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Beatitudes: "Nothing Succeeds Like Failure"

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Perhaps there is no better statement of the message of the beatitudes (Matthew 5:2-12) than G. K. Chesterton's curious little maxim, "Nothing succeeds like failure." Of course, Jesus was not speaking of real failure even as Chesterton was not, but of what men have generally viewed as failure. The cross was certainly a colossal disaster by every conventional standard. It only seems "right" to many of us now because we have acquiesced in nineteen hundred years of well-established tradition. It is not so remarkable then that a kingdom destined to be hoisted to power on a cross should be full of surprises and that Jesus should say that only those who were apparent failures had any hope of its blessedness. In the following beatitudes the Savior makes very clear that the kingdom of heaven belongs, not to the full, but to the empty.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3). Jesus begins by touching the wellspring of the character of the kingdom citizen - his attitude toward himself in the presence of God. Luke abbreviates this beatitude to, "Blessed are you poor" (Luke 6:20) and records also a woe pronounced by Jesus upon the rich (Luke 6:24). In the synagogue at Nazareth Jesus had read Isaiah's messianic prophecy of the poor ("meek," ASV) having the gospel preached to them (Isaiah 61:1; Luke 4:18) and was later to soberly warn that the rich would not come easily into the kingdom (Luke 18:24-25). But while it is true that "the common people heard Him gladly" (Mark 12:37) because the rigors of the poor bring them to humility more easily than does the comfortable affluence of the rich, Matthew's account of the sermon makes evident that Jesus is not speaking of economic poverty.

It is not impossible for the poor to be arrogant nor for the rich to be humble. These "poor" are those who, possessing little or much, have a sense of their own spiritual destitution.

The Greek word here translated "poor" comes from a root word which means to crouch or to cringe. It refers not simply to those for whom life is a struggle, but to men who are reduced to the most abject begging because they have absolutely nothing (Luke 16:20-21). Here it is applied to the sinful emptiness of an absolute spiritual bankruptcy in which a person is compelled to plead for that which he is powerless to obtain (Jeremiah 10:23) and to which he has no right (Luke 15:18-19; 18:13), but without which he cannot live. Begging comes hard to men (Luke 16:3) - especially proud, self-reliant Americans - but that is where our sinful ways have brought us and we will not see the kingdom of heaven until we face up to this reality with humble simplicity.

"Blessed are those who mourn" (Matthew 5:4). Men have been brought up to believe that tears must be avoided if they are to be happy. Jesus simply says that this is not true. There is some sorrow which must be embraced, not because it is inescapable and the struggle futile, but because true happiness is impossible without it.

Even grief that is unavoidable to mortal men whatever their station can have salutary effects on our lives if we allow it to. It can, as Solomon says, remind us of the wispy momentariness of our lives and set us to thinking seriously about the most important things (Ecclesiastes 7:2-4). The psalmist who gave us such a rich meditation on the greatness of God's law has linked pain and understanding. "Before I was afflicted," he reflected, "I went astray, but now I keep Your word." He then concludes, "It is good for me that I have been afflicted, that I may learn Your statutes" (Psalm 119:67,71). Tears have always taught us more than has laughter about life's verities.

But there is something more to the mourning in this gem-like paradox than the tears we cannot escape, the sorrow that comes unbidden and unsought. This grief comes to us by choice, not necessity. The Old Testament should influence our understanding of these words first spoken to a Jewish audience. Isaiah foresaw that the Lord's anointed would come to "heal the brokenhearted" and "comfort all who mourn" (Isaiah 61:1-2). But these words applied only to a remnant of Israel which would come through the nation's affliction for its sins, humbled and grieved. Ezekiel's vision of God's wrath on a corrupt Jerusalem revealed that only those "who sigh and cry over all the abominations that are done within it" were to be spared (Ezekiel 9:4). Zephaniah issued a similar warning (Zephaniah 3:11-13,18).

The prophets would have us understand this mourning as the grief experienced by those who in their reverence for God are horrified by their own sins and those of their fellows, and are moved to tears of bitter shame and grief. This is the "godly sorrow" of which Paul writes, a sorrow that "produces repentance leading to salvation" (2 Corinthians 7:10). These are the tears we must choose to shed, renouncing our stubborn pride; and out of that choice will come the unspeakable comfort of a God who forgives us all, takes us to Himself, and will ultimately wipe all tears away (Revelation 21:4). Nothing save God's mercy can assuage a grief like this.

Live the Right Message

Dick Lankford

I was sitting in a hospital waiting room and noticed a lady coming toward me wearing a shirt with beautifully scrolled letters that said, "It Is Well With My Soul." She was heading for the empty seat next to me. As she sat down, she dropped her phone and also dropped nasty swear word as she did. And you know... regardless of her reasons for that, the inconsistency of it all just didn't sit well with me.

As a believer, it should never sit well with us when we observe blessing and cursing coming from the same life (James 3:7-12). It doesn't make sense for someone who claims to be living a Christian life to swear and curse others and tell crude jokes, even if those things are supposedly done in secret. We ought not make excuses for the language we use—we ought to make changes to the language we use.

While not every sin of your tongue will be heard by someone else, every sin of the tongue is heard by God. And that ought to motivate us to make sure that our speech is "always gracious, seasoned with salt" (Colossians 4:6) and that we "speak and act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty" (James 2:12).

The gospel that we claim to live ought to be the same gospel that is communicated by our words—that Jesus is the king of our lives and rules over us in every way.