

I have a confession to make. I always wish I was on vacation when this gospel comes up. And I have a warning to deliver. You ain't gonna like this homily! And neither do I! First, we have this 'blessed are you poor, hungry, weeping and hated stuff.' How do you make a decent homily out of THAT in middle class America? According to Bill Farmer's newspaper column, a man named J. Upton Dickson said he was writing a book called COWER POWER. He also founded a group of submissive people. It was called DOORMATS. That stands for "dependent Organization of Really Meek and Timid Souls – if there are no objections." Their motto was: "The meek shall inherit the earth – if that's ok with everybody." Their symbol was the yellow traffic light. (HOMILETICS, Jan-Feb 05, p. 45) But seriously, this is a very difficult gospel to hear, and a very difficult gospel to preach. Someone once said, "There are some parts of the gospel that are too overwhelming to hear without a community to support you." All of us sitting here, including me, are rich and full, compared to the rest of the world. The proof of that is that most of us need to lose weight, and many Americans are carrying credit card debt because we bought stuff we don't need. That means we are full and rich. I can't possibly deal with this gospel by myself, so I invite you along for a ride! (adapted from WEAVINGS, May-June 1991, Elaine M. Prevallet, S.L., p. 17)

First, a bit of background. We love to talk about the nice, sweet Jesus, who affirms us, forgives us, and loves us no matter what. And that's all true. But it's only half true. It's only half of the story. Jesus blesses – but He also pronounces woes. This God of ours takes sides, has opinions. To bless some choices is, at least by implication, to criticize others.

We easily lose this prophetic, judgmental edge in much of our preaching. Jesus is worked over into the one who always blesses and never condemns. So today's Gospel is a challenge for us -- but also an opportunity to reflect on the demanding nature of the Gospel. Before the Gospel is a comfort, the Gospel is a challenge. The cross comes before resurrection. That's why we need to hear and wrestle with this Gospel together.

Now we need to remember that this is an eschatological passage – it has to do with the end time. We don't like to talk about the end these days, not because we are so progressive but rather because most of us have got it so good. When we sit on top of all this world has to offer, who wants to die and go to another world? Eschatology says that God is disruptive and dangerous before being creative. God is out to get what God wants -- and Jesus' sermon is the inauguration address, the declaration of war, the announcement of an invasion related to a whole new world. (Adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Feb 11, 2007, p. 26-27)

OK, you're sitting there and saying 'so what?' And so a second point, which I found I could instantly relate to. Anthony de Mello defines an attachment as anything in this world – including life itself – that we convince ourselves we cannot live without. The implication, of course, is that in Christ we can live without anything in this world, and to know that in our bones is to be detached, spiritually free. To become focused on anything less than God is therefore to place ourselves in spiritual danger. Most of us, I think, would admit, that we are not spiritually free! Perhaps the best way to translate all of this into contemporary language is by using the word 'addiction.' When we attach ourselves to something less than God, we are addicted, because the lack of satisfaction that we necessarily experience leads to an obsessive and compulsive desire for more and more. If this amount of money didn't quell my desire, I must need more money; if this sexual encounter didn't satisfy the loving of my heart, I must need another more thrilling one, if the 10 pairs of shoes and 5 matching purses I have in my closet don't seem like enough, well, there's always a new designer pair or purse that I can find. The initial thrill – the 'rush' – of money, sex, power, or stuff contributes to an obsession that

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finally takes away our freedom and self-possession; we're addicted. The fact that many Americans are carrying significant credit card debt is proof of this truth.

Jesus describes the overcoming of this addiction with the word 'blessed,' pronounced over 4 different things. A word on each. First we are told 'how blessed are you who are poor.' (V. 20) We notice that here is none of the softening offered by Matthew (poor in spirit), but a simple and straightforward statement of the blessedness of being poor. How do we interpret what seems to be a glorification of economic poverty? We could read it this way: "How lucky you are if you are not addicted to material things." One of the classic substitutes for God is money, the accumulating of things. It's one of the reasons why people struggle with tithing 10%. They have spent too much on junk they don't need and don't really even want. Like any drug – houses, cars, property – they provide a 'rush' when they first enter the system, then in time, the thrill that they provide wears off, and more of the drug must be acquired. Why else would we now have the biggest houses Americans have ever owned, with the biggest closets ever seen, for the smallest families we have ever had – and still have to have STORAGE UNITS to keep ALL THE STUFF WE KEEP ON BUYING!!! Check what you're giving to the church and tell God about it (He already knows, by the way) and see if your values are in proper order.

And has all of this stuff made us happy? NOT AT ALL! In fact, studies indicate that as our income goes up, our happiness rate goes DOWN! Why? It is theorized that the more we have the more we want, and the more we hang with people who have lots. Then we want, not only what we have, but also what everyone else has. That gets us into a really addictive and vicious circle. And it doesn't lead to happiness.

Then 'how blessed are you who weep now' (v. 21). Again, we are struck by the oddness of the claim, who wants to weep? We might try this: "How lucky you are if you are not addicted to good feelings." We live in a culture that puts a premium on good feelings and attempts to deny or medicate depression. But feeling happy is just as much a false god as wealth or power. It is, in itself, only an emotional state, a fleeting and insubstantial psychological condition that cannot possibly satisfy the deepest yearning of the soul; yet it is sought with as much compulsive frenzy as we shop. We feel the 'rush' of pleasure and then, when the thrill fades, we try at all costs to reproduce it at a higher pitch. It is this context that the addictive use of drugs, alcohol, food, and artificial stimulants, as well as the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure in sex and at the table are to be understood. The person who lives centered in Christ, the place of detachment, escapes this trap – and would be blessed.

Next; "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man." (v. 22). That sounds downright masochistic. Again, some light might be shed if we translate it in terms of detachment. It becomes "How blessed you are if you are not addicted to the approval of others." Status, attention and fame are among the most powerful of the false gods who lure us. Even our constant desire to wear the latest fashions has to do with this addiction to the approval of others. We somehow become convinced that if I wear these cool glasses, carry this designer purse, drive this sporty car, live in this particular neighborhood, that we will have the approval of others. Jesus tells us: "Woe to you when all speak well of you" (v. 26) and Winston Churchill said, 'Never trust a man who has no enemies.' The one whom everyone loves is in spiritual distress, since the goodwill of the crowd has undoubtedly become that person's idol. And so many of the saints witness – and Jesus Himself – the path of spiritual freedom brings one almost inevitably into conflict with others. Those who place themselves with Christ and His values rest secure even as the approval of the fickle crowd waxes and wanes.

How do we get ourselves out of this? We don't. This is the struggle of following a blood-stained Lord. I told you that you wouldn't like this homily! But how about this? John of the Cross had a beautiful mantra:

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“To reach satisfaction in all, desire satisfaction in nothing; to come to the knowledge of all, desire the knowledge of nothing; to come to possess all, desire the possession of nothing; to arrive at being all, desire to be nothing.” This fourfold nada is not a negation but the deepest affirmation, since it is a ‘no’ to a ‘no.’ Desiring to possess all, desiring to be all is the nonbeing of attachment, the misery of addiction; desiring to possess nothing, desiring to be nothing is, accordingly, freedom and being. It is finally to see the world as it is, and not through the distorting lens of our egos and desires. It is the view from the center, the view of the center of the gospel, the view of the beatitudes. Blessed are we if we can begin to put them into practice. (Last part adapted from Robert Barron, THE STRANGEST WAY: WALKING THE CHRISTIAN PATH, p. 50-53). And blessed am I – and blessed are you that this homily is finally over! AMEN!

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