

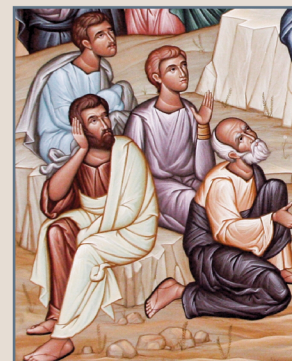
Blessed Are You: Living the Beatitudes

Christopher Ruff

- **The Discipleship Series** -
Dynamic Resources for Small Groups

The Discipleship Series

For people with busy lives but open hearts



- Concise, lively, readable materials
- Balanced and integral components: Prayer, Reflection, Fellowship, and Service
- Discussion questions connecting faith with life
- Appendix of "Suggestions for Service"
- Intended for small groups but suitable for individual use

"Blessed Are You makes the Beatitudes come alive with meaning and relevance. As with the other books in the Discipleship Series, Chris Ruff takes you deeper than a theoretical study of the Faith – into a shared experience of following Jesus and building his Kingdom in the world today. Truly second to none!"

– **Chris Stefanick, Founder and President of Real Life Catholic**

"This expanding set of small group resources is aptly named the Discipleship Series. I recommend it wholeheartedly to individuals, groups, parishes and dioceses that wish to foster a deeper, fuller discipleship in Christ."

– **Archbishop Jerome E. Listeki, Archdiocese of Milwaukee**



Christopher J. Ruff, M.A., S.T.L., is Director of the Office for Ministries and Social Concerns for the Diocese of La Crosse. He has more than twenty-five years of experience overseeing and writing resources for small-group reflection and renewal.

Novo Millennio Press
www.ChristopherRuff.com

ISBN 978-0-9831257-7-8



The Beatitudes

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down his disciples came to him.

And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

“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 obtain 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.”

Matthew 5:1-10

Author’s Note:

Jesus proclaimed eight Beatitudes in his Sermon on the Mount. For this book I have chosen to reflect on them in pairs in two instances:

- Session 1 reflects on “Blessed are the poor in spirit” and “Blessed are the meek.”
- Session 3 reflects on “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” and “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake.”

The remaining four Beatitudes are discussed in individual sessions.

Table of Contents

Introduction (page 8)

Opening Prayer to the Holy Spirit (page 19)

Session 1 – The Poverty That Makes Us Rich (page 20)

The Lord in His Scriptures
Catechism and Papal Quotes
The Lord in the Life of His People – “*Thank God Ahead of Time*” (Blessed Solanus Casey)
Questions for Discussion
Closing Prayer – *The Magnificat*

Session 2 – Holy Mourning (page 44)

The Lord in His Scriptures
Catechism and Papal Quotes
The Lord in the Life of His People – *A Sorrow so Sweet* (St. Gemma Galgani)
Questions for Discussion
Closing Prayer – *Stabat Mater*

Session 3 – The Eyes of the Lord are Upon the Righteous (page 70)

The Lord in His Scriptures
Catechism and Papal Quotes
The Lord in the Life of His People – *Blessed Padre Pro: Righteous to the End*
Questions for Discussion
Closing Prayer – *Prayer for Persecuted Christians*

Session 4 – Recipients of God’s Mercy, We are Called to be Merciful (page 92)

The Lord in His Scriptures
Catechism and Papal Quotes
The Lord in the Life of His People – *The Monk and the Murderer*
Questions for Discussion
Closing Prayer – *Prayer of St. Faustina*

Session 5 – A Heart Set on God (page 116)

The Lord in His Scriptures
Catechism and Papal Quotes
The Lord in the Life of His People – *The Mystical Heart of Brendan Kelly*
Questions for Discussion
Closing Prayer – *Psalm 51*

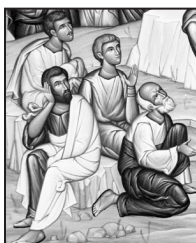
Session 6 – “Peace I Leave with You; My Peace I Give to You” (page 138)

The Lord in His Scriptures
Catechism and Papal Quotes
The Lord in the Life of His People – *An Impossible Peace* (St. Teresa of Calcutta)
Questions for Discussion
Closing Prayer – *Make Me a Channel of Your Peace*

Appendix – Suggestions for Service (page 158)

Session 1

Session 1 - The Poverty That Makes Us Rich



The Poverty That Makes Us Rich

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven....
Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Matthew 5:3,5

The Lord in His Scriptures

The Blessed Poverty of the Tax Collector

[Jesus] told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others:

“Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’ I tell you,

this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Luke 18:9-14

Rich in the Things of God

“Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?

“Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O men of little faith? Therefore do not be anxious, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the Gentiles seek all these things; and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well.”

Matthew 6:25-34

Meek and Humble of Heart

“Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves. For my yoke is easy, and my burden light.”ⁱ

Matthew 11:28-30

Soak in the Word

Two Minutes of Silence

Reflect...

The Gospels were written in Greek, and there were two words in Greek for “poor”: *penés* and *ptóchos*. *Penés* referred to the “working poor,” laborers of the lower class who struggled yet somehow managed to get by. But *ptóchos* referred to a much more radical kind of poverty, the poverty of beggars, of people driven to their knees, possessing nothing. Lacking any social standing, these beggars were utterly dependent on the generosity of others. Remarkably it is *this* word, *ptóchos*, that is used for the poor whom Jesus declares “blessed,” or “happy.”

What is he saying? Is Jesus advocating a life of destitution, of extreme material poverty? No, on the contrary, he calls on his disciples – then and now – to alleviate that kind of misery, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked.ⁱⁱ It is not material poverty that he is declaring blessed. Rather, “blessed are the poor *in spirit*.” Jesus is praising a state of mind and heart in relation to God. We are blessed if we understand that we come to God with empty hands, utterly dependent on him, like beggars or little children.

In the Parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector, we see that the tax collector acknowledges his poverty also in another way – as a sinner. He beats his breast and cannot even raise his eyes as he beseeches the Lord for mercy. Jesus leaves no doubt about the lesson of the parable: “Every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (18:14).

We should be poor in spirit in both these ways – in our complete, childlike dependence on God, and, like the tax collector, in the humble recognition that as sinners we depend particularly on his mercy and forgiveness. This should not depress us, but rather fill us with hope. The beautiful paradox is that it is precisely when we humbly fall on our knees and acknowledge our sinfulness and our dependence on God that we become open to the divine grace and love that “exalts” us, or literally “lifts us up.” This is captured in the words of the Little Flower, St. Thérèse of Lisieux, as she reflects at the end of her life on the meaning of sanctity:

Sanctity does not consist in this or that practice, it consists in a disposition of heart which makes us humble and little in the arms of God, conscious of our weakness and confident to the point of audacity in the goodness of the Father.... [Sanctity] is to recognize our nothingness, to expect everything from God as a little child expects everything from its father....ⁱⁱⁱ

Of course, by God’s grace, one member of the human race was poor in spirit *without* sin – the humble Virgin Mary. Her *Magnificat* (the closing prayer for this session), bursting with joy, glorifies God, recognizing that in his great mercy he has lifted her up from her lowliness, “scattered the proud,” and “filled the hungry with good things!”^{iv}

Hers is not a moral poverty. Mary does not need to beat her breast as a sinner. But she recognizes her littleness and utter dependence on the grace and providence of

God. She knows she has nothing of her own and must be cared for like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field. Her concern is not for herself, but for God and his kingdom.

The other Beatitude we have paired with “blessed are the poor in spirit” for this session is “blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” We have paired them because the meanings are very close and complementary. The only trouble is that in English the word “meek” is often taken to mean weak and passive, lacking in confidence and easily trampled upon. But that is not what is meant by the Greek word *praus* that we find in the Gospel of Matthew.

That Greek word carries several important connotations, including gentleness, humility and self-control. It is interesting to note also that it was used to describe domesticated animals obedient to their masters. Christian meekness, then, is docility to the Lord, humble responsiveness to the workings and directives of the Holy Spirit, with gentleness and self-control. We are to model our meekness, our docility, on that of Jesus, who said, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me.”^v

We see, then, how closely these two Beatitudes align, and once again we are struck by how beautifully they are embodied in the Blessed Virgin Mary. She was completely emptied of self and dependent on God, and she was perfectly docile to his direction. “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word.”^{vi}

So what blessed assurance does Jesus give to those who are poor in spirit, to those who are meek? He assures them that the kingdom of heaven is theirs, and that they shall inherit the earth.

This is really two ways of saying the same thing. The kingdom of heaven exists wherever God reigns in the human heart. His kingdom has come wherever his will is done (“on earth, as it is in heaven”), and it will be unveiled in its full glory in the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city spoken of in Hebrews 11:16 and depicted in Revelation 21. It is this kingdom, this “new heaven and new earth,” that belongs to us if we are poor in spirit, if we are meek and responsive to the Lord. It can belong to us even now, in the midst of the challenges and sufferings of this world, bringing us a blessed joy and peace that the world cannot take away.

Catechism of the Catholic Church

2547 – The Lord grieves over the rich, because they find their consolation in the abundance of goods.^{vii} “Let the proud seek and love earthly kingdoms, but blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.”^{viii} Abandonment to the providence of the Father in heaven frees us from anxiety about tomorrow.^{ix} Trust in God is a preparation for the blessedness of the poor. They shall see God.

Pope Benedict XVI

In his 2007 Christmas message, Pope Benedict XVI said faith and humility are needed to recognize the meaning of Jesus' birth. He noted the humility of those present:

The humility of Mary, who believed in the word of the Lord and, bending low over the manger, was the first to adore the fruit of her womb; the humility of Joseph, the just man, who had the courage of faith and preferred to obey God rather than to protect his own reputation; the humility of the shepherds, the poor and anonymous shepherds, who received the proclamation of the heavenly messenger and hastened towards the stable, where they found the new-born child and worshipped him, full of astonishment, praising God (cf. Lk 2:15-20). The little ones, the poor in spirit: they are the key figures of Christmas, in the past and in the present; they have always been the key figures of God's history, the indefatigable builders of his Kingdom of justice, love and peace (*Christmas Message, December 25, 2007*).

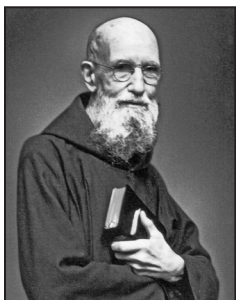
Pope Francis

In his message for the 29th World Youth Day, Pope Francis urged young people to imitate Christ in becoming poor in spirit, quoting St. Paul's letter to the Philippians:

“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (2:5-7).

Pope Francis continued:

Jesus is God who strips himself of his glory. Here we see God's choice to be poor: he was rich and yet he became poor in order to enrich us through his poverty (cf. 2 Cor 8:9). This is the mystery we contemplate in the crib when we see the Son of God lying in a manger, and later on the cross, where his self-emptying reaches its culmination (*Message of January 21, 2014*).



The Lord in the Life of His People

“Thank God Ahead of Time”

In every age, God raises up from among his humble followers – from among the “poor in spirit” – holy men and women who bear witness to him in extraordinary ways. We usually think of them as figures at a distance from us in time and space – Francis of Assisi, Vincent de Paul, Thérèse of Lisieux. But the Spirit is always moving, even in times and places that might surprise us. And so this is the story of “Barney of Wisconsin” – otherwise known as Blessed Solanus Casey.

“Uh-oh, look who’s coming.”

The Capuchin friars who had been enjoying a moment of fellowship suddenly busied themselves as a tall, thin friar with horn-rimmed glasses, bald head and long gray beard approached, carrying his fiddle and bow. This captive audience knew they were about to be serenaded by Fr. Solanus Casey. Oh, they loved him dearly, but that high, squeaky voice of his was like fingernails on a chalkboard. They smiled and applauded a couple of times before each discovered something he needed to do. And so, as he sometimes did, Solanus made his way to the chapel, where he finished playing before his Lord in the tabernacle.

God Chooses the Humble

Fr. Solanus Casey was the porter, or doorkeeper, at St. Bonaventure Monastery in Detroit. Ordained a priest in 1904, he could celebrate Mass, but his superiors had withheld from him the faculties of preaching and hearing confession because of poor academic performance during his formation. Solanus had accepted this decision in simple obedience. Everything seemed to point to a life of faithful, quiet obscurity, and if God had not had other plans, humble Solanus would have been quite content with that.

The sixth of sixteen children born to Irish immigrants, he came into the world on November 25, 1870, in Hudson, Wisconsin, and was named for his father, Bernard (“Barney”) Casey. The Caseys were a devout farm family, and they filled their tiny log cabin with singing, stories and prayer, especially the rosary. The younger Barney worked hard on the farm until, at age 17, he left to supplement the family income through a variety of jobs, including lumberjack, prison guard and streetcar operator.

One day while driving his streetcar through a rough area of Superior, Wisconsin, Barney saw a woman brutally stabbed to death by a drunken, cursing sailor. This display of sheer evil shook him to the core and helped stir him, at the age of 21, to pursue a priestly vocation, entering the seminary in Milwaukee. It would be a winding and academically challenging path that saw him given the religious name “Solanus” and finally ordained a Capuchin priest at the age of 34.

Doorkeeper for the Lord

For his first assignment, Fr. Solanus was sent to Sacred Heart Parish in Yonkers, New York, where he served as sacristan and doorkeeper. He quickly became an ardent promoter of the Seraphic Mass Association, an apostolate of the Capuchins in which people would enroll and be remembered in the Masses, prayers, sacrifices and good works of the friars around the world.

When people came to Sacred Heart Parish seeking counsel, prayers for healing, etc., their first contact was the kind doorkeeper, Fr. Solanus, who, as soon as he got a whiff of their worries or woes, encouraged them to enroll in the Seraphic Mass Association. Suddenly stories began to circulate about miraculous cures and remarkable answers to prayer. For just over fifty years until his death in 1957, this “doorkeeper’s ministry” would consume his life, in several different assignments, the longest of which returned him to St. Bonaventure’s in Detroit where he had begun.

Solanus was directed to keep records of the “special favors” received by those who came to him for help, and by the end of his life these filled seven large notebooks. He would never take any credit though, always attributing the miracles to the Seraphic Mass Association. But the throngs that waited in line at the door – up to two hundred people each day – knew the hand of God was upon him. He encouraged many who came for help to go to confession, humbly referring them to another priest, since he had not received the faculty to hear confessions.

Time for Everyone, Care for the Poor

Brother Leo, a fellow friar at St. Bonaventure’s, said that even though huge crowds waited for the chance to meet with Solanus, “he would never hurry anybody. He would listen to your story as if he had all the time in the world, and he would try to advise you, console you, comfort you and then he would usually give a blessing. When the people got home, often they would discover whoever had been sick was cured.”^x

But this extraordinary man was not a pious holy card figure. He loved to joke, played volleyball at recreation, enjoyed hot dogs piled high with onions, and was a baseball fan. He was also a man of profound social charity. His love for the poor inspired the Capuchins in Detroit to open a soup kitchen which became a major source of relief for poor eastside workers during the Depression. By 1931 the monastery soup kitchen was providing up to 3,500 free meals each day. Solanus spent a lot of time there, giving comfort to the hungry. One man, who became a dedicated kitchen volunteer, had come to him previously with a stomach tumor, asking for prayers. Solanus told him to go see his doctor again and then to come back and help feed the hungry. To the doctor’s amazement, the tumor had disappeared.

Thank God Ahead of Time

Solanus believed that when making an appeal in prayer, we ought to “thank God ahead of time.” He felt this showed such a level of grateful trust that it made

it much harder for God to say no! He used this “prayer psychology” on the Blessed Mother, too. A woman named Gladys Feighan came to him one day, confiding her desire to have another child. She had had one baby, but then lost the next three due to a blood problem.

“You will have another child, Gladys,” he said. “Your Blessed Mother will give you another child. You must believe this so strongly that before your baby is born you will get down on your knees and thank the Blessed Mother. Because once you ask her, and thank her, there’s nothing she can do but go to her own Son and ask him to grant your prayer.”^{xi}

There were tears in his eyes as he spoke. Five years later, Gladys gave birth to twins.

Certainly many people who came to Fr. Solanus with prayer petitions did not see their petitions granted, and the good friar prepared them to bear their crosses. But in this and other cases of confident assurance, he was likely given the grace of special foreknowledge.

A Holy Death

Solanus lived to the advanced age of eighty-six. The day before his death from a long and painful skin ailment, he told his superior, Fr. Gerald Walker, “I looked on my whole life as giving, and I want to give until there is nothing left of me to give. So I prayed that, when I come to die, I might be perfectly conscious, so that with a deliberate act I can give my last breath to God.”^{xii}

The next morning his voice was weak and inaudible, until, as the attending nurse reported, he suddenly sat straight up in bed and said in a clear voice, ‘I give my soul to Jesus Christ.’ He died on July 31, 1957, precisely fifty-three years – to the day and to the hour – from his first Mass.

Twenty thousand people came to pay their last respects at Solanus Casey’s viewing in Detroit. The opening of his cause for canonization was accepted by the Vatican in 1976. He was declared Venerable by Pope John Paul II in 1995 and beatified by Pope Francis in Detroit on November 18, 2017. It should come as no surprise that reports of miracles attributed to his intercession are plentiful, and continue to increase.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss what it means to be “poor in spirit” and “meek.” In what ways do you see those Beatitudes evidenced in the story of Blessed Solanus Casey?

2. In declaring blessed those who are poor in spirit, Jesus clearly was referring to something deeper than material poverty, for it is possible to be rich in the world’s goods yet remain poor in spirit, and it is possible to be materially poor yet greedy and self-centered. Still, we see Jesus in the Gospels invite a rich young man to sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor and follow him (cf. Lk 18:18-25). Saints throughout the ages have done exactly that (St. Francis of Assisi comes to mind) in imitation of Jesus, who possessed nothing. And members of religious congregations take a vow of poverty. So what kind of relationship do you think exists between these two things – poverty in spirit and the riches of this world?

Blessed Are You: Living the Beatitudes

3. Discuss examples of people who have been meek and poor in spirit and the ways that was expressed in their lives. These could be figures from the Bible, saints or other well-known persons, or people in your own circle of family and acquaintances.

Session 1 - The Poverty That Makes Us Rich

4. What sorts of practices, habits or attitude shifts might help you to better reflect these two Beatitudes in your own life?

5. Discuss ways you might undertake the service component of this Discipleship Series program, whether individually or as a group, and how love of neighbor contributes to being poor in spirit.

Group Prayers of Intercession

8 to 10 minutes

Closing Prayer

The Magnificat

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden.
For behold, henceforth all generations will call me
blessed;
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
And his mercy is on those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm,
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their
hearts,
he has put down the mighty from their thrones,

and exalted those of low degree;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent empty away.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
as he spoke to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his posterity for ever.
Amen.

Luke 1:46-55

-
- i New American Bible, copyright 1991, 1986, 1970, Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, D.C., and used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.
 - ii Cf. Mt 25:35-36.
 - iii St. Thérèse of Lisieux. *Last Conversations*, Trans. John Clark, OCD. (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1977) 129.
 - iv Lk 1:51,53
 - v Jn 4:34.
 - vi Lk 1:38.
 - vii Lk 6:24.
 - viii St. Augustine, *De serm. Dom. in monte* 1,1,3:PL 34,1232.
 - ix Cf. Mt 6:25-34.
 - x Diane M. Hansen, "The Holy Doorman of St. Bonaventure: The Story of Venerable Solanus Casey." *The Word Among Us*. July 2011.
 - xi Catherine Odell. *Solanus Casey: The Story of Father Solanus* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2007) 228.
 - xii "Road to Sainthood." *Fr. Solanus Guild*, 2017. <http://solanuscasey.org/who-is-father-solanus/road-to-sainthood>.

Additional Works Consulted/Recommended:

Crosby, Michael, O.F.M., Cap. *Thank God Ahead of Time: The Life and Spirituality of Solanus Casey*. Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2009.

Odell, Catherine. *Solanus Casey: The Story of Father Solanus*. Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 2007.