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SLIPPERY SLOPE

Truly influential people are rare. In the history of the world, there have been few people that had an impact over significant portions of the world population. We think, perhaps, of Alexander the Great, and Jesus, and Mohammed. In modern times, truly influential people include Alex Bell and Thomas Edison, but they also include Napoleon and, for better or worse, Adolf Hitler. While the influences on Hitler, for instance, were varied (including Nietzsche, among others) he grasped the power to put those influences into action. Since that time three-quarters of a century ago, the ideas of a super-race, justifiable genocide, and the needs of the few overriding the needs of the many have taken a foothold in many aspects of society. General Eisenhower insisted that Army photographers document the death camps because he predicted the rise of the Holocaust-deniers. The super race today may not be defined by skin color or facial characteristics; still, many will try to use today's technology to breed the most intelligent, strongest, or most beautiful people. While neo-Nazi sentiments are derided by most, it is still a significant movement, particularly among the criminal element.

That is the problem. Much of what Hitler believed leads to what society tends to think of as criminal. When the self is given priority, then society must take a back seat. If "I" am superman, everyone else doesn't matter; there is no criminality, just self-realization.

In the last couple of years, because of laws being passed (Texas) or failing (New Mexico) banning "late-term," "third-trimester," or "pain-aware" abortions, some have revived the notions of some of the Nazi leadership. One prominent MSNBC analyst has proposed that life doesn't begin until the parents have an overwhelming feeling for the child. If the parent is a Cathy Trask (*East of Eden*) that feeling might never develop, and taking the life of a child at any age might then be considered an acceptable abortion. Others have proposed that a child could be aborted as late as three months after birth. These "fourth trimester" abortions could be because of unforeseen physical or mental problems, or just because the parents no longer want a child. Many of these advocates either don't see or don't care about the slippery

slope they are on. If a child can be aborted without conscience after birth, then what is to prevent euthanasia of the elderly, the maimed, or the mentally handicapped? Would such a person go quietly if they were paralyzed and deemed "useless" to society? Would we pass laws that certain diagnoses require medical termination? Such thought is selfish, as long as one doesn't become part of the unwanted class.

Fortunately, another influential man was also the Son of God. Jesus taught that neither class, illness, mental health, nor any other factor determines the worth of a human being. Once born, if not before, all people are of equal value to God. "Fear not therefore: ye are of more value than many sparrows." (Lk 12:7) There are those that hold the life of an animal as more valuable than that of a baby, but those people are not God.

Many people that associated with Jesus derided him because he associated with those of an unacceptable class. The master race among the Jews, the Pharisees (*p'rushim*, separated ones), sometimes questioned Jesus for his practice of eating with "sinners."

But their scribes and Pharisees murmured against his disciples, saying, Why do ye eat and drink with publicans and sinners? And Jesus answering said unto them, They that are whole need not a physician; but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. (Lk 5:30-32)

We are all damaged, or unloved, or unloveable. Nevertheless, God loves regardless of how parents, doctors, society, or others feel. Nobody should be killed because they are no longer worthless, because their worth to us is not the final standard. Even the worthless of the world are of value to God.

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BEATITUDES, PART 3

The number three has many traditional overtones. Some say, even though it is not borne out by scripture, that three is a perfect number representing God. Jude explained most things in his book by using three examples. Mozart and Rossini, in their operas, often ended an aria with a triple repetition cadence. Although this is the third part of an analysis of the beatitudes, there is no significance to dividing them into three. Considering the standard length of articles in *Minutes With Messiah*, it was necessary to divide these admonitions to help others into three parts.

Having looked at the most of the passage in Matthew 5 known as the beatitudes, it is now time to look at the last two or three of these blessings. Two or three because some people consider verses 10-12 as one unit, even though Jesus twice uses the word blessed.

Peacemakers

“Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.” (Matt 5:9)

We live in a world of conflict. Often history is taught as a series of wars. The twentieth century, for instance, could be characterized by the Boer War, World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War,

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the Cold War, the Gulf War, and others, like the Six Day War. But the conflicts in this world are not always between nations. There are conflicts at work, in school, (regrettably) in families. Ever since Cain killed Abel, it seems that mankind has been in conflict. We even have conflicts within our own selves.

I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members. (Rom 7:21-23)

If we find it so hard to find peace within ourselves, how much worse is it when others add to the conflict? It seems that peace should be an ideal for which all men strive. Unfortunately it is not so. Some people delight in causing division and strife. Christians, however, should not be among those.

Jesus pronounced a blessing on the peacemakers. As a friend of mine recently pointed out, “creating peace and keeping peace are polar opposites.” We are not called upon to be peacekeepers but peace makers. What is the difference?

Keeping the peace is a passive thing. One can be a peacekeeper by just keeping your mouth shut. It may be a blessing to keep from saying or doing something that would lead to conflict, but almost anybody can do that. Furthermore, keeping peace is often selfish. You don’t say what you would like to because you know the other person will respond in kind. You don’t want the argument, so you hold your comments in. Nevertheless, you still would like to say something. It becomes a passive-aggressive situation where all you are concerned with is how failure to keep peace will affect you.

A peace maker, on the other hand, seeks out ways to bring about peace in a conflicting world. He or she is not content to sit back and fail to add to the conflict. The desire is to prevent or reduce conflicts that do not have a personal affect. A peacekeeper sees the potential for conflict, and merely fails to add to it; a peace maker sees the same potential, and acts to defuse it.

Perhaps some practical examples might show the difference. Children fight. My brothers and I would be picking at each other from the time we got out of bed. To prevent this, my mother served us breakfast in bed (usually a bowl of cereal). This was keeping the peace. The potential for conflict remained; it was just delayed for a few minutes. In those circumstances, peacekeeping might have been sufficient. A peace maker might have brought us all to the table, and when conflict started taken action to show how everyone would be better off on a daily basis if we chose not to fight.

On a more spiritual level, a peacekeeper sees sin in another person’s life. That sin may not affect the observer, but he sees how it is affecting the one observed. The person may be unhappy because of the consequences of the sin. He may even be putting his own life in danger. The peacekeeper says that the other person has the right to choose his own path. Rather than possibly being looked upon as a “Bible thumper” he will choose not to say or do anything about the sin. The peacemaker sees how the sin is affecting the sinner, or the potential to affect the sinner in this life or the next. In a loving, gentle way he confronts the sinner, and offers a solution. He teaches about forgiveness and that God can and will forgive any sin. He shows that it is possible to live a happier, more productive life in Christ. It may be that the other person will respond harshly, will not even be a peacekeeper. It may be the other person will merely listen and not respond in order to

keep peace. Or it may be that the other person will find peace through Christ. Regardless of the reaction of the sinner, the one person has acted to create peace. If there is conflict, it is not his doing. “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.” (Romans 12:18) As much as it is in your power, live peaceably.

Those who make peace will be called the children of God. By whom? In many cases, by those between whom they made peace. Those who take an active role in creating peace in a chaotic world will be recognized as different, as God’s children. In a world of conflict, most people appreciate those that make that world a little nicer place to live.

Being persecuted

Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you. (Matt 5:10-12)

Some have said that the Ten Commandments are all about actions except the last (coveting) which is about thought. In the same way, the beatitudes are generally active attributes except this last one, which is primarily passive. One rarely chooses to seek persecution, and those that do are considered to have a mental disease. This beatitude about being persecuted does not say to seek it out. It does, however, say that if persecution comes because of Christ, we are to be considered blessed.

Peter apparently listened when Jesus said this. Years later he expressed the same thought.

Let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters. Yet if any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf. (1 Pet 4:15-16)

Persecution will come. The world has three choices about how to react to the gospel. The ideal choice is belief. The majority choice is indifference. The other choice is to be so pierced by the truth of the gospel, yet so unwilling to obey, that one lashes out at that which they don’t want to accept to be true. Many preachers have pointed out that Peter’s sermon on Pentecost (Acts 2) and Stephen’s sermon (Acts 7) were essentially the same. Both audiences were cut to the heart (Acts 2:47; 7:54), but their reactions were opposites. The first asked what to do to be saved; the second stoned the preacher.

If persecution does come for righteousness’ sake, for Jesus’ sake, how does that benefit others? The contention throughout these three articles has been that the beatitudes are about doing good for others. How does being persecuted fit into this?

Jesus specifies the personal benefit—a reward in heaven. He even specifies that such a reward will come because the persecuted are following in the footsteps of those who have previously been persecuted. After all, the old saying is, “they kill prophets.” This personal benefit bears some comfort, because we don’t like being persecuted in this life. To some, even the promise of reward after this life is a comfort.

But, again, how does my being persecuted help others? Paul understood the benefits, because he more than most was reviled and persecuted. “And many of the brethren in the Lord, waxing confident by my bonds, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.” (Php 1:14) He goes on to say that some preached out of selfish motives, hoping to increase Paul’s suffering. “Notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in

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truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice.” (verse 18)

Throughout Christian history, those who bore up under torture and persecution have been held in high regard. Eusebius has several chapters about those who were burned, flayed alive, and suffocated by hanging them over a fire made of green twigs. Fox was not the first, then, to write a “Book of Martyrs.” The reason we read of those who suffered persecution at the hands of the Romans, the Jews, the Muslims, and others, is that we want to be encouraged by their courage. If they can keep their faith under such circumstances, maybe we can keep ours under less obvious persecutions. Furthermore, the argument has frequently been made that the gospel must be true because the primary witnesses to the gospel were willing to die for what they believed. Our faith is enhanced by their willingness to undergo death rather than say that what they taught was a lie. Who, after all, would do that, knowing that it was a lie?

The word martyr is a Greek word meaning a witness. It is a legal term for one who testifies in court to what they saw. The writer of Hebrews listed, in chapter 11, many people that (s)he considered martyrs. In fact, the first verse of what we call chapter 12 refers to them as “so great a cloud of witnesses [martyrs].” The point was that we should be willing to run to the death because we have seen, and are being seen, by all those who were persecuted before us. This includes the one who spoke the beatitudes.

LOADING AND BEARING

“Blessed be the Lord, who daily loadeth us *with benefits*, even the God of our salvation.” (Ps 68:19, KJV)

“Blessed be the Lord, who daily bears our burden, The God who is our salvation.” (Ps 68:19, NASB)

Same verse, two different translations. At least the King James Version, by putting words in italics, admits they supplied some words to make sense, or to meet their particular bias. In the Hebrew, this would read, “Blessed Lord, day day loadeth/bearth, God of salvation.” That explains the confusion. The one word can mean to load or carry a load. Perhaps it is so vague so that we can learn two lessons.

The King James Version says that God loads us. Probably because of theological questions, they add that he loads us with benefits. Better that than to say that he loads us with burdens. After all, “God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man. (Jas 1:13) It is, therefore, logical that if God loads us down, it is with good things. “And I will make them and the places round about my hill a blessing; and I will cause the shower to come down in his season; there shall be showers of blessing.” (Ezek 34:26)

The greatest benefit that God could give is our salvation, and that is what the verse is talking about. God was David’s salvation then. And in Christ he is the salvation of all who will follow him now and forever. If sin separates us from God, then there could be no greater blessing than forgiveness of sin. If we cannot save ourselves, then the blood of Jesus Christ is the blessing above all blessings. That salvation is a daily, continuous thing.

Most translations, however, take the second meaning of the word: who bears our burdens. It seems that in this world so many things become burdens. Sin, of course, is a burden. Sometimes relationships become burdens. Our own choices may become burdens. Suicide is epidemic in America, because people see no other way out from under their burdens. Things pile up, and after a while we think that the burden is so heavy there is no choice but to lay it down. That is when God steps in. The God who is our salvation daily bears our burdens. Each day has its own troubles, but God bears those so they don’t add up.

God established a simple way to bear our burdens. He gave us the church. This is not The Church that some people attend every week or twice a year, where nobody knows anybody, and cares less. This is not the ritual Church where we go to earn salvation, and end up learning that we cannot even do that. No, this is a group of people who are characterized by love. “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ.” (Gal 6:2) It is the church’s job to be the hands of God that lift our burdens. If we are not doing that, we quite simply are not the church. If we are not allowing the church to do that, we are turning away from God.

Nobody puts the burden on the donkey, then ends up carrying it himself. Nobody but God. He puts blessings on us, then he not only bears our burdens, he puts us on his back, too. Every one of us. Even those who are bearing someone else’s burden. Our God is strong like that. He does it every day.

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