



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 The Beatitudes
in the Desert
(Sermon on the Mount,
pp. 60-67)

Suggested Article:

📖 Living the
Beatitudes Today
(Sermon on the Mount,
pp. 84-89)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Beatitudes in the Desert

In our fast-paced world of wars and anti-war activism, seeking wisdom from the ancient Christian solitaries may seem counter-intuitive (or just flat wrong). Yet how they received Jesus' blessing in the Sermon on the Mount reveals how we can live faithfully in a broken world.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Matthew 4:23-5:12

Meditation¹

Each of the beatitudes has to do with dying to self. Poverty of spirit, the foundation of the beatitudes, is the ongoing process of dying to self, not out of self-hatred or a collapse of self-esteem, but because there is no other way to love God and neighbor.

Jim Forest

Reflection

"The restoration of the church," Dietrich Bonhoeffer said in 1935, "will surely come from a new kind of monasticism, which will have nothing in common with the old but a life of uncompromising adherence to the Sermon on the Mount in imitation of Christ. I believe the time has come to rally people together for this."

The first monastics – fourth-century Christians who moved to the desert to escape the alluring distortions of their Empire and Church – found the Beatitudes to be windows into a new world where love of God and neighbor is possible. Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, who leads a new monastic movement – Christians who move into the decaying hearts of American cities to find God's love afresh in worship together and service to others – is inspired by the desert Christians' stories. "Their context was not the same as ours," he says, "but their faithfulness is a witness to us, and whether monastic or not, we all have a lot to learn from their wisdom about how to live faithfully in a broken world."

Through the Beatitudes, the desert Christians learned how

- ▶ *to mourn their sin.* Not through false humility or poor self-esteem, but in radical self-honesty the desert Christians developed "a way of prayer that brought one face-to-face with the obsessions and illusions which so often control our attitudes and behaviors." Confessing to an abba or amma (a respected man or woman) the thoughts that disturbed their minds during prayer, they "learned to tell the truth about themselves and mourn the sin that was real in their lives."

Wilson-Hartgrove reports that Rutba House members have "sharing time" on Sunday evening where they listen to and pray for one another. "We have to be pretty honest with one another," he says. "After all, we live together. When I am sad or frustrated, people tend to notice. By God's grace, they have helped me over time to name the thoughts and desires behind those feelings – and to mourn some of them."

- ▶ *to hunger for righteousness.* The desert Christians' fasts seem extreme to us, but they honored "the real needs of body and



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spirit for nourishment and rest," he notes. "These masters of the spiritual life also saw how easily we are deceived by our desires, hungering and thirsting for pleasures that distract us from God's good gifts that would fill us to overflowing."

Rutba House members "fast" from other good things "for the sake of receiving God's good gifts." For instance, they do not use the Internet in their houses. "We hope that we have more time and attention to focus on becoming more holy."

- ▶ *to be peacemakers*. Rutba House is named for a village in Iraq where just three days after the U.S. had bombed its hospital in 2003, a local doctor saved Wilson-Hartgrove's friends' lives after their auto accident. Refusing payment, the doctor said, "You do not owe us anything. Please just tell the world what has happened in Rutba." Peacemakers, Jesus teaches, receive God's adoption. "With it, they are given a new heart. In the desert tradition, the state of this new heart is called hesychasm. It is the deep peace that fills a monk's heart after she has lamented her sins, wrestled the demons, fasted faithfully, and given her whole self over into the hands of a loving God. This peace is the goal of the monastic life."

Study Questions

1. In regard to three practices of mourning for one's sin, fasting, and peacemaking, compare the goals and methods of the desert Christians and the new monastics at Rutba House.
2. How is each of these three practices countercultural?
3. Discuss Arthur Boers' claim, "More important than examples of solitary 'heroes and saints' would be accounts of communities living out the Beatitudes" (*Sermon on the Mount*, 86).

Departing Hymn: "Eternal God, May We Be Free"²

Eternal God, may we be free
from false pretense and foolish pride;
help us your perfect will to see,
and cast unworthy thoughts aside.

From worship that is insincere,
with shallow words and thoughtless prayer,
may we be free, your voice to hear,
and then respond with newfound care.

O God our Father, we confess
an unconcern for those in need;
break through our sinful selfishness,
and reign as Lord of word and deed.

Renew our lives that they may be
alive and vibrant to your call,
with ears to hear and eyes to see
new ways to crown you Lord of all.

Michael G. Dell
Tune: CANONBURY

¹ Jim Forest, *The Ladder of the Beatitudes* (Marynoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 146.

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Beatitudes in the Desert

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Question 1	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To introduce how the desert Christians in the fourth century understood the countercultural message of the Beatitudes.
2. To consider how their reception of the Beatitudes reveals how we can live faithfully in a broken world.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Sermon on the Mount (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “Eternal God, May We Be Free” locate the familiar tune CANONBURY in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, a cofounder of Rutba House in Durham, North Carolina, writes, “In the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers* there are a number of stories about Abba Arsenius. He was a well-educated man of senatorial rank who had been appointed by the Roman emperor to tutor his sons. In something of a midlife crisis, Arsenius decided to sneak away to the Egyptian desert and learn from the monks there. One day someone noticed him consulting an old Egyptian monk. ‘Abba Arsenius,’ he asked, ‘how is it that you with such a good Latin and Greek education, ask this peasant about your thoughts?’ Abba Arsenius replied to him, ‘I have indeed been taught Latin and Greek, but I do not even know the alphabet of this peasant.’

“For many of us new monastics,” Wilson-Hartgrove notes, “the wisdom of the desert has become real as we have apprenticed ourselves to poor and marginal Christians. Sure, we have learned some things from books and professors. But like Abba Arsenius, we realize that we have not even learned the spiritual alphabet of some of our neighbors. People who have lived on the under side of the American dream teach us how to hear the gospel anew and trust Jesus above all else. We inherit the Kingdom as we join them in day-to-day life and beg with them for God’s reign to come on earth as it is in heaven” (*Sermon on the Mount*, 62).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to speak to the group through the Beatitudes about how to live faithfully in a broken world.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Matthew 4:23-5:12 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study brings together the insights of the *first monasticism* (a movement of Christian men and women into the Egyptian desert in the fourth century) and the *new monasticism* (a movement of Christian individuals and families into communities of service within American cities). Focus on the creative ways these intentional communities, separated by sixteen centuries, have taken the Sermon on the Mount seriously and lived out the character of the Beatitudes.

If members want to explore the lives of the first monastics, point them to Roberta Bondi's *To Love as God Loves* and John Chryssavgis' *In the Heart of Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*. To learn more about the "new monasticism," see Bryan Hollon's "St. Benedict in the City" in *Cities and Towns*, Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics, 37-42, and *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*, edited by The Rutba House.

Your group may want to explore the Beatitudes further by reading James C. Howell's *The Beatitudes for Today*, Erik Kolbell's *What Jesus Meant: The Beatitudes and a Meaningful Life*, or Jim Forest's *The Ladder of the Beatitudes*. Arthur Boers reviews these three books in "Living the Beatitudes Today" (*Sermon on the Mount*, 84-89).

Study Questions

1. Assign three small groups to review Wilson-Hartgrove's discussions of the practices. Encourage them to look for the continuity of goals and methods between the new monastics and first monastics, as well as significant differences.

In each monastic movement, communal confession and encouragement allow members to become radically honest and insightful about their sin. The first monastics communities developed informal orders of spiritual leadership, with most members following the direction of an abba or amma. Rutba House members gather for a sharing time each Sunday evening. How can members of your congregation support one another in learning to lament?

The first monastics practiced fasting of food. While some went to extremes, many monks just limited their food to what a poor peasant of the day might eat. Rutba House members limit their use of the Internet. Discuss how this counts as a "fast." How could members of your congregation support one another in fasting?

The desert Christians monitored their anger and learned to forgive one another and seek reconciliation. Wilson-Hartgrove admits, "The truth is that we are, all of us, broken creatures who are helplessly addicted to violence." Rutba House members seek peace among themselves, but also among the people they serve in Durham, North Carolina, and among nations as they "tell the world what has happened at Rutba [Iraq]."

2. Encourage small groups to list the objections we might make and the obstacles we would face if we tried to follow each one of these practices. Our culture's excessive individualism, consumerist habits, and violent ways generally discourage these practices. Consider specific obstacles to each practice. In regard to lamenting our sin, for instance, to whom would we confess our thoughts and desires? What friend would be trustworthy enough, committed over time, and capable of responding in love? Can we form and maintain such friendships outside of an intentional community? In regard to fasting, who would help us establish and monitor a fast? Can we avoid becoming vain about it if we have no intentional community?
3. Arthur Boers has two concerns. First, he says we need to see examples of *living out* the Beatitudes. "Pretty words, compelling phrases, and even the most careful theology need to be fleshed out imaginatively with examples of those who experiment with living out God's truths." Second, we need to see examples of *communities* living out the Beatitudes. Forming the character of disciples and encouraging them to live out the radical claims of discipleship in an unwelcoming culture require a supportive, intentional community. He commends the Amish of Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, as a remarkable example of a "community and its practices...where the seemingly unimaginable has become reality."

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.