

One afternoon a minister from another state drove into a run-down neighborhood, looking for the church building that had once been the First English Lutheran Church of the city. He'd heard about its magnificent stones and lovely stained glass windows... A couple of blocks away, he could see its imposing steeple. When he pulled up in front, he saw a small wooden sign telling the neighborhood that it was now the "New Shiloh Baptist Church." He rang the bell, and was let inside by a young woman, who was glad to let him look around. The sanctuary had been totally changed, and was now used for more informal worship.

Downstairs, in the undercroft, there was a section honoring the former pastors. Only three names were there, but under their names was written: "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God." (Micah 6:8)

The minister looked at their photographs, thought about how the church had fallen apart so quickly, and wondered whether these pastors had been able to live up to such a challenge. He thought about the run-down neighborhood outside the fancy church walls. And he wondered about his OWN ministry, and indeed the ministry of every Christian. "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God." (Micah 6:8)

The prophet Micah came from a run-down neighborhood, too. Unlike his contemporary, Isaiah, who may have been an aristocrat with easy access to the king, Micah came from the countryside. He left his vegetables and flocks behind in order to offer a better commodity: God's Word. Jerusalem was not loving mercy, or walking humbly with their God. So Micah challenged the people to see that they were feeling too complacent as God's people, too comfortable with the fine Temple and their elegant rituals. He accused them of treating God as though they had God locked up in the ark of the covenant just to do their bidding. Thus, they were not doing justice, loving mercy, or walking humbly with their God. The day would come when "Jerusalem shall become a heap of ruins and Zion shall be plowed as a field." ... What does it take to be faithful?

"Blessed are..."

Inwardly we may shudder when the words we call "Beatitudes" are read, for they seem to say that if things are going well for us now, they won't be so good for us later... There is an undeniable discomfort for comfortable people in this teaching of Jesus.

Somewhere, and I could not locate the "where" of it for this sermon, I read about a pastor who stood up before his congregation and suggested that a fresh perspective on the Beatitudes could be achieved by reading them with your own name in them in the place of "Blessed are." The way he did it, it went "Pastor is merciful....Pastor is pure in heart..... Pastor hungers and thirsts for righteousness.. Pastor is a peacemaker...." And then this pastor looked at his congregation and said, "I have lied with these statements, for I am *not* merciful or pure in heart or hungry for righteousness or meek.... I don't fit here, in this teaching of Jesus, and you probably don't fit

so well, either!”

If there's one thing we know from living, it is the fact that people are often not loving or meek or gentle or determined to work for peace and justice, the way the beatitudes suggest we should be. In fact, the Bible supports an extremely realistic view of humanity, showing the first couple messing up on one little rule given by God, the first child born murdering his brother, and things going pretty well downhill from there! So we don't need to think that maybe God lost touch with reality for a brief period when these beatitudes were issued... No way! They were "issued" to the very people who would misunderstand what Jesus was all about, not long before Jesus would be hung on a cross by not-so-meek people.

Jesus painted this picture to provide hope for those who struggle in life and to provide guidance for all who want to "walk humbly with their God..." This is what it looks like, the humble walk. This is what true discipleship - serious following of Jesus - will involve. To live this way requires an act of will: a firm decision to walk forward through life in a way that appears like foolishness to most of the world....

From *The Applause of Heaven*, p. 56 by Max Lucado:

“As Brazilian jail cells go this one wasn’t too bad. There was a fan on the table. The twin beds each had a thin mattress and a pillow. There was a toilet and a sink.

No, it wasn’t too bad. But, then again, I didn’t have to stay. Anibal did. He was there to stay.

Even more striking than his name (pronounced “uh-nee-ball”) was the man himself. The tattooed anchor on his forearm symbolized his personality—cast-iron. His broad chest stretched his shirt. The slightest movement of his arm bulged his biceps. His face was as leathery in texture as it was in color. His glare could blister a foe. His smile was an explosion of white teeth.

But today the glare was gone and the smile was forced. Anibal wasn’t on the street where he was the boss; he was in a jail where he was the prisoner.

He’d killed a man—a “neighborhood punk,” as Anibal called him, a restless teenager who sold marijuana to the kids on the street and made a nuisance of himself with his mouth. One night the drug dealer had used his mouth one time too many and Anibal had decided to silence it. He’d left the crowded bar where the two of them had been arguing, gone home, taken a pistol out of a drawer, and walked back to the bar. Anibal had entered and called the boy’s name. The drug dealer had turned around just in time to take a bullet in the heart.

Anibal was guilty. Period. His only hope was that the judge would agree that he had done society a favor by getting rid of a neighborhood problem. He would be sentenced within the month.

I came to know Anibal through a Christian friend, Daniel. Anibal had lifted weights at Daniel’s gym. Daniel had given Anibal a Bible and had visited him several times. This time Daniel took me with him to tell Anibal about Jesus.

Our study centered on the cross. We talked about guilt. We talked about forgiveness. The eyes of the murderer softened at the thought that the one who knows him best loves him most.

His heart was touched as we discussed heaven, a hope that no executioner could take from him.

But as we began to discuss conversion, Anibal's face began to harden. The head that had leaned toward me in interest now straightened in caution. Anibal didn't like my statement that the first step in coming to God is an admission of guilt. He was uneasy with words like "I've been wrong" and "forgive me." Saying "I'm sorry" was out of character for him. He had never backed down before any man, and he wasn't about to do it now—even if the man were God.

In one final effort to pierce his pride, I asked him, "Don't you want to go to heaven?"

"Sure," he grunted.

"Are you ready?"

Earlier he might have boasted yes, but now he'd heard too many verses from the Bible. He knew better.

He stared at the concrete floor for a long time, meditating on the question. For a moment I thought his stony heart was cracking. For a second, it appeared that burly Anibal would for the first time admit his failures.

But I was wrong. The eyes that lifted to meet mine weren't tear-filled; they were angry. They weren't the eyes of a repentant prodigal; they were the eyes of an angry prisoner.

"All right," he shrugged. "I'll become one of your Christians. But don't expect me to change the way I live."

The conditional answer left my mouth bitter. "You don't draw up the rules," I told him. "It's not a contract that you negotiate before you sign. It's a gift—an undeserved gift! But to receive it, you have to admit that you need it."

"OK." He ran his thick fingers through his hair and stood up. "But don't expect to see me at church on Sundays."

I sighed. How many knocks in the head does a guy need before he'll ask for help? As I watched Anibal pace back and forth in the tiny cell, I realized that his true prison was not made of bricks and mortar, but of pride. He was twice imprisoned. Once because of murder, and once because of stubbornness. Once by his country, and once by himself. (Lucado, M. 1996. *The Applause of Heaven*. Word Pub.: Dallas [Tex.]

"What does the Lord require of you,...but that you walk humbly with your God."

The passage we heard today from Micah reveals the frustration God has that his people do not obey him. Surely God suffers this same frustration when we look at the beatitudes and declare them to be impossible or hear the commands to be just and to walk with God and then act as though God is a silly Sunday idea and nothing more.... (pause) God yearns for us to hear God's message and wise up.

The late UM Bishop Roy Nichols used to tell the story of a preacher who was aware of the sinfulness of his congregation and who never failed to include in his sermons the fact that they were all going to hell. This didn't endear him to the congregation, and the SPR committee couldn't wait to get the Cabinet (bishop and district superintendents) to move him. They were tired of his hellfire ranting. After a while, the bishop complied and sent a new preacher. But after the new preacher got to know the congregation, he too began to warn the people that they were all headed straight for hell. The bishop was aware that the new preacher was preaching

hellfire, too. Much to his surprise, though, not a single complaint came to his office.

The Bishop couldn't understand why there were no protests, so he finally inquired of one of the leading members of the church as to why they seemed so satisfied, even though they were receiving the same message of condemnation from the pulpit. The member responded, "Well, that first preacher told us we were going to hell, but he acted like he didn't care. Now this second preacher is telling us the same thing, but he acts like he loves us." Tears welled up in the man's eyes, "And Bishop, some of us are beginning to change." (From *The Greening of the Gospel*, Roy Nichols)

We've been given a real challenge from the God who has acted and continues to act like he loves us.... In pain, there is comfort. In sorrow, there is hope. In death, there is the promise of more and even better life... In admitting that we cannot save ourselves, we will discover amazing life in Christ Jesus.

What does the Lord require of us? God has given us life. God has given us a promise: Every day, through every situation, God is with us. God knows who we really are and how unloving we can be, but God loves us anyway; and God wants to show us the way to better, more abundant life. God yearns for us to make the right choices: to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. This wisdom is blessing.

Let us pray:

Holy God, we hear the beatitudes and feel the unholiness of our own lives... We think of walking humbly with you and must confess that too often we give little thought as to the paths Jesus would walk. Most of the time we don't feel that we are walking anywhere near you at all. Help us to discern your paths, your ways for our steps. Help us to know that we are your children, and to remember that every other person in this world is also your child. May we wise up, so that we spend our lives counting our blessings and sharing them with others, humbly, in love, today and forever. Amen.