

# Living As A Follower Of Christ

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[ 0 : 00 ] I'll tell you what's going on here, so to speak. You'll notice that there is a few extra candles here tonight, three of which are burning.

That wreath of candles, which will be joined eventually by another, represents the count up, because there's going to be candles added every week, the count up to the parish mission, which will be light in our darkness.

The theme reminding us that light is needed in our world, to shatter the darkness of our world, the light of Christ, to clear up the God-like.

And so week by week, fire will grow, so to speak. Week by week, one more candle will be lit. The three that are lit already represent the fact that, at least at the 10 o'clock service, this is the third week that the mission's been talked about.

So, three candles. Three candles to remind us of light in our darkness. And the second reading you've heard today contained the Beatitudes, which in their own way are light in our darkness.

[ 1 : 38 ] Except the sort of light they represent. The third week is not the, if you like, hard, cold, pointed, verbal presentation of the gospel.

Rather, it represents the presentation of the gospel through your actions, through your life.

So what I'd like you to do this evening is to take a look again at those Beatitudes. I think it was, if I remember correctly, page four in the Pew edition of the New Testament.

I'd like you to see some common threads, some way of trying to pull those nine guidelines, if you like.

Nine guidelines for living into a tighter unity, something that we can all make vivid in our lives. As you look at those Beatitudes, all nine of them, the first thing I want you to pick up from those nine blessings is that the idea that followers of Christ are, first of all, people who hold fast to God in simple trust.

[ 3 : 10 ] There's nothing complicated about being a Christian. No, ultimately, although in any form that the institutional church may take, we institutionalize, systematize part of becoming a Christian, but ultimately becoming a Christian and being a Christian is very simple.

It's just a matter of trusting Christ. It's simply that. And in the Beatitudes, we see that idea of trust held up to us, held up to us as a necessity.

And it's a necessity to have a right inward attitude, because trust is an inward attitude that spills out in all sorts of ways. But first of all, it's an inner attitude, an inner, if you like, position.

That inner attitude, that inner position is represented most clearly by a couple of the Beatitudes. For example, the first Beatitude, which is verse 3 of chapter 5.

Blessed are the Beatitudes. Blessed are the poor in spirit. For the Beatitudes, I personally prefer the New English Bible.

[ 4 : 35 ] I think it brings a clarity to them that the more conventional translation, the sort of thing you find here doesn't bring to us.

The New English Bible says here, Blessed are those who know their need for God. For the poor in spirit of those who know their need for God.

We're full in our society. We're full because all our media, all of the very ethos of our culture, tell us that we don't need anybody.

One of the marks of the feminist movement has been to repeat the stupidity, if you like, of the male chauvinist pig school of thought.

And that is that I can control my life. I can take absolute control of it.

[ 5 : 50 ] And I can do everything that needs to be done. No problem. I can do it. Of course, such a stand that's classically been represented among the male of the species really is unwillingness to

recognize any personal need, any personal area of, well, of weakness.

I guess would be the word. Weakness. Yet, one of the marks of people who are the true people of God is that very willingness to see weakness in their lives, to see need in their lives, to give up the myth of personal self-sufficiency.

More than to recognize the myth and give it up, it's also something that has to be acted upon. That's what the matter of trust is.

Acting upon that recognition. Acting in such a way that our trust is no longer in me, but in the Lord. Or look at the third beatitude, which is really verse 5.

Blessed are the meek. Or another way to translate it is blessed are those of a gentle spirit.

[ 7 : 29 ] And the meek, the people of gentle spirit and lifer, are really the people who will accept hardships in life. And they'll accept the limitations that are a natural part of anyone's life.

And they'll accept them without bitterness towards God or towards any other human being. That is needed. I guess I'm betraying my age when I say that I really find it difficult to understand a lot of couples these days who are contemplating marriage, or as they're contemplating marriage, thinking about having kids.

Because I see an awful lot of people who won't get married until they've got, you know, a car, and a down payment on the house, and more furniture than a lot of couples who've been married 20 years have, etc.

They've got to have everything all lined up. Then they'll get married. And when it comes to having kids, not only do they have to have all that, but the house has got to be paid for, and they should probably have a healthy down payment on a recreational property as well, before they'll consider having children.

No sense of that there's any limitation to life. No sense of wanting to even have to deal with any limitation to life.

[ 9 : 09 ] It's a difficult way to live. There's no idea of the limitations to life. There are. Sad to some people, but I would say, generally speaking, happy reality is that there are limitations.

Wonderful limitations. You can't own everything. You can't tie up everything. You can't be everything to everybody. You know, that's freeing.

That's really freeing. Because when you get rid of all that junk, then you can be yourself.

You can stand before God, and you can stand before your fellow human beings with a freedom. Freedom you'll get no other way.

Freedom that comes from giving up the idea of self-sufficiency. Freedom. The impossible ideal. Freedom with just being you before the Lord, before your spouse, before your kids, before your parents.

[ 10 : 24 ] Freedom with just being you before the Lord, and you can't be your child. See, one of the things these Beatitudes gets at is the fact that anyone who wants to declare their self-sufficiency is at the same time declaring their exclusion from the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is only for realistic people. The kingdom of heaven is only for those who realistically recognize the weakness in their lives and trust that weakness to the Lord.

The second sort of theme I would hope you would see through these Beatitudes is the idea that followers of Christ are single-minded in their love of God.

A lot of the popular wisdom of our society says that with a certain grain of truth, obviously, that nothing is simple.

There's no being able to divide things up into pure, if you like black, I'm pure white. That life is a whole lot of gray. It's a great complexity.

[ 11 : 51 ] The sign of maturity is the recognition of complexity. And to a limited degree, that's true. But to a limited degree, because you carry it too far.

You come to a point of, if you like, sophistication, where you're able to rationalize a compromise of your values, you come to the point where you're able to rationalize a retreat from the values, the standards that you hold dear.

You're able to rationalize a skirting of the issues. That's taking that idea of complexity too far.

Because the grounds on which we do, and we all do those things, the grounds on which we do them, is that complexity makes simple values, complexity makes simple love irrelevant.

Yet, we look at these Beatitudes, verse 8, which is the sixth Beatitude, blessed are the pure in heart.

[ 13 : 22 ] Blessed are those whose simplicity of love for God is such that they stick to the central issue of life, no matter what.

The simple, central issue is the person of Jesus Christ. No ifs, ands, or buts.

That's the central issue in life. Where do you stand in relation to Christ? How do you relate to Christ? What does that do to your life, your words, your thoughts, your actions?

The central issue is Jesus Christ. The pure in heart are people who see in the simplicity of their love for Christ that that is the issue.

And, of course, when you see the issue with that sort of simplicity, then, certainly, if you want to be paranoid about it, you can see life as being full of persecutions.

[ 14 : 36 ] Because to stick to that central issue of Christ means that sooner or later it's going to cost you time.

It's going to cost you money. It's going to cost you social position in the eyes of at least one person, if not a whole lot of people.

That's not usually that anybody's out to get you. That's why I said if you want to be paranoid about it. Because really, it boils down to the fact that if you want to gain time, if you want to gain money, if you want to gain social status in the eyes of others, then you can only do so by retreating at least partially from your love for Christ.

You can't have your cake and eat it too. If you want those things, you're going to have to loosen your grasp on Christ.

And yet, to hold to Christ, to hold to that simple love of Christ, is not a matter of assuming a hardship to earn salvation, to earn a place in God's heaven.

[ 16 : 11 ] But rather, it's that the love of Christ opens our lives to his blessing. By receiving his blessing, we gain an assurance.

We gain the assurance that the kingdom of heaven is our destiny. That's the assurance that enables us to put up with some things from time to time.

Assurance that we know where we're going. That we love the person who is preparing that place for us. So the love that Christ seeks from us, as we see it exemplified in the Beatitudes, is a love that so concentrates upon God that all inconveniences are counted as mere nothing.

The other theme I'd like you to pick up out of all this is that followers of Christ are devoted to God's standards of justice.

Jesus expects, Jesus expects, that his teachings will be put into practice.

[ 17 : 38 ] That's what a lot of people complain about because they say, how can you do it? It turns all sorts of things in our world upside down, all sorts of values, all sorts of truths.

How can you do it? And yet Jesus says, it can be done. It's not impossible. It can be done.

The fact, you see, the very real fact, that to enter fellowship with Jesus Christ is to undergo a transformation.

Part of the tragedy of the Old Testament, and you've heard some of that tragedy in that reading from Jeremiah tonight, part of the tragedy is that the people of God wouldn't stick to, work for, carry out the justice of God.

So, time and time again, the prophet spoke against it. If you want to hear some pretty blunt talk, read the prophet Amos.

[ 18 : 56 ] It's blunt. To the point. With the fact, you can't claim to follow God on the one hand, and on the other hand, deny justice.

So, if you look at these Beatitudes, you'll find that the second one, verse 4, says, blessed are those who mourn.

Or other translations may say, blessed are those who are sorrowful. Mourn. Mourn. Not in the sense of grief that somebody important to you has died, but mourn.

Be sorrowful in the sense of seeing where in your life you have died to God's justice. Then repent of it.

Do something about it. The opposite, you see, of mourning in this sense, being sorrowful, I would say, being lightheaded, being weighed down with no concern except concern for oneself.

[ 20 : 14 ] or, verse 9, the, uh, seventh Beatitude. Blessed are the peacemakers.

A real peacemaker is not an appeaser. who've learned nothing else from high school history courses but hopefully the lesson of Neville Chamberlain.

The lesson that peace can never be brought about by appeasement. And that's true not just in affairs between nations, but affairs between individual people, relationships of our everyday life. That appeasement does not bring peace. True peace only comes when we use every opportunity possible to work at reconciliation.

To work at identifying what divides us and then bringing what divides us under the sovereignty of God and then dealing with them on the basis of what the sovereign justice of God demands.

[ 21 : 35 ] That's how to make peace. That's, uh, that's what I admire in Archbishop Tutu.

The television image that's been burned on my visual memory more than anything I've seen on TV in many years. The image earlier this month of, that was, he's five foot four black archbishop in his Episcopal purple cassock walking from a large crowd at a funeral.

Large crowds were getting pretty upset for those big so-called hippopotamuses, those oversized armored personnel carriers that had police in them.

You see that little man walk across the hot, dusty area that looked like a rope. You see that big, somewhat overweight police colonel get down out of that hippopotamus to see the archbishop reasonably to work at reconciling the needs of the mourners in that funeral with the somewhat weighty and unnecessary demands of the police for security.

He brought those two together in a way that was true reconciliation. Did you notice that the funeral didn't die?

[ 23 : 28 ] Yet, neither were the police pushed to the point where they do something for the gentlemen drastic. That was a peacemaker at work.

Looking at what's at stake, looking at it from God's point of view, bringing about reconciliation on that basis.

The message, not just of the Beatitudes, but the message of Christ over and over and over again, all through his teaching in the Gospels, is that if we ignore God's call for true justice, whether that's justice in the marketplace, or justice in our personal relationships, or justice in the affairs of nations and between nations, if we ignore God's call for justice, us, then we forfeit our citizenship in the kingdom of God.

Yet, the other gospel message is that to those who pay the cost of discipleship, for those who not just hunger for justice, but who in the spirit of Christ, under the direction of the spirit of Christ, work for the justice of God in the affairs of the human race, to such people as those belongs a loving welcome into the heavenly kingdom of God, a loving welcome back where we belong.

Amen. Andaman