

# “Character that Counts” (2011)

Matthew 5:1-12; Hebrews 11:32-12:4 <sup>1</sup>

The letter “to the Hebrews” is one of my favorite books in the Bible. Hebrews has long been attributed to Paul, but the truth is that we don’t really know who wrote it. Whoever the author was, he or she has given us an elegant essay—or perhaps a sermon—in which every chapter—indeed, nearly every paragraph—sparkles with well-chosen words that beautifully frame eternal principles. Hebrews makes compelling reading. If you’ve never read it all at one sitting, that might be a good way to spend this afternoon. It’s less than twenty pages.

One of the best-known chapters in Hebrews is chapter 11, frequently called “The Faith Chapter,” or “The Roll Call of Faith.” I invite you to turn to Hebrews 11 while we look at it briefly.

Hebrews 11 begins with the powerful affirmation that “*Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see*” (v. 1). The chapter goes on to give examples of persons throughout the Bible who lived lives of faith, building case upon case, life upon life. The roll call of the faithful ends by saying, “*These were all commended for their faith, **yet none of them received what had been promised**, since God had planned something better for us **so that only together with us would they be made perfect**” (vv. 39-40).*

That last clause intrigues me: “so that only together with us would they be made perfect.” Paul looked forward eagerly to the prize at the end of the race of life (2 Timothy 4:6-8), and Jesus taught us that if we are His, physical death brings us into eternal Life in the very presence of God (Luke 16:23, 23:43). That matters a great deal to me when I think of my friend Royce Quarles, who died this week, and as I think of my Dad, who died five years ago today.

While I believe that we can build a good case from the New Testament that persons who are in Christ experience resurrection Life in the very moment of their deaths (Philippians 1:23), this statement in Hebrews tells us that those believers who have already died have even more wonders to receive from God when you and I have finished the race of life—when God’s Final Curtain falls.

Chapter 12 builds on the racing image. The picture is that of an Olympic stadium, filled with these believers who have gone before us . . . not just those persons listed in “the faith chapter,” but our own grandparents, parents, sisters, brothers, husbands, wives, sons, and daughters. Everyone who has gone before is in those stands, watching us run.

So how do we run? Hebrews 12 tells us to run as if we were Olympic athletes, stripping off every weight that slows us down, running with endurance, and keeping our eyes on the finish line. Hebrews also tells us that someone is waiting for us at the finish line, and that Someone is Jesus.

Jesus has already run the race. That’s how He got to the finish line. The race isn’t easy for us, but it wasn’t easy for Jesus, either. While we run with our eyes focused on One who loves us, Jesus ran with His eyes focused on one who hated Him, with His heart engaged in cosmic conflict on the Cross.

But here’s the best part. Why did Jesus do that? Why did Jesus run such a race? Why did He choose to suffer the agony of the Cross? Hebrews 12:2 tells us that “*for the **joy** set before him [Jesus] endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*” What sort of joy could that have been? The joy on the other side of the Cross wasn’t simply being with His Father, because He had that joy before He came to earth. The joy beyond

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on March 6, 2011.

the Cross wasn't just receiving the honor due Him from all the heavenly hosts, because He had that glory before He became one of us.

What joy could have possibly been on the far side of the Cross that Jesus had not known on this side? Listen closely now. There was only one joy that the Cross gained for Jesus, and when Jesus ran His race, He looked beyond the Cross to this one joy, and this one joy is what kept Him going. What was that joy? **It was the joy of spending eternity with you.** Let me say that again. **The yearning that brought Jesus to earth and that took Him to the Cross was the yearning for the joy of spending eternity with you!**

You and I could never have experienced healing and release from the awful brokenness of our sin, could have never known the joy of forgiveness, could have never known the gladness of a heart set free, unless Jesus had run that race. **You are what God values. You are his joy. And Jesus ran the race for you!**

The Bible tells us here that **what God values above everything else is spending eternity with us.** No, that doesn't make sense, but when was the last time that God's love made sense? We are loved! You are loved! And what God values next after opening the Door that takes us Home is teaching us what we have to do in order to go through that Door. The laws, the commands, the principles that we find in the Bible are there for only one reason: to bring us to God.

Knowing this, how are we to run the races of our lives? While everything Jesus said and did was intended to prepare us for this Race, one of Jesus' most focused teachings is found in the eight verses we know as the "Beatitudes." Turn back with me to our text in Matthew 5.

It takes a lifetime to grow into these eight verses, and countless thousands of pages have been written exploring the depth of their meaning. All I'm going to try to do this morning is to give you an overview of these eight character qualities that Jesus says are necessary to finish the Race and of the rewards that will accompany each quality at the Finish Line.

Character Quality #1: DEPENDENCE. "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 5:3). From the Garden of Eden until now, we humans have struggled against being dependent upon our Creator. We try to insulate ourselves from dependence in every way we can imagine: we collect money, we collect houses and lands, we collect honors and degrees, but none of these can fill our emptiness or heal our souls.

It's only when we kneel before God and offer our lives to God for healing and then for His service that we're granted membership in the unseen and coming Kingdom. Only then do we belong. Only then do we truly have a home in the universe. The blessing, the "beatitude" that comes with dependence is **membership.**

Character Quality #2: VULNERABILITY. "*Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted*" (Matthew 5:4). What is mourning? Mourning is grief, and grief is sorrow over loss. Mourning, grief, and sorrow are experiences that only come to those who experience the vulnerability of love. The grief that we feel today at Royce's death, and the grief that my family experiences today on the fifth anniversary of my father's death is one of the results of the vulnerability of love.

Sometimes we try to protect ourselves from the pain of vulnerability by refusing to love, but we eventually discover to our sorrow that our efforts at self-protection also insulate us from being loved. When we choose to open ourselves to the vulnerability of love, we also open ourselves to God's tender care and comfort (Psalm 103:13; 2 Corinthians 1:3-4), and we no longer grieve like people "*who have no hope*" (1 Thessalonians 4:13). The blessing, the "beatitude" that comes with vulnerability is **comfort.**

Character Quality #3: HUMILITY. “*Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth*” (Matthew 5:5). Some translations render “meek” as “gentle and lowly,” or as “humility.” When was the last time you saw someone put “meek” or “gentle and lowly” or “humble” on their résumé? Yet these are crucial character qualities, because humility helps to protect us from our corrupting desire for power, and gentleness helps to protect us against our persistent tendencies toward arrogance. Interestingly, the *reward* for humility is the very thing that arrogance and power vainly promise to deliver: ownership of the whole world by virtue of being children of the King.

The late Bishop Edwin Hughes once delivered a rousing sermon on “God’s Ownership” that put a rich parishioner’s nose out of joint. The wealthy man took the Bishop out to lunch and then walked him through his elaborate gardens, woodlands, and farm. “Now are you going to tell me,” he demanded, “that all this land does not belong to me?” The Bishop quietly responded, “Ask me that a hundred years from now.”<sup>2</sup> We are wise to be humble, and the blessing, the “beatitude” that comes with humility is **ownership**.

Character Quality #4: RIGHTEOUSNESS. “*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled*” (Matthew 5:6). The prophet Micah cried out, “*And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God*” (6:8). To “act justly,” to pursue righteousness, is to do that which is right, that which is fair and just, that which brings the greatest good to the most people, irrespective of how that action affects me personally.

If we live by this commitment, our own character becomes more and more like the character of God. We find our lives filled more and more with “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*” (Galatians 5:22-23). The blessing, the “beatitude” that comes with righteousness is **character**.

Character Quality #5: MERCY. “*Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy*” (Matthew 5:7). Mercy is the other face of justice. Righteousness has to do with acting on behalf of those who are not able to act for themselves, while mercy means going beyond justice when we ourselves are the offended. Exercising mercy means refraining from exacting penalty even though justice allows it. Victor Hugo’s classic novel, *Les Misérables*, is really a study in mercy, and Jesus’ parable about the unmerciful servant (Matthew 18:21-35) emphasizes that we must offer mercy to each other if we expect to have any hope of mercy from God—as, indeed, does the Lord’s Prayer that we pray every week (Matthew 6:9-15). The blessing, the “beatitude” that comes with showing mercy is receiving **mercy**.

Character Quality #6: PURITY. “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God*” (Matthew 5:8). Jeremiah wrote that “*The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?*” (17:9). As just one example of such deceitfulness, the Internet pornography that’s available even on our cell phones these days has become the scourge of many lives—the lives of both men and women, the lives of teens, and even the lives of children. It’s really pretty easy in this electronic age to live one kind of life in public and another, very different life that is secretly in bondage to the Darkness.

Hebrews warns us, though, that “*Nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account*” (4:12-13). Pornography is all about seeing and desiring. So what do we really want to see? The truth is that each of us tends to get what we really, really, really want. Those who really, really, really want to see God, and who guard the purity of their hearts, thoughts, and desires to that end, will indeed see God’s unbelievable, indescribable glory at the end of the race. The blessing, the “beatitude” that comes with purity is **vision**.

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<sup>2</sup> Bennett Cerf, *Leadership*, Vol. 1, no. 2.

Character Quality #7: RECONCILIATION. “*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God*” (Matthew 5:9). Notice that Jesus talked about peacemakers, here. He didn’t say “peace hoppers” or “peace wishers.” Working for peace is sweaty soul work indeed. As Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin put it years ago, “Peace is not made with friends. Peace is made with enemies.”<sup>3</sup>

I sometimes hear people say, “I’ll forgive, but I won’t forget.” That attitude is not forgiveness, and it will not lead to healing. The “forgetting” of forgiveness is choosing to act toward the forgiven one as if the offense had never happened. The “forgetting” of working for peace is choosing to never, ever bring up the offense again, because if it’s brought up, it’s not forgiven.

If we live in this way, the time will come when we really don’t remember the offense at all anymore. When that day comes, we’ll truly be children of God, “*who blots out [our] sins for [his] own sake and remembers [our] sins no more*” (Isaiah 43:25). And the blessing, the “beatitude” that comes with reconciliation is **adoption into the family of God**.

Character Quality #8: INTEGRITY. “*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 5:10). So what does it mean to be persecuted because we live for God? Are we supposed to live in the world as long-faced, contrary, judgmental people whose every comment is an invitation to battle? Hardly!

Living with the winsome integrity Jesus intends here simply means knowing what we believe and why we believe it, and then choosing to live and speak day by day consistently with those beliefs. When we live with Christian integrity, we live as Light in Darkness, and sometimes there is a price to pay even for quiet choices (John 3:18-20; 2 Corinthians 2:15-16).

But there’s something else that happens when we live with Christian integrity. When we reach the end of the course after living with Christlike integrity, the Master will say, “*Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful in [running the race]; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!*” (Matthew 25:23). Our reward is the Kingdom of Heaven itself. The blessing, the “beatitude” that comes with integrity is **reward**.

*Dependence, Vulnerability, Humility, Righteousness, Mercy, Purity, Reconciliation, and Integrity.* This is a tall order, but Jesus has promised to give us the strength we need and to give us His own character if we truly desire it (Romans 12:2; Philippians 2:5, 4:13; 1 Peter 2:21).

My friends, Jesus is waiting for you at the end of the track. Run! Run!! RUN!!!

<b>What God Values</b>	<b>What God Gives</b>
Dependence	Membership
Vulnerability	Comfort
Humility	Ownership
Righteousness	Character
Mercy	Mercy
Purity	Vision
Reconciliation	Adoption
Integrity	Reward

<sup>3</sup> *Newsweek*, September 13, 1993, cited in *Christianity Today*, Vol. 37, no. 12.