

Eight Traits of An Ethically Healthy Culture:

Insights from the Beatitudes

by David W. Gill, PhD

Mockler-Phillips Professor of Workplace Theology & Business Ethics

Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

130 Essex Street, South Hamilton MA 01982 USA

dgill@gcts.edu

Abstract

This paper argues for the potential relevance of the Beatitudes as critical values (using the term to refer to desirable traits or virtues) to embed in an organization and its culture if it is to be “ethically-healthy” (inclined and empowered to seek and perform the “right thing”). When Jesus “saw the crowds” in all their need his response was to call together a community of disciples and teach them the Beatitudes characteristics which would render them as “salt of the earth” and “light of the world.” This is character and culture-building. Because even non-disciples are made in the image and likeness of God we should not be surprised that they resonate with the basic traits and values presented by our Lord. Doing so does not save them, of course. But it does “salt” and “light” them and it can lead to God being glorified. This is an example of how Christians in business can bring basic biblical insights into our needy and often lost marketplace.

Today’s workplace and marketplace are ridden with ethical weakness and failure. Every day in the *Wall Street Journal* and in the business news in virtually all media are stories of some scandal, some indictment, some breakdown, some questionable behavior. Most people in business, most leaders and companies, do operate ethically for the most part it seems. But the bad guys are not going away and the actual and potential consequences are dire. How to respond? Better regulation and oversight? Stricter, more severe and certain punishment? Well, sure. No serious observer could wish for a return to a lawless, unregulated wilderness competition (e.g., today’s Somalia). But regulations and laws cannot produce virtue and goodness.

If Christians could get beyond “cursing the darkness” and actually “light a candle” in the workplace and marketplace, what would that look like? I think there are four candles to be lit actually. First, we need to pray. In our personal prayers and in our congregational prayers, the workplace and economy deserve regular and passionate attention. We need to pray and ask God’s help and presence, not just when crisis hits, but proactively. Second, we need to evangelize and share Jesus Christ with our workplace colleagues. It is not enough just to pass on some new insights --- our colleagues need to be born again. We need to learn from some careful, experienced, gifted workplace evangelists how to share our faith, faithfully and effectively.¹ Third, we need to model integrity and excellence in our own career and sphere of influence. Our colleagues need to have some examples of good character and behavior, of a different way of leadership and business, in front of their eyes. People often lack imagination and descend to the lowest common denominator, not realizing they don’t need to go there, because they have not seen an alternative, positive way to do things.

The fourth candle to light is “biblical insight” for the workplace and economy. These are actually not four separable “candles” but a team, an ensemble, of four ways to light up a dark world. But the reality is that biblical revelation contains a veritable gold mine of insights relevant to the workplace, a bright candle we can bring into the marketplace. We all know the famous phrase “servant leadership” which has come directly from our Lord’s teaching and found some currency and resonance in the business world, thanks to Robert Greenleaf and others.² That is just one small, but important, example of bringing a biblical insight into the workplace.

In this paper we will reflect on the Beatitudes, Jesus' famous list of "Blessed" statements at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).³ The context goes like this: "When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them . . ." (Matt 5:1-2).⁴ Certainly this teaching was first of all for disciples sitting at the feet of Jesus. And yet, it was on "seeing the crowds" that Jesus taught these disciples, first, about their character, about what kind of people they should be.

This was a needy, hurting, confused crowd that Jesus saw: Jesus' response to this need was to call together a small community and work on re-building their character (individual) and culture (collectively, their community). This is lesson one for Christians who want to impact the needy crowds of our marketplace and world. That Jesus had an impact on the world in mind when teaching the Beatitudes is clear from his concluding remarks after the Beatitudes: "You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world. . . . let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:13-16). It is "beatitudes"-type people who will serve as the salt of the earth and the light of the world. No one else can do it. It is a common pedagogical mistake in our churches to reflect on the Beatitudes, on the one hand, and on the salt and light statements, on the other, with stressing their intimate, indissoluble connection.

Jesus sees the crowds in all their need and responds not by haranguing and griping to his political representatives, proposing new legislation in Rome, or expecting the answers to trickle down from the well-off in his society. Instead he responds by calling together a small band of disciples and teaching them, first of all, a set of eight characteristics to demonstrate in their lives together. These characteristics promise to be (1) a blessing (*makarios*, "good for them") to them personally, (2) good for the world in having a salting and illuminating effect, and (3) something that will lead people to glorify God. The specific blessings, attached to each characteristic, he described in the second half of each statement.

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, we are told "Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching" (Matt 7:28). This paper argues that Jesus' Beatitudes teaching is not just for Christians huddling together in some ecclesiastical enclave but is a truly astounding source of wisdom for the crowds today, for all of life including business. We the disciples of Jesus today can truly *salt* and *light* our companies and marketplaces if we will live out and promote these characteristics.

Culture: What It Is and Why It Matters

When things look bad in the workplace and marketplace (or in society, for that matter), our attention is often directed to the top and to a macro perspective. Intense passions focus on presidential candidates and economic philosophies and grand policy choices. No doubt these are important concerns and God bless those whose life calling is to work at this level. But most of us will not be asked to decide on policies at this grand level. If all of our energy and passion is absorbed here we will likely miss our opportunities to actually bring about some "salting" and "lighting" impact on our world. Jesus brought a revolution to our planet by starting with a small twelve-member community and their distinctive mission and culture.

In business and beyond, small value-embedded, mission-driven communities actually have a huge impact on our world. Starbucks started as a neighborhood coffee experience and eventually changed peoples' behaviors all over the world. It didn't start in the corridors of power and decision-making at the big corporate coffee companies. Microsoft, FaceBook, Hewlett-Packard, Southwest Airlines . . . the Civil Rights Movement . . . these started out "off the grid" we could say. Small, dormitory room or garage-based movements. The point is: let's not ever forget that while we should "think globally," we need to "act locally."

At the other extreme, our attention can narrow down to specific ethical dilemmas and infractions. Much of today's business ethics training puts isolated individuals in front of computer screens to pick from multiple choice answers about a particular ethical scenario. Context, ambiguity, grey areas, and team discussion and discernment are completely ignored. Teaching people the rules of a code of ethics or conduct and then asking them to apply those, working alone, to particular, customized, sterilized sample cases will teach something. But it often enough produces cynicism among employees and it doesn't get at the heart of the ethics challenge.

Here is why: no matter how inspiring your goal, you must build the capacity to achieve it. In sports, it's about physical fitness, mental preparation, and habits of teamwork. Great teams don't just have a great playbook and know the rulebook. In business it's about the character and culture, not just the code of ethics. Does it enable your business to "leap high"? Or is the organizational culture toxic, weak, and like a dead weight keeping your business from "leaping up above the rim"?

In a word, culture is what you *are*---more than what you *do*---even though, in the end, being and doing are inextricably related.⁵ On a personal or individual level we call this phenomenon "character"; on a corporate, group or organizational level we call it "culture." This has been a topic of growing conversation, study, and attention for the past couple decades. Louis V. Gerstner, who led a turnaround at IBM during the 90s, said that changing the culture was critical. "Culture isn't just one aspect of the game, it *is* the game."⁶ Jim Collins and Jerry Porras devoted a full chapter of *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* to a positive description of "cult-like cultures."⁷

As for ethical health, we can say that people respond to ethical challenges partly based on "internalization"---that is, based on their internalized, personal values, character, and interior moral compass. (Lesson: pay attention to this when hiring your people). But we also respond based on "socialization"---that is, the influences of other people around us, and the influences and pressures of systems of rewards and penalties. (Lesson: pay attention to your culture). Cultural/organizational systems can be formal (IBM) or informal (Apple), strong (IBM and Apple) or weak (organizations with little self-conscious "identity" or distinctiveness), healthy (empowering ethics and excellence) or unhealthy (toxic relationships, unethical behavior, unmet standards). Sometimes the term "corporate culture" is used only to refer to the "feel" of a company, its "folkways" and rituals. That is certainly important but we should look at culture in a broader way, sort of like an anthropologist would do on discovering a new group of people in some remote area.

In this larger, more complete sense, a culture has four basic components. (1) The physical infrastructure: building, office set-up, furnishings, IT system, software, landscaping, decoration, and so on, all carry and proclaim core values, whether we like it or not. This material infrastructure empowers---or undermines---our mission and our ethics. (2) The organizational infrastructure: Organizational charts, structures, policies, and procedures, including compensation and budget patterns, express concretely to everyone what and who is valued. (3) The human infrastructure: Personal character and temperament are a critical component in corporate culture. Hiring for "cultural fit" is critically important. (4) The informal, ritual infrastructure. rituals, traditions, atmosphere, etc.

A company or organization comes together in order to carry out some common *mission* (purpose). The culture (physical, organizational, personnel, and informal aspects) either enables and empowers the achievement of that mission ---or it undermines, impedes, and frustrates it. Having an inappropriate (or ugly) office or laboratory set-up, idiotic policies, divisive and incompetent personnel, and a toxic atmosphere are the kinds of things that undo the best of purposes.

Cultural Values: What They Are & Why They Matter

What we are looking for are *value-embedded cultures*. This is where someone is paying serious, active attention to the characteristics, traits, and habits built into (1) the physical infrastructure, (2) the organizational infrastructure, (3) the personnel, and (4) the informal rituals and atmosphere, the “style” of relationships, communication, and decision-making. Two kinds of *value-challenged cultures* are often seen in today’s business world. The *accidental* culture is one that has not been intentionally created but has haphazardly evolved. It is weak, adrift, patchwork, thoughtless, and unintentional. The *misaligned* culture is one that may be strong but is in conflict with the mission and core values. For example, the reward systems may all focus on individuals—while teamwork is critical to the success of the company. Or the computer systems or office set-up may be inadequate for the sort of information sharing that is essential to achieve the vision. Or the environmental stewardship commitment is undermined by our gas-guzzling company auto fleet.

So the critical question is “What traits, habits, capacities, and “style” will help us achieve our mission? What structures and traits will impede or frustrate our mission? It is the mission that drives the answer to the values question. As Aristotelian philosophy says, if the purpose of a knife is to cut, the primary trait of a good knife will be sharpness (not shininess or some other irrelevant trait). And if the purpose of our team is to win football games, the core traits we need to build into our people and systems will be things like speed, power, durability, flexibility, team spirit, coachability, and so on (not physical cuteness or good table manners).

What is our company’s mission and what are the handful of key traits needed throughout our culture in order to achieve that objective? That’s the question. We will use a common term---*values*---to describe the most basic, core, fundamental traits needed in a successful mission-controlled organization. In moral philosophy it is more precise to call these “virtues” but we’ll stick with the common terminology of “core values.” Our core values are the essential characteristics, habits, and orientations, the basic capacities and inclinations, we want to see embedded in our culture. “Values” are things having “worth”---the things worth embedding in every part of our company (not just some parts, sometimes).⁸ Our values are our *standards* for evaluating our office set-up, compensation policies, hiring decisions, and atmosphere. They are the *habits* of behavior and interaction we seek in our employees and in our teamwork. If our company culture is thoroughly guided and permeated by values that are key to helping us achieve our vision and fulfill our mission, we will be on our way to ethics and excellence.

How the Beatitudes Can Salt and Light Our Workplace Cultures

To this point, the argument has been that companies must get clear on their mission, then figure out what cultural values are critical to empower and reward the achievement of that mission with excellence. There would seem to be a vast flexibility here. But as my understanding of biblical Christian ethics deepened, on the one hand, and my understanding of the business world expanded and increased, on the other, I began to notice some continuities, parallels, and resonances between what I saw as biblical ethics for the community of faith and organizational ethics for a diverse marketplace. It was not ideology or theological presuppositions that got me to this place but the experience of being immersed simultaneously in the teaching of Scripture and the challenges of the business world.

The theological perspectives that help me best understand this convergence in my thinking are (1) the creation of all men and women in the image and likeness of God and (2) the presence of God’s law “written on the heart” of those outside the community of faith. Despite the brokenness and fallenness of people, there remains something in them that resonates with biblical truth and goodness. This process does not save anyone but I do believe that it “salts” and “lights” the world in such a way that God can be glorified. I also believe that taking our biblical faith into the marketplace in this way is an avenue to a more direct evangelistic sharing of the Gospel whenever our colleagues are led to inquire where we get these ideas from.

On the level of the mission and purpose of business, I have come to believe that pretty much any successful, inspiring business mission must tap into one or both of the following fundamental themes: (1) to create, invent, or build something useful or beautiful, or (2) to fix what is broken, heal those who are hurting, or set free those in bondage. There is a vast flexibility on the particulars but at a deep level it is these two grand themes that drive a business where employees want to get out of bed in the morning and bring their best selves to work. Why? Because our God is above all else, the Creator and Redeemer. And every man, woman, and child has been made in the image and likeness of that Creator and Redeemer. Though we are sinful, failing, broken people, there remains some of that “creator” and “redeemer” DNA in each of us. When these aspects of our humanity get challenged and invited to expression, we usually feel a sense of value, worth, and satisfaction. Biblical Christians (ought to) know this from our theology --- and bring it into the workplace.⁹

From A Creative/Redemptive Mission to a Beatitudes Culture

Just as all healthy business mission and purpose will somehow tap into the creation or redemption themes, the cultural values that will best sustain and empower that mission are not infinitely flexible. There is one God who is Creator and Redeemer, and thus one source of the image and likeness stamped on our common humanity. We will not find a wooden uniformity and sameness anywhere in God’s world, but there will be some commonality. Many biblical passages can help us here but I want to suggest that the Beatitudes are an extraordinary guide to a healthy character and community that will salt and light the business world.¹⁰ Although Jesus often returns to various components in the list (notably in the "Sermon on the Plain" in Luke 6), we will rely on the opening of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5.

There are actually *nine* beatitudes in the opening of the Sermon on the Mount---but I will follow a common practice of treating the ninth one as a repetition and personalization of the point made in the eighth beatitude. At the outset, however, I want to stress how important is the *order* of the beatitudes. John Chrysostom (ca. 347-407), an early church leader, wrote that the Beatitudes are like "a sort of golden chain" in which "in each instance . . . the former precept make[s] way for the following one" by careful design.¹¹ Not every commentator pays attention to this but I find the order crucial. This is not an arbitrary melange of proverbs but an inspired architecture for a good character and community (remember that these are not teachings to isolated individuals but rather for individuals in a community).

The broad stroke movement of the Beatitudes is that we begin in humility, then build out of that a passionate search for God’s righteousness, and culminate in reconciliation and peacemaking. I believe this is the way individual disciples as well as Christian communities should seek to live. But I have also come to see this as the broad pattern for *any* healthy organization in the world. As I was studying the Beatitudes back in the 1980s alongside the management literature, I was struck by how similar the Beatitudes message was to what I was getting from business leaders and writers about healthy business (not just religious) cultures and how insightful it was for organizational ethics and corporate culture building. I developed a list of “Eight Traits of Ethically Healthy Organizations.”¹² Here is the list of the original Beatitudes, followed by some brief comments on their business application:

The Beatitudes: Matthew 5:1-16 (New Revised Standard Version)

**When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain;
and after he sat down, his disciples came to him.**

Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

Blessed are those who mourn.....for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek.....for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger & thirst for righteousness..

..for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful.....for they will receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart.....for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers.....for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.....

.....for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all

kinds of evil against you falsely on my account;

Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way

they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

You are the salt of the earth

You are the light of the world.....

let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works

and give glory to your Father in heaven.

1. Openness & Humility (“Blessed are the poor in spirit”)

Teachability from top to bottom of the organization; Arrogance kills off learning and growth by blinding us to our own weaknesses. Strength comes out of receptivity and the willingness to learn from others

The first Beatitude is “poverty of spirit.” It is about neediness, emptiness, even brokenness, at the very spiritual core of our being. Only those who are empty and receptive have room to be blessed by receiving God as king at the center of their lives. If our gracious, forgiving, saving God is near, then it is a good and blessed thing to have room to receive him. If we are full of ourselves or of some other spirit, if we are arrogant and unbroken, if we think we know everything or have no need, we have no way of receiving from God – or perhaps even from others.

I was struck by Jim Collins’s research finding in his *Good to Great*, the best-selling business book of the past decade, that what he calls “Level Five” leaders, who took their companies from good to great, had in common this humble, teachable attitude. Collins is not a Christian and he was not looking for this. I was further surprised to find that Collins’s leading exemplar of this leadership characteristic, Colman Mockler the CEO of Gillette, was connected to Gordon-Conwell and that his widow funded both our Mockler Center and half of my chair in Workplace Theology. And a decade earlier, Jim Collins and Jerry Porras argued in *Built to Last* (1994), the best selling business book of the 90s, that great companies “try lots of things, and keep what works.” It is common sense. Even if we are doing well, adding the best ideas from someone else can make us even better. Openness and a humble teachability are not signs of weakness but of strength. Think of the opposite traits: arrogance, closed-mindedness, narrowness, and rigidity. These vices stifle creativity and freedom. They kill off learning and growth and blind us to our own weakness. Strength comes out of receptivity and a willingness to learn from others.

The 3M company is justly famous for its openness to new ideas. And certainly you have to hand it to Toyota and other Japanese automakers for beating Detroit to a pulp ---mainly by their openness to innovation and the ideas of others, while Detroit closed up and suffered the competitive consequences. Finally, think about who you want to work for. Isn’t it obvious that we flourish when we get to work for bosses who are open to our ideas and humble enough to listen to our suggestions for improvements?

So being poor in spirit is not just a first step in the spiritual life, it is the first trait of any healthy organization, though we usually call it openness, teachability, and humility in “business speak.”

2. Accountability & Responsibility (“Blessed are those who mourn”)

All individuals and teams stand up; Denial, blame, and excuses harden relationships and intensify conflict. Successful teams care deeply when things go wrong, hold each other accountable, and willingly accept personal responsibility.

The second Beatitude says “Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted.” “How does that work?” I hear you say, “especially in a business context.” Remember the point made by John Chrysostom: this Beatitude is a commentary on number one (and a foundation for what follows). This is not about generalized sadness, mourning, and weeping but specifically about individuals and communities who *mourn their poverty, brokenness, and neediness*. The tendency is to *blame* others or at least to live in *denial* of our brokenness. Mourning here is about *caring deeply* about it, *owning* it and *regretting* it. Instead of blaming others or accepting mediocrity, we feel it and own it.

In business, as in church and family, a need or weakness provides an opportunity for denial, blame, and excuses. A culture of irresponsibility breeds dissension and distrust among colleagues and customers and long-term disaster and loss for the company. A healthy culture or individual recognizes the problem, and *cares* about it. Do we care when things go wrong or do we just blow it off and move on? Do we regret that failure or weakness or just ignore it or justify it? In an ethically healthy culture we hold ourselves and each other accountable for our actions (including our weaknesses and mistakes).

This is about caring and responsibility. A responsible person (or company) willingly accepts accountability, agrees to care for something, and can be counted upon to do what they say they will. It is not easy for most of us to swallow our pride and say “that was my fault” or “I’m going to need some help on this.” A culture of accountability and responsibility has to start at the top. Nobody is fooled by CEOs denying all knowledge, failure, and responsibility. A powerful cynicism spreads through such CEOs’ companies. So from the top down, let’s not just be humble and open but also accountable and responsible.

So “mourning” our “poverty” is not just for Christian saints --- when it is understood as “caring deeply about, and taking responsibility for, our mistakes, weaknesses, and failures,” it is a core value in a healthy business culture as well.

3. Freedom (“Blessed are the meek”)

Creative risk-taking encouraged; no micro-managing control freak. Both extremes---an excessive, reckless risk-taking and a stifling, fearful control---threaten any organization. Freedom to risk new ideas flourishes best within appropriate limits.

The third Beatitude is about meekness or gentleness. The meek shall inherit the earth (a quotation from Psalm 37). The Greek word here is *praus* which meant “tame” among other things. It was used of a horse that accepted a bit and bridle and of a waterway that accepted channeling through a canal. It is not about weakness but about giving up control. In Psalm 37 the contrast is with “fretting.” Meekness is about giving up control. It is about freedom --- for those in our relationships and also freedom for ourselves. We stop trying to fix everything. We realize that we actually cannot fix and control everything. This is why “freedom” is our summary term. And again it is a commentary on what has preceded it: we are poor and we mourn it . . . and we give up control, not compelled to try to intervene and fix it ourselves.

In business this third trait is about managers and organizations giving up control. It is about a culture of freedom for risk-taking, giving others space, giving up, or at least sharing, control. Joe Caruso’s *The Power of Losing Control* (Penguin/Gotham Books, 2003) understands how important this is in organizations. The vice that is the counterpart to this virtue is micro-management, “control-freakism.” Are you going to try to micro-manage that teachability

piece or that accountability piece we just reviewed---or can you let things ferment without your hands-on direction? It's about how we manage people and their issues and growth. Control freaks kill trust in cultures. If you can't trust and let go, either you need to leave or the objects of your control will shut down (or flee at the first opportunity).

The 3M company is an example of openness and freedom that exhibits this trait as well as any company. The old Hewlett-Packard with its flexible hours and other policies was also a culture of freedom in the sense we are using it here. Business leaders will create healthier organizations if they will keep this value in their top ten list and actively live by it---disciplining themselves to not intervene immediately to straighten everyone and everything out. Give your people some space.

So meekness is also not just for saints – it is for managers. The third value of a healthy culture is the *freedom* that comes with not trying to micro-manage and control everything.

4. Ethics & Excellence (“Blessed are those who hunger for righteousness”)

Insatiable hunger for both “doing the right thing” & “doing things right.” Mediocrity is easy; excellence is hard work, and there are many temptations for short-cuts. A search for excellence always inspires both inside and outside an organization.

The fourth Beatitude is “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.” Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus will say “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added unto you.” These are statements about discipleship, about being a follower of Jesus. As Paul was to put it later, it is about becoming “instruments of righteousness” (Rom 6:19). The Greek term *dikaiosyne* means righteousness and justice, seeking and “doing the right thing.” But it also suggests “doing things right.” This is much like the term “virtue” (Greek, *arête*), which connotes both moral virtue and excellence.

The pattern being taught by Jesus seems clear: out of poverty of spirit, mourning, and meekness we can best and most successfully hunger and thirst for righteousness. This is an exact parallel to Psalm 23 where the paths of righteousness *follow* lying down, quiet waters, and the restored soul. The first three values feel passive --- or we could say “preparatory”--- openness, responsibility, and freedom. But those three are creating the capacity to better see what is really excellent and ethical (the fourth value or trait). Without openness, teachability, and freedom, I don't think we can really see excellence and ethics clearly.

But with the fourth Beatitude we are talking about an organizational culture that has a real passion to get things right---in financial terms, technical/engineering terms, legal terms . . . and ethical terms. It is about excellence in all those directions. Mediocrity is easy; excellence is hard work, and there are many temptations for short-cuts. But a search for excellence (as the best-selling business book of the 1980s was titled) always inspires both inside and outside an organization.¹³ Harris & Associates, the outstanding construction and project management firm based in Northern California, captures this double message in its core values by making “integrity” their first value and “quality” their second---other terms for ethics and excellence. Starbucks is another company making both ethics and excellence core values in the culture. It starts with a leadership that is not satisfied with second-best or ordinary results. This is where we can let our perfectionist streak run wild. We aim as high as possible and go for it. In spiritual-faith terms “hungering for and seeking righteousness” is at the heart of discipleship. In business and organizational contexts, the quest for excellence and integrity is equally central. This shouldn't surprise us.

5. Mistake-tolerance (“Blessed are the merciful”)

Avoid punitive, fearful, repressive reactions Punishing honest mistakes stifles creativity. Learning from mistakes encourages healthy experimentation and converts negatives into positives.

The fifth Beatitude is “Blessed are the merciful.” This follows hard on the heels of hungering for righteousness and justice. The biblical teaching cover to cover is that justice and righteousness are primary – but what if we fall short (as we all do)? This is where forgiveness and generosity, mercy and grace come in. If we acknowledge unrighteousness, mercy can forgive and move on with a lesson learned. If we just paper over the righteousness problem, the mercy is hollow and the lesson is unlearned. Jesus himself demonstrated the meeting of perfect justice and perfect mercy in his life and death. His followers are challenged to do the same.

In the rough and tumble world of business one might think there is no place for mercy or sentimentality or compassion or forgiveness. But an organization that aims high is not always going to achieve its ambitious goals. A sure way to kill off such ambitious attempts at greatness is to punish failure. Punishing honest mistakes stifles creativity. Learning from mistakes encourages healthy experimentation and converts negatives into positives. So there is a place for mercy and for generosity in business. If we want people to step up and be accountable and responsible (remember the second value), we must not overreact and crush them. If we want them to aim high again after a failure, we must not crush them at that moment of failure. An honest---but failed---effort at achieving something great should not be viewed in the same way as an effort that failed for lack of preparation or care. Some business leaders have told me that a mistake might be tolerated once, but repeating the *same* mistake twice is another story. Perhaps it is not a mistake but true negligence the second time around.

Certainly companies with an emphasis on research and new product development (e.g., pharmaceuticals, technology, entertainment) have to embrace this cultural trait. When bad things happen, part of the learning is to put safeguards and back-up systems in place the next time to minimize the impact if something starts to go awry. Such companies must learn to tolerate mistakes made in good faith efforts---and turn those mistakes into learning experiences. The business payoff is a workforce without fear of trying things that are new or difficult, a workforce that learns from its mistakes rather than living in denial or blame or the likelihood of repeating them.

So mercy is not just a religious virtue; understood in context, it is a core trait in ethically healthy organizations and businesses.

6. Honesty, Integrity, & Transparency (“Blessed are the pure in heart”)

No hidden agendas, no evasions. Dishonesty and inconsistency undermine trust. Organizations and relationships thrive on clarity, transparency, honesty, and reliable follow-through.

The sixth Beatitude is “Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God.” Those whose hearts are fogged and polluted by sin will have difficulty seeing a holy God. Building on the preceding traits, as Chrysostum teaches us, this purity of heart is particularly important in terms of the mercy we extend to those whose justice is imperfect. Is our granting of mercy and forgiveness authentic and honest – or do we harbor hidden reservations and even retributive thoughts. If we do not have a pure heart, if integrity, honesty, and transparency are not ours, our movement toward peacemaking (the next value) will surely be undone.

All of the foregoing corporate cultural traits we have described must be authentic and real if the organization is going to achieve its potential. An organizational leadership that only pretends, Machiavelli-like, to care about teachability, accountability, freedom, excellence, and mistake-tolerance may sometimes succeed in the short term. But longer term, such dishonesty will come back to haunt the company. Business requires trust---and trust requires integrity, “trustworthiness.” Integrity is about consistency, the “integration,” of what is inside with what is outside, of what is thought, known, and believed with what is said and done.

Relationships thrive on clarity, transparency, honesty, and reliable follow-through. Integrity and trust can be destroyed in a moment; they take a long time to be rebuilt. Integrity simplifies life: If we live with integrity we are relieved from having always to be covering our tracks, maintaining a facade, or looking over our shoulder. Don

Tapscott and David Ticoll's *The Naked Corporation* argues that in our internet age, it has become almost impossible to hide anything. Those e-mail memos that ridiculed someone will almost certainly come back to haunt their author. What we do, say, and think is more likely than ever to come out in the open. Therefore, the authors suggest, companies might as well embrace transparency, divulge their true reality, and live consistently with it. Integrity is the virtue that makes transparency pay off. Integrity and trust take a long time to build---though they can be destroyed in a moment. Among our personal or corporate assets they are as precious as anything else we could possibly list.

Purity of heart sounds so spiritual and religious, and it is. But as "integrity" and "transparency" it is also a core value of healthy business cultures.

7. Collaboration & integration ("Blessed are the peacemakers")

Bring people together...bring ideas together. Turf wars and narrow thinking are deadly. Drawing together the best ideas and practices, integrating the best people into collaborative teams, multiplies organizational strength.

The seventh Beatitude is peacemaking. The peacemakers "shall be called the children of God." This is the pinnacle, the goal of the whole series of traits. The fundamental problem of the world is alienation and separation – from God, from each other. The great work of God is reconciliation and to God's followers is given the ministry of reconciliation helping people find peace with God and peace with each other. We never look more like the children of our Redeemer God than when we are peacemakers. We shall be called the children of God. This is not just "conflict-avoiding" but "peace-making." And to achieve reconciliation we must begin in humble openness, responsibility, and gentle freedom. We must pursue peace on a foundation of truth and justice; "if you want peace, work for justice" as the slogan has it. But justice and righteousness must be accompanied by mercy and purity of heart or peace cannot be made. This, now, is the seven-fold character of the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

In business, our terminology for this peace-making is *collaboration*. Companies are groups of people who work together ("co-laboring"—*collaborating*). In other terminology it is about *integration* --- of people and of ideas. Collaboration and integration in pursuit of excellence ---that's what a company is all about. Peace-making is about building high performance *teams*. Teams thrive when there is an inspiring mission, a passion for excellence and ethics (doing the right thing and doing it right), with an atmosphere of mistake-tolerance and a high degree of integrity.

If we could do it better alone, why form a company? If we are going to make the most of our business opportunity, we need to put an emphasis on team play, not just on individual stardom. Turf wars are deadly. Integrating the best people into collaborative teams multiplies organizational strength. Rather than regarding competitors (internally or externally) as enemies, it is often wise to find ways to work together. Life and business are not a zero sum game. Two businesses creating similar products (or two employees competing with each other) may actually have greater success by working together. Of course, competition is also part of human nature (and often produces better results than its absence). And ego and other narrow interests often disrupt or destroy cooperation and community. Collaboration is not an easy option but it is worth pursuing and making a value in our companies. Wisdom, creativity, and innovation, are usually to be found in a diversity of voices collaborating around a common goal and task.

Jody Hoffer Gittel's *The Southwest Airlines Way: Using the Power of Relationships to Achieve High Performance* (McGraw-Hill, 2003) is a superb demonstration of how collaboration can bring business value as well as workplace happiness. Jon R. Katzenbach & Douglas K. Smith's *The Wisdom of Teams* (HarperBusiness, 1993) and James Surowiecki's *The Wisdom of Crowds* (Anchor, 2004) make the case that thinking together in teams produces better results than individualism. There is a lot of mythology (and some truth) about "cowboy capitalism" and predatory

economic class warfare. The other side to the story is that trust, integrity, cooperation, and collaboration play a much larger and more positive role in business success than their negative counterparts.

Described as “peace-making” this trait sounds more like politics, diplomacy, or community relations if not religion. But clearly stated as “collaboration,” “integration,” and “team-building” this trait is at the heart of good business.

8. Courage & persistence (“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness”)

Guts in the face of difficulty. Courage and persistence in doing the right thing, no matter what.

The eighth Beatitude is “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness.” It is about hanging in there and persisting in righteousness, doing the right thing, even when you are opposed, persecuted, and attacked for it. This is the “realism” caveat added on to the Beatitudes values architecture. The basic progression is from humble openness to righteousness to peaceful community. It is the most (maybe the *only*) effective strategy to salt and light the world. But that world remains broken and imperfect, no matter what we do. There will be times when our best efforts, our best character and community, will be met with accusations, paranoia, opposition, even persecution. The final Beatitude urges us to “keep on keeping on” no matter what. The promise is that God our king will be with us in these times, that all the great prophets of the past had suffered some of this, that in the grand, eternal scheme of things we will be rewarded.

In business, the eighth trait is about courage and tenacity in doing the right thing and in staying true to our core values. This is necessary because the business playing field is not always level and life is not always fair. Much of what we deal with in the marketplace, the global economy, or the environment is unfair. Who can predict natural disasters, epidemics, terrorism, or war? Even without such large-scale forces, it is difficult to manage a workforce, adapt to change, and make wise decisions in a swirling global marketplace. Problems and even defeats will come, sometimes wholly undeserved. But healthy organizational cultures will be unintimidated and undeterred by these difficulties. Courage, persistence, and “guts” mean that we stay true to our values despite the struggles, set-backs, and pain.

Such a steady, indefatigable persistence was demonstrated by Cantor Fitzgerald after losing much of their business and workforce in the 9/11 attack on their building. Resilience is now one of their stated core values. Levi Strauss lists courage among its four core values---highly appropriate in a global textile business.

So courage and persistence in the face of opposition and tough times is a Christian virtue --- but it certainly has its counterpart in the business world as well.

Conclusion

For the past thirty years or so, I have taught, and tried to practice, this understanding of the Beatitudes (1) in relation to churches which found reconciliation elusive and needed help getting there, and (2) in relation to marriages that were deeply wounded and sought help getting back to the shalom that was lost. If we could just sit at the feet of Jesus and hear these gracious words from him as our Heavenly King, if his Spirit, the Comforter promised in the second Beatitude, would come upon us . . . perhaps we could move toward righteousness and then on to mercy and end up in a rediscovered peace.

For the past twenty years or so, however, I also began to see this same progression of values and virtues as a helpful template for understanding a healthy character and culture even among those who do not yet acknowledge the author of the Beatitudes as their Lord. I do not think the Beatitudes can be seen or experienced in full clarity and power apart from a relationship to Jesus Christ. But I have been convinced that there is something in the heart, you might say “in the DNA,” of all people and all groups and organizations that yearns for and resonates with this pattern of

human values revealed in the Beatitudes. I believe this is because all men and women were created by God to live in this way; it is imprinted on their nature in a profound way, even though wounded by sin and the fall.

How can Christians “salt” and “light” their workplaces? Certainly by way of (1) their prayers, (2) their evangelistic efforts, and (3) their personal behavioral example. But I am convinced that a fourth strategy is essential and that is (4) to take the values and management insights of Scripture into their work places and practices. Taking this Beatitudes-inspired approach to organizational culture and values into our businesses is a powerful contribution that can bring glory to God and significant help to a needy marketplace.

In practice, in the trenches, my approach is to say something like this: “As we are working on this project to revisit (or identify for the first time) the core values we must have in every one of our employees and every corner of our corporate culture, I would love to share with you a list of eight traits that I have come to see as cutting across most if not all healthy, ethical organizational cultures. I’d love it if at some point we could spend an hour reviewing and discussing these and their possible relevance here at our company.” Low key. Humble. But remember: Jesus calls us to be the salt and the light of our world --- not the bull-dozer and steam-rollers of the world. A little humble salt and light can start a revolution. It did once.

Eight Traits of an Ethically-Healthy Culture

1. Openness & Humility

Teachability from top to bottom of organization; no arrogant know-it-alls

2. Accountability & Responsibility

All individuals & teams stand up; no blaming, no excuses

3. Freedom

Creative risk-taking encouraged; no micro-managing control freaks

4. Ethics & Excellence

Insatiable hunger for both “doing the right thing” & “doing things right”

5. Mistake-tolerance

Learn and try again; avoid punitive, fearful, repressive reactions

6. Honesty, Integrity, & Transparency.

Consistency of thought, talk, and walk; no hidden agendas or evasions

7. Collaboration & integration.

Bringing people together...bringing ideas together

8. Courage & persistence

Guts in the face of difficulty

¹ My favorite book on workplace evangelism is *Workplace Grace: Becoming A Spiritual Influence at Work* by Bill Peel & Walt Larimore (Zondervan, 2010)

² Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership* (Paulist Press, 1977).

³ This essay draws heavily (with occasional repetition of language) on the exposition of the Beatitudes in my *Becoming Good: Building Moral Character* (InterVarsity Press, 2000).

⁴ Jesus is teaching his *disciples*---so this is an ethic primarily for people in relationship to him. The symbolism of Jesus going up on a mountain to teach, and of this discourse (the whole Sermon on the Mount, Matt 5-7) as the first of five great teaching blocks in Matthew--all of this looks a lot like a new Moses with a new Law/Pentateuch. So at the outset this is an authoritative ethic for the people of God.

⁵ In ethics, I have always reminded my students, it isn't just "do" (the right thing) or just "be" (a good person or company)---it's "do-be-do-be-do"

⁶ Louis V. Gerstner, *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?* (HarperBusiness, 2002); my discussion here of corporate culture draws heavily (with occasional repetition of language) on my *It's About Excellence: Building Ethically Healthy Organizations* (Eugene OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), especially chapter 5, "Building Ethical Muscle: Value-embedded Corporate Cultures," pp. 119-138.

⁷ Jim Collins & Jerry Porras *Built to Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies* (HarperBusiness, 1994), pp. 115-139. The classic on this topic is Edgar H. Schein, *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (Jossey-Bass, 3rd edition, 2004).

⁸ It is common to criticize "values" (often in the name of "virtue" terminology) on the assumption that this *always* refers to a subjective, "everybody choose whatever appeals to you" moral framework. Nonsense. I want my values to be *what God values*, and that is not at all about my subjective preferences. Of course values can be subjective. What we want are the *right* values, the characteristics that lead to excellence and ethics, that glorify God.

⁹ I make this case to a general business audience in my *It's About Excellence*, Ch. 4, "What Do You Love? Mission-Control Ethics," pp. 95-118. A secular management text that reinforces this approach is Nikos Mourkogiannis, *Purpose: The Starting Point of Great Companies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

¹⁰ Among the most helpful studies of the Beatitudes are Robert Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1982), D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), Alphonse Maillot, *Les Beatitudes* (Paris: Librairie Protestante (le christianisme au vingtieme siecle), n.d.), and John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1978).

¹¹ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Saint Matthew*, Homily XV, in Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1956), vol. X, p. 96. My understanding of the Beatitudes, on the whole and in the parts, is very close to that of Chrysostom.

¹² I wrote a series of my "Benchmark Ethics" columns in *Ethix Magazine* (www.ethix.org) on these traits, between June 1999 and February 2001. An earlier, edited version of my list was published in May of 2002 in *Ethix* and is still floating around cyberspace. The basic list and an abbreviated exposition for a general business audience is in my *It's About Excellence* (2011), Appendix A, pp. 183-194. I also want to acknowledge my primary ethics and business conversation partner, and frequent collaborator and co-teacher over the past twenty years, Dr. Albert M. Erisman, now with the Seattle Pacific University School of Business and Economics after a long and distinguished career as an executive at the Boeing Corporation. Without any doubt Al's ideas and push-back have helped me strengthen and clarify my approach to the Beatitudes in business contexts. And without any doubt some of his phrasing and nuance on various points is part of what I am presenting here. Al's forthcoming book on *Joseph: The Accidental Executive* will demonstrate what I have said for a long time: that there is no business leader who better integrates biblical truth and business leadership than Al.

¹³ Tom Peters & Robert Waterman, *In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best-Run Companies* (Harper & Row, 1982)