

“Living the Beatitudes Today”

Dr. David Yount

The Annual Delta Epsilon Sigma Lecture

Villanova University

October 21, 2004

Introduction:

Good evening, and thanks so much for coming tonight.

Our National Scholastic Honorary Society recognizes scholarly achievement in Catholic higher education. In addition to this goal, members of the Beta Chi chapter at Villanova dedicate themselves to the ideals expressed in the Beatitudes.

Further, the Society seeks to support all members of the University community who are interested in learning more about their faith, the Catholic tradition, Villanova's Augustinian heritage, and living lives of Christian service.

Consistent with this purpose, the Society, in conjunction with the Office for Mission Effectiveness, sponsors an annual lecture which seeks to provide the campus community with an opportunity to reflect on what it means to live lives inspired by faith.

To this end, we are delighted to have as our guest this evening, Dr. David Yount -Vice Chairman of the Washington Theological Consortium - a community of 18 theological institutions of diverse religious traditions that seeks a deeper appreciation of other world religions and exploration the faiths and values that they hold in common.

David Yount is nationally syndicated by Scripps Howard News Service to 400 newspapers with a combined readership of over 25 million. He hosts his own television show. He holds three graduate degrees in theology. He is the recipient of both the Thoth Award and the PR Casebook Award. He holds a Lifetime Achievement Award from Knox College.

Among his recent works are:

- *The Future of Christian Faith in America*
- *Faith under Fire: Religion's Role in the American Dream*
and
- *Growing in Faith: A Guide for the Reluctant Christian*

Most important for our purposes tonight is his book:

- ***“What Are We to Do?: Living the Sermon on the Mount”***

So after looking long and hard, I am confident that we could not find a more suitable speaker to address our topic tonight, “Living the Beatitudes Today,”

Please help me in welcoming Dr. David Yount.

Invocation:

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord: and may the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, come upon us and remain with us forever. Amen.

“Living the Beatitudes Today”

When Margaret Thatcher set about privatizing the British economy in the 1980s, millions of redundant and inefficient workers lost their jobs. Knowing the prime minister to be a devout Christian, the nation's most distinguished political columnist, John Humphrys, conspired to ambush her into apologizing to the nation.

In a televised press conference, he asked Mrs. Thatcher to describe the essence of Christianity - fully expecting her to reply "love" or "charity" as the essence of her faith. Whereupon he intended to say: "Aha, prime minister, you talk of love and charity, and yet your government has put three million people on the dole. How do you justify that?"

Alas, Humphrys was thwarted by the devout politician. Instead of answering "love" or "charity," Mrs. Thatcher snapped back that CHOICE is the essence of Christianity. Christians must choose!

1. Of course, there's a problem with that. Among God's creatures, humans beings alone are born without a set of directions. We lack right choices, especially since much more is expected of us than any creatures God has made? To make things worse, Jesus said that we are to be "perfect, as our heavenly Father is perfect."
2. When I am perplexed (which is oftener than I wish), I envy Nessie, our Scottish terrier, who has always known how to be a dog. And our cats, Rufus & Ginger, who are content to follow their feline instincts.
3. By contrast, it can take a man or woman a lifetime to discover how to be human, and some people go to their graves never fully knowing what they were meant to do and be, ending their lives in regret. The old adage: "To thyself be true" is useful only when you know who you are.
4. Unlike animals, humans take years to assume anything approaching independent action. Our infancy and toddlerhood are lengthy. And then as adults we must live by our wits, not by instinct. The ancients fixed the age of reason at seven years. By that they meant that our consciences are formed by then. But if you have much experience with seven year olds, you'll agree that their capacity for choosing wisely is limited.
5. Years ago, when Secretary of State Colin Powell was considering a run for the presidency, he was asked by reporters what was the most important thing he would want to bring to the answer "PRIDE." Instead, he said that the American people most need a renewed sense of SHAME. What he was lamenting was that conscience was insufficient to keep us behaving in society's interests, let alone our own interests, and God's interests. In Powell's estimation, what people need is social disapproval ensure that they act well.

6. I can't speak for Augustinians, but the Jesuits used to fancy that, given a child to educate, they could vouch for that child's beliefs, values, and good behavior once he or she reached adulthood. What the priests were saying is that even a well meaning person's conscience is not infallible, but needs educating. Parenthetically, when I was in public relations in Washington, I worked alongside a Jesuit educated young man who went on to become the tobacco industry's chief apologist. The priests may have overstated their case!

7. If instinct and conscience are insufficient to guarantee good behavior, what is the key? Surely a set of directions. If you have had children, you may remember long Christmas Eves spent assembling their toys with the help of directions written by someone in Taiwan or Korea for whom English was clearly a second or third language. The mystery of garbled directions was compounded by the discovery that batteries were not included!

8. In the absence of instinct and clear directions, human society as it is, laws have multiplied over the ages. If we lived in Florida, for example, we would discover 28,750 statutes telling Floridians how to behave. And those are only state laws; add to them local and federal and international laws that aim to regulate our behavior.

9. Still, as we know from the daily newspapers and personal experience, people continue to act badly or blindly. Moreover, even effective laws do little more than keep us from trespassing on one another and harming our planet. Just because a person manages to stay out of jail doesn't mean he is fully human, let alone good. And few laws guarantee that we will choose well and DO good.

10. One exception that comes to mind is the Good Samaritan rule in France. As you may recall from the auto crash that took Princess Diana's life, the French require by law that bystanders actually help people involved in an accident. If you remember the last episode of the TV series "Seinfeld," you will recall that Jerry and his callous friends were thrown into a small town jail because they failed to come to the assistance of a woman in need.

11. Of course, the original Good Samaritan Jesus referred to was impelled by something other than law. Let's call it compassion or love.

12. But back to the law as a moral guide. Who should know better than how we were designed to behave than the God who made us for himself? Through Moses he gave Ten Commandments (far fewer, you will agree, than Florida's 28,000 plus). Four of God's commandments are now reflected in civil law or criminal law the world over proscriptions of murder, theft, adultery, and perjury. But the other six are expectations that do not easily translate into civil or criminal statute. The command to honor one's parents, for example, is more of a tribal and cultural expectation than a legal one. Similarly, the condemnation of covetousness is a brake on ambition and passion rather than on overt behavior.

13. As to the three remaining commandments, two call for honoring God, and the third requires observance of the Sabbath. Not many years ago, my home state of Virginia had so called "blue laws" that attempted to require citizens to keep this commandment. By the time Jesus appeared in history, the Israelites had elaborated the original Decalogue into rules governing an Israelite's every waking moment. Judaic scholars proclaim 613 commandments, including 248 obligations and 365 prohibitions. The Ten

Commandments had been expanded more than 60 times!

14. Of course, as Jesus affirmed, the Ten Commandments can be reduced to just two: To love God with one's whole heart, soul, and mind; and to love one's neighbor as oneself. For Jesus, mere law abiding was insufficient. One must act from love. He (and John the Baptist before him) called not just for adherence to law.

15. Parenthetically, the *Times of London* not long ago polled the clergy of the Church of England and discovered that a majority of the vicars could not remember all Ten Commandments. This revelation did not discomfit one clergyman, who said that Englishmen and women can be expected to act as ladies and gentlemen without being reminded of God's rules. (In view of the fact that the British government predicts that more than half of male Britons born in this century will spend some time in jail, the vicar may have been flattering his flock).

16. This brings us (at long last) to the Sermon on the Mount, which stands not only as the Christian ideal but was respected as the highest expression of moral excellence by non-Christians like Gandhi. The novelist Leo Tolstoy asked this question on behalf of all humanity: "What Are We to Do?" Tolstoy answered it by attempting to live the Sermon literally. He failed, but he blamed his failure on his own weaknesses rather than on Jesus' demands. Fidel Castro believes that the Sermon on the Mount is what Karl Marx had in mind as the ideal in communism.

17. For all the praise heaped on it, the Sermon is more ignored than followed. It is not difficult to sense why. The Sermon's appeals go against almost every natural human instinct, turning morality upside down. Jesus values poverty over wealth, humility over pride, sorrow over comfort, mercy over mere justice, happiness in persecution, and demanded that we not only forgive our enemies but love them. Moreover, the Sermon lays down a strict sexual morality, equating mere lust with adultery, and suggesting drastic ways of dealing with temptation.

18. No wonder, then, that the Catholic convert G.K. Chesterton remarked that "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found to be difficult and is yet untried."

19. The Sermon comprises chapters 5, 6, and 7 of Matthew's Gospel. There is a shorter version in Luke. Whether Jesus said all these things at any one time is besides the point. Taken together, these are his directions for how we are to choose and act. In some cases Jesus resorts to exaggeration, but only to drive home his point. When I was in parochial school, I was taught that the Sermon consisted only of "Counsels of Perfection" to be followed by saints - mere optional behavior at extra cost but not expected of the run-of-the-mill Christian. But in view of Jesus' command that we be perfect like our Creator, they must be taken more seriously.

20. If we approach the Sermon as just another set of laws and rules, we are bound to fail. What they exemplify is how a person acts who follows Jesus' example and lives by love. It would be impossible to even attempt to be true to the Sermon if we could not count on God's forgiveness. The Sermon is not for the righteous, but for the humble who seek perfection through love. It is for people who seek seriously to imitate Christ.

21. The setting of the Sermon is critical. It begins: "When Jesus saw the vast crowds he went up the hill side and, after he had sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began his teaching by saying to them..." Who does the word "them" refer to? The vast crowds? No, it's clear that, although the multitudes are listening to the Sermon, Jesus is speaking about his disciples. They are the ones who have already left everything to follow him. The Beatitudes precisely describe them. They are poor, for all they have is Jesus. They are sorrowful, humble, merciful, sincere, persecuted, and blamed, and they are peacemakers. What else could they be under the circumstances? Ordinary and flawed as they are, because they have thrown in their lot with Jesus, they are the salt of the earth and light of the world, and heirs to God's kingdom. They are not just "blessed", they are "happy" in their new state.

22. Does this mean that the Sermon refers only to the disciples and not to the multitudes? No, but it reflects the fact that the disciples exemplified the new values of the Kingdom. To the extent that you and I leave things behind in order to follow Christ, we are doing the same.

23. In the Beatitudes Jesus is not so much saying what we must do, but HOW THINGS ARE for those who follow him: we are blessed to what have been called his "hard sayings":

- We must not be angry with one another.
- We must forgive one another before we seek God's pardon.
- We must not only refrain from adultery, but from lust.
- We must not divorce for any reason other than unfaithfulness.
- We must forswear oaths.
- We must turn the other cheek to our persecutors, and give to those who would borrow from us.
- We must love our enemies and refrain from criticizing others.

24. As if this weren't a difficult enough agenda, Jesus says that "if your right eye leads you astray, pluck it out and throw it away," and "if your right hand leads you astray, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than that your whole body should go to the rubbish heap."

25. What are we to make of this? Is it simply hyperbole that Jesus often uses to underscore the moral of what he is saying? Of course: Jesus isn't into self-mutilation. Otherwise, there would be a lot of one-eyed, one-armed Christians – and there aren't. But Jesus wouldn't use such drastic figures of speech unless what he's saying is to be taken seriously. At the Chautauqua Institution a few summers ago the chaplain who shared the week's religious program with me argued that the Sermon on the Mount needs to be reinterpreted in the light of contemporary life. There is no evidence for this. My own sense is that these are permanent values of the Kingdom, and that when we fall short, we need to acknowledge the fact, then seek God's forgiveness and one another's. Just as alcoholics don't stop being alcoholics when they stop drinking, Christians don't stop being sinners when they seek God's kingdom. But they can count on being forgiven.

26. The theme of the Sermon is that those who respond to Jesus' call to follow him need a change of heart. Not a change of mind, but a change of heart. In Jesus' words, "Don't worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow can take care of itself! One day's trouble is enough for

one day" (Matthew 6:34). "Treat other people exactly as you would like to be treated by others - this is the essence of all true religion" (Matthew 7:14).

27. Despite the impression that the Beatitudes seem to go against human nature, Jesus says that those who follow them are happy. The traditional translation states "Blessed" are the poor..." and so on. But here is the equally valid translation of the Anglican scholar J.B. Phillips that I use in my books:

- How HAPPY are those who know their need for God, for the kingdom of Heaven is theirs!
- How happy are those who know what sorrow means, for they will be given courage and comfort!
- Happy are those who claim nothing, for the whole earth will belong to them!
- Happy are those who are hungry and thirsty for true goodness, Happy are the merciful, for they will have mercy shown to them!
- Happy are the utterly sincere, for they will see God!
- Happy are those who make peace, for they will be known as sons of God!
- Happy are those who have suffered persecution for the cause of goodness, for the kingdom of Heaven is theirs!
- ... and so on.

28. Jesus proclaimed that those who followed him in poverty and persecution, love and forgiveness were not only blessed but happy. That does not mean they particularly felt happy, but that they were in a state of happiness - they were following the directions God intended when he made us. We must not berate ourselves when we fail to live up to the Sermon, but accept forgiveness, pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and start all over again. Humility, after all, is a virtue, and imperfection is a fact of life. I am not comfortable with my failures, but I am reconciled to the fact that I do fail.

29. Does the Sermon give us sufficient directions to cover every circumstance we will meet in life? Evangelical Christians tend to confront every situation by asking themselves "What would Jesus do?" For example, would Jesus drive an SUV? Frankly, we can't always be sure what he would do in situations he was never in. Jesus said to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and that works out in practice. If you ever read the Travis McGee novels by the late John D. McDonald, you will recall the hero's wise sidekick, Dr. Meyer, who counseled that, when uncertain about options, taking the harder course was probably more moral.

30. I don't think we'd always agree with that. When Jesus noted that the birds have nests but the Son of Man had nowhere to lean his head, he was not praising discomfort. I can't recall whether it was Shaw or Wilde who said, "The English think they are moral when they are only uncomfortable." The fact is that Jesus didn't address some big moral issues, let alone the little ones you and I encounter. He didn't condemn slavery, for example, and he only counseled soldiers to obey their leaders. He said we would always have the poor among us. Does that mean he approved slavery and war and poverty? Of course not, but the lack of clear moral imperatives in every situation should keep us from acting self-righteous and keep us open to forgiveness, because we are certain to keep making mistakes even when our hearts are in the right place.

31. If you recall the film, *The Madness of King George*, you will remember that George III was as insane at the end of the picture as he was at its outset. But what he learned was to successfully feign sanity. He was restored to the throne and his pretense actually improved his mental health. Psychologists have long advised insecure people to act secure, the shy to act confident, pessimist to act optimistic. The more we act positively, the better chance we have of becoming habitually positive.

32. Hollywood mogul Sam Goldwyn once sourly observed: "The most important thing in acting is honesty. Once you've learned to fake that, you're in." But acting is not a charade; it is experience, even if it starts with nothing more than going through the motions. Those of us who would follow Christ and his Sermon will be afflicted with stage fright and the fear of forgetting our lines. But unless we start acting, and moving, we cannot expect to heed Christ's call: "Follow me!" G.K. Chesterton, a clumsy man, wryly advised that anything worth doing is worth doing badly - which is all we may be capable of when we begin to follow Christ. But it is a start in the right direction.

33. Are we deluding ourselves that we can follow Jesus' call? Well, consider this: When Jesus told his disciples that a camel could more easily squeeze through the eye of a needle than a rich man get into the kingdom of God, they asked him, "Then who can possibly be saved?" Jesus looked steadily at them and replied, "Humanly speaking it is impossible; but with God anything is possible!" (Matthew 19:24).

34. While researching a book about Civil War re-enactors, Sunday the preacher devoted his two-hour-long sermon to posing this question to his congregation: "If you were arrested and charged for being a Christian, would there be any evidence to convict you?"

Even a second-rate defense attorney could plead successfully that mere church-going is insufficient evidence to support the charge that his client is a Christian. So, too, is any nominal profession of faith, whereas a Christian with real religious convictions would likely be convicted. Given the same scenario I can imagine a clever prosecutor demanding how the defendant regards Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. There's the true test of faith, but it is seldom the subject of preaching from our pulpits.

35. Nor on our campuses. But, as recently as a century ago, the virtues propounded in the Sermon on the Mount actually motivated the curriculum of American colleges and universities. Here is a portion of the founding charter of the University of Maine:

"It shall be the duty of Trustees, Directors, and Teachers...to impress upon the minds of the students the principles of morality and justice and a sacred regard for truth; love of their country; humanity and universal benevolence; sobriety, frugality, chastity, moderation and temperance, and all other virtues that are ornaments of human society."

Lest you suspect Maine to be the moralistic exception, the University of North Dakota a century ago opened every class day curriculum, that public university's catalog stated that "an effort has been made to include subjects...valuable for their influence in the formation of character and correct views and purposes of life."

Inasmuch as many of the nation's private colleges originated as seminaries, it's no surprise that they stressed the following of Christ in their curriculum. President Mark Hopkins of Massachusetts' Williams College actually proclaimed that only one book - the Bible - need be in the college library. A century ago Pennsylvania's Lafayette College

catalog stated that "the Bible shall be the central object of study throughout... It is dealt with reverentially as the Word of God and as the inspired and infallible rule which God gives to his people."

A century ago Pennsylvania's Lutheran-founded Gettysburg College taught ethics leading to "an immutable basis for right in the nature of God." Today Gettysburg College is not so sure. Its current catalog concludes that "human thought is not often capable of reaching universal certitude" and proposes instead a "wise skepticism" and "a sense of human fallibility."

36. In our times, unfortunately, spirituality has largely been reduced to a free-floating sentiment divorced from religion. One can feel spiritual about a pet, nature, art, or even oneself. At best, spirituality can be merely sentimental; at worst it amounts to self-worship. Unlike faith, hope, and love, it cannot be shared with others.

Spirituality professes to be humble and unassuming because it's always seeking, morphing, and incomplete. Whereas religion is something else altogether, defining the actual, permanent relationship of every mortal to God - subordinate, dependent, flawed, tested, redeemed, and hopeful. By extension, religion defines our responsibility to one another, not resting on feeling at all, but on conviction, devotion, and gratitude. Religion acknowledges that faith itself is a gift not of our own creation. It puts an end to random seeking in favor of accepting what God has already revealed, however indistinctly we perceive that revelation.

37. "By their fruit you shall know them" is the perennial truth about religious faith. Everyone must act on faith, not certitude. But, as we know, sentiment or mere inclination can masquerade as faith. Unlike most Christians, the Quakers have no creed to express their beliefs, but rely instead on an inner light to inform their consciences. I once asked a wise Friend how to determine whether his inspiration was true or bogus. "Easy enough," he replied. "Judge me not by what I say but by what I do!"

38. A faith based on sentiment will always be limited, whereas a faith based on love is universal. God does not play favorites. He is the great democrat, treating everyone equally, sinners as well as saints. As he is not sentimental, neither ought we to be. Instead we can emulate him in loving service, which is often. People do not have to like others in order to love them, but must accept the fact that God loves others as much as he loves us. We are equally called to service: "What you have done for the least of my brethren you have done to me."

Love is not a feeling but a devoted doing. "Whatever you have done for these, the least of my brethren, you have done to me."

39. Peter Maurin, co-founder (with Dorothy Day) of the Catholic Worker movement, insisted that the test of faith rests in action. For humanity's sake, he argued, the church must speak loudly to government and business alike. By the church he meant every Christian.

"When religion has nothing to do with politics," he said, "politics is only factionalism: 'Let's turn the rascals out so our good friends can get in!' When religion has nothing to do with business, business is only commercialism: 'Let's get what we can while the getting's good!'"

At the same time it sought justice and jobs for ordinary Americans, the movement insisted that individual Christians retain personal responsibilities they cannot cede to government and institutions. Maurin was impressed that the earliest believers were admired by pagans for their personal generosity with one another: "See how they love one another!"

To be sure, piety easily becomes pretentious. In his Sermon, Jesus himself decried the religious show-offs: "Believe me; they have had all the reward they are going to get" (Matthew 6:2).

It is ironic that religion remains a taboo topic for polite hypocrisy abounds in public life. Politicians routinely pronounce their piety but casually vote against their beliefs, protesting that faith is a private affair and that they were elected to reflect the wishes of the voters.

The denominations do not help matters when they disagree with one another about the Gospel's demands on public policy. But honest disagreement should not deter the churches and individual believers from speaking out and acting out. If the church were meant to be exclusively other-worldly, then it was pointless for God to walk the earth and give rules for living this side of eternity.

40. Years ago, when I was first moved to produce a book, I addressed it to people like myself - "reluctant Christians." That book was entitled, *Growing in Faith*. My hope was that I could help myself and others to overcome the reluctance to act out our beliefs publicly:

I suggest that our reluctance to respond to Jesus stems not from any disagreement with him but from a fear of going out on a limb, of trying and falling flat. We hate the prospect of appearing foolish. If we're going to try to act like Christians, we don't want to appear amateurish about it, but that appears to be the best we can expect from ourselves since Jesus' standards are Olympian!

The church itself must risk appearing foolish when it confronts a permissive, self-indulgent culture with a faith that insists on simplicity, humility, peace-making, forgiving, and expects persecution for its efforts. So be it. The church itself must live the Sermon on the Mount.

41. Early in the new millennium I challenged an audience of Quakers at North Carolina's Guilford College, asking them, "Why did Quakers stop quaking?" A man in his 80s gave this testimony:

I know why I don't quake. I don't ask God the hard questions about what he requires me to do with my life. I'm afraid that if I ask him God will tell me something difficult that I'm unwilling to do. But if I was willing to listen to him, and do what he demands, then I'd start quaking."

Whether or not he realized it, that man sensed the power and the necessity of the Sermon on the Mount.

If we are overwhelmed by the demands of the Sermon on the Mount, here are some consoling words of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who ventured this prediction: "We may be surprised at the people we find in heaven," he said. God has a soft spot for sinners. His standards are quite low."

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For more information, please contact Dr. Christopher M. Janosik, Secretary-Treasurer of the Beta Chi Chapter of Delta Epsilon Sigma.