



Assassin Repellent

Reflections on Jesus' Beattitudes

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One of the more popular passages from the NT is the so-called Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7). This sermon encapsulates the whole range of Jesus' teachings. The 'introduction' to the sermon is a set of ideas commonly referred to as 'Beattitudes'.

Here I suggest we read these ideas as a type of 'repellent', not against insects but something more sinister. The path of faith is beset by 'assassins' whose mission is to derail and sabotage those who would truly seek God. We can

think of such famed historical assassins like the ninjas to realise the danger they pose. Hollywood has done its part to fill our screens with images of assassins of every shade. Even video games thrive on the imagery. Common to these portrayals is the acknowledgement that these assassins lurk in dark alleys and attack when least expected.

In our spiritual struggles, there are assassins lurking in the shadows of life awaiting our unsuspecting moments. They pounce on us when we are least prepared and many times succeed in exterminating our spiritual intentions. While these assassins may not be visible, they require the same treatment that mosquitoes do, a spray of repellent. I will refer to the contestation via the word 'spirit' since we are dealing with spiritual matters. So here we go!

Spirit of Pride v Poor in Spirit

Throughout Christian history, pride has been recognised as the number 1 sin, Assassin 1. The more religious a person believes he/she is, the more pride there is. This type of pride is highly destructive because it convinces us we are good enough for God and better than others. If ever a group of religionists lived who embodied this spirit, it had to have been the Pharisees. They were so full of themselves that they could look down their noses at everyone else. They were a tightly knit group and referred to each other as '*khaverim*' (brothers). They called the common people *ha'am* (Hebrew) or *laos* (Greek) meaning simply 'the people' (a rather pejorative usage).

I am often gobsmacked by the fact Jesus had the temerity to call these 'holy Joes' all kinds of unflattering names like 'den of vipers', 'whited tombs' and 'children of Satan'. Jesus also called them 'hupocritis', meaning they were great actors. Their whole religious framework was great theatre and they knew others actually admired them for this, except maybe God. In the Parable of the Two Worshippers (Luke 18), Jesus demonstrated the lengths to which this arrogance carried them; even in God's presence they had no appropriate sense of humility.

The Repellent for this Assassin is being poor in spirit. I like the active NLT reading, 'God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs' (Matt 5.3). I believe Jesus is drawing

attention to a simple reality: when in the presence of most high God, what can we offer as credit?

Here are some biblical samples of what his means:

- When Israel's High Priest entered the Holy of Holies during Yom Kippur, he wore only a plain white robe rather than his impressive regalia (Lev 16).
- When Isaiah encountered the thrice holy God in vision (Isa 6), he thought it would be his demise for having 'seen' God.
- When Joshua the High Priest stood in the presence of God, his apparel seemed caked with excrement (Zec 3).

Poor in spirit is the antidote against pride. It enables us to know that God is holy and we, even though much loved, are not. That is the spirit God can truly bless.

Spirit of 'Celebration' v Mournful Spirit

Religious fanaticism often thrives on the misery of others and imbues the spirit of 'They deserve it'. It is almost as if we want to celebrate the failure of others because somehow it makes us feel better about ourselves. This is a very powerful assassin because it has the knack of removing our basic humanity. When we 'smack' our lips at the sins of others, we show that we think they somehow had it coming. The problem here is not just about a lack of humanity but a false theology. We think God may also be like that. Job met this attitude in his friends. A Netflix movie, *Miracles from Heaven*, captures this same attitude in a truly touching manner. This is *Assassin 2*.

The Repellent is captured in these words, 'God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted' (Matt 5.4). This is not the mourning of grief or even repentance. It is the recognition of sin's tragedy wherever it occurs and seeks to empathise or sympathise with the sufferer. It is an attitude which holds that someone's failure is our failure. It was the attitude Jesus displayed as he rode into Jerusalem for the last time and saw its obstinacy (Matt 23.37). It was the cry of Yahweh as he wrestled with the epic decision regarding the Babylonian Captivity (Hos 11).

Such mourning finds solace only in the heart of God for he will truly comfort as he pronounced in Isa 40.1, 'Comfort, comfort my people; speak tenderly to Jerusalem'. This comfort is the counter balance to sin itself, something only Christ can do for us. This was the whole point of the incarnation, that God can immerse himself in humanity so as to provide the extraction we desperately need (see Heb 2.14-18).

Spirit of Self-Praise v Humble Spirit

One day I walked into an office of a church leader who had the reputation of being a humble man. As I entered the door, I was greeted with unique wall fixtures, framed certificates, diplomas and awards decorated every wall. Whether we accept it or not, all of us love being recognised and will do much to advertise ourselves, even decorate our walls. This is also why people and even leaders get so miffed when they are not praised. I admit no one enjoys being criticised but people who are critical of us may not be our enemies, while those who flatter us may not be our friends. Returning to Jesus' story of the Two Worshippers, we see this self-praise so evident in the Pharisee. Why did he have to recite his good deeds before God? Self-praise is Assassin 3.

To counter this attack on our spiritual life, Jesus offered a Repellent called 'humility', 'God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth' (Matt 5.5). This is not simply deference to others or a willingness to play second fiddle. The Bible provides us with a working model, Moses (Num 12). Moses was under attack from his own siblings, Miriam and Aaron. They accused him of being an autocratic leader and praised themselves for also being called by God (this 'song' reverberates through every corridor of power, especially in church circles). Self-praise is a close companion to the desire for getting even. It is in this context that Moses is described as being 'the humblest man' who ever lived. Here is the crux: Moses was not humble because he lacked fire but chose to let God defend him and even attempted to assuage God's anger against his siblings. This is the Repellent against self-praise. Learning to let God deal with our Assassins means we will inherit the earth.

Spirit of Materialism v Righteous Spirit

Have you ever wondered what being materialistic really means? Jesus taught that it is impossible to serve God and material well-being (Matt 6.24). doing that is like being caught in a crossfire. Yet, there is not even one human who can claim not to be concerned about material well-being. As someone once said, 'None is so poor as the person who thinks he does not have enough'. This is the heart of materialism; not some rampant love for money but an apparent need for things. The tragedy is that often our need for things becomes our priority in life (Mrs Lot is a good example). Here we meet Assassin 4, one common to everyone.

To repel this animalistic instinct and avoid being spiritually assassinated by it, we need what Jesus offers: 'God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied' (Matt 5.6). To protect ourselves from the materialistic Assassin, we need to have our priority properly focused on righteousness or justice (these two words are two sides of the same coin). 'Hunger and thirst' are basic needs; that is how elemental we must get to obtain the satisfaction of life only God provides. I think of what Isaiah wrote that if we truly seek God 'We will live in joy and peace' and nature itself will resound with our celebration (Is 55.12).

Spirit of Indifference v Merciful Spirit

One of the best known parables of Jesus is recorded in Luke 10. A traveller went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and along the way was attacked by robbers who left him half-dead. Presently, a priest came along but passes by without offering any help. Shortly after, a Levite (Temple worker) came by and also walks on by. The two men probably had good reasons for not helping; fear of the robbers or of ritualistic contamination. Then a despised Samaritan came by and did what the other two should have done and even more.

Assassin 5 is the 'spirit of indifference', that all too familiar human inaction based on concerns about convenience. This brings to mind this well-known statement: 'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing' (attributed to Edmund Burke though probably from philosopher John Stuart Mill).

Jesus' chosen Repellent here is 'mercy': 'God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy' (Matt 5.7), a rather reciprocal result. The absence of a merciful spirit was cited as one of the main factors in God's anger against Judah (Isa 1) prior to the Exile. God is repulsed by our inhumanity and indifference is the ultimate version of it.

Mercy is the ability to look beyond circumstances, failures, mistakes and sin and to see people for who they really are, or more appropriately, to see others as God sees them. When we do that we will stop to help and seek to push back against evil itself. Being truly merciful requires us to do the following: 'Learn to do what is good, seek justice, correct the oppressor, defend the rights of the fatherless, plead the widow's case' (Isa 1.17 HCSB). Do this and we will receive mercy.

Spirit of Impurity v Spirit of Purity

The Bible consistently asserts that 'purity' is needed for those who would enter the presence of God. We see this in the cultic laws of Leviticus and the eschatological materials of Revelation. We read the assessments of God about Noah and Job as individuals who were 'pure' before God (the Hebrew word '*tamim*' is used here and in Leviticus). Jesus is depicted as human but without impurity, without sin (Heb 4.15).

Impurity is Assassin 6 and is the most insidious of them all. This Assassin can come at us from every conceivable angle, in our thoughts, words and actions. It may appear as profanity or lustful thoughts. It may appear as pornography or destructive addiction. It pollutes our thoughts, contaminates our words and soils our actions. It is a deadly Assassin.

The obvious Repellent is purity (the antithesis of impurity): 'God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God' (Matt 5.8). Adam and Eve lived in God's presence but lost that privilege the moment sin entered the planet (Gen 3). Moses requested to see God's face but was told that would not be possible for humans, even Moses (Exod 33.18-23). Yet, in Revelation God's people stand in his presence on the crystal sea and celebrate their

redemption from sin (Rev 7; 19). These redeemed persons have been purified by the spirit of purity and therefore are able to see God.

Spirit of Conflict v Spirit of Making Peace

Assassin 7 has been part and parcel of human history from the beginning. In actuality this Assassin first did his work in heaven, causing havoc in the universe's most perfect place (Isa 14; Eze 28; Rev 12). Then it came to earth and things have never been the same. It unsheathed its ugly daggers in the first murder (Gen 4) and has never looked back. Conflict is almost synonymous with humanity. Conflict within family. Conflict in society and nation. Conflict between nations. The 20th cent witnessed two World Wars. The 21st cent is witnessing conflict in every corner of the globe, and conflict is not always about open war.

The only way to repel conflict is to apply the Repellent called 'making peace': 'God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God' (Matt 5.9). People tend to respond to conflicts in one of two ways, ignore them or participate. If we ignore conflict it will not go away. If we participate, it may destroy us. Jesus calls for a third option, working to make peace.

We are not referring to the Henry Kissinger model but the day to day attempt by every believer to overturn the Assassin named 'Conflict' through love. Jesus points out that to be children of God we must learn to love our enemies, anything less is unacceptable (Matt 5.43-48). When God's people spray the world with this peacemaking Repellent, then conflict may be overturned.

Spirit of Persecuting v Spirit of Persecuted

There is a degree of evil which lurks in every person that turns simple folk into persecutors and governments into exterminators. The Roman persecution against Christians. The Christian Crusades. POW internments. The Holocaust. The Gulag. The Killing Fields. The Balkan ethnic cleansing. The Rwandan genocide. The Rohingya displacement. The list is limitless. Reasons for persecuting others often have strong religious overtones. Christianity has

stood on both sides of the fence as persecutor and persecuted. It appears that there is no way to avoid this Assassin. Wherever humans go, it follows.

So what Repellent can we use? 'God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs' (Matt 5.10). We have travelled full circle back to the first promise Jesus made. There is a causal relationship between 'poor in spirit' and 'persecuted spirit'. These are not inevitables to be accepted meekly but intentional attitudes to be deployed as Repellents against Assassins who would endanger or crush our spiritual journey.

Learn more about God's Assassin Repellents. They could make the difference between life and death!

Shalom!