

“Character that Counts: Integrity”

Revelation 2:8-11; Acts 4:12-31 ¹

Μακαριοι οι δεδιωγμενοι ενεκεν δικαιοσυνης, οτι αυτων εστιν η Βασιλεια των ουρανων.

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

Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:10-12).

It was a small adjustment that could make a big difference. Sure, it was against NASCAR rules, but almost everyone else was doing it. As crew chief Tim Shutt tells the story about Mike McLaughlin’s #20 Busch Series car, “I said to Mike that morning, ‘If we’re no good in practice, I’ll put this piece—the illegal piece—on. Probably thirty other teams are doing it.’”

Tim was a relatively new believer who came to Christ at a retreat for folks in the racing industry. “Our owner, Joe Gibbs, is adamant that we don’t cheat,” Tim said, “but most teams figure that as long as you get away with it, it’s not cheating.”

“I got up under the car,” Tim said, and when I was halfway through putting the part on, that verse, ‘*Seek ye first the kingdom of God,*’ came flashing in red in front of me, and whoa, that was it. I said, ‘I’m leaving this up to you, God.’”

Tim Shutt didn’t put the piece on the car . . . and McLaughlin won the race. It was Talladega, one of the biggest races of 2001. “When we won, the first thing that came to my mind was that verse,” Tim said. “God wanted to show himself to me.”²

In 1967, Truett Cathy opened the first fast-food restaurant that ever operated in a mall. That mall was Greenbriar Shopping Center, the first mall in Atlanta, and it happened to be in our neighborhood. The restaurant’s name was *Chick-fil-A*. Today, *Chick-fil-A* has more than 1,800 stores, with more than five billion dollars in sales every year—and every single *Chick-fil-A* franchise is closed on Sunday.

Kid’s meals at *Chick-fil-A* don’t come with promotional movie toys. They include character-building items like *Veggie-Tales* books and similar resources. “I see no conflict between biblical principles and good business practice,” Cathy says. “Corporate America needs faith in something more than the bottom line.”³

Truett Cathy and Tim Shutt have something in common. It’s called “integrity.” According to the dictionary, “integrity” refers to “an unimpaired condition,” “firm adherence to a moral code,” “the quality or state of being complete or undivided.”⁴ Psalm 86:11 says, “*Teach me your way, LORD, that I may rely on your faithfulness; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name.*”

Integrity—an undivided heart—is the character quality I associate with the last of Jesus’ Beatitudes: “*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 5:10). Having integrity means choosing to do the right thing, no matter what it costs . . . because that’s what Jesus would do.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship of Columbia, Maryland on August 24, 2014.

² Victor Lee, *Sports Spectrum*, cited in *Men of Integrity*, May/June 2002.

³ www.chick-fil-a.com

⁴ *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1991).

Bill Lear was devastated when he learned that two of his Learjets had crashed under mysterious circumstances. In those early days, he had sold fifty-five jets, and he sent word to all fifty-five owners to ground their planes until he could find out what had caused the crashes.

To Bill Lear, a follower of Jesus, protecting lives meant far more than the bad publicity his young company would get from grounding all of his planes. Bill protected his customers and trusted God to protect his business.

Bill experimented with his own plane to recreate the failure scenario. Although he nearly lost control of his plane in the process, Bill identified the problem, and put a new part on all fifty-five planes. The rest, as we say, “is history.”⁵

I have a friend named Andy who owns a large electrical contracting business in Louisville. Not too long after Andy became a Christian, another businessman broke a contract that cost Andy a lot of money. His lawyers told Andy to sue the other businessman. When he asked God for wisdom, Andy remembered Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 6: “*When you have something against another Christian, why do you file a lawsuit and ask a secular court to decide the matter, instead of taking it to other Christians to decide who is right? Don’t you know that someday we Christians are going to judge the world? . . . To have such lawsuits at all is a real defeat for you. Why not just accept the injustice and leave it at that? Why not let yourselves be cheated?*” (vv. 1, 2a, 7, NLT).

Andy chose to “eat” the loss, and his decision served as a powerful witness to his employees. Andy’s decision cost him a lot of money, but he had decided that money isn’t the main thing in life. And this brings us to the second main idea in the eighth Beatitude: persecution.

To “persecute” means “to harass in a manner designed to injure, grieve, afflict, or annoy.”⁶ That’s what the other guy was trying to do to Andy. Andy was injured—persecuted—because the other fellow rightly thought that Andy’s faith would prevent him from doing battle. In God’s economy, Andy’s loss became a test of spiritual integrity, and Andy passed. So did this nurse:

It was her first day in the operating room of a prestigious hospital. One of her primary responsibilities was to ensure that all instruments and materials were accounted for before closing the patient. As that time approached, she said to the surgeon, “You’ve only removed eleven sponges. We used twelve.”

“I removed them all,” the surgeon declared emphatically. “We’ll close now.”

“No,” the rookie nurse objected, “we used twelve sponges.”

“I’ll take the responsibility,” the surgeon said grimly. “Suture.”

“You can’t do that, sir,” the nurse blazed. “Think of the patient!”

The surgeon smiled, lifted his foot, and showed the nurse the twelfth sponge. “You’re going to do fine here,” he said.⁷

It’s important to remember that Jesus didn’t pronounce every persecution—every test—blessed, but only those we experience *because we’re living for God*. One of the many good things

⁵ Stephen Arterburn, *The Power Book*; reprinted in *Men of Integrity*, January/February 2002.

⁶ *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*

⁷ Denis Waitley, “Your Absolute Bottom Line,” *Priorities*, 2.6.

about Jesus was His sheer honesty. He never left us in any doubt about what would happen to us if we choose to follow Him. As Paul later told Timothy, “*Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*” (2 Timothy 3:12).

In February 2001, John Oros told this story about his experience as a church leader in Romania during the Communist years. “During communism,” he said, “many people came at the end of a service to say, ‘I’ve decided to become a Christian.’”

We told them, “It’s good that you want to become a Christian, but we need to tell you that there’s a price to be paid. Why don’t you reconsider what you want to do, because many things can happen to you. You can lose, and you can lose big.”

“A high percentage of these people chose to take part in a three-month catechism class. At the end of this period, many participants declared their desire to be baptized. Typically, I would respond, ‘It’s really nice that you want to become a Christian, but when you give your testimony . . . there will be informers here who will jot down your name. Tomorrow the problems will start. Count the cost. Christianity is not easy. It’s not cheap. You can be demoted. You can lose your job. You can lose your friends. You can lose your neighbors. You can lose your kids who are climbing the social ladder. You can even lose your life.’”

“Let me tell you my joy,” he said. “When we looked into their eyes, they told us through their tears, **If I lose everything but my personal relationship with my Lord Jesus Christ, it’s still worth it.**”⁸

John and Kay Tallman had prayed daily for over a year for hostage missionaries Martin and Gracia Burnham during their captivity at the hands of terrorists in the Philippines. As missionary colleagues, they prayed for the Burnham’s safety and release. When word of Martin’s death in a firefight on June 7, 2002 arrived at New Tribes headquarters in Sanford, Florida, the Tallmans were stunned. In a prayer letter to her supporters, Kay described the final hours of the Burnham’s captivity:

“Martin and Gracia and the guerrillas had been on the run for about seven days with little or no food. . . . They had been running in terrible weather, tropical torrential downpours, slipping and sliding and falling. Martin strung a hammock for himself and Gracia on the top of a little knoll. Then they prayed together—the last thing they did together. You know what they prayed through this whole ordeal? ‘God, thank you for the privilege of serving you. Please help us to serve you with gladness.’”

“Then the bullets hit. Gracia was hit first and rolled down the hill away from the fighting. Then Martin was hit and rolled down right beside her. By God’s own hand Martin was laid down right by his precious bride of nineteen years. They were together until he drew his last breath.”

As she poured out her heart to God about her friend’s death, Kay said, “God, this isn’t how I would have written the last chapter.”

And God’s quiet reply was, “Kay, this isn’t the last chapter.”

⁸ Brent Kipfer, Brussels, Ontario. This message was delivered at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana.

As Kay shared this with an older friend from church, the friend added, “And it’s not your book.”⁹

As we saw in our text this morning, Jesus told the church in Smyrna, “*Don’t be afraid of what you are about to suffer. The Devil will throw some of you into prison and put you to the test. You will be persecuted for ‘ten days’ [or a relatively brief time]. Remain faithful even when facing death, and I will give you the crown of life*” (Revelation 2:10). Jesus had previously told us, “*But I say, love your enemies! Pray for those who persecute you!*” (Matthew 5:44).

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 action is an invitation to battle? Hardly! Living with integrity simply means knowing Who and What we believe and Why, 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’s 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 choose to live with Christian integrity, and it’s the third main principle of this Beatitude. When we reach the end of the journey, the Master will say, “*Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master’s happiness!*” (Matthew 25:23). You and I may not fully understand our parts in the drama we’re living, but if we’re faithful, our reward is the Kingdom of Heaven itself.

William Wallace, hero of the film *Braveheart*, was the warrior poet who liberated Scotland in the 1300s. When Wallace arrived on the scene, Scotland had been under England’s iron fist for centuries. England’s latest king, Edward the Longshanks, was the worst of all.

Wallace was the first to defy the oppressors, and Longshanks sent his armies to Stirling to crush the rebellion. When the Scots began to lose heart, Wallace rode in with his band of warriors, ready for battle. In the film, Wallace reminded his countrymen that a life lived in fear is no life at all. He reminded them that every single one of them would die one day: “And dying in your beds,” he said, “many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that, for a chance—just one chance!—to come back here and tell our enemies that they may take our lives, but they’ll never take our freedom!?!”

William Wallace defeated and almost destroyed the English army at Stirling on September 11, 1297, driving the English entirely out of Scotland.¹⁰ The fight for freedom later cost him his life through dreadful torture, but his death inspired his people to win a lasting freedom.

What price will you put on your integrity? Dying in your bed, many years from now, would you be willing to trade all the days from this day to that for a chance—*just one chance!*—to stand for Jesus when the cost is great? Prepare yourself, for you do not know the hour at which the test will come. . . .¹¹

The table on the screen reminds us that Jesus’ eight Beatitudes challenge us to develop the character qualities of *Dependence, Vulnerability, Humility, Righteousness, Mercy, Purity,*

⁹ Greg Asimakoupoulos, Naperville, Illinois; used with permission of John and Kay Tallman, Crisis Management Team, New Tribes Mission, Sanford, Florida.

¹⁰ *Braveheart* (1995), directed by Mel Gibson, also *Compton’s Interactive Encyclopedia*, Copyright (c) 1994, 1995 Compton’s NewMedia, Inc.

¹¹ See the hymn, “Once to Ev’ry Man and Nation,” that follows this sermon.

Reconciliation, and Integrity. “That’s all pretty tough!” you say. But would you want it to be easy? **Do you not desire a cause that is worthy of your very best, that demands all you have to give in a mighty quest both for time and eternity?**

Yes, this is a tall order, but we need to remember that Jesus came, not to make life *easy*, but to make life *great*. Will you follow Him?

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

Once to Ev’ry Man and Nation
James Russell Lowell

Once to ev’ry man and nation
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good or evil side;
Some great cause, some great decision,
Offring each the bloom or blight,
And the choice goes by forever
‘Twixt that darkness and that light.

Then to side with truth is noble,
When we share her wretched crust,
Ere her cause bring fame and profit,
And ‘tis prosperous to be just;
Then it is the brave man chooses
While the coward stands aside,
Till the multitude make virtue
Of the faith they had denied.

Though the cause of evil prosper,
Yet the truth alone is strong;
Though her portion be the scaffold,
And upon the throne be wrong:
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And, behind the dim unknown,
Standeth God within the shadow,
Keeping watch above his own.