

SEWEN

THE DEADLY SINS AND THE BEATITUDES

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THE BEETLE WAS AN INCREDIBLE PLACE. IT USED TO BE THE COFFEE-drinking, Parliament-smoking, open-till-3:00 a.m. lounge next to the university. The lonely gathered at the Beetle at night. The homeless sat at the Beetle when there was nowhere else to sit. The Beetle had that vibe of posh college elitism mixed with a come-as-you-are indifference. It had flair. It had character. But when the city of Greeley decided to ban smoking in restaurants, the Beetle couldn't last.

The building had sat empty for almost two years when we began renting the space. It was the perfect size for a small church like ours. The Beetle still had much of its former comfort and nostalgic smell, and of course there was the upside-down VW Bug hanging from the front of the building. Black floors, tin walls, and gorgeous wood ceilings, the Beetle was a work of art, and we weren't the only ones who loved it.

The week that the people of Atlas began preparing the space and painting the walls, nearly thirty people came through its doors. Each one of them walked in looking for a familiar face, and they all asked the same question: "Hey, is the Beetle opening up again?" Of course,

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this was an opportunity to shake hands, introduce ourselves, and be welcoming. And, of course, no one cared.

“Actually, we’re a church group that’s renting the space,” we would say. “We have drinks on the counter if you’d like to come in and have one.”

Without exception, our guests’ faces would drop. They would politely decline and turn toward the door, some with a respectfully muted curse as they stepped back onto the sidewalk. It was as though our church had taken something very valuable from them, something the people on Sixteenth Street had cherished, and was making it into a specialty shop for religious people.

On the night Atlas had its first gathering in the Beetle, we heard a collective groan from all of our neighbors. Sixteenth Street was once a well-loved strip of restaurants, bookstores, and music shops, but there just wasn’t any life there anymore. Only the anticorporate idealists kept the few remaining shops in business, and in their eyes we were most unwelcome. We were just another sign that Sixteenth Street was dying.

That was two years ago. Last Friday, the forty or so folks of Atlas drew a crowd of a few thousand people onto Sixteenth Street for a block party. Some of the businesses next to us ran out of stock and shut down early that evening, not realizing how big the event would be. I saw at least five mullets, freshly shaven by the girls at the hair salon who were giving them away for free. My wife and some friends got new piercings at the tattoo shop. College students and locals erupted in protest when we had to shut down the main stage at 10:00 p.m. because, yes, we had to follow the noise ordinances. Yes, we know that “Paradise City” is a crowd favorite that can go on forever. And yes, we’re aware that nothing good like this ever happens in Greeley, but the friendly police officers near the sound booth asked

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us to stop. We invited everyone off the street and into the Beetle, which quickly filled to standing room only. The music played on until 2:00 a.m.

When I went for my second beer that night, I introduced myself to the owner of the Crabtree Brewery. I asked for their wheat ale — one of the finest in Colorado — and he said they were out. I asked for the brown, which is a fine choice as well, but they were out of that too. They still had a ginger, he said.

“You sold out of beer?” I asked after trying a sample.

“Yeah, my family will be able to buy groceries this month because of this thing.”

Occasionally, the planets align in bizarre patterns, prayers are taken as an opportunity for God to be mischievous — and standing in the middle of the beer garden, the local brewmaster looked at me and said, “I’m so glad your church is here. You bring so much life to this part of town.”

Businesses are closing all around us. The Mexican food restaurant shut its doors last summer. Kimbrall’s Music moved away. The only store that seems to thrive on Sixteenth Street is Mellow Yellow, the head shop next to us, where they carry a fine assortment of bongos, incense, and handmade clothing. Sixteenth Street was once filled with life, but now empty windows and For Rent signs decorate seven or so buildings on the strip. Yet for one night in early September, Sixteenth Street was the place to be in northern Colorado. The block party was a sign of things that could be. It was a symbol of hope for building owners and nostalgic workers who had almost given up.

I teach philosophy across the street, and the next day I spoke with my students — many of whom normally look for any reason to get out of this town and head over to Boulder or Fort Collins. They all knew something special had happened. “It just felt like everything

worked,” they said, “like this was how things should be on the drag next to the university.”

The evening was remarkable because the people of Atlas took something that was dead and made it alive again, and for that night, at least, all who came out witnessed a resurrection.

SCRAPING ASIDE WHAT WAS GOOD

I grew up in a small mountain town in Colorado, a few miles from the best skiing in the world, yet distant enough that cows were the backbone of our local economy. The sharp hills and tree groves along my drive to school were striking pieces of scenery. The world’s best photographers often capture the mountains near us. Locals rightly call it “God’s country,” and it is — until you reach the rock quarry, that is.

Nearing town, you hit a spot where large digging machines and belts are at work all day, carving out the side of an alpine ridge, moving the extracted stone into large piles beside the road. The company has been there for many years and has obviously sold a lot of rock, for hundreds of yards of earth have nearly vanished. The gap looks awkward, as though there’s an enormous void in something that was once solid and ought to be beautiful.

The picture is one I return to often. As I look at our world, at my friends and family, at myself, I see and experience a similar kind of void. It feels as though I was once made strong and whole, but something has gone to work on me, hollowing out my insides. It is cliché to say, “I feel empty,” when I have done something wrong, but often that is the effect of my failures. Sometimes, thankfully, those places grow back. Sometimes the beauty returns and healing occurs. But sometimes the holes remain. Sometimes healing is elusive and

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difficult. In fact, sometimes I continue to scrape away more and more of what once made me authentically human.

I am self-centered when I ought to be thoughtful. I hurt those I care for most. Sometimes I'm a coward. Sometimes I'm a fool. Sometimes I give total control of my life to unhealthy appetites that make my life a mess. Recently, a song has been repeating in my head that says over and over again, "I don't want to fight. I'm tired of being sorry."¹ They are the words of a broken soul, and I find myself relating all too much.

In my better moments, I ask myself why I am compelled to act in these emptying ways. What is it that inspires such acts? Why can't I simply live out the complete, genuinely robust life I desire to have? It feels as though something is at war with me — within me — that is determined to make my life miserable.

The Bible has a name for this force in us and in our world that is clawing away at what was once solid. It calls the force "sin" and suggests that when early humanity first chose death over life, sin — this active absence — was unleashed and began eroding all that was once good. We ought to think of sin not as human wickedness or immoral actions. Sin is first and foremost a *power*. Augustine wrote that sin "tends to make that which is cease to be."² It is a parasitic force, and like all parasites, sin does not exist on its own. It thrives off a host. The unconscious goal of sin — in devils, governments, and ourselves — is to cut pieces out of the fabric of reality and call the incisions "real life."

From the earliest days of Christianity, lists were written naming the manifestations of this power. These lists were not assembled for curiosity's sake. The writers were doing the work of physicians — diagnosing the disease that is killing us. And around the sixth century, one of the lists came to be viewed as definitive. Seven can-

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cers were identified and exposed as the power of sin at work in us, mangling our desires and pointing us toward poisonous delights: *pride* — the natural love for myself magnified and perverted into disdain for others; *envy* — the rejection of the good life God has given me for an obsession with what God gives to someone else; *sloth* — the indifference toward my neighbor, my soul, my world, or my God; *greed* — the desire to possess more than I need because of fear or idolatry; *lust* — the handing of control over my body and mind to illicit cravings; *wrath* — the love for justice perverted into bitterness, revenge, and violence; and *gluttony* — the excessive consumption that deprives another human being of a life-giving necessity. These are the seven expressions of the power of sin at work in our world. These are the seven ways we assault ourselves, those around us, and the world as a whole.

These are the seven deadly sins.

We see these sins parodied in commercials with men passed out on couches after eating Cheetos — as if that’s what sloth and gluttony look like. A popular movie featured a religious fanatic killing the “sinners” around him according to their “sins.” The list of sins is used to advertise everything from perfumes to cell phones (as though these sins were a desirable stench for our calling plan). There are a lot of bad ideas about the seven deadly sins, but despite the fog, the name is still spot-on. These seven sins are *deadly*, and if they gain a significant hold in our hearts, they will burrow and burrow and burrow until all that was once beautiful in us is torn away like so much sandstone.

Sloth and wrath remold us, taking the image of God and cracking the reflection. We are moved by greed and envy and gluttony to reject the life we were made for. When we say that people are filled with pride or lust, we mean that the power of sin has infected

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them so thoroughly that their bodies are swarming with these toxins as lungs might swarm with emphysema. These deadly sins are the means by which a world that was created sound and thriving with life is flipped upside down, made to appear as though real happiness could be found by accumulating all one wishes, enjoying every possible pleasure, dominating others, and ultimately serving one's self as the master of all things.

Above all, the deadly sins are a summons into a dead life, a dysfunctional life. And if you are like me, you have received and embraced their invitation countless times. But what you and I really want is freedom. What we want is to break past our addictions and failures. We want the scrapes and claw marks in our souls to heal and our lives to be made whole again.

What we want — above all else — is our own resurrection.

THE SOWER

When Jesus stepped down from the mountain where he had given his greatest teaching, a sick man called out to him.³ The man's skin was white and blistered, and he had been told for years that he was not allowed to touch anyone. For the sake of his neighbors and friends, the man had lived outside of town. Anytime he entered his village, he had to yell at passersby the words he had come to hate: "Unclean. Unclean." The disease would eventually eat him away, killing his nerves first. Over time, his fingers and feet would disintegrate for lack of feeling. He would find it harder to find food, to do daily chores, to simply survive. The disease ate holes in a body once solid, holes the man hated, holes that stole away all he had.

The man had once been healthy. He had once had a family, but the infection had taken all of it away from him. The infection left

him alone. His only future was one in which he would watch his body fall apart. When the man heard about Jesus, he came and threw himself before the miracle worker, begging Jesus to clean the horrid infection from his skin.

When Jesus acted, his touch and blessing were not only a restoration of the leper's flesh; they were an invitation to the man to reenter society, reenter his family circle, and become human again. Jesus' touch filled the voids in this man with life again. The man had been a corpse counting down the last of his pain-ridden days, but Jesus changed that. He took the man's hand, lifted him from his knees, and raised him from the dead.

This is a microcosm of Jesus' work, for nearly every miracle Jesus performed, nearly every word he spoke, was a billboard that read, "God is raising the dead!"

The gospel writers tell us that Jesus' primary activity was traveling "from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God."⁴ That is, *Jesus spent his time announcing an event*. Something extraordinary was happening of which Jesus was both herald and instigator. "The time has come," he would say.⁵ God was returning to rule a world too long infected with the power of sin. But now God was acting in a new way. He was beginning to set things in order again himself. He was making a dead world Eden once more.

As Jesus walked the roads of Israel, he encouraged everyone he met to give up their agendas and join God in setting all things right. Jesus invited his audience into God's story — the story of the future, the story that would enliven all the earth again, the story in which all things dead would be transformed. Heaven was coming, Jesus said, and it would soon fill every crevice of a world too long eaten away by

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hell. Jesus' most explicit statement about God's future came in the story often called "the parable of the sower":

"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown."

When he said this, he called out, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."⁶

This was the first parable Jesus told, and it is the most important.⁷

After telling this parable, Jesus said, "If you can't understand the meaning of this parable, how will you understand all the other parables?"⁸ Jesus never again said anything like this. *He intentionally drew his listeners' attention to this unique spot.* Jesus offered this parable as the primary clue for understanding everything else he would say and do. It is the key to understanding all of Christ's work.

On the face of things, the parable doesn't seem too important. We get it. Good soil versus bad soil. Change your heart. We've heard the Sunday school songs. It's fairly elementary. But notice, when Jesus finished the story, *he called out* to the crowd, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."⁹ This was a passionate invitation to go deeper, as though he were saying, "Everyone, listen! There's more to this parable than you think."¹⁰ He was, in fact, offering an explicit invitation to his followers to pull the story apart and look closer. So let's consider the symbols here.

First, what is going on with this farmer, and why is he so reckless

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with his seed? Jesus seems to be telling a story in which the farmer is deliberately wasteful, scattering seed everywhere, even on the path beneath his own feet. Why would the farmer spread seed *everywhere*? This doesn't seem to be a good gardening practice. Rather, it seems as though the farmer is being intentionally gracious to even the worst kind of soil.

Next, consider the location. Where is this farmer throwing his seeds? This is probably happening in a field or garden — a place where you grow stuff — and this is a significant clue. Anytime Jesus mentions a “garden,” he is directing our attention back to Eden — and Eden is about how things ought to be. But notice, in *this* garden there are weeds, thorns, soil wearing Kevlar, and nasty, seed-eating birds. This garden has gone downhill. Anti-seed, anti-crop forces have infiltrated the farmer's field and are eager to stop anything from growing there.

Now some may suggest that if the farmer in the story was good, wise, and powerful, he would simply kill the birds, destroy the weeds, and tear out the rocky soil — right?¹¹ Isn't that the obvious course of action? Possibly, but it seems this farmer knows something we don't. *He knows the quality of the seed in his pockets.* He knows that killing birds and ripping up the earth are unnecessary, for once this seed finds root in the ground, its power will be overwhelming. When the seed takes root, it will affect everything else. And as Jesus closed his parable, we see just that. This seemingly wasteful farmer, Jesus said, received back “a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.”¹² This by all accounts would have filled the entire garden with the crop, pushing it to capacity. All the space that was once empty and barren would have been jammed with the fruit the farmer chose to bear. It's a miracle, and it displays precisely the work Jesus would accomplish on earth.

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The picture Jesus painted for his audience — the picture that should color everything we think about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection — is the fruit filling every emptiness in a world that was made to be Eden but is barren and lifeless.

Jesus revisited this image in many of his other stories. In the parable of the tenants, a landowner plants a vineyard in order to bear fruit, but the tenants produce nothing for him. So the landowner takes the vineyard and gives it to others, *because the fruit* — not the tenant — *is what matters*.¹³ In a story called the parable of the workers in the vineyard, a landowner hires laborers all day long — even until the last hour — and pays everyone a full day’s wage to come and bear fruit in his garden. The landowner is reckless with his cash, *because he thinks the fruit* — not the wage — *is what matters*.¹⁴ In another parable, a tree has been growing without fruit in a man’s field for three years, and the owner decides to give it one more year to yield a harvest, but after that he will cut it down. It may have been a lovely tree, but the man calls it worthless, *because the fruit* — not the tree — *is what matters*.¹⁵

When the disciples later asked Jesus what the parable of the sower meant, he gave them still more clues:

“The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that,

“‘though seeing, they may not see;
though hearing, they may not understand.’

“This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but

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they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop."¹⁶

In one sense there is a clear message here: Be like the soil that received the word of God with a good heart. However, it is obvious that Jesus thinks this parable is explosive. Why would he need to say after the first telling, "Whoever has ears, let them hear," if all the parable meant was, "Be good and bear fruit"? Why say, "I speak in parables so they may not see, so they may not understand"? Telling people around you, "Just have a good heart, man," simply isn't that controversial. So what is it that's so revolutionary here?

The key to understanding this parable is not the question, *what* is the seed? but *who* is the seed? And Jesus told us. The seed is the Word of God. And the Word of God, we might note, is Jesus.¹⁷ Jesus is the seed the farmer is planting everywhere, the seed whose crop will consume the entire garden. Jesus — his life and healing and rule — is the seed that will renovate every square inch of our world, our relationships, and ourselves.

This parable is an announcement of a worldwide revolution in which evil, sin, and death are not purged but totally overrun, as though they were merely empty space needing to be filled again.

Jesus believed that God's restorative power was overwhelming the holes dug not only in the world's power structures but in lost humanity itself. Neither the tyrants who controlled his country nor the religious elite who would later kill him nor the pagan gods happy

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with barren fields nor the darkened human heart within us all, Jesus said, can withstand the restorative power of God's Word filling in every void, everywhere. As biblical scholar E. P. Sanders wrote, "Jesus did not expect the end of the world in the sense of destruction of the cosmos. He expected a divine, transforming miracle."¹⁸

Jesus referred to God's restorative rule breaking into a void-filled earth as "the kingdom of heaven." For Jesus, heaven is not something we wait for. Heaven is something to be embraced and spread now. Jesus taught his followers to pray, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."¹⁹ And Jesus believed that was precisely what was beginning to happen. God's restorative rule was beginning to put back together all that had been slashed and burned by the power of sin. It was an event to be welcomed. It was an event to celebrate.

This more than anything else was the good news that Jesus announced as he went from town to town. This is the gospel, and this gospel is all about resurrection.

A NEW WAY TO BE HUMAN

As a little kid, I remember watching my first movie about God.²⁰ I had never seen God before — on the screen or in real life — so this was important information for an irreligious eight-year-old. In the movie, God dressed like an elderly man from Missouri. He wore a sky-blue button-up shirt tucked into beige pants placed a little too high on his hips. He pulled a goofy white hat down low near his eyebrows, and he was old. Very old. This God would have looked right at home in a Las Vegas casino, and, in fact, that was where the movie was shot. God walked past multicolored lights and slot machines, and he took a seat at a lonely poker table next to a man who had the exact same face.

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Though they looked like twins, the other man wasn't into retirement home fashion. He wore an expensive black suit with a red tie. His eyes weren't filled with wisdom or welcome, like God's were. His were eyes of distrust. Watching the movie, you didn't need to ask who the man in the black suit was. He welcomed God, the two began catching up, and then God asked about a specific soul on whom the black-suited man had a unique claim. The man in black acknowledged the soul while the dealer shuffled a deck before them. And as God and the Devil spoke, they began playing cards.

This was the climax of the film. The two battled for the soul of some unfortunate guy, and their weapons were poker cards. It was an interesting twist, but everyone watching knew who would win. God could change his pair of threes into four aces. God could overwhelm the fear glands in the Devil's brain so he would immediately fold and run out of the room screaming. God could turn back time over and over again until his hand was just perfect.

That whole "all-powerful" thing can be a real advantage when playing cards.

But the movie didn't hinge on the cards being played. In fact, as the hands are dealt, we don't pay attention to them. *What we care about is the dialogue.* We want to know what evil will say to goodness, and what goodness will say in return. That's where the action is. It will not do for God to walk up to the poker table like Clint Eastwood, draw a lightning bolt from his holster, and send evil sprawling to the floor. God cannot win the day like that. We must hear something else.

As they speak, we need to see the lifestyle of heaven as superior to that of hell. The good life must not only be good; it must also be the happy life, the wonder-filled life, the attractively complete life. It must be, in fact, the best life worth living. So too, God must show

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that a hellish lifestyle isn't merely undesirable. It is pathetic and falling apart. He must show that the hell-ridden life is one that begins in decay and ends in decay, and only the pitiable embrace it.

Nothing less will do.

When we watch films depicting the struggle between good and evil, we need good to overcome evil — not with power, not with tricks, not with lucky flukes, but through its goodness. Only then will we have a reason to walk the hard roads where goodness often leads us. Such confrontations give us hope that, yes, the sacrifices we make, the passions we restrain, the drops of blood we give are not vanity but are marks of the complete and happy life.

In such moments, we need God to speak, because soon we will leave the theater. Soon we will turn off our television or close our book, and we will enter our normal rhythms again. We will begin to make hard decisions about what we want and how we will treat others. And when we begin to ask tough questions about our lifestyle, we will need something worth saying to our own devils when they inevitably come chomping. This is the duel at hand. The battle between heaven and hell is waged with bold invitations, and the soul hanging in the balance is not some unfortunate fictional character.

The soul being played for is our own.

When Jesus began to announce that heaven was engulfing our world, he had to do more than show this reality through miracles. He had to show that God's work was *desirable*. He had to awaken the passions of his audience so they would devote themselves fully to the difficult work God was doing all around them. In his own words, he had to convince them that God's work was worth giving away one's entire life for,²¹ like a man selling everything he had to buy land with a wondrous treasure buried within.²²

As Jesus entered the synagogues of northern Israel and spoke from

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its streets and hillsides, he used the same phrase over and over again to excite his listeners and invite their devotion: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”²³

Now if you and I went out in the streets of our towns or onto the campus of a local university and said with a loud voice, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near,” those listening would hear something like, “Give up your private sins! Get religion! The end of the world is coming! I am a crazy person!” But those in Jesus’ day would have heard something much different. It would have sounded more like, “Stop. Give up your personal agenda and come join me. God is starting an uprising. He’s returning to set everything right again.”²⁴

Of course, any fool can claim to be God’s messenger, but because of Jesus’ miraculous power, word spread everywhere concerning him. People walked dozens of miles to hear him speak. Monstrous crowds assembled everywhere he went, and each time Jesus held the attention of his audience, he would sit down and give a sermon.

The same sermon.

Luke records the time when Jesus gave this sermon on a desert plain. In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus delivered it from a mountainside. We call the content of this teaching “the Sermon on the Mount,” and for the first year of his public life, this was how Jesus introduced himself and invited his audience to choose the life of heaven.²⁵ Through this sermon, Jesus told his audience how God saw things, what God was doing, and what God cared about most. It was much different from what anyone expected.

We often read passages from the Sermon on the Mount — passages about not lusting or not hating others, about going the extra mile, loving our enemies, not judging another, turning the other cheek, bearing fruit with our lives — as good advice or good rules to follow.

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But that is not what is going on here. Throughout this sermon, Jesus described a new way to be human.

The sermon began with what ancient writers have called “the Beatitudes.” The Beatitudes are eight snapshots of eight different lives that Jesus said experience God’s favor.²⁶ The Beatitudes introduced all that Jesus wanted to say about a new kind of life. Through them Jesus sought to pull at his audience’s heartstrings. He wanted to draw them in and show them that the life God offers is precisely what they desired. The Beatitudes were, above all else, Jesus’ invitation to see the world as God does — and to love it.

As a whole, *the Beatitudes are a picture of the voids created by sin being filled in with the life of heaven.* They are eight pictures of resurrection.

The first four beatitudes focus on the poor, meek, mourning, and thirsty — all people we consider wretched. But more than anything, the poor in spirit, the mourning and meek, those thirsting for righteousness *would have seen themselves as rejected by God.* Everything in their culture would have screamed out that these people were unworthy of God’s love and affection, that their lives would remain miserable, that they were as good as dead. Jesus spoke directly to these people and raised their chins:

Blessed are the poor in spirit — those who know they lack what makes them alive and who look to others for help — *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Blessed are those who mourn — those who have had that which they care for most stripped away — *for they will be comforted.*

Blessed are the meek — those who do not pursue power or authority but live gentle lives in my kingdom — *for they will inherit the earth.*

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*Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness — those who have no good thing inside themselves yet still long for something real — for they will be filled.*²⁷

This was good news. Many of those listening had been told or knew implicitly that their misery was the result of their own deviation from God. They had been taught that power and physical glory characterized the happy life. But Jesus — this preacher exercising God’s power over every disease and demon he encountered — told them that comfort, inheritance, wholeness, and heaven were theirs *where they were*.²⁸ That though they saw themselves as dead, God saw them as alive.

The last four beatitudes commend the merciful, the peacemakers, the pure in heart, and the persecuted. Often it is these who strive for goodness with no apparent reward. It is these who — though bent low for God — receive nothing but sorrow for their self-giving. And Jesus said to them, “In my kingdom, under my rule, you will be shown mercy. You will see God. You will be called children of God. You will be like the prophets, receiving their same reward, their same blessing, their same measure of happiness.”

Again, this is a picture of the world being restored. The holes are being filled in. Jesus removed his listeners from the noise and trash that the cultures around them offered, and instead praised a different kind of praiseworthiness:

Blessed are the merciful — those who give even out of their want — for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart — those whose insides are dedicated to what actually matters — for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers — who work for the same ends I do — for they [too] will be called children of God.

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*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness — who live the life of God in broken places, showcasing God’s reign — for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*²⁹

These beatitudes are cheers from the farmer to those who work the soil in his garden. They are encouragement to those who feel as though their life is a constant battle with no apparent victories. They are a message of hope to those who anticipate a day when the holes in our world are finally filled and everything is made new.

Thus the Beatitudes are one part invitation and one part acclimation. The Beatitudes are some of the sights we see when heaven and earth overlap and interlock. More than anything, they are Jesus’ appeal to the brokenhearted and the arrogant, the virtuous and the self-assured, to awaken, to turn their perspective right side up and not only see the world as God does, but desire it.

And at their core, the Beatitudes are Jesus’ portrait of a dead world resurrected from the clutches of the seven deadly sins.

TWO INVITATIONS

When our oldest son was born, a good friend of ours got him a short-sleeved black Onesie with red trim. It has a picture of Darth Vader’s mask on the front, and underneath it in bold red letters, it reads, “WHO’S YOUR DADDY?” It makes me laugh, but of course it refers to a sinister event. This is the temptation of Luke Skywalker to turn his heart and mind over to the dark side.

From the outset of the original Star Wars trilogy, we see that Darth Vader stands for evil; Obi-Wan Kenobi represents goodness; and there’s a struggle for the heart of Luke Skywalker and his future. Each time good and evil speak to Skywalker, they invite him to see

Introduction: Holes in a Good World

the world as they do — telling him what is valuable, what is worthy of his pursuit, where real life is found. Kenobi and Vader each speak in invitations: Come into this kind of life, this kind of reality; be transformed; follow me; this is who you are made to be; this is your destiny.

So too the Beatitudes; so too the seven deadly sins.

The Beatitudes and the deadly sins are two sets of invitations. Looking at them in turn, we see two paths available to us. Both call to deep places within us to come and taste. Both present themselves as life as it actually is. Both invite us to take up residence. But only one will make us happy, for one is life, full and awake; the other is the absence, the nothingness. In the Beatitudes and the deadly sins, we see heaven and hell and we hear the words they speak to us.

Perhaps you're like me, and when you see the list of deadly sins — envy and lust, wrath and greed, sloth, pride, and gluttony — they are not like a foreign language that you can speak but generally avoid. For me, the deadly sins describe how I normally think, what I normally want, and how I normally behave. The seven deadly sins illustrate my everyday rhythms. They are often the unconscious guide I follow.

And they just don't seem to work anymore.

I want something else. I desire someone to fill these empty places in me, but often I don't know what will do the job. Yes, I've loved God for a long time and pray for his help and guidance, for the strength to change. But often the holes just feel too deep. At times I feel like I don't have the energy to wrestle anymore. It's easier to give myself over to these tendencies, to these voids — to just let them do their thing.

But yet another part of me says this just isn't right. This is not how things are supposed to be. I want to be alive in ways I can only dream

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of. I want to shed this deadweight and run again. I want what I think Jesus had. Passion. Joy. Wonder. An invigorated soul.

The Beatitudes offer me — and offer you — that reality. They are the antidote to the poisons we so readily consume. If only we could see where they speak to the infected places inside us, allow them to push back the void, and watch as they regrow our humanity. If only Jesus' words would speak directly to the deadly sins in your life and mine, perhaps then we would know what happiness is. Perhaps then we could truly say, "This is what I was made for. This is who I was meant to be. This is heaven." Perhaps then we would see the road leading clearly toward our own resurrection.