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Vulnerability by the Beatitudes

Written by Brad Hambrick, M.Div., Th.M.

Blessed are **the poor in spirit**, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are **those who mourn**, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are **the meek**, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are **those who hunger and thirst** for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are **the merciful**, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are **the pure in heart**, for they shall see God.

Blessed are **the peacemakers**, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are **those who are persecuted** for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others **revile you and persecute you** and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account (Matthew 5:3-11).

How do you become more vulnerable? This is a common question amongst those who struggle with insecurity, guardedness, and mistrust. It is difficult for those coming out of harsh homes, abusive marriages, or manipulative relationships. In their world (“their” to some degree meaning “all of us”), there are two options: safe and naïve, protected and exposed. These two positions are as absolute as “to be absent from the body is to be present with God.” To make myself known is to be hurt (but with a lottery’s chance and hope at companionship). To be suspicious is to be safe (but lonely and coveting of social people). There is desert and there is ocean, but both end in death.

It would be nice to start this article on a more positive note, but then it would not resonate with its target audience. To those who struggle with a lack of vulnerability, relationships are all or nothing. They have been burned by *all* out pursuit and starved by a *nothing* doing approach. Neither work and they know it, but they live in a ping pong match between the last option that did not work (again) and the option that is about to not work (again). While life is not always as desperate as this introduction sounds, for those who struggle with vulnerability it feels desperate when social risk or disclosure is involved.

The question is how do you break the cycle? Where do you find the courage to bare your soul (again) with the restraint not to bank your hopes that this time will be happily ever after (finally)? That is the goal of this article. The source of the article is the beatitudes—Matthew 5:3-11. This passage is Jesus’ introduction to his Sermon on the Mount. Early in Jesus’ ministry he was preaching to a crowd of people who wanted to know what Jesus’ way of life was all about. In this sermon, Jesus would address many topics that are well-known to those who struggle with vulnerability: compromise (5:13-20), anger (5:21-26), lust or counterfeit intimacy (5:27-30), divorce or broken relationships (5:31-32), broken promises (5:33-37), the desire for revenge (5:38-42), and a longing for equity and love (5:43-48). With the beatitudes, Jesus lays the foundation for how to address these subjects. In the beatitudes we can find the foundation for vulnerability as God intended it.



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This article will not be a formal exposition of these nine verses. Many more excellent works have been written for those interested in such a read. This article will seek to answer the question, how does Jesus lay a foundation for realness, authenticity, and vulnerability in these verses? How does the world-view and personal identity found in these nine verses serve to protect Christians from the temptations listed above without trapping them in lonely isolation? There are many other great truths and implications in this rich passage, but these questions will serve as our focus.

[The “Yes” and “No” boxes and the ranking scales will be explained at the end of the article.]

“Poor in Spirit”

Yes No ___ /10 Intensity ___ / 8 Rank

Description: Simply stated to be poor in spirit means to realize life requires more than I have to give. However, it is more akin to humility than desperation or pessimism. Those who have traveled outside of America realize that the truly poor are some of the world’s most generous people. Life is bigger than them, but that does not impede their joy, love, work, or service. To be poor in spirit is to realize those things I have were given to me to bless others (Gen 12:1-3) and, therefore, I am poor. It is similar to the man driving an armored car. He is literally loaded with cash, but the money is neither his nor for him. The blessings of life (grace, love, money, pleasure, talent, charisma, relationships) are intended to glorify God. Our joy should be in dispensing these blessings, not hoarding them. Those who are poor in spirit do not take ownership of life’s blessings and, thereby, become defensive, prideful, or protective. Rather, they view themselves as a conduit of these blessings looking to multiply the blessing through sharing them.

Benefit for Vulnerability: Being poor in spirit removes the fear of “being found out” or revealed as inadequate. This fear under girds many struggles with vulnerability. Being poor in spirit allows me to walk into a room and not compare myself to the others in the room. The one who is poor in spirit is not competing or seeking to be recognized. The goal of greatness or being special is replaced with the goals of faithfulness and contentment. The audience to which they play has been significantly shrunk. If we are concerned with what they (plural pronoun) think, we are missing the point of being poor in spirit. This is different from being callous or indifferent towards people (that disposition is soured by bitterness and cynicism). Being poor in spirit allows us to be vulnerable by simply recognizing that we are (at our best) simply a conduit of God’s blessings and that we are not the special blessing ourselves (with all the pressures that role would bear). We are free to love without having to measure up, because the gift is not us.

Implementation: Is this really blessed? With each beatitude, we will be challenged by this question if we take them seriously. In order to agree with Jesus about the blessedness of being poor in spirit, requires us to wrestle with the question, “What really matters?” Take a look at the areas in which you struggle to be vulnerable (real, authentic, free, relaxed) and ask yourself the question, “What does this struggle reveal to be most important?” Is it status, image, competence, athleticism,



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intelligence, or achievement? What kind of “rich” are you after? When you identify this variable(s), repent of allowing it to be your measure of richness. That place is reserved for Christ’s presence in our heart and being an instrument of His (II Cor. 8:9). Resist the opposite temptation to use this beatitude as a reason to refuse all compliments or consistently talk negatively about yourself. When someone compliments you rejoice with them about what God did in their life through you. Like a good impoverished host, celebrate the moment, relationship, or blessing more than focusing on the thinness of the chicken in the soup.

Personal Reflection: What aspects of the description of being “poor in spirit” challenge you most? What remaining questions do you have regarding how being “poor in spirit” equips you to be wisely vulnerable? What changes do you need to make in order to become more “poor in spirit”?

“Those Who Mourn”

Yes No ___ /10 Intensity ___ / 8 Rank

Description: Mourning is the painful recognition that something treasured is absent. Because one’s treasure is obvious during mourning, the experience of mourning is often confused as weakness (a negative synonym for vulnerability; see meekness below). The logic is, “If people can see what I miss, they might think its silly, believe I’m over-reacting, use it against me, or judge me for it.” Those who mourn are evidencing that they believe their treasured person or object is worth the risk. Often mourning is avoided or viewed negatively because it is unpleasant. A predominant value of our culture believes that only things that are pleasant are good; that all things unpleasant are bad (suffering has no value). This false belief causes shame or awkwardness whenever I am not happy. Because we usually see others at their best, this belief can be easily reinforced.

Benefit for Vulnerability: It is hard to be vulnerable if only happiness is acceptable and my treasure can only be known by a select inner circle. Romans 12:15-16 says, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly.” Here we have a biblical command that necessitates the sharing of both pleasant and unpleasant emotions. Therefore, to resist being vulnerable is to live contrary to God’s design for our lives (and will carry the negative consequences of any other disobedience to God). Allowing our treasure to be known is also a part of the Christian life. Matthew 6:21 says, “For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” Part of our being salt and light to the world around us (Matt 5:13-14) is the functionality of our treasure. If, as Christians, we are guarded with our





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treasure, we either have focused our life on the wrong treasure or have a wrong view of what we are to do with our treasure.

Implementation: First, you must discern whether your resistance to mourning is a result of shame (mourning is unacceptable) or fear (mourning reveals something about me). If the resistance emerges from shame, then you either need to allow your beliefs regarding unpleasant emotions to be challenged by the God who cares enough to keep your every tear in a bottle (Psalm 56:8) or evaluate the health of your circle of relationships (past and present) and their influence upon your emotions. If the resistance emerges from fear, then you need to evaluate whether your treasure has become something less permanent and stable than God, or whether you have constructed some set of rules or protocols by which you believe you must ensure the safety of your treasure.

Personal Reflection: What aspects of the description of “mourning” challenge you most? What remaining questions do you have regarding how “mourning” equips you to be wisely vulnerable? What changes do you need to make in order to become free to “mourn”?

“The Meek”

Yes No ___ /10 Intensity ___ / 8 Rank

Description: The most common and very accurate definition of meekness is power under control. The tendency of fallen humanity is to emphasize one or the other. Either we are powerful—confidant and open to the point of arrogance, foolishness, or blindness—or we are under control—withdrawn, suspicious, or measured to the point that relationships are fake, optional, superficial, or dissatisfying. Meekness is that balance of a firm, principled sense of identity with the calm, open-minded awareness of personal weaknesses, others, and situational challenges.

Benefit for Vulnerability: Vulnerability requires both confidence and restraint. Meekness jettisons the all or nothing disposition of guardedness. Without the concept of meekness vulnerability feels like a chasm to leap (“I have to get there.”) rather than a balance to walk (“I am avoiding opposite extreme reactions”). Meekness makes vulnerability as much about character as it does skill. Vulnerability is less about conversational ability (although that can play a part) than it is about a balanced set of goals and expectations in a relationship. Too often in the struggle to be vulnerable our focus immediately jumps to how we are interacting with people instead of seeing how our perspective on “who we are” and “what relationships are about” dictates our interactions. Meekness



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forces us to examine our sense of identity and relational objectives before we try to fix our socialization skills.

Implementation: Recognize when you are likely to struggle with over-emphasizing power or control. Both are likely to be present; one primary and the other a compensation for the more natural over-emphasis (I am quiet and don't address concerns until I become over-whelmed and blow up). Note the circumstances, types of relationships, or personal values that trigger the compensation. In terms of meekness and vulnerability these triggers typically have something to do with safety. The sentence completion, "I only feel safe when *blank* is true," should help lead you to the answer. A failure to be meek most often reveals a sense of safety that is rooted in something other than God's care and provision. Tracing our guardedness back to our relationship with God helps us identify what aspect of God's character or redemption we need to grow in our understanding of or reliance upon.

Personal Reflection: What aspects of the description of being "meek" challenge you most? What remaining questions do you have regarding how being "meek" equips you to be wisely vulnerable? What changes do you need to make in order to become more "meek"?

"Those Who Hunger and Thirst"

Yes No ___ /10 Intensity ___ / 8 Rank

Description: To hunger and thirst is to admit one's dependence. To hunger and thirst for righteousness is to admit we do not have a suitable righteousness of our own. Simply put: we are not good enough. Biblically, life is not about a high self-esteem. Life is about a confident reliance upon God's sufficiency and surrendering our inadequacies to His grace. The emphasis of this verse is not upon the reality of lacking, but upon admitting to that lacking. The great paradox of this beatitude is that the one who can admit his/her deficiency is the one who will receive the grace necessary to overcome it. The one who is too prideful or insecure (two sides of the same coin) to openly acknowledge that deficiency will go through life with an increasing hunger and shame because of it.

Benefit for Vulnerability: Vulnerability requires silencing the fear of being found out. Creating more elaborate disguises does not work. Even the greatest secret agents begin to doubt their disguises when they are in a den of thieves. Acknowledging our hunger (deficiency, weakness, or insecurity) allows us to live in the real world; as opposed to the fabricated world where we have to portray that we have it all together. This is not the voyeuristic telling of all of one's problems to everyone.



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Rather is it placing all of our inadequacies, hurts, and sins in the hands of God to allow them to be used at His discretion for the advancement of His kingdom by encouraging, instructing, or identifying with His other hurting people. This hunger (acknowledging dependence) is a hunger for righteousness because it longs for God to redeem every aspect of our life (even the unappealing) for His glory.

Implementation: Reflect on the parable of the talent (Matthew 25:14-30). What are the one-talent aspects of your life; those things you want to bury and hide for fear of God’s or people’s scorn? Make a list of events, physical attributes, abilities, or embarrassments. Pray that God would reveal to you an opportunity to use one item on your list to encourage, instruct, or identify with someone else. Study for a biblical perspective on each item on your list so that when the moment comes, your words will reflect God’s heart. Pray that when the moment comes God will give you both the courage to speak and the heart to rejoice for the opportunity. Pray that God will eventually give you the ability to rejoice and give thanks for those aspects of your life you currently do not want to acknowledge (II Cor 12:7-10).

Personal Reflection: What aspects of the description of being “hungry and thirsty” challenge you most? What remaining questions do you have regarding how being “hungry and thirsty” equips you to be wisely vulnerable? What changes do you need to make in order to become more “hungry and thirsty”?

“The Merciful”

Yes No ___ /10 Intensity ___ / 8 Rank

Description: Mercy is not fair. Those who are merciful necessarily come up on the short end of the stick. If I am going to be merciful, I must be willing to lose. That is the gritty side of mercy that we all naturally resist. That is the side of mercy which makes many who try to practice it doormats. Actual mercy is not being a doormat, but it is in that direction. Mercy is the willingness to accept personal loss for the good of another for a worth-while cause. Often it is the neglect of that final clause (for a worth-while cause) that makes attempts at mercy weak. The worth-while cause for Christian mercy is the fame and declaration of God’s character. Mercy says, “If God is glorified, I am willing to surrender what I am due from someone who has sinned against me or lived foolishly.” Mercy does not condone or overlook sin or folly. Mercy acknowledges sin and folly for what they are, but bears consequences it does not owe in order to make God’s character known and loved.



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Benefit for Vulnerability: It is impossible to be vulnerable while insisting on winning or complete fairness. Those who are competitive or meticulous rule-followers will struggle with this aspect of vulnerability. In a fallen world, where redemption exists, truth and justice will not always win. The key to wise vulnerability is both the willingness to sacrifice and the ability to discern when the worth-while cause of God’s glory can be advanced. Labeling every offense an opportunity to display God’s grace is well-intentioned naivety. Mercy is the balance of grace and truth in relationships. Mercy is wise and discerning about when to go the extra mile and when consequence is the best and appropriate means of God’s grace (Heb 12:1-13). Mercy is willing to call a Pharisee a “white-washed tomb (Matt 23:27)” and is willing to tell a prostitute to “go and sin no more (John 8:11).” When we are willing to personally lose for a cause greater than ourselves wise vulnerability is possible.

Implementation: Wise mercy will not be practiced in isolation. This is partly because mercy requires an offending party. But what is meant here is that none of us contain the wisdom and discernment necessary to consistently dispense balanced mercy. Mercy requires the involvement, perspective, and accountability of the Body of Christ. Denial, harshness, pet peeves, idealizing, and glossing over will taint our attempts at mercy. We need one another in order to properly reflect God’s character. Mercy requires allowing your judgment to be questioned. Therefore, mercy requires not only the risk of being wronged, but also the risk of admitting you might be wrong. This means you must begin with someone, preferably two to three people, opening your evaluations and perspective to critique: Did I over react to this situation? Was my response of hurt proportionate to that offense? Did I read a wrong meaning into what was said to me? Were my expectations too high? Implementing mercy for the purpose of becoming vulnerable requires an initial investment of vulnerability. Chose wisely and persevere with that person(s).

Personal Reflection: What aspects of the description of being “merciful” challenge you most? What remaining questions do you have regarding how being “merciful” equips you to be wisely vulnerable? What changes do you need to make in order to become more “merciful”?

“The Pure in Heart”

Yes No ___ /10 Intensity ___ / 8 Rank

Description: The pure in heart do not choose expediency over rightness. The pure in heart do not fudge because “it’s just easier that way.” The pure in heart have chosen certain convictions that will govern their lives and they do not depart from them. These convictions emerge from and are the relational, emotional, volitional expressions of the priorities of Scripture. Being a person of conviction is essential to being biblically vulnerable. Great plots are written as the convictions of the





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superhero are used against him—he can either save the girl or catch the villain. The villain gets away, but integrity is maintained. The hero was manipulated. His virtue used against him. Evil lived to fight another day. But the hero remains a hero; a person of character and integrity who is admired and can be emulated.

Benefit for Vulnerability: Without purity of heart (loving conviction) vulnerability is side-stepped for personal gain or ease. Vulnerability requires principles. A person who stands for nothing (or little of substance) is a moving target or someone who is not relevant enough to be targeted. One of the common themes of significant figures in church history is that they took stands for truth and were often scorned (or worse) for it. Purity of heart—knowing what is important in life and sacrificing for the goodness of those things—is the pre-requisite of vulnerability. If someone does not take a genuine stand, the only opposition they will face is perceived opposition. Vulnerability will be a battle of their imagination. Battles of imagination are often harder to fight because the opponent has no body and is ever present in the creative mind of the afflicted. Being pure in heart makes vulnerability count for something (imaginary vulnerability is meaningless) and this serves as positive motivation for humble perseverance in the face of opposition.

Implementation: Decide what is worth being vulnerable. What are the convictions and principles for which you are willing to suffer (physically, emotionally, relationally, or financially)? A man without a cause can die on a thousand hills and will run from every elevation on his path. Vulnerability is confusing, meaningless, and wasteful unless there is a cause. This helps answer the question, “Must I just tell everyone everything about me? Do I become an emotionally voyeuristic person?” No. Vulnerability is the expression of a pure heart that is committed to the glory of God, the advancement of God’s kingdom, the truth of Scripture, and the good of one’s fellow man. When my social risk advances these things I commit to keeping my heart true to my convictions. Husbands love their wives as a public portrait of the gospel. We are honest about our sins and short comings bearing testimony that it is the truth that bears freedom, not hiding (John 8:31-38). The full spectrum of emotions is displayed in order to accurately reflect the complete image of God to the world that has many misperceptions of God’s character and purpose.

Personal Reflection: What aspects of the description of being “pure in heart” challenge you most? What remaining questions do you have regarding how being “pure in heart” equips you to be wisely vulnerable? What changes do you need to make in order to become more “pure in heart”?



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“The Peacemakers”

Yes No ___ /10 Intensity ___ / 8 Rank

Description: The peacemakers are able to hold the convictions of the pure in heart without attacking those who disagree with them. Vulnerability is the balance of these eight attributes; not emphasizing any two of three of them over the rest. Peacemakers do not compromise; yet they do not lose sight of the people who need to be reached with the truth to which they cling. Peacemakers do not retreat from conflict in fear. Conflict is the very context in which they are called to be peacemakers. Peacemakers are able to recognize that disagreements are not ultimately about them. Issues do not become personal and thereby inflame the emotional vigor of the conversation.

Benefit for Vulnerability: Vulnerability requires facing conflict and being able to maintain a focus upon the issue(s) at hand. Recognize that being a peacemaker (which is considered “blessed” by our Lord) requires being in awkward, tense conversations. This is where a Christian belongs. Often those who struggle to be vulnerable, feel as if they are doing something wrong if they are in an awkward or contentious conversation. While the Christian should not be contentious (II Tim 2:24-25), you can rest in the fact that the call to be a peacemaker frees you from this guilt. When I realize that conflict is not about me, even when I am the subject of it, this also frees me. In James 4:1-6, the believers who were fighting were not confronted about being unfaithful to one another, but to God. When someone is rude, harsh, or mean they are primarily breaking the first great commandment, not the second. When we over-personalize the offense we are emotionally reversing the priority of the offense. Like Moses when he angrily struck the rock before the children of Israel, we are wrong for not honoring God as Holy (Numbers 20:1-13). We lead the other person to believe (because we are believing it at that moment) that their *primary* offense is against us rather than God.

Implementation: Resist the temptation to think that an awkward moment means you must speak or have the right answer. Having the awkward conversation well (calmly, without personalizing it, seeking to honor God and obey Scripture) is often more important to peacemaking than immediately solving the issue. Rushing leads to foolishness, over personalizing, and harshness. Pay attention to whether your offendedness is primarily asking for repentance towards you (which is eventually appropriate if they sinned against you) or God. If I am more concerned about the other person being right with God, then my hurts (and even the subsequent protective measures that may be biblically warranted) become much less reactive. For example, course jokes do not define me and humiliate me; they embarrass me and reveal this person’s need for God’s work in their heart. I am hurt and desire the person to repent. However, I recognize until this person realizes that their words reveal their heart (Luke 6:45), their repentance to me will be superficial and of little eternal value.

Personal Reflection: What aspects of the description of being “a peacemaker” challenge you most? What remaining questions do you have regarding how being “a peacemaker” equips you to be wisely vulnerable? What changes do you need to make in order to become more “a peacemaker”?



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“Those Who are Persecuted and Reviled”

Yes No ___ /10 Intensity ___ / 8 Rank

Description: If mercy requires accepting unfairness, being persecuted and reviled means facing things that are attacking and untrue. With mercy I voluntarily and sacrificially embrace unfairness. With being persecuted and reviled it is forced upon me. With mercy I have a choice. With being persecuted and reviled that choice is taken away. Persecution and being reviled reveal who your enemies are. To be persecuted and reviled by the world means that you have identified with Christ and Truth.

Benefit for Vulnerability: Other opposites of vulnerability are people-pleasing and naively believing everyone can get along. Vulnerability must be willing to accept that there will be opposition. Too often an idealized view that people are basically good makes real vulnerability feel like it should be irrelevant. The logic says: if everyone realized their loving potential we would not need to be vulnerable; we could just be perpetually affirmed for our uniqueness and individuality. A willingness to face persecution and being reviled gives grit to vulnerability. It allows vulnerability to exist in a fallen world. When we expect to live without resistance, stress, or opposition (even in our close circle of relationships) the inevitable disappointment tempts us to retreat into a shell of self-protectiveness. It is “blessed” to have a vulnerability that expects opposition.

Implementation: This is not a call to be quarrelsome. It is not a call to look for a fight. It is a call to not allow the inevitability of opposition to cause you to draw back from being lovingly real. How do you do this? Read books with which you disagree. Watch news programs that oppose or revile your political preference. These things allow you to practice engaging in the dialogue without becoming personal or defensive when the opposing person is not yet physically present. Next, have meaningful conversations with people that have different views from you. When they attack you or become defensive seek a way to bless them. Compliment their vigor to get things right, even when you disagree with them on what right is. Never lose the clear conviction of being “pure of heart” but recognize that a vulnerability that never enters hostile ground is not vulnerability with a biblical mission.

Personal Reflection: What aspects of the description of being “persecuted and reviled” challenge you most? What remaining questions do you have regarding how being “persecuted and reviled” equips you to be wisely vulnerable? What changes do you need to make in order to become more willing to be “persecuted and reviled”?



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What Do I Do Now?

Do not put this article away and never look at it again. A single reading of an article that is primarily a guided personal reflection will not accomplish the purpose for which you began reading. Vulnerability (or the lack thereof) is a lifestyle, not an idea.

Take the time to carefully answer the personal reflection questions. Now that you have read the article, take one per day for the next week. Review the beatitude it is drawn from. Reread the description, benefit, and implementation material. Look at your initial answer and develop it further.

Rank intensity of each struggle on a 1 to 10 scale and order the areas of struggle. These evaluations will be subjective, but still useful. It is profitable to have a prioritized list of your obstacles. You may choose to attack it like debt; retiring the smaller ones first, building equity for the larger ones. You may choose to start at the top and work your way down. Even if you choose to allow life's circumstances to dictate the order, having a list from which to be on guard is helpful.

Share these answers with a trusted Christian friend, pastor, or counselor. Now that you have organized thoughts and do not feel like you are just rambling about unrelated issues, hopefully sharing is less intimidating. The encouragement of others is important to any prolonged effort. Growing in vulnerability is no different. As was said earlier, choose wisely and persevere with these people.

Patiently commit to working on each area. This is not a race. Make it a relational and character building scavenger hunt. Use your list to record challenges, episodes of growth, personal insights, or other significant aspects of the struggle. Recognize that God usually works slowly in our lives over a period of time. Resist the urge to wish God would just take this away. That will only breed unnecessary discouragement. Rather, thank God for His patience and grace that you can still serve, worship, and enjoy Him as you grow and by growing in this area.