

# “Character that Counts: Dependence”

Matthew 5:1-3; Hebrews 11:32-12:4 <sup>1</sup>

Μακαριοι οι πτωχοι τω πνευματι, οτι αυτων εστιν η Βασιλεια των ουρανων.  
“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3).

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 nearly every paragraph sparkles with well-chosen words that beautifully frame eternal principles. 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 “*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.*” 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 begins with the image of an Olympic stadium, filled with these believers who have crossed over before us . . . not just those persons listed in “the faith chapter,” but our own grandparents, parents, sisters, brothers, husbands, wives, sons, and daughters. Every believer who has gone us before is in those stands, watching us run.

Hebrews 12 encourages us to run the race of life as though we were Olympic athletes, stripping off every weight that slows us down and keeping our eyes on the finish line. Hebrews also tells us that someone is waiting for us at the finish line, and that this 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, one with whom He engaged in cosmic conflict throughout His life on earth, and especially 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 anticipated joy kept Jesus on the Cross? The joy on the other side of the Cross wasn’t simply being with His Father, because Jesus had that joy before He came to earth. The joy beyond the Cross wasn’t just receiving the honor due Him from all the heavenly hosts, because He had that joy before He became one of us.

What joy could have possibly resided on the far side of the Cross that Jesus had not known on this side? Listen closely now. It seems to me that there was only one joy that the Cross gained for Jesus, and He looked beyond the Cross to this one joy. This one joy is what kept Him going.

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on July 6, 2014.

What was that joy? It was the possibility of spending eternity with you. Let me say that again. **The purpose that brought Jesus to earth and that took Him to the Cross was the yearning for the joy of spending eternity with you!** That's the possibility created by the Cross.

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 His race all the way to the finish line. **You are what God values. You are God's joy. And Jesus ran the race for you!**

Hebrews tells us 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 be able to go through that Door. **The laws, the commands, and the principles that we find in the Bible are there for only one reason: to bring us to God.**

Knowing this, how are you and I 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 principles we know as the "Beatitudes." Turn back with me now to our text in Matthew 5; and while you're turning, travel with me back in time and around the world. We're going to Hanoi, North Vietnam, in the spring of 1971.

For five weeks in the spring of 1971, the North Vietnamese permitted three prisoners in the Hanoi Hilton to copy the Bible for one hour a week. James Ray was one of the three. He sat on a wooden chair at a wooden table and began copying the Beatitudes and the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount.

The guard standing beside James repeatedly placed his elbow on the verse he was trying to copy. When the guard moved his elbow, James wrote so fast that his hand cramped. When the guard wasn't holding his elbow on the page, he tried to distract James by continually asking inane questions.<sup>2</sup>

If you had been in James Ray's situation, which parts of the Bible do you think you would have copied and memorized? Why do you think he began with the Sermon on the Mount? I can only guess, but I do have a theory about it.

One of the first things I was taught at Officer Candidate School was the U.S. Military "Code of Conduct." The Code has six articles, of which the first two say, "I am an American, fighting in the forces which guard my country and our way of life. I am prepared to give my life in their defense. I will never surrender of my own free will. If in command I will never surrender the members of my command while they still have the means to resist."

The Code of Conduct is brief and focused. It's intended to give the members of our Armed Forces something to hold onto to guide their behavior in combat. The Sermon on the Mount is also brief and focused. It's intended to give those who follow Jesus something to hold onto to guide our behavior in spiritual combat.

When everything else caves in, these codes remind us about who we are, about who we belong to, and about the promises we've made. On crisis days, and on ordinary days, we need to be reminded of these things, and I think that's why James Ray and his fellow prisoners of war wanted to go over the Sermon on the Mount again and again in their minds.

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Colson, *Loving God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), pp. 203-205.

We call Matthew five, six, and seven “the Sermon on the Mount” because we’re told that these teachings were given in a large level area somewhere in the Galilean hills (Matthew 4:23, 5:1; Luke 6:17). Having spent the entire night in prayer, at daybreak Jesus had chosen twelve of those who followed him to be “apostles,” or “sent ones.” And, as happened to me at OCS, Jesus immediately began teaching these new recruits about the Code of Conduct that was expected of those who follow Him. While the Twelve were Jesus’ primary focus for this teaching, huge crowds of other people were also present and overheard what Jesus said (Luke 6:12-17).

Like the military Code of Conduct, the Sermon on the Mount confronts us with uncompromising demands that we frequently find rather shocking. Interpreters across the centuries have often tried to tone these demands down to a more manageable level.<sup>3</sup> As we make our way through the Beatitudes over the next few weeks, we’ll find that nearly every sentence of Jesus’ Code of Conduct stretches us far beyond our comfort zones. We’ll find here no maudlin admonitions to “be nice.” On the contrary, we’ll be challenged again and again by the rigors of what it means to be about the business of the Kingdom of Heaven—which is the theme of the sermon.

Before we look at the Sermon, let me ask you a question: What do you want from life? Our nation’s *Declaration of Independence* states that “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.”

So what is “happiness”? What does it mean to “be happy”? I submit to you that “happiness” gives its own case away. “Happiness” is derived from the root “hap,” which has to do with luck or chance, as in “happenstance.”

Happiness is dependent on the chances and the changes of life; happiness is something that life may give and that life may also destroy. A change in fortune, a collapse in health, the failure of a plan, the disappointment of an ambition, even a change in the weather can steal happiness away.

According to a report in *U.S. News & World Report* several years ago, although the U.S. standard of living has improved in astounding ways since World War II, there has been no increase in the number of people who consider themselves happy. *U.S. News* reported that, “Once income provides basic needs, it doesn’t correlate to happiness. Nor does intelligence, prestige, or sunny weather. People grow used to new climates, higher salaries, and better cars.”<sup>4</sup>

God intends for your life to be more than that. God wants you to experience a joy that is deep and unmovable, a joy that sorrow and loss cannot destroy, a joy that shines even through tears, and that nothing either in life or death can take away. *Keep that goal in mind as we study the rigors of the Sermon.*

We call the first twelve verses of the Sermon on the Mount, “the Beatitudes,” because each of the eight Beatitudes begins with the affirmation that persons with this character quality are “blessed” by God. So how would you answer someone who asked you what it means to be “blessed by God”? I suspect that most of our answers would head off in the direction of happiness, good health, and material prosperity, but that’s not what He meant, as we shall see.

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<sup>3</sup> During the Middle Ages, the Roman Catholic Church taught that only those who lived in monasteries were responsible to live by the ethics of this sermon. Martin Luther found the sermon impractical for public affairs. Cyrus Scofield thought that these ethics must surely come to bear only after Jesus has returned to Earth and established His eternal Kingdom.

<sup>4</sup> Holly J. Morris, “Happiness Explained,” *U.S. News & World Report*, September 3, 2001.

From the Garden of Eden to the gardens of Columbia, we humans are persistently deceived by the idea that life is about us—our health, our families, our happiness. We get seduced by tangible stuff that we can put our hands on, and we miss the deeper reality that life is not about us—life is about God. It's only when we finally understand this, and only when we understand it so deeply that it changes everything we do, that we're able to experience the gift of God's own eternal Joy, which is only available through the bloodlines of the Cross (John 15:11).

And it's only after we've begun to experience this Joy that we begin to understand what it means to be "blessed." **To experience God's blessing means to begin to taste the joy that comes only from personal relationship with God.** To experience God's blessing means to begin to know who we really are, who we really belong to, and what He has promised to us.<sup>5</sup>

All of this brings us at last to the first Beatitude: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 5:3). As He usually did, Jesus turned the world's values upside down "right out of the starting gate." The world tells us to become rich. Jesus tells us to become poor . . . "in spirit."

It's important to note that Jesus did not call poverty a good thing. He's not giving us an excuse for allowing persons to suffer in wretched slums and other substandard housing—most especially not as their landlords. Jesus isn't talking about "happiness," either. Jesus is talking about the kind of life God blesses; and the first characteristic of such a life is that it "realizes its need for Him." "Poor in spirit" means that we recognize that we don't have what it takes, and that on our own, we're never going to have what it takes to experience intimate personal relationship with God.

Our tendency as Americans is to be fiercely independent. We struggle mightily against being dependent on anyone or on anything, and we try to insulate ourselves from dependence in many ways. We collect money, we collect marriages, we collect children, we collect houses and lands, we collect honors and degrees, but none of these can fill our emptiness or heal our souls. In fact, they often do more harm than good.

In order to begin to experience that supreme gladness that comes only from personal relationship with God, to begin to know who we really are, who we really belong to, and what God has promised to us, we have to first see ourselves as God sees us.

When I got back in the Navy nearly thirty years ago, I was quite excited to be able to wear my summer white uniform again. I came down the stairs in all my glistening finery and asked Jill, "What do you think?" She looked me over for a moment and replied out of her hospital background, "To tell you the truth, you look a lot like an orderly." POP! went my balloon! Jill didn't see me AT ALL as I saw myself!

My friend, the next time you're tempted to think that God really should be quite impressed with you, go outside and look at the stars awhile. Compare the span of your life with that of the Chesapeake Bay. Reread chapters 38-41 of Job. Jesus made it very clear that citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven is not granted on the basis of nationality, race, degrees, power, or wealth.

Jesus told us that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to the poor, to the despised, to the prostitutes—to those who knew they had nothing to bring by which to impress God, so they didn't

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<sup>5</sup> As Paul put it, "*I pray that your hearts will be flooded with light so that you can understand the wonderful future he has promised to those he called. I want you to realize what a rich and glorious inheritance he has given to his people. I pray that you will begin to understand the incredible greatness of his power for us who believe him*" (Ephesians 1:18-19).

even try to do it. Unlike the religious leaders who were so full of themselves, these alone cried out for God's mercy, and they alone received it.

My friend, do you want to experience that supremely glad life that Jesus described as "abundant life," "life in all its fullness" (John 10:10)? Jesus told us to "*Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it*" (Matthew 7:13-14).

I wonder whether folks miss the gate because they can't find it, or because when they get there they realize that the gateway is so small that they can't pass through it with anything in their hands, and like the rich young man who came to Jesus, they turn away (Matthew 19:22).

What does it mean to be "poor in spirit"? It means that you understand what the hymn, "Rock of Ages" means when it says,

Nothing in my hand 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.<sup>6</sup>

My friend, I know you don't want to be dependent. You want to do it yourself. But the end of that way is death. The door to the Kingdom of Heaven opens only to those with nothing in their hands. Which way will *you* choose?

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<sup>6</sup> Augustus Toplady, "Rock of Ages," 1776.