



Overcoming Attitude

Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12; 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

The New Baptist Covenant Celebration met this week in Atlanta. Some argued it would be a partisan political exercise, yet it gathered some 15,000 Baptists from over thirty Baptist denominational groups for the sake of unity after the call of Christ. Republican, Democrat, Black, White, Asian, Hispanic, northern, southern, conservative, moderate, known, and unknown, it gathered diverse Baptists seeking unity under the commands of Christ Jesus to love the neglected. 162 years after Baptists fell apart over slavery, we broke new ground in recognizing our failure to live up to the call of Christ Jesus. Can we overcome our attitudes of comfort and sufficiency to face the real challenges of faith?

Once Jesus called the disciples, he began his ministry. His teaching directly connected with needs around him. He spoke of God's eternal care and met the pressing needs of those in his midst. In healing the spirit, he healed the body. In feeding the soul, he fed hungry mouths. He coupled the spiritual and the physical in a way that would surprise us. He brushed away categories used to classify people and showered God's love upon all.

The way Matthew tells it, he did not worry so much with the temple and synagogues. He took his primary teaching further afield in the Judean countryside. Sure, he taught in the synagogues, but he did not limit his message to such a structure. He met the crowds in the marketplace, touched them on the road, spoke at the lakeshore, and in the outer hills, as well. The distinctiveness of Jesus' teaching, however, was not the venue, it was message. Jesus lived what he preached, but in that he was not alone. Others did not preach and teach what Jesus taught. They certainly did not live it.

For the most part, people were concerned with discovering how to get around God's instructions without jeopardizing their standing before God. It was similar to the way so many of us drive, trying to figure out how fast we can drive without getting caught for speeding, or the way lawyers to help us push the limits of the legal system to enable theft, deceit, and aggression without falling prey to the law's teeth. How badly can we mistreat our bodies, damage the environment, or mistreat others without facing the consequences? How far can we go without getting caught?

Jesus established a wholly new standard of conduct. Rather than look at ways we destroy, maim, and kill, he addressed what should assume the focus of our lives. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Poverty is something we struggle to flee! We seek ways to increase our wealth, while Jesus calls us to depend upon God. Blessing is not the fruit of what we can control, but placing control over our lives into God's hands.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." We struggle to protect our lives from things that would cause distress. It is when all is taken away, however, that we can learn to rely upon God as the source of our comfort and confidence. "Blessed are those the world walks all over, for to them belongs the earth." In teaching meekness, Jesus offered unmeasured forgiveness to those who abused and killed him. He thought nothing of retribution and revenge. He simply gave up his own life as violence rained against him.

"Blessed are those whose hunger and thirst is for righteousness, for their pangs will be sated." Wealth, revenge, violence, position, control, and power are never enough. There is always another

dollar in a stranger's pocket, someone who does not fulfill our desires, pain that revenge can never soothe, an enemy who does not recognize our position, and someone we cannot control. Righteousness, however, can find satisfaction in our lives when it becomes our driving force.

Blessed are those whose rights we neglect, for God will stand on their side. Blessed are those we feel right to despise, for God will lift them up. Blessed are those we lock out of society, for God would grant them His presence. Blessed are those who can't pay their debts, for God is willing to meet their needs. Blessed are those on whom we tread, for God would heal their wounds. Blessed are those we shun and ignore, for their voices are heard in the court of heaven. Woe to those who claim to be righteous, yet neglect to care for the needs of others. They brush away any help from God.

In facing the giants in our lives, it is not our strength, knowledge, and use of force that make the difference. Victory is in letting go of those things that would seem to give us control and resting in what God can do through us. Paul said that it is foolish to depend upon God, yet it is also the way of God's wisdom. What is foolish to us is the way of Christ.

Perhaps we don't see it as clearly as Paul's Corinthian audience. Perhaps they missed it, as well. Jesus lived and died turning the words of his beatitudes into flesh. That he would willingly walk to the cross is foolishness by any other standard. It is foolish by our standard for life. Time and again, we fail to see that the attitude of Christ Jesus in presenting this ethic of living is the ethic by which he lived, died, and calls us to die. Its seeming foolishness brings us to refuse these words as inappropriate for us. It would be great if the rest of the world would live according to Jesus' words, but we are above them. Surely, Jesus did not really expect us to take them literally. Why, if we were to do so, we would have to give up our dreams and ambitions for increasing our wealth, status, power, and selfish designs.

We are much too comfortable with our lifestyles and standards of personal righteousness to give much value to Jesus' words. It was right for Jesus to live by those standards, but he was God, after all, and times have changed. We live in a society with more just and equitable laws than those of Jesus' day. We find no pressing need to live according to the attitudes of submission Jesus' portrayed, when we can so easily live in comfort and ignore the pattern of Jesus' words and living.

It is easier to quote the Beatitudes than to live by them. They seem too foolish, anyway. We would have to re-evaluate all our attitudes, goals, and ambitions in life if we were to take them seriously. It is so much more comfortable to live by our status quo idea of righteousness. It is simpler to go through the motions of attending church, singing hymns, reading the Bible, praying, and resting in the idea that God loves us so much that we are safe for eternity.

It is a far different thing to take Jesus' words at face value. It is a far different thing to accept that life as we know it runs wholly counter to the essential attitudes of the gospel of Christ. It is simpler to persist in our foolish denial of the gospel's claim on our lives and attitudes.

How far are we willing to go in denying attitudes that do not reflect those of Christ Jesus? Are Jesus' words unworthy of our allegiance? Paul considered it simply foolish to deny the cross of Christ. It is the attitude of the cross that should overcome the patterns of our living. Can we afford to trust our lives to any other standard of living?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*