sit on the mountain' with the crowd and the disciples. We will sit at Jesus' feet and listen as he teaches us. We too, like the crowd should be in awe at Jesus' teaching and learn obedience (Matthew 7:28): *"When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law."* Here is one greater than Moses coming down from the mountain with God's Law. Here sits God amongst his people. Here sits the King of the Kingdom, the hope of the world. He didn't just give a good talk. He was totally counter cultural. He was the king who served, humbled all the way to the cross. We need to listen to him and answer his call to be different.



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

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

## **POOR & MOURNING**

### **Matthew 5:1-16**

I want you to imagine two different persons. One is a secret agent who is described in a spy thriller as 'so ordinary looking, so unremarkable that no one would remember he was there.' The other is a punk rocker who has turned up at a civic reception. He stands out with his spiked, multi-colored hair, nose rings and torn cloths. Now here's a question for you. Which of the two is a closer picture of a Christian in terms of the Sermon on the Mount? The secret agent who has blended in and draws no attention. Or the counter cultural punk rocker whose very style is screaming 'Look at me'? The Christian character Jesus describes in the Sermon on the Mount was so counter cultural that to his audience it was even more odd than a punk rocker at a civic reception. In fact, Jesus is arguing that the Christian should stand out as being very

different. The reason for that was to draw attention to themselves. (Matthew 5:14) Like *"...a city on a hill that cannot be hidden ...and ...a light on a stand ...not under a bowl."*

But how should a Christian to be different? Are they supposed to have different hairstyles? Or wear different clothes? Are they to drive certain cars? Should they be wearing suits as they walk in pairs down the street carrying satchels with their free magazines? That's not the sort of thing Jesus is getting at. Although in Australia Christians do tend to be mostly middle class. The Bible belts in both Melbourne and Sydney are in the eastern and wealthier suburbs. Jesus had something else in mind. The people listening to him on the hillside, must have been spellbound. What he was telling them would have seemed absurd. It was a reversal of all accepted standards. Listen to how Luke puts it in his version of the Sermon on the Mount (Luke 6:20-26), *"Blessed are the poor..." "Woe to you who are rich". "Blessed are those who hunger..." "Woe to you who are well fed now". "Blessed are you who weep..." "Woe to you who laugh now".* You get the picture. Talk about going opposite to what is usually expected. Jesus is calling on his followers to be very different.

What Jesus is saying is going deep. He is not just talking about outward lifestyles. He is talking about deep spiritual characteristics. Christians are to have very different attitudes. That may affect what they wear, or what they drive and where they live. But the outward lifestyle issues are driven by an inner character. That is what the Beatitudes, these eight 'blessings' describe. They set out the various aspects of one Christian character. So, note that. The Beatitudes are not describing eight separate groups of disciples. Some who are poor, and others who are mourning. It describes followers of Jesus who are all poor in spirit, meek and merciful, mourning and hungry. And neither is this referring to an elite group. Jesus is referring to the ideal characteristics of every Christian. In fact, Jesus is describing his own character. The calling of each Christian is to get to know Jesus and become more like Jesus.

Also notice that Jesus does not issue a command here, 'You shall be like this....you shall mourn or hunger for righteousness.' Rather each characteristic is commended with a promise "Blessed are...for they will..." The Greek word for 'blessed' means 'happy, to be joyful'. So, Jesus is saying how happy are those who mourn, those who hunger. But don't be misled here. In our culture when we use the word 'happy' we are referring to how we feel. It's about an emotion in that moment. But our feelings can quickly change. Jesus is referring to more than just happy feelings. He is talking about how God views the Christian. He is talking about what God gives to those with these characteristics. What he gives is something perfect and permanent. Being 'blessed' means heaven's favour rests on the Christian. God's unchanging grace rests on the

Christian. Nothing can take that away. In fact, in time the sense of blessedness, the sense of joy and happiness, will become perfect. This is a fact, even when we don't always feel it. You can sense that. Otherwise it all seems rather strange to say, 'happy are those who mourn', as if we feel happy, when we feel sad.

What are the blessings that are guaranteed by God? Look at the Beatitudes. We see the blessings in the second half of each Beatitude. *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted... they will inherit the earth... they will be satisfied... they will be shown mercy... they will see God."* Now, again, all these blessings belong together. They are given to all those who have these characteristics. If the 'kingdom of heaven' is ours, then we will also 'inherit the earth...and be satisfied... see God and be called children of God.' So, what we have here are the qualities of the Christian character; Christ's character. These outline how we are to be as the citizens of God's kingdom. How we are to be different. How we are to be counter cultural. The blessings describe the privileges of being citizens of the kingdom. They refer to things we can already enjoy now. With the guarantee we will have perfect enjoyment of these blessings in time to come.

Let's look at two of the Beatitudes. The first is, *"Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* In the Old Testament the word 'poor' originally referred to those who were in real need. They had little food or shelter. They were often destitute with nowhere to turn for help. Except to plead to God. So, the word came to have a spiritual meaning. It referred to a humble dependence on God. Psalm 34:6 *"This poor man called to God, and the Lord heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles."* Luke in his version of the Sermon speaks of the 'poor'. Matthew says, 'poor in spirit'. They came to mean the same thing. The 'poor person' in the Old Testament was often persecuted by the rich and powerful. Which explains Jesus saying (Luke 6:24) *"Blessed are the poor...But woe to you who are rich"*. The poor were those who were unable to save themselves from exploitation. They were so under-resourced they were completely reliant on others. The rich in Israel gloated in their own strength. Or they compromised with the heathen nations to gain their wealth. But the poor often remained faithful to God and were reliant on him. So, to be 'poor in spirit' meant to come before God, humbly admitting dependence on him. For all their physical needs. As Jesus prayed *"Give this day our daily bread"*. But it also came to mean approaching God and admitting spiritual poverty. It meant we have absolutely nothing to offer God to be loved by him. We have nothing to appease his judgement for sin. We cannot buy the favour of heaven because we are completely bankrupt. As the hymn writer, Augustus Toplady, put in in his hymn 'Rock of Ages', 'Nothing in my hands I bring, Simply to Thy cross I

cling; Naked, come to Thee for dress; Helpless, look to Thee for grace; Foul, I to the fountain fly; Wash me, Savior, or I die.' That is the language of the 'poor in spirit'.

Astonishingly, it is to such, and only to such, that the kingdom of heaven is given, "...theirs is the kingdom...". God's blessing is a gift. It is as utterly free as it is utterly undeserved. The kingdom of God can only be received with the needy humility of the poor. Right from the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is showing how completely different the kingdom of heaven operates. So much in our world belongs to the rich. So much is dominated by the strong. But God's kingdom belongs to the poor, to the meek, to the childlike. In Jesus day the Pharisees thought they would gain the kingdom because they were rich in money and their good works they displayed for all to see. And the zealots of the time dreamed of establishing the kingdom by the sword and blood. But Jesus made it clear they would not enter the kingdom of God. Not with those attitudes. When the disciples were in an argument about who was the greatest, Jesus said (Matthew 18:3) *"Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."* Counter culturally Jesus said it was the tax collectors and the prostitutes, the rejects of society who would enter the kingdom in Jesus' time. Not because they were tax collectors and prostitutes. But they knew, given their lifestyles, they were spiritually poor. They had nothing to offer God in the way of good works. All they could do was to cry to God for mercy. And he heard their cry. That is where the Christian character starts. It's with deep humility and utter dependence on God. If that is not in place, nothing else is either. "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom."

That leads into the second characteristic. *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."* We could translate this as 'Happy are the unhappy'. That draws attention to the startling paradox here. What kind of sorrow is it, that when you feel it, brings the joy of God's blessing? It's not those who mourn the loss of a loved one. It refers to those who mourn the loss of their innocence, the loss of their self-respect. It's the sorrow of repentance. It's being deeply sad about just how sinful you are. It's one thing to be spiritually poor, to know you have nothing to make you right with God. It's another thing to grieve over how deeply you have failed God. It's like the anguish you feel when you admit the deep hurt you have caused a loved one by betraying their trust. It's not only seeing how dependent you are on God. It's also about how deeply you have hurt the God you are so dependent on. Thomas Cranmer was the leader of the English Reformation and Archbishop of Canterbury. He wrote the English Prayer Book. With the Prayer of Repentance, he wrote 'We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness.' We read in Ezra 10:1 *"While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of*

*Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly.”* Paul groans deeply in Romans 7:24 *“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?”* Were they all going over the top with their mourning over sin? No, they grasped the reality of their sin and brokenness. In their grief they felt the depth of their failure. One of the reasons Christians lose their passion for Christ, and the gospel, is they lose appreciation of how much God has forgiven them. If you owe me five dollars and I say, ‘Don’t worry about it’, how do you feel? Grateful perhaps, but it’s no big deal. What if you owe me five thousand dollars and I say, ‘Don’t worry about it?’ How do you feel then? Deeply thankful. And willingly to be helpful in any request I might have. Jesus said, *“Blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted”*. Imagine how the Prodigal Son felt, that deep sense of relief when his father ran all the way to greet him and hugged him, kissed him with such joy. When we mourn our sin, and cry out to God, our Father comforts us as he reassures us ‘It’s all forgiven. Jesus has covered it all. (Micah 7 :18-19) I don’t stay angry forever. I delight to show mercy. The debt is paid in full. The sin is thrown away into the depths of the sea.’

Mourning for sin is not just over our personal failure. It’s also a deep grief about the sinfulness and brokenness in the world. It’s crying over the failure of humanity. Jesus was sinless so he didn’t mourn his own sin. But he certainly cried over the sins of others. He wept over the bitter consequences of sin, like judgement and death. The shortest verse in the Bible says, *“Jesus wept”*. When Jesus rode the donkey into Jerusalem he sobbed as he thought of the Jews rejecting God and facing the destruction of their city by the Romans. The Psalmist wept over human disobedience. (Psalm 119:136) *“Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed.”* Paul writes (Philippians 3:18) *“For as I have often told you before and now tell you again with tears, many live as enemies of the cross. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach and their glory is in their shame.”* We too, should weep over the fact so many face hell because they have rejected God. We need to feel the awful reality of the human situation. Only that will drive our passion. Passion to witness. Passion to strive for justice. Passion to pray for change. We need to feel the depth of our sinfulness. But not as those despairing. Rather as those mourning who will be comforted. (Revelation 21:3-4) *“I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ‘He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death’ or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”* He who was seated on the throne said, *“I am making everything new!”* Then he said, *“Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.”* We may cry now but the time will come when God will comfort all his creatures.

Jesus calls us to be different. To be counter cultural. He calls us to stop being be fiercely independent of others and even God. We need to demonstrate humility and reliance on God. We can't just be blasé about the pain our sin causes God. Or unmoved by the unending evil in our world, and our own communities. We need to grieve and be deeply passionate to drive us towards what we are called to be; Jesus' agents of comfort and hope. Jesus said, "*You are the salt of the earth...you are the light of the world*".



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

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

### **MEEK & HUNGERING**

#### **Matthew 5:1-16 (5-6)**

A key reason for looking at the Beatitudes, these eight 'blessings' here in the 'Sermon on the Mount', is that they represent Jesus' vision for humanity. What does it look like to be truly human? To be 'blessed', finding hope and the true joy? If we are going to be become spiritually mature, what does that look like? If we are going to fulfill our vows with Ava's baptism, to 'so order our lives and witness as a congregation' so she becomes a follower of Jesus, what does that look like? It looks like what Jesus describes here in these verses. The Beatitudes describe eight characteristics of the core character of someone shaped by the life of Jesus. Nowhere else in the Bible does Jesus describe more fully the outcomes of life with him. What we see is a character that is different, one that is counter cultural to what is often seen around us in our communities.

We see Jesus begins by saying we are to be humble before God and totally reliant on his grace. (Matthew 5:3) "*Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*". The New English Bible translates it as "*Blessed are those who know their need of God.*" That's where it starts. Deep humility and dependence on God. Without that, there is no entry to the kingdom. As Jesus said (Matthew 18:3) "*Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.*" What follows on from that is a deep sense of grief, (Matthew 5:4) "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*" It means we are upset about the sin in our lives and how we so often hurt God. It's not just about recognizing our need for forgiveness. It's about grieving that we keep on hurting God, day after day. It also means we mourn

over sin's destructive force in the world. The gross injustices, the pain and bitterness, even death, all caused by human sin. The droughts and earthquakes, destructive cyclones and devastating bushfires- creation itself suffers under the curse of sin. Things are not as they should be. But we mourn, not as those without hope, but as those who are comforted by God. All our sin is forgiven in Jesus. And one day Jesus will return with a new creation, where there will be no more mourning or death. God himself will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

This sense of mourning leads us to the third beatitude Jesus mentions, (Matthew 5:5) *"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."* The Greek word we translate as 'meek' means to be 'gentle, considerate, humble and courteous.' It includes the idea of having the self-control to be able to be gentle. A form of the Greek word was used to describe taming a horse. The horse did not lose its strength, but it was controlled in a useable way. So, it's gentleness as a form of controlled strength. Jesus used the word to describe himself. He said (Matthew 11:29) *"Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and lowly (gentle and humble) in heart..."* So, Jesus asks us to be like him, to do what he first did for us. We get a clue as to what Jesus meant by gentleness when we note the sequence in the list of the Beatitudes. It is between those who 'mourn' over their sin and those who 'hunger for righteousness'. It indicates a meek attitude towards others. This gentle attitude comes about when we have a true estimate of ourselves. If we are honest enough to mourn over how we hurt God, it has a double effect. First, we can be far more gentle with others when they point out our failures. This meekness accepts 'You are right. I have been selfish. I was only thinking about myself. Yes, I see it now. I did speak too strongly. I didn't stop to think how it would upset you.'

The second effect is we can be more gentle with others when they fail because we won't be self-righteous. A gentle approach provides the grace and space for them to feel safe to admit their sin. It does not seek to stick the knife in or bring up the issue to get even. One commentator pointed out that it can be one thing to be honest before God and admit our sin. But it's much more difficult to have someone else point out our wrong. In church together, we will all together confess 'Lord forgive us, we are sinners before you'. But we won't admit to anything in particular. And we can get pretty cranky if someone else wants to point out our failure. In other words, we are often not prepared to allow other people to say to us what we have acknowledged to God. You can see the hypocrisy there. That's what you get when meekness is missing from our lives.

Now, as I put it earlier, meekness does not mean we are timid pushovers. That's what we often think when we use the word. But that's not what is meant. Remember it is a form of controlled strength. Look at Jesus. He was humble. Often acted as a servant. Not because he was shy or a doormat. From his position of inner strength, he chose to offer himself on the cross. True humility, and thus being gentle, comes from a strong inner self. Mourning our sin and being humble before God is very different to being depressed and feeling you are worthless. A Christian can be confident and positive as a person. They know and relish being made in God's image and a child of God. But they are still very self-aware of how they have that rebellious spirit within. And because of that they are genuinely amazed at God's grace. Since God is gracious with them, they control themselves to be gentle and gracious towards others.

It's to the 'meek' that Jesus said "*...they will inherit the earth*". That sounds very counter cultural. To many people the 'meek' wouldn't get anywhere because everyone would walk over them. To get ahead in this world you have to be a bit arrogant. But remember, we confess that Jesus has risen from the dead and ascended into heaven. From there he rules all of life and history. He is the one who will usher in the new heavens and the new earth when he comes again. It is his to give. And he' says the meek will inherit it. It's his gift to those who follow his gentleness. The psalmist says (Psalm 37:1,11,22,34) "*Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; ...the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity... those the LORD blesses will inherit the land, but those he curses will be destroyed... Hope in the LORD and keep his way. He will exalt you to inherit the land; when the wicked are destroyed, you will see it.*" The powerful and arrogant of this world may very well come along and strip everything off those who are 'poor' and 'mourning' and 'meek'. Christian persecution is still continuing. But those persecutors cannot touch the inheritance of the 'meek'. They cannot touch or receive the new earth. It's the meek who will inherit it. It's the children of God who are heirs of the kingdom. It's God's to give his kingdom to whom he pleases.

Now I want you to see the flow on of the Beatitudes. We are aware of our own spiritual poverty. We are deeply aware of the effect of sin and mourn over it. We are gentle, considerate and humble in our attitude towards others. It stands to reason then that we will also have an intense desire to right the wrongs we are aware of, both which we commit, and others commit. So, we can understand Jesus saying next (Matthew 5:6) "*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*" To say we are to 'hunger' and 'thirst' is to say we have an intense longing for something. It means we have a deep passion for something, that is not easily quenched. The question is what are we to be hungry and thirsty for? What should be the driving

passion that we focus our time and energy towards? It's justice, ensuring freedom and opportunity for all human beings, that allows them to flourish. Jesus put's it as hungering for 'righteousness.' Many people may be engrossed in the pursuit of possessions or power. In the process they often put others down. But Jesus says later in the Sermon we are to (Matthew 6:33) *"Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness."*

What is that 'righteousness'? In the Bible it can refer to our status before God. Paul speaks in Romans 3 about the 'righteousness from God that comes by faith'. In other words, by faith in Jesus all is forgiven. Jesus is not talking about that here in the Sermon on the Mount. Because if we are Christians we are already regarded by God as righteous. We don't have to hunger for what we already have. The other way the Bible speaks of righteousness is how we conduct ourselves in life. That's what Jesus is talking about here. He is saying his followers intensely desire to live the way God wants us to. Jesus means we desire to act righteously. Not because we must or are forced to. But because we yearn, we hunger to live by God's standards. We should have a deep passion to fight sin in our lives. And have an unquenchable thirst to live for God's glory. We see later in this Sermon on the Mount that Jesus contrasts Christian righteousness with that of the Pharisees. Jesus accuses the latter of an outward conformity to the rules. Remember Jesus said (Matthew 23:27) *"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean."* Jesus is saying our wanting to do the right thing is not just about strutting our stuff and being outwardly religious. It's something that comes from the heart. It comes from a desire deep within. It's something we hunger and thirst for, a passion that cries out to God to do his will. To do things right because it is right.

But there's more. This moral sense of righteousness has a social aspect to it. It's not just a personal affair making sure we personally do the right thing before God. It's something that involves the whole community. It's about having a deep longing to see justice is maintained in our communities. It's about the things focused on a few weeks ago with Freedom Sunday. The Old Testament prophets spoke a lot about freeing the oppressed. That oppression could be put upon the people by a government or corrupt business. Or it could be social attitudes that tolerate bullying or domestic violence or various forms of abuse. Jesus saw himself in terms of freeing the oppressed. In Luke 4 we see Jesus reading that wonderful passage of Isaiah 61 as referring to himself (Luke 4:18) *"The Spirit of the LORD is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free."* Hungering and thirsting for righteousness involves promoting freedom from bigotry and prejudice. It involves striving to ensure there is

justice in the system of law, integrity in business, faithfulness in the home. We should be well aware of the difference between 'justice' and 'just us'. We hunger and strive for righteousness because it is right in the eyes of God. And, also, because it is so needed in our world. Ours should not be an attitude that says 'Don't get involved. It's not our problem. They probably brought it on themselves.' Because we hunger and thirst for righteousness, we will not accept excuses. 'The problem is too big for us. We don't have the resources or time'. As Martin Luther put it so strongly 'The command to you is not to crawl into a corner, or into the desert, but to run out, if that is where you have been, and to offer your hands and feet and your whole body, and to wager everything you have and can do. What is required ...is a hunger and thirst for righteousness that can never be curbed or stopped or sated, one that looks for nothing and cares for nothing except the accomplishments and maintenance of the right, despising everything that hinders this end. If you cannot make the world completely pious then do what you can!'

If our lives seem at times to lack growth or passion, perhaps its because we don't have a healthy spiritual appetite. We are spiritually sick and not that hungry because we are compromised. We have become spiritually arrogant instead of dependent. We are blasé about sin instead of mourning it. We are not that counter cultural. But if we have truly seen our brokenness, and experienced God's forgiveness, then we will see how things are supposed to be. We will long for that. In this life, our intense hunger will not be satisfied. Sometimes, when faith triumphs we will rejoice and feel refreshed. But the hunger will return. Yet, Jesus promises that those who hunger and thirst will be 'filled'. They will be satisfied. It will occur when Jesus comes in judgment. Then righteousness will triumph. Like Amos put it (Amos 5:24) "*...let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never failing stream*" Then all wrong and evil will be overthrown. Then justice will prevail over all the nations and all creation.

The Christian faith is not just about me and my sin forgiven and going to heaven. The scope of salvation is the creation. The day will come when every plant and animal, every atom and molecule, will sigh with relief. It will happen as Jesus comes with justice. When he removes the curse of sin. When he brings peace and joy to all creation. Every wrong ever done, will be made right. Hunger for it, gentle Christian. Thirst for that day, you who mourn. For you will be satisfied.



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

### **MERCIFUL**

#### **Matthew 5:7**

The story was once told of two tourists travelling across England by train. One of them, an American nudged her Canadian fellow traveler, and said 'See that man five seats ahead? I think he's the Archbishop of Canterbury. I recognize him from a picture in today's paper'. Her Canadian friend disagreed. 'I think you're making a mistake.' They argued about it. So, the Canadian said 'If you are so sure, go up and ask him'. So, the American made her way up the aisle and spoke with the man she thought was the leader of the Church of England. 'Excuse me sir. My friend and I were wondering if you are the Archbishop of Canterbury.' This passenger apparently did not appreciate the intrusion into his privacy. He glared at the American, swore at her and told her to mind her own business. The American, rather shocked, returned to her seat. 'Well', said the Canadian. 'Is he the Archbishop or not?' 'I don't know' said the American, 'he wouldn't say!'

What do you think? Does that sound like the behaviour of an Archbishop? Would the Archbishop swear to disguise his identity? We hope not! While a disguise may be necessary for undercover agents it is not necessary for Christians. If our mission was an undercover one, Jesus would have told his followers to 'Blend in with the world. Be exactly like the rest. Whatever they do, you do as well so no one will notice you.' But Jesus did not tell them that. With the Sermon on the Mount Jesus was telling his disciples to be different. They were to stand out. That is still our calling today. By our different character and lifestyle, we are to draw attention to ourselves. We are to do that, so we ultimately draw attention to God. As Jesus said (Matthew 5:16) *"Let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven."* That is the thrust of Jesus' teachings with the Beatitudes. Be different to cause a difference.

In the Beatitudes Jesus is describing what that different Christian character is to be like. It is the person who is 'poor in spirit'. There is a sense of spiritual poverty recognizing a deep need for God. The follower of Jesus is one who 'mourns' their sin. And, also, the sin of all humanity which causes havoc on creation. The disciple of Jesus is one who is 'meek'. They are humble enough to acknowledge their faults. And they are gentle with the failings of others. The followers of Jesus are those to 'hunger and

thirst for righteousness'. They are deeply passionate about bringing justice. They long to have all the wrong made right.

That leads us into the fifth Beatitude (Matthew 5:7) *"Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy."* The Greek word for 'mercy' means 'to give help to the wretched; to relieve the miserable'. So, to have compassion for the sick, the suffering, the dying, the poor. It's also about forgiving those who are miserable because they know they have done wrong. Someone might say that having compassion for others is not distinctly Christian. It can be argued that's because our culture has been influenced over the centuries by Christianity. In Jesus' time, the dominant Roman and Greek cultures had little regard for mercy. The Romans saw mercy as a weakness not a virtue. There was a right that belonged to Roman fathers called *patria potesta* ('power of a father'). That right gave him the power to kill an unwanted child after they were born. If a father wanted a son but a daughter was born, he could give a thumbs-down, and the infant would be drowned immediately. However, if he gave a thumbs-up, the child would live. That was the mentality of the day. As one philosopher put it 'Mercy is the disease of the soul that spells weakness.' The Greeks, too, saw mercy as a weakness. Compassion for someone who was in a bad way, created fear the same could happen to them. That fear was a weakness. Mercy got in the way of justice, which in those cultures was often more about revenge. Lack of mercy explains how the Romans could enjoy so much killing in the Games in the Amphitheatre. In Romans 1 Paul lists twenty-one things about those who lived in Rome, including *"... evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, deceit..."* and then at the end of the list we see *"...they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy."* The very last words used to describe them is 'unmerciful'.

In the Bible, mercy is not just an emotion. It is not seen as a weakness. Mercy comes from a position of strength. It is an attitude, a mindset, that acts purposefully. The Greek word for 'mercy' in our text is used in the Septuagint, the Greek version of the Old Testament, to translate the Hebrew word 'chesed'. This is a very significant word in the Old Testament. It is translated as 'mercy' or 'loving kindness'. It is closely tied to the word 'covenant', which referred to God's relationship with Israel. Because of God's great mercy he chose Israel to be his own people and promised to love them. God was not drawn to Israel because of their greatness or courage or wisdom. They were nothing but a huge group of slaves in Egypt. It was God's loving kindness, his mercy, that drew him to Israel. And because of that covenant of love, God said not only would he be merciful to Israel, but his people were also to be merciful. Mercy is based on a relationship, on the covenant. It's a way of life. It is not a weakness that gets in the way of justice. As the prophet Micah summed it up (Micah 6:8) *"What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."* In other words,

true worship of God requires humility towards God. And at the same time, it requires we act with mercy and justice towards others.

From that perspective this Beatitude emphasizes how the followers of Jesus are to be different. Often in our communities there can be a tendency, perhaps as a way of coping emotionally, not to care or get involved with others. There can be a protective mindset to insulate ourselves from the suffering others go through. We can easily walk around the homeless on our city streets. We can watch news items and see all the tragedies around our country and the world, and not feel anything. We switch off. But Jesus says here in our text 'Blessed are those who, despite having their own problems are willing to get involved in the pain and struggle of others. Blessed are those who are willing to join them and get right into their situation.' When you think about it, that is precisely what Jesus did. He came down into our human situation and all our struggles. He took on himself our sin and brought the way of forgiveness. Which shows us that the concept of 'mercy' is very close to that of 'grace'. If we want to distinguish between the two, we can say 'mercy' deals with the results of sin. It deals with the pain, the failure, the hurt, the frustration caused by sin. 'Mercy' seeks to provide relief from the effects of sin. 'Grace' deals more with sin itself. It deals with the guilt of sin and the person's relationship with God. 'Grace' seeks to provide pardon for sin. 'Blessed are the merciful' for in doing so we celebrate God's mercy.

Now you notice that Jesus did not specify which group of people his followers were to show mercy to. He didn't spell out whether they were to show mercy to those in the situation of a disaster, or those who were hungry, or the sick. Or if it referred to those who had sinned and failed badly. Nor did Jesus suggest not to show mercy to those who acted grievously against his disciples or might be regarded as enemies. Well, at least not here in our text. The lawyer in Luke 10 was thinking that way when he asked who fitted into the category of neighbour. In other words, so it's clear who is not my neighbour and I don't show them mercy. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan showed the error of the lawyer's thinking. But there is no need for Jesus to specify which groups we are to show mercy towards, because we have an example to follow. God himself is that example. Remember when God had saved Israel from Egypt. Moses asked God to reveal his character. We read (Exodus 34:6) *"Then the LORD came down in the cloud and stood there with him and proclaimed his name, the LORD. And he passed in front of Moses, proclaiming, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness..."* The LORD God is a merciful God, full of compassion. As such he shows his mercy to everyone. Later in his Sermon on the Mount Jesus says (Matthew 5:43-48) *"You have heard that it was said 'Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute*

*you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”* As God our Father is, so must we be as his children. After all, the whole point of the exercise is as Jesus said (Matthew 5:16) *“Let your light shine before others that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.”*

A question may arise as to whether people deserve mercy? Do they deserve the caring involvement of others? The story is told of a mother who approached Napoleon asking for pardon for her son. Napoleon replied that the young man had twice committed a certain crime and that for justice to be done, the man deserved to die. ‘But I don’t ask for justice’ said the mother ‘I plead for mercy’. ‘But your son does not deserve mercy’, replied Napoleon. ‘It would not be mercy if he deserved it, and mercy is all that I seek for him’, replied the mother. Because of the mother’s sound reasoning Napoleon said ‘Well, then, I will have mercy’ and spared the woman’s son. Mercy is a gift given to those who don’t serve it. And yet so often people can ask things like, ‘Why should we have compassion for a man who is constantly on the bottle and wrecks his own life. Why be gracious towards the convicts in prison, they are there for a reason. They stuffed up. Let them wear it’. Show mercy? There are times when that word sounds appalling. Show compassion? Let’s face it. There are times that the calls for justice and revenge sound sweeter in a person’s ears. People can understand the Greek attitude towards mercy.

But note again the text. *“Blessed are those who show mercy, for they will be shown mercy.”* We noted earlier that mercy and grace are closely linked. As Jesus says later, when teaching the disciples, the Lord’s Prayer (Matthew 6:14-15) *“For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.”* And in the parable of the unmerciful servant, the master says (Matthew 18:33) *“Shouldn’t you have had mercy on your fellow servant as I had on you?”* Jesus does not mean that a person gains mercy because they have shown mercy. Rather we cannot receive mercy and forgiveness from God unless we repent. And we cannot claim we have repented of our sin if we are not merciful towards the sin of others. For nothing proves more clearly that we have experienced God’s undeserving grace, than our willingness to be gracious, to be merciful toward others. Nothing moves us to mercy more than our experiencing God’s mercy. To have experienced mercy and to show mercy, the two belong indisputably together.

Notice how the Beatitudes follow on from each other. The 'poor in spirit' have experienced the grace of God because they claimed nothing else except the mercy, the compassion, of God. 'Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to the cross I cling'. God in his mercy has become totally involved in the human situation with the incarnation of Jesus. In his mercy God has dealt with our sin through Jesus' death and resurrection. Because the Christian has experienced God's mercy, they are more open and realistic about their sin. And they mourn over it. They can be meek and humble about their sin. And gentle towards the failings of others. The Christian hungers to have things made right in the world. It's a passion that drives their compassion. It is the Christian with these characteristics who is motivated to be merciful and compassionate towards others. They are willing to get involved in the lives of others because Christ got involved in theirs. Mercy is so important. For mercy is the basis of hope. Loving kindness, amazing grace, tender mercy, are such hope inspiring words. They do not signal weakness. They are not indicators of being pushovers and give-ins. They are demonstrations of the Almighty. Mercy is a key characteristic of the awesome God. It is an outcome of the fact that (1 John 4:8) "*God is love*". Without mercy there is no hope for an end to the bloodletting, the revenge, the retribution. That's what is ripping the heart and hope out of so many countries. Without mercy there is no hope for justice for the poor and downtrodden. Without mercy and compassion so many abused will continue to go unheard and be unable to thrive. Without mercy there is little chance for peace and reconciliation. Without grace there is no hope to be forgiven or know how to forgive. Without God's mercy, this creation is doomed. But the good news is that (Ephesians 2:4-5) "*...because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive in Christ Jesus. It is by grace you have been saved.*" That's why we can say "*Blessed are the merciful for they will be shown mercy.*"



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

**PURE IN HEART**  
**Matthew 5:8**

Let me ask you what has been described as life's most important question. What do you desire the most? What is it that drives you? Do you know? What do you want the most from life? Are you aware of it? Can you identify it? Is it fulfillment of some sort,

recognition, to be loved, financial security, friendship, what? What one thing is it that gives direction and meaning to your life? It's been said this is the most significant question of the Christian life. Of any life for that matter. That is the question that will be answered by today's Beatitude in the most unambiguous way; (Matthew 5:8) *"Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God."* That's it! That's the goal of the Christian life. That's what we are living for. That we may live our life in such a way that we see God. If we see God, that will open the treasure trove of all the blessings. Not only for eternity but also for life here and now. The key to open that treasure trove is a 'pure heart'.

This Beatitude is the most significant of the eight 'blessings' Jesus mentions here. You cannot be 'poor in spirit' without having a pure heart. You cannot 'mourn' over your sin without having a pure heart. You cannot be 'meek', you cannot 'hunger and thirst for righteousness', you cannot be 'merciful', you cannot be a 'peacemaker' or be prepared to stand 'persecution' for the name of Jesus, without having a 'pure heart'. This is one of the most central principles of the Christian life we see in the whole Bible. The 'heart of the matter' is the 'matter of the heart'. No wonder it's been said 'Matthew 5:8 is one of the greatest statements in the whole of the Bible.' *"Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God."* This is what Christianity is about. The gospel is about the condition of our heart which determines our relationship with God. David, as Jesus' ancestor, had already asked the central question to life, centuries before, (Psalm 24:3-4) *"Who may ascend the hill of the Lord? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and a pure heart..."*

In stressing the heart Jesus was again very counter cultural. He was so different to the practices and religion of his day. The Pharisees were very conscientious in their religion. They were incredibly pedantic with their ritual purification. They were not allowed to touch certain animals or people who were regarded as unclean. Otherwise they would be defiled. The Pharisees were zealous at this ceremonial cleanness. They were obsessed with washing their hands. They were preoccupied with appearing to do all the right religious things. They could be seen praying on the street corners. They were sticklers with their tithing. They were well versed in the Scriptures and could argue at length about their interpretations. They very much kept the letter of the law. But while they appeared so pure on the outside, inside they were corrupt. Their hearts were unclean. And it was the heart that Jesus focused on. As he said, (Matthew 15:19) *"Out of the heart proceeds evil thoughts, murder, adultery, lying..."* Everything comes from the heart. In the Bible the word 'heart' refers to the real inner you. The heart is what you are, in the secrecy of your thoughts and feelings, when nobody knows, but God. From the heart comes all our thinking, our desires, our feelings. It's the real motive

behind our decision making. So, Jesus is saying, as his followers, you shouldn't just look good. You must be good right to the core of your existence. It's what you really are in the deep recesses of your heart, that matters more to God than what you appear on the outside. As God said to Samuel when looking at Jesse's sons for a new king (1 Samuel 16:7) *"People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."*

So, the heart is utterly crucial to Jesus. What we are in the deep, private recesses of our lives is what he cares about the most. He calls us to be 'pure in heart'. The word 'pure' translates the Greek 'katharos'. From the Greek we get the word 'catharsis'. That's a psychological term which refers to a cleansing of the mind or emotions. In other words, you get it all off your chest and clear out the hidden emotions. So, we are talking about making the heart pure by cleansing. To be pure means to be 'washed, to be without dirt, to be free from impurities, without blemish, spotless.' So, there is the sense of being morally pure. We don't just look good. We are good and moral. We are as good deep inside as we appear outwardly. That is, we have integrity, what we really are inside, and how we appear to others, lines up.

Now, you can scrub up and be clean on the outside by having a bath. But how do you get a pure heart? Well, we need to look at the second and more basic meaning of the word 'katharos'. Which is 'single-mindedness'. The 'pure in heart' are those who are 'sincere, without hypocrisy, pure in motive'. To be 'single minded' means 'you mean it when you say it'. The opposite of a 'pure heart' is a divided heart. Or being 'double minded'. By 'double minded' we mean the outward expression does not match up with the inner motive. For example, the salesman says with a straight face 'This is cheap'. But he knows full well he is charging the unknowing tourist triple the price. Or a man says, 'I love you sweetheart' to his wife, all the while he is seeing another woman. Now, spiritually, the double minded person tries to serve God and still follow the ways of a world that cares nothing for God. James writes in his letter (James 4:8) *"Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands you sinners and purify your hearts you double minded."* The double minded, or divided self, tries to serve two opposing masters at the same time. But the reality is it can't be done. When was the last time you managed to walk in two different directions at the same time? Jesus spoke about this later in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 6:19 & 24) *"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth...no one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth."*

If we are honest, we must admit that a lot of our spiritual struggle is due to a divided heart. In a sense one part of us wants to know and serve God. But another part wants

something entirely different. Do you know what I mean? We find ourselves trusting God. But, also, a good bank balance. We trust God. But, also, get our security in our possessions or our status. We want to serve God. But, also, want to follow some of the base passions in us. So, we find ourselves vacillating between the two. And then we wonder why we do not feel close to God. Referring again to Jesus' brother James, (James 1:5-8) *"But if any of you lacks wisdom, let them ask God, who gives generously and without reproach and it will be given to them. But they must ask in faith, not doubting, for the one who doubts is like the surf of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind. For that person ought not to expect they will receive anything from the Lord, being double minded, unstable in all their ways."* James is saying, how can you get wisdom from God if you keep changing direction and denying him? You will not be able to see what God is really doing in your life if your inner motives are selfish and against God. You say you trust him, and then you don't. In other words, if we are going to have real fellowship with God, then we must be 'pure'. That is, we must be single minded in our determination to follow God. We must be 'pure' in our intention to worship God alone and trust him alone.

Being pure is not just about being 'honest, sincere and open'. Because you can be sincere, but sincerely wrong. You can be exceedingly honest in your unbelief and disregard for God. So being single minded needs a direction, a guide. David says (Psalm 86:11) *"Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name."* So, being 'pure in heart', being 'single minded' means we focus our whole life towards God. We love the Lord, with *"...all our heart and all our soul and all our strength."* It means first, that we have come to know God through the saving work of Jesus. It means we have come to see that we are 'spiritually poor' and desperately need God's grace. The Spirit opens our hearts to see realize the extent of our sin, which we 'mourn' deeply. By that, we are humbled and 'meek', 'gentle', willing to see our wrong pointed out to us. We have a passion, a deep hunger to have the wrong in the world made right. So, we are 'merciful' to others, displaying God's grace to them. And by God's grace and Spirit we are motivated by one single desire, to serve God in all we do. Evidence of a pure heart is a transparent life. It is a life free from playacting or pretending to be someone we are not. Honesty, openness, sincerity make us look deep within to challenge our thoughts, our ambitions, our desires that are not God honouring. Our single mindedness makes us open ourselves before God and let him see what is there. We are completely honest. We don't pretend. We don't deny. We don't rationalize. We say 'God you are justified when you judge. Jesus, please cleanse me and I will be whiter than snow. Holy Spirit create a new heart within me.'

So, being 'pure in heart' is not something we can achieve by ourselves. It comes in response to the grace of God. It's only by Christ's death and resurrection that God can look at our corrupt hearts and say 'Pure, clean. Cleaned by the blood of Jesus. It's pure enough for my Spirit to reside there.' If we have experienced God's grace, then we will want to be open to God and be determined to follow him only. As John puts it in his letter, we will want to (1 John 2:6) "...walk as Jesus did..."; to follow his example. Because he alone followed God with 'all his heart and all his soul and all his strength.' Jesus is the prime example of single mindedness. He did God's will all the way to the cross. Even when it almost became too much in the Garden of Gethsemane, he said (Luke 22:42) "...not my will but your will be done". Soren Kierkegaard wrote a book called 'The Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing'. That's a good definition. A pure heart is driven by one thing only, to do everything according to God's will for his glory.

Now this 'purity of heart', this single mindedness, in serving God is truly worth our response. For Jesus says, "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." What does that mean? Well, there is the sense in which this occurs here and now. Being pure in heart changes our entire view of life. It determines our ability to see God. The true believer sees God in a way that unbelievers don't. But there is also the sense of the great things to come. A vision too wonderful to be fully experienced in this life. Let me explain. When our lives are fully focused on God and we desire to do everything for him, we have a far greater sense of God's presence here and now. We see clearly that where we are, is God's creation. 'This is my father's world'. As we do our work, as we travel, as we explore life, we see God in his creation. We 'hear him pass in the rustling grass'. The majestic mountains and the violent thunderstorm remind us that God is awesome, that he is almighty and holy. Or the gentle touch, the caring gesture, remind us of our loving Father, full of grace and compassion. When our hearts are 'pure' we can 'see God' everywhere. Unbelievers can't. But we can. In our daily food, our health and strength we see the provision of God. We see God in the Bible. We recognize it as God's Word, his voice to his people, his instruction for our lives. The 'pure in heart' 'see God' in the church. Some may just see a building with people. But those who love God see him and feel his presence in worship.

But even more than that, the 'pure in heart' will see God by being admitted to God's presence. That will be when we see him face to face in heaven. And when we live with God on the new earth. Moses, in his time when he asked to see God, was still a sinner. He was only allowed to see the back of God. But in the fullness of time we will bask in the full glory of God. The 'pure in heart' will find complete fulfillment in finding their highest purpose in life, their greatest joy. And that is to find and see God himself. We may enjoy our homes and our children. We may enjoy work and friends. We may enjoy

our own selves and life. We can say life is good! But all of that only has true meaning when we know God. The greatest and most wonderful thing in life is God himself. And when we seek him with all our heart, when we are single minded in our devotion, when we have a passion for God that silences all other passions, we will find God. As Jon Bloom put it 'What God is after in this truly honest surrender is to give us the greatest joy possible: Himself. We shall 'see God'. We will see him and be in deep fellowship with him. In God himself, we will find true joy, real life, the point and pleasure of life all rolled into one. Is this your heart's desire. Is it the single motive for everything you do- to see God? Then you will. For Jesus promised "*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God*".



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

### **PEACEMAKERS**

#### **Matthew 5:9**

Making trouble and causing hurt is one of the easiest things to do in life. A lot of the time all someone needs to do is to open their mouth and put their foot in it. An unthoughtful comment, a verbal snap at one's spouse, a short fuse at work, or a flare up at a committee meeting can create ongoing hurt. Maybe some of us are nursing emotional scars from such scenes. It does not take any training to be good at fighting. It comes naturally. Even toddlers can fight without being taught. Just watch them trying to share a toy. They can soon be into hitting and biting each other. Adults are more sophisticated. They don't usually hit or bite each other. They use gossip and bickering or the silent treatment to fight. As nations we are even more sophisticated and violent. We use political intrigue and espionage. We explode bombs and hit back with retaliatory raids. In fact, we are very good at making war. Our history is full of it. Over the period of recorded history, about 3000 years, there has been an absence of war only 8% of that whole time. Since 36 BC there have been over 15,000 wars. Thomas Jefferson said, 'Peace is that glorious moment in history when everyone stops to reload.' And here Jesus says "Blessed are the peacemakers..." Doesn't he know that goes against the grain? We are naturally warmakers not peacemakers. Even in our peaceful Australia we see cars with stickers that say, 'I don't get mad- I get even'. It was a real shock to his audience when Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, "*Blessed are the peacemakers...*" We have repeatedly said that Jesus was counter-cultural with the

Beatitudes. It was no different with this one. The Jews were not looking for peace. They were looking for victory over Rome. They had been subjugated and taxed into poverty by the Romans. The Zealots were ready to take up their swords. They were all waiting for the Messiah to come. The expectation was that he, with military might, would remove the Romans. But Jesus spoke of the 'poor in spirit', those 'mourning', the 'meek', the 'pure in heart' and 'peacemakers'.

The Greek word for 'peace', 'erepe' means 'an absence of war'. But Jesus was saying more than 'Blessed are those who ensure there is no war'. The Hebrew word for peace, that Jesus would have used, is 'shalom'. It never means only 'the absence of trouble'. It refers to the presence of 'harmony, wholeness, completeness, prosperity and welfare. Everything which makes for a person's highest good.' The Jews when greeting each other didn't say 'Good day'. They said 'Shalom'. That is, 'How is your peace?' You were asking about a person's health, their prosperity and their total wellbeing, their relationship with God. 'Shalom' has that wonderful sense of salvation about it. Like when everything is restored to wholeness. When everything is again as it should be. When sin is removed and all of creation is at peace. It's not coincidental the Saviour is called (Isaiah 9:6) 'Shar Shalom', the 'Prince of Peace'. In time Jesus will restore, not just our soul, but bring wholeness and harmony to the entire creation.

Jesus was aware of the devastation caused in Israel by the Romans. Jesus was not a sentimental 'make love not war' type when he refused the Jews' demand to be their leader and force an uprising. He wanted to bring true shalom, wholeness and prosperity for all creatures on earth. That required Jesus to deal with the deeper reason for all the war and suffering. The sin in the human heart is the real underlying problem. That's the cause for our natural tendency towards antagonism. That's why there is a curse on creation. It's only by being reconciled with God we find real peace. It's only by Jesus dealing with our sin that we can begin to speak of shalom, harmony and wholeness for the world. And it's in that context that Jesus called his followers to be peacemakers. Notice, not passive peacekeeping, but peacemaking. It requires action on our part. This is a calling to hard work. For that it requires a certain character. Think again of the sequence Jesus has with these Beatitudes. To be able to be peacemakers, Jesus' followers need to have the characteristics of the other Beatitudes. It requires being 'poor in spirit'. We need to know our limits and rely totally on God. We need to 'mourn' our sin. We need to recognize the depth of sin in our lives and just how much we need Jesus to experience peace with God. We need to be 'gentle'. Peacemaking is not about imposing power over others. We must 'hunger and thirst for righteousness'. There needs to be a deep longing for the wrong to be made right. We need that passion to drive us on. We need to be profoundly 'merciful'

because without grace we cannot bring healing. We need to be 'pure in heart' because peacemaking requires integrity. It needs single-mindedness in pursuit of truth. We need to be open and honest, saying what we mean, not scheming and manipulating. To be peacemakers we need all these qualities. For not only is peacemaking hard. It can lead to the last Beatitude "Blessed are the persecuted..." That can be the result of peacemaking. So, we need a deep sense of God's amazing grace, as well as a passionate and single-minded drive to pursue peace. If we are not totally open, merciful and sincere we will not have the capacity to be peacemakers. You cannot be a peacemaker if you are regarded as hypocritical and untrustworthy. You cannot be a peacemaker if you don't have the care and willingness to be involved in the lives of others.

Making peace is not the same as appeasing people. Appeasing means to pacify people by yielding to their demands. The dictionary defines appeasement as 'giving people what they want to prevent them from harming or being angry with you or preventing further disagreement.' It is the lazy approach to peace. It involves compromising your principles to keep others quiet. In the appeasement method it's often said 'Just don't say anything that gets people worked up. Make sure you don't do anything that will rock the boat.' It's an approach that is more concerned with the demands of other people than listening to God's requirements. When there is a dispute, appeasement says 'Look let's just forget it. Hey, who wants a hassle?' So, everyone pretends nothing happened. But they still hurt because it did happen. The pain is still there and has not been dealt with. This is not only a lazy approach. It is uncaring and dangerous. It's like a bomb covered by sand no one can see anymore. Everything seems fine and peaceful. Until someone's long toes tread on it. Then there will be an explosion of emotion. Then all the stuff and pain from the past is dragged up again and used as a weapon against the others. It is the peace of the false prophets. (Ezekiel 13:10) They would say "...*'Peace' when there is no peace...*" and give the people of Israel a false sense of security when God's punishment was facing them. Can you imagine Jesus using this method after Adam and Eve had ruined the creation by their fall? Humanity has rebelled against God. The entire universe is cursed. The Son of God, in his mediatorial role says 'Let's just forget the whole thing. Pretend it didn't happen.' Would he have brought peace? No! God would be blasphemed because his justice had not been met. God would need to deny his own character and his holiness. All of us would still be insecure because forgiveness had not been granted. We would live in a cursed world with no hope. All the while pretending everything is fine. No, for Christ to bring peace it cost him his life. To reconcile humans with God, Jesus had to bring God justice and people mercy. Which is what he did on the cross. Through his suffering and death, he brought us peace. As Paul put it (Colossians 1:19-20) "*For God was pleased to have all his fullness*

*dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross."*

The same word for 'peace' spoken of here in Colossians concerning Jesus is also used here in Matthew 5:9 concerning the Christian. What Jesus is calling the Christian to do is to be like him. We are to bring peace as he brought it. It is interesting to note that Jesus says (Matthew 10:34) *"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law..."* That sounds contradictory to our text. What Jesus means is the glorious shalom he will bring to the creation will not be without a struggle. There will be division as there will be those who accept Jesus as Lord and receive God's peace. And there will be those who remain antagonistic to the gospel. That is what makes peacemaking so difficult. We are not just appeasing everybody. We are to call for true peace on earth based on God's truth and grace. In that sense peacemaking is about evangelism. It's about calling people to receive the peace of God through repentance. It's about striving to bring harmony and wholeness to the creation by having society follow God's ways.

Peacemaking begins with us. It might be we are in a disagreement with someone. That requires, first, that we see our own wrong, 'mourn' it and confess it. Then we must seek the other person's forgiveness. Peacemaking may involve showing another person the need for repentance. With 'gentleness' and 'mercy', we must lead them there. Because without their confession you cannot express forgiveness and restore the relationship. Remember peace is not just about the absence of conflict but making things whole. Often the biggest difficulty for the peacemaker is continuing to plead with someone who refuses to deal with the issues. Sometimes we can do no more than pray for peace in that situation. As Paul writes (Romans 12:18) *"If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, be at peace with everyone."* Not everyone will respond to the peacemaker. Others will be antagonistic because we are asking them to be at peace with God and doing things his way.

Being a peacemaker will not necessarily mean we are all good at reconciling warring parties. Jesus idea of peacemaking revolves around the way we live. It was Adam and Eve's conduct that broke the peace between them and God. As with all of us, it is our conduct that can make or break the peace. It can be as simple as not being involved in gossip. Proverbs (26:20) says *"Without wood a fire goes out. Without gossip a quarrel dies down."* Don't be needlessly quarrelsome. Then you wreck peace by creating controversy over things that don't matter. So be humble. Don't insist on having your way and standing on your rights. Be wise. As James says (James 3:17) *"But the wisdom*

*that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.* That way of conducting ourselves helps make peace and wholeness. There may be times we are involved as peacemakers between two people or groups. Then it's important as James says *"Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry..."* Peacemaking says we get everyone to listen, to understand what each is really saying and why they hurt. Peacemaking says we graciously call on each other to confess their part in the conflict, to forgive and be reconciled. Peacemaking is not easy. But Jesus said, 'Blessed is the peacemaker'. Blessed is the peacemaker who brings healing and forgiveness to a broken family. Blessed is the peacemaker who brings harmony to a divided church. Blessed is the peacemaker whose heart drives him into the world to seek the lost. Blessed is the one who seeks the lonely, the destitute to bring them the peace and salvation of God.

Jesus said, *"Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God"*. When he said that Jesus was not saying if his disciples were peacemakers, they earned the right to be called children of God. He was simply saying that children of God, are by their nature peacemakers. Those who are peacemakers will be recognised for who they are on the day of judgement- God the Father's own children. As the children of God, they will be welcomed into the Father's house. In other words, peacemakers have the character of their heavenly Father. Peacemaking is how we show ourselves to be God's sons and daughters. Later in his Sermon on the Mount Jesus said (Matthew 5:43-45) *"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."* The thought there expands on what Jesus means by this Beatitude. We are peacemakers like our Father. We love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us because we are God's children. Peacemakers are doing their Father's work. The whole history of redemption, which climaxed in Jesus' death and resurrection, is God's strategy to bring lasting peace to the creation. God's children have the character of their father. They love what he loves. What he longs for they strive for as well. You can know God's children by their willingness to make sacrifices for peace they way Jesus did. I have had great joy watching my boys and a grandson play football. I have had very proud moments watching them do some wonderful playmaking. And letting everyone in the crowd know 'That's my boy!' Making trouble, causing hurt comes so easily in this world. But we are called to be different. To be peacemakers. And when we stand out as such, God will say, 'See that? That's my son! That's my daughter! You can tell they are mine! They are peacemakers. Those are my children!' *"Blessed are the peacemakers for they will be called children of God."*



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

### **PERSECUTED**

#### **Matthew 5:11-12**

The children's author Dr Seuss has a wall sticker that says, 'Why fit in when you were born to stand out?' That might help you remember the message of the Beatitudes. Jesus, with these eight 'blessings', called on his followers to be different. They were to stand out. Jesus called them to be contrasting to much of the world's attitudes. Just how different and how counter-cultural to the world, becomes strikingly clear in the last Beatitude (Matthew 5:10) "*Blessed are those who are persecuted...*" Or, as Luke puts it in his gospel (Luke 6:22) "*Blessed are you when others hate you, when they exclude you and insult you...*" The Greek word for 'persecute' means 'to pursue'. It's like hounds chasing after a fox to run them down into the ground. Another translation is to 'harass'. 'Blessed are you when you are harassed.' Jesus was not speaking metaphorically here. He was not an armchair theologian belittling how brutal and terrifying persecution could be. A couple of years after this Sermon on the Mount, Jesus himself was executed in one of the most torturous ways. The early church also suffered dreadfully. Most people know that Christians were thrown to the lions by the Romans. Emperor Nero wrapped Christians in pitch and set them alight to use them as living torches for his garden parties. But it wasn't just back then. Recently the Australian journalist, Greg Sheridan, mentioned on the ABC program 'The Drum' that persecution of Christians still goes on. Sixty percent of all Christians live in countries where there are significant restrictions on their religious freedom. For example, there is Zhang Daojun, a house church leader in China. He lived under the threat that the police could kill him. Once he was sentenced to 18 months imprisonment for his Christian activities. He was also tortured with electric shocks. Looking at the global setting it's a disturbing reminder of how our brothers and sisters in Christ suffer for the gospel and need our prayers. Without wanting to be glib it's understandable if we said this last Beatitude is not particularly appealing. All of us would rather be left in peace. We just want to be friendly with everyone, appreciated and enjoy life. Yet Jesus says "*Blessed, that is, how happy, are those who are persecuted...*" What is more striking is that Jesus is not talking of persecution that might happen occasionally. He is listing it as a Beatitude. You will remember that these Beatitudes list the characteristics of his followers. They describe

what every Christian is intended to be like. So, the condition of being persecuted or harassed at some level is the normal characteristic for the Christian. As the Apostle Paul says plainly (2 Timothy 3:12) *"Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."* So being 'persecuted' is as much a part of being Christian as being 'poor in spirit', 'hungering for righteousness', being 'merciful', 'pure in heart', and 'peacemakers.'

It may seem strange that Jesus should pass from 'peacemakers' to 'persecuted'. Christians should work hard at achieving peace. Doing that in an attitude of humility and compassion. They are to bring hurting people together, to have them experience the love and grace of God. So, it seems odd for Jesus to say that those same Christians would meet hostility. And yet Jesus is very clear here. Every Christian is to be a peacemaker. And every Christian can expect persecution. Those who hunger for righteousness will suffer for that righteousness they crave. Those who are merciful will be walked on for the mercy they give. Those who are pure of heart, single minded, open and honest will be used. Those who mourn over their sin will be laughed at. The Apostle Peter spoke of this as well. (1 Peter 4:12) *"Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering as if something strange were happening to you"*. He also said (1 Peter 2:20-21) *"...how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you leaving you an example..."* It has been this way for Christians in every age. Peter is saying we should not be surprised if anti-Christian intolerance increases. Rather be surprised if it does not.

Christians in the West have not suffered much in the way of real persecution. We still don't, really, in Australia as Tim Costello has emphasized. It's been suggested that lack of suffering could be a point of concern. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who suffered under the Nazis, said, 'Suffering then, is the badge of true discipleship'. It's argued that persecution is an indicator of how different we are from the society we live in. If there is little persecution, there are two possibilities. One is that we live in a Christian country. The community holds the values Christians do. The other possibility is that the Christians no longer stand out because they have taken on the values of the society around them. That's the fear of one commentator who writes 'We get along... by living as the world lives, laugh at its humor, immersing [one]self in its entertainment, smile when God is mocked, act[ing] as if all religions converge on the same road...' Or says another 'I believe there is a silent Christianity today. People don't tell others ...that they're one of the Lords...' Well our society has been influenced by Christianity. The West places a high value on human life. That stems from the Christian teaching that all humans are made in the image of God. Much of the values, laws, hospitals, nursing

homes, schools, universities, charities have longstanding Christian backgrounds. There is this lingering thought that Western values are Christian values. But our society is changing. Christians can't just follow the values of the society on autopilot. Jesus has called his disciples to be different. Which means they will stand out. And it is this difference that causes the persecution Jesus is talking about.

Let me clarify this. Jesus is not talking about persecution due to different ethnic backgrounds or ones' personal characteristics. That is not Christian persecution. That's more be racial prejudice or bigotry. Christians must be very careful not to suffer because of their own misconduct. Peter says (1 Peter 4:15) *"If you suffer, it should not be as a murder or thief or any other kind of criminal or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed..."* A lot of negativity towards the church in Australia is due to the church's failings, especially in the area of abuse. We need to cop that on the chin and be humbled. If you are a loud, obnoxious, arrogant religious figure and get harassed, that's coping it for bad behaviour. It's not the persecution Jesus talks about. Unfortunately, we can have a blind spot in seeing our personal failures and think we suffer for being Christian. A Christian's lifestyle should be their best argument they don't deserve what is happening. Jesus speaks here of *'...saying all kinds of evil against you falsely...'* In other words, your life is exemplary but still you suffer. What Jesus is talking about is (Matthew 5:11) *"...those who are persecuted because of righteousness..."* Or as he clarifies that (Matthew 5:12) *"Blessed are you when people insult you...because of me."* In other words, many are offended because they find distasteful the righteousness we hunger for. They are insulting because they have rejected Jesus. John Stott said, 'Persecution is ...the clash between two irreconcilable value systems.' The values and standards of Jesus are in direct conflict to the accepted values and standards of the world. Theologically we would say at heart all people are sinners. They have all rebelled against God. They want to be their own god. That's the Adam and Eve stuff. The source of persecution is Satan, and his target is God. Satan not only hates God he hates everyone who follows God. Ultimately it is a rejection of Jesus, as well as all who stand out for him. Jesus said (John 15:18-22) *"If the world hates you, keep in mind it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey you also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the one who sent me. If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not be guilty of sin. Now, however they have no excuse for their sin. The one who hates me hates my Father as well."*

But even accepting this underlying resistance to God, why should Christians be persecuted if they are gentle, meek, merciful, pure in heart, hungering for righteousness and being peacemakers? Why should anyone be offended by such behaviour? The answer to that comes out later in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said (Matthew 5:24) *"No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money"*. In the parallel passage in Luke we see the reaction to Jesus saying this, (Luke 16:15) *"The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus."* There you can see why Jesus is harassed. You see them 'sneering'. They are contemptuous. The reason for it was 'the Pharisees loved money'. Jesus' attitude towards money was taken as an attack on their love of money. Then comes the rest of the explanation for their mockery. (Luke 16:15) *"But Jesus said to them 'You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What this people value highly is detestable in God's sight."* Here is the reason for Jesus being harassed. There is the love of something that he says is not right. And there is the need to justify that love. Jesus comes on the scene with a way of life and a message that implies love of money is treason against God. 'You can't serve two masters.' Saying that was not a deliberate insult. It is part of Jesus' purity. He was simply stating what is true. It's something essential to know if you want to relate with God. But it goes against the Pharisees love of money. To justify themselves they put Jesus down. That is the standard operating procedure for self-justification. And it's the root cause for much of Christian persecution. Human nature dislikes, and is often threatened by, those who are different. People may often not know why they can't stand those who live out the Beatitudes. But it pricks their conscience and irritates them. If you are humble and gentle you expose the evil of pride. If you hunger for righteousness your passion throws their callousness into sharp relief. If you have integrity, being pure of heart, you reveal the falsehoods and spin doctoring for what they are. If you are poor in spirit and live in simple trust of God, you show the folly of materialism and luxury. The human tendency, if one feels put down, is to tear down the other even further.

Now how are we to respond to persecution? (Matthew 5:12) *"Rejoice and be glad..."* The parallel section in Luke (Luke 6:23) says *"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy..."* We are not to retaliate and get our own back when harassed. Nor are we to sulk like a child or lick our wounds in self-pity. Nor are we to be stoic and just grin and bear it. We are to rejoice. Now, really, this is a tough bit of counsel. What could justify Jesus' command here to be exceedingly glad and 'skip with excessive delight and ecstasy' when we are harassed or mocked? (Matthew 5:12) *"...because great is your reward in heaven."* In other words, we may lose everything. Our standing and reputation. Our possessions. But we will inherit everything in heaven. As Jesus says *"... theirs is the kingdom of heaven"*. All

the kingdom, all the abundance of God, is theirs! Nothing can compare with what is coming. The word 'reward' implies that the more your faith is tested, the greater will be your reward. Jesus said (Matthew 19:29) *"And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life."* Jesus knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that the reward of heaven will more than compensate for the suffering we might endure in Jesus' name. Another part of the reason why we rejoice is that persecution is an indicator of genuineness. It is like a certificate that says 'These people really are Christians'. That's clear from what Jesus also said, *"Rejoice and be glad... for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."* In other words, if Christians are persecuted for the faith, it implies they belong to the same noble group of prophets. It places them in the company of Jeremiah, Daniel and all those others the writer to the Hebrews speaks of when he says (Hebrews 11:38) *"... the world was not worthy of them."* But the major reason we rejoice is because we are suffering for Jesus. We suffer on his account. *"...persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me."* Persecution is a sign of our loyalty to Jesus. It is an indicator of our obedience to his standards and values. Persecution is a sign of our worthiness to represent the Christ, the King of the universe. Think of our series on Acts. Remember how Peter and John were before the Sanhedrin for judgement. (Acts 5:40-42) *"...They called the apostles in and had them flogged. Then they ordered them not to speak in the name of Jesus and let them go. The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name."*

Here's the question for us: Are we worthy? Jesus in his mercy, in his poverty of spirit, in his hungering for righteousness, gave himself for us on the cross. How are you responding? In an obedience that shows we are loyal to Jesus? Are we starting to feel the cost of being counter-cultural? Keep the faith. Honour Jesus, even if draws displeasure from those around you. *"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."*



