

Jesus's Sermon on the Mount: The Spiritual Foundations of Stress Resilience and Health

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Have you ever wondered why this remarkable experience we call life is filled with so many stressful twists and turns? When this life experience was planned for us, why so much difficulty? And particularly, since all the stress is here, how can we deal with it wisely and well?

Is it possible that such challenges are an intrinsic part of why we are here? And that the instruction manuals for dealing well with life, provided by our spiritual sages, needed vivid real-life experiences to realize just how powerful such spiritual ways are for us to become wisely resilient, as they describe God being? Could it be that learning how to face challenges with such equanimity is a fundamental reason for our lives?

Jesus's Map for Creating Resilience

You've heard it said that when you give a speech, or teach a lesson, you should "Tell them what you're going to tell them; then tell them; then tell them what you told them." When Jesus began his ministry, he summarized what he was going to teach for his remaining years. That summary was captured in his Sermon on the Mount (New Testament Matthew 5-7 and Luke 6). Then he later filled in the details and taught his illustrative stories until his last trip to Jerusalem. Finally, at the last supper, and vividly, in his final actions, he summarily demonstrated what he wanted them to remember.

His summarizing Sermon on the Mount followed a similar pattern: The Beatitudes at the beginning (Matthew 5:3-11) outlined the rest of the Sermon (in a developmentally maturing pattern), and then, at the end of the Sermon, he summarized the essential purpose of what he had just told them:

"Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

And every one that heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them not, shall be likened unto a foolish man, which built his house upon the sand:

And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell: and great was the fall of it."

(Matthew 7:24-27)

Here, he describes the *essence of his teachings as being about God's wisdom for dealing well with the stresses of life*: for creating resilient wisdom in the face of whatever comes up. The Sermon is about how to handle well the major and minor challenges and seeming crises we all face. His wisdom is profound, and resonates with that already present in our deeper intelligence. Interestingly, his teachings also highly reflect what practical health science has gleaned from years of study of what healthy resilience is all about. It turns out that the spiritual principles Jesus teaches have been well proven to create better social, mental and even physical wellbeing (which is how the World Health Organization defines health.).

To begin, let's touch on what life's experience is about, then identify four key, proven principles highly proven to create good mental and physical health,

and finally explore how Jesus developed those principles in his Sermon on the Mount.

Stress: Good or Bad?

Do you think stress is bad for wellbeing (health), or could it also be good? Most of us, on reflection, would probably say it could be either. Too much can cause havoc and feeling overwhelmed (and cause stress-related illnesses), but just the right amount is motivating, stimulating and invigorating. Hans Selye, considered the father of stress studies a century ago, called the bad kind “distress” and the good kind “eustress”. (You may be more familiar with the term for the bad kind -distress- than the good kind.) So what makes the difference between whether the stressor is good or bad? The four principles mentioned convert the bad kind of stress to the good kind. The fact is, that stress just *is*. Life tends to be one stressor after another. It seems to be part and parcel of what mortal life is about. If you were to pray to have the stress removed from your life, it’s probably a prayer that can’t be answered; because stress seems to be a fundamentally necessary part of life’s experience.

If you had opportunity to create for your children a marvelous, beautiful world like this one, with an experience full of significant challenges, and send your kids off, away from you, to live in it, why would you do so? What would be your purpose in creating such a “camp”? What would you most want them to come back with from the challenging experience? What would you want them to learn? (Before reading on, close your eyes for a few moments and contemplate your answer.)

Would part of the answer be something like the following?

- To grow into mature, resilient people: to become wise, strong and capable of dealing well with whatever comes up (by experiencing *doing* it)?
- To find out what actually works to create such wise resilience?
- To discover how to experience joy?
- To learn how to really love? (And what love is really about)?

Might these reasons also be what God’s ways are about? (The ways of being that Jesus taught and demonstrated)

And incidentally, would you really send your children to such an experience just to prove themselves worthy to come back to you? (Really?)
Might that notion carry some misconceptions about life’s purposes?

Stress, Health and Transformation

Do you think stress impacts physical illness? Well, it depends. Medical studies reveal that over half of physical illness in primary care clinics is highly associated with mental depression, anxiety and distress. The mechanisms of that connection are becoming clear.¹ On the other hand, the good kind of stress

(eustress) can actually be health enhancing. (Boredom is not healthy.) Health means *total* well-being.

Do you think Jesus’s teachings might contain profound wisdom for dealing well with life’s challenges, for creating total well-being— and for making life beautiful? Let’s explore together some of the details of that, and how deeply empowering spiritual principles can transform the bad kind of stress (distress) to the good kind. In the mental and physical health science literature, handling life’s challenges well, even productively, is called resilience. And then resilience moves on even further to experience the beauties and joys of life with greater abundance: to flourish, to find fulfillment, purpose and meaning. As Jesus put it, “I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10)

As noted, Jesus summarized his great Sermon by saying its profound principles create such resilience. A very interesting observation is that the seemingly most difficult parts of the Sermon are usually the most profoundly effective. They are Jesus’s masterstrokes.

Jesus’s teachings are largely about spiritual transformation: letting go of the little, ego-driven mind or self we all grow up with —scripturally called the “natural man” (1 Corinthians 2:14)— and moving to actualize the large, real self: the divine intelligence (or mind of God) within us. This has to do with moving from a mindset of competitive and comparative separateness (us versus them) toward oneness (the at-one-ment Jesus came to bring). We will see that process in the details of the Sermon.

The Beatitudes: Jesus’s Developmental Outline

Jesus begins his grand sermon with eight progressive steps that seem to lay a framework for what is to come (Matthew 5:3-11). He says “Blessed (fortunate, made better, even happy) are those who...

(Preparation and ground):

- are poor in spirit (humble)
- mourn
- are meek

(Active transformation):

- hunger and thirst for righteousness
- are merciful
- are pure in heart

(Experience equanimity):

- become peacemakers
- even when persecuted

For they shall...

be open to receive the kingdom of heaven
be comforted
inherit the earth

be filled [and enlightened]
obtain mercy
see God [all around them]

be called the children of God
experience the kingdom of heaven [now]

Let’s put this sequence of attitudes in the context of the stressful circumstances he alludes to at the end of his Sermon. We may be sailing along in a comfortable, old, automatic rut when a major crisis comes along, creating chaos, or at least not fitting well with our old automatic way of doing things. This is the stressor. Is that good or bad? Three possible results could occur²:

1. Give up, become bitter, proceed downhill
2. Try to get back to where you were before (that comfortable rut)
3. Become better than before as a result: wiser, more compassionate, more mature: i.e., more resilient.

Jesus says you are “blessed” if the stressor brings you into the beatitude sequence:

Preparation

- When the difficulty comes, you are blessed if, as a result, you become humble: recognizing you need to know more, that old ways of seeing and doing things are not enough to handle this well: submitting to possible guidance.

- How could mourning be blessed? Mourning occurs when we have to let go of old things to which we are attached. You are blessed if you let the old, comfortable but inadequate ways go: this often involves letting the little-ego mind die; letting go of old assumptions, attachments and worldviews (and thus mourn), in order for the new divine mind to emerge within us.

- You are blessed if all this brings you meekness. Meekness is about softening old rigidities: becoming more flexible and open. Then, “The meek will he guide in judgment: and the meek will he teach his way” (Psalm 25:9). Jesus said, “...learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls.” (Matthew 11:9) A former University of Utah Dean, Neal A Maxwell, defined meekness as “power under gentle control.” Meekness involves courageously, patiently and hopefully staying with the process in order to cultivate a deeper newness.

Transformation

- You are blessed if all this brings you to deeply *hunger and thirst* for righteousness (that is, for a heart and mind one with God’s, incorporating his wisdom into your being and action): to fully open yourself to enlightenment. Asking “How would God handle this?” opens you to the divine intelligence that already dwells within each of us, that to which we more deeply resonate. And thus you “shall be filled”: surrounded by what is needed, seeing through expanded eyes, creating inspired new vision.

- As that happens, you experience the great blessing to become truly merciful and compassionate (which is the heart of God’s righteousness). This dissipates feelings of angry judgment, self-criticism, hate, and revenge that cause so much of our unhappiness. And when we are merciful, we are more able to fully receive mercy with deep gratitude. By refusing to blame others for how we experience life, we feel more internal control of our lives.

- This growing state then evolves into pureness of heart: literally *actualizing* your deepest yearnings for goodness and wisdom; blossoming the divine seed within you; finding your great purpose and acting from pure intentions, from unlimited love and integrity (as God does). In this, you “shall see God” and his goodness all around you in awe, gratitude and even joy.

Equanimity

- At this point you are blessed to become a peacemaker, to create God's peace and strength both within yourself with whatever arises, and also the compassion needed for the imperfect others around you: healing seemingly separated (egoic) concerns in the understanding of oneness. This at-one-ment is the embodiment (the daughter or son) of God.

- All this brings you to be blessed with resilient equanimity (to be powerfully wise, and who you really are) even when you are being persecuted (insulted, shamed, conspired against). Your mental well-being is no longer controlled by external forces, but rather arises from within. Notice how Jesus demonstrated this in spades in the final hours of his life. You are now blessed to have a full internal sense of control to be who you want to be no matter what others are trying to do to you. Some of Jesus's seemingly more difficult sayings (to the little ego) will turn on this point.

After this introduction to the Sermon, Jesus is ready to dig into some of the specifics of these ways of responding. But first, let's identify four key principles, proven by health science, to significantly improve well-being.

Principles of Stress Resilience that Strongly Improve Health

Health is not just about the absence of disease. Real health is robust, *total well-being* in all the dimensions of life: physical, mental, social, spiritual, communal, environmental³. In health science, four core mental principles keep arising from hundreds of studies to have strong effects on creating good physical and mental health.⁴ These four principles are also proven central to studies of human happiness, to stress hardiness, to human fulfillment and to higher levels of mature human development:

- **An internal locus of control** (rather than feeling victimized by external forces.) This is not about controlling the external world, but rather responding to it with *integrity to one's deepest wisdom and values* regardless of circumstance. ("I am in charge of me; it isn't.") In responding to stress, common sense says that if the stressor is out of control it seems distressful, but if one has a good sense of control of dealing well with it, the stressor may even seem empowering: ("Bring it on! Let me show what I can do.") Such integrity is the foundation of well-being.

- **A sense of connectedness** (or oneness)
People who give and receive loving support have better health than if feeling isolated or judgmentally separated. Hostile, competitive, "us versus them" thinking usually ends up causing suffering. Collaborative cooperation and loving support usually eases that suffering. Creating such connectedness from separation is the essence of *healing* (whether for a wound or a relationship). Compassion is at the heart of connectedness.

- **A sense of purpose and meaning**
Finding meaningful purpose in one's life and work, and also in this event before me; seeing it having something valuable to teach me, or help me discover.⁵

• Hope

e.g., Optimists have better health than pessimists. The powerful placebo effect is about hopeful expectation: how the mind elicits effects clear down to cellular levels. Healthy hope, however, is not so much about attachment to a specific outcome as it is about anticipating being able to deal wisely and well with whatever arises, and to turn that into something of value. It is about anticipating an abundance of possibilities, even if being uncertain what they are. With hope one is able to see those possibilities (to which they may have been blind before).

Look carefully at each of these four principles. Note that at their core, *these are also spiritual principles*. From a health and behavioral science standpoint, these may also represent the essence of spiritual well-being. As we shall see, they seem to lie at the heart of Jesus's teachings. In New Testament times, the Greek word translated as "salvation", *σωτηρια (soteria)*, was not primarily a theological word. It primarily meant "total well-being" (= health). This is what Jesus came to bring. He came as the Savior. The New Testament translates the Greek word *σοζο (sozo)* as either "to heal" or "to save." Healing, which Jesus said he came to bring, is about creating oneness and wholeness (connectedness) out of separation (eg. a wound or a relationship). To be saved is to be thus healed.

Understanding the essential nature of these four principles might guide our spiritual practices: Those practices and concepts that enhance these principles, proven to increase total wellbeing (salvation) are likely to be good ones; those that undermine them may be misleading, or misconceptions.

Common Ways We Make Ourselves Miserable

Let's reflect for a moment on some of the most common ways we cause distress and make ourselves miserable. Here are a few:

- Taking offense: being judgmental, blame, victimizing
- Anger: brooding over grudges: wanting vengeance
- Worry: catastrophizing
- Feeling unworthy and inadequate (unlovable)
- Failing: in attempts to prove self or look good (not measuring up)

The solutions for each of these are addressed in the Sermon. What is the central underlying issue in these? Is it not the little-ego mind? This little, "natural man" self, feeling separate, is highly driven *by pride, comparisons, competition* and resultant *fear*: "Am I making it?" "Am I worthy and acceptable?" "How do I prove myself to others?" "They make me feel bad." "Who is the most important?" These thoughts are all driven by the little ego's pride and fear. Such thoughts relate directly to the above ways we make ourselves miserable. Jesus is going to summarize how to let go of all this; that is, how to move from a fear-based mentality to one that is love-based. "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not [yet] made perfect in love." (1 John 4:18).

On the other hand, given the chance to let go of this little, artificially constructed ego, we all seem to have within us a much deeper mind or true self: the source of our wisdom, that holds the solutions to dealing well with our problems. This is the true "I Am" self,⁶ the part of us in which the kingdom of heaven, the mind of Christ, already

abides (1 Corinthians 2:16). This deeper mind draws from divine intelligence, the seed of godliness within, as taught by several spiritual traditions. It is this deeper, wise self that Jesus reveals to us divine wisdom, and to which he appeals.

Embracing Paradox: Intrinsic and Extrinsic Religion

Many of Jesus's seeming paradoxes become clear in the above little-ego vs large "I am" context. For example, in the Sermon:

"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:16)

But he also then says, "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them" (Matthew 6:1).

So which is it, do good things publicly or only privately?

The *intent* behind the good act seems to be key here: Is it motivated by the little ego ("to be seen of them"), or the larger "I Am" (to just do good and possibly even gently draw others toward God's wisdom)? There are two New Testament Greek words translated as "good works": *agathos* (meaning high quality), and *kathos* (meaning captivating, attractive, beautiful). In the Sermon (Matthew 5:16), Jesus uses *kathos*: to bring grace, compassion, calm strength and goodness (equanimity) to difficult situations that draw others to also love such ways of God, and to want to incorporate them.

This introduces Jesus's strong emphasis on *the difference between intrinsic and extrinsic religiosity* (doing religious things). **Extrinsic religiosity** is little-ego centered: to get reward, approval or acceptance, to get important position, or to avoid punishment (fear). On the other hand, **intrinsic religiosity** is deeply centered in love for God: doing religious things out of reverence for his ways, gratitude, yearning for oneness and intimacy with God, loving quality of soul. Perhaps one example might be why one wants to keep the sabbath holy: to just keep the external rules to get reward or stay out of trouble? Or to love time pondering with God and serving as he would? Dozens of studies have examined the effects of religiosity on health, both mental and physical. One bottom line is that only intrinsic religiosity improves such well-being.⁷

In his Sermon, Jesus uses many illustrations of this difference: He says that more important than the good acts themselves is the heart behind it. As important as doing is, he is calling us to genuinely *be* good as God is good. Then the acts naturally follow. For example, he notes that the law says if you swear an oath (or sign a contract) you are bound to keep your part. Jesus said you don't need to formally take an oath, just saying "Yes" or "No" is as binding because you *are* honest, a person of your word. (Matthew 5:33-37). It is that *integrity* that really matters. Note here where the *locus of control* lies (one of the resilience principles): Do I act from within, according to who "I am", or from external pressures and fear of consequences?

So what does all this have to do with stress resilience?

The Heart of the Matter

In the last half of Matthew Chapter 5, Jesus gets to some real punch lines. These seem like "hard sayings", but are profound.

Anger

Matthew 5: 21-25: “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment: and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire... Agree with thine adversary quickly, while thou art in the way with him.”

There are two New Testament Greek words for anger: θυμος (*thumos*) (like a quick fire) and οργε (*orge*) (deep rooted, brooding, long lived anger). Jesus uses *orge* here. (It is of note that lots of health science confirms that brooding hostility causes lots of body damage, particularly for the heart: cynical hostility is a major coronary risk factor.⁸) *Raca* is word of utter contempt in Jesus’s language (Aramaic). The Greek word (μωρε) translated “thou fool” is an aspersion on one’s character and mental capacity: a putdown. Here Jesus is saying, that the old (extrinsic) law says “Don’t kill”, but I say avoid the angry putdowns that leads to the whole violence-creating sequence: blame→take offense→ identify “enemy”→ anger→ foolish rhetoric (more putdowns)→ vengeance→ violence. The “hell fire” and judgment he mentions is here and now, not some distant or future place. As we shall soon see, “agree with your adversary quickly” involves compassionately finding a connecting place before dealing with the issues of differing. (Remember the resilience principle *connectedness*?)

So is it better to express or repress your anger? Actually both are problematic for healthy wellbeing. But Jesus introduces a third alternative that allows the anger to just dissolve away. It involves seeing the other through a new set of eyes. “I came that the blind might see”, Jesus said. Once again he is talking about the blindness of the separate little-ego (the us vs. them mentality), as compared to the connected seer, the divine “I am” self.

To illustrate, notice the *progressive sequence* at the end of Matthew 5:43-48:

Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you; That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust. For if ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the publicans so? **Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.**

This describes a crescendo-like progression to the kind of “perfect”, or unlimited, love that God has: not only for those who love you, but then on to those that curse you or even hate you, thus on to love with compassion as God does for all his children. *This is about perfection of merciful, compassionate love, not of performance.* If you are not yet sure about this, compare the way the same passage is rendered in the Sermon version reported in Luke 6:35-36:

But love ye your enemies, and do good, and lend, hoping for nothing again;
and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be the children of the Highest:
for he is kind unto the unthankful and to the evil.

Be ye therefore *merciful*, as your Father also is *merciful*.

Compare Jesus's mercy and compassion expressed on the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Jesus's counsel to "Love your enemy" seems very difficult to the vengeful little-ego. Looking at this statement in Jesus's own language (Aramaic, from the New Testament *Peshitta* manuscript)⁹ is very insightful. Typical of eastern languages, Aramaic words have multiple levels of meaning: first a superficial meaning, but then also a deeper meaning based on the roots from which the word is constructed. The Aramaic word translated "love," *aheww*, refers to "a mysterious, compassionate force that acts to bring separate things together to heal and create new life." Notice here the concept of bringing *healing*, the reconnecting of separateness by creating oneness through compassion. Then the Aramaic word translated "enemy," *bwheldbabaykhun*, at a superficial level means "enemy" as we usually understand it. But there are two roots to this word, one meaning "being out of rhythm, disconnected"; the other root refers to "having a place of emptiness, pain or suffering within."

So, for this person showing enemy-like behavior, what Jesus is in essence saying is: "First, find a connecting place" ("Agree with thine adversary quickly" -Matt 5:25); then, "See with healing compassion and mercy the suffering that drives his poor behavior: his insecurity, his anger of taking offense, his fear, his need to prove himself, his blindness or ignorance." See with understanding eyes his underlying pain, and respond with healing compassion (rather than judgmental hate.)

For an example, let's consider a true story of a mother whose child contracted chickenpox. The little girl was miserable and frightened, and began lashing out at her mother: "Get out of here! You don't care about me and never have! You're a bad mother! I hate you!" There are basically three ways her mother might respond:

(1) Judgmentally defend yourself: "What you mean, you ungrateful kid? I've been here caring for you all morning! What's the matter with you?"

(2) Take it personally, shamefully: "I guess I've failed. If my own child doesn't love me, who could?"

Which self do you think these two responses come from, the little-ego or the large I am? Jesus said "Judge not that ye be not judged." (Matthew 7:1); this goes beyond simple justice: when you are judgmental either of others or yourself, you suffer.

Fortunately the suffering little girl's mother was able to choose a third option:

(3) She saw her daughter's reaction as a symptom of her chickenpox, driven by her misery, fear and suffering. She gently said, "It's no fun having chickenpox. I remember how bad I felt with it, too. But don't worry. It's going away soon. And actually I do love you a lot. Let's read a story and have a little snack. You'll feel better." She was being the mother that her deeper wisdom would have her be, regardless of her daughter's behavior. Note how she is seeing with compassion the fear and misery, with the intention to lovingly heal these, rather than react to the suboptimal behavior that arose from them. (It's always easier to do this with kids; but then, compared to our divine Parents, we're all kids.) This is the resilience Jesus was talking about, that seemed so hard to understand,

when he said, “Love your enemy.” This is the inner sense of integrity-type control, connectedness and purpose that allows the mother to feel some equanimity and at peace in the face of her daughter’s provocation.

One of the other paradoxes in the Sermon was his juxtaposing “Judge not” and shortly later “By their fruits you will know them.” (Matthew 7:1 and 7:20). Again the resolution comes in the context of distinguishing whether they (or I) are coming from the little judgmental ego self or from the larger, connected I am. By the fruits you will know. If the fruits are distress and suffering, it’s likely the little-egoic self reacting. If resilient, likely the larger wise self is speaking.

“Take no thought”

Another of the “hard” (but greatly insightful) sayings is Jesus admonition to “Take no thought for your life, what you shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat and the body than raiment?” (Matt 6:25 - King James Bible) He then compares the birds and lilies: not greatly concerned, reaching toward the light, living in the moment, but beautiful, and receiving what they need. Does this mean we should not be concerned about planning for future needs? Visualizing a desired outcome and anticipating effective responses seems wise.¹⁰

Once again it’s useful to look at the original New Testament Greek translated “Take no thought”. The Greek word Jesus uses here is *merrimnan*, which literally means “anxious worry.” Jesus is saying, “Don’t be *anxiously worried* about tomorrow...” (as rendered in modern translations-e.g., NRSV). Sometimes we think that worrying is doing something to prevent the catastrophe. But stop and *really* think about that. Isn’t worrying like practicing visualizing (even living) the catastrophe that hasn’t yet happened? If an athlete worryingly visualizes failure ahead of time, what is he or she likely to get? If you worry (thus practice visualizing) that your going to blow a talk you’re scheduled to give, are you more likely to blow it or succeed? Jesus’s counsel is not about avoiding planning. It’s about changing the planning from suffering the imagined catastrophe to visualizing success, and living that (as God did in planning this amazing earth for us: the “spiritual creation”.) Worrying about failure and inadequacy (little-ego) is *living* in the fear world. Do you think God worries a lot? Or is he more likely to anticipate how to wisely handle what might come up?

Then Jesus says, “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness [*his wisdom and ways*]; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought [*anxious worry*] for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself.” (Matthew 6:33-34).

What do you think about this counsel?

Staying Wisely Present: Mindfulness

Remember the principle of an internal locus of control? What can you control? Unless you hibernate, you can't control most of the external events of life. You can't control the future (which is imaginary). You can't control the past (which is also largely reconstructed and thus imaginary.) What you can control (and what is real) is how you are going to be right now with what is present in this moment.

Jesus said, “the kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21)— the divine “I am”. Note that if you love God, your deeply admired human characteristics (the way you would love us all to be) are those you envision God having: His wisdom really does already lie within us. Being true to God is being true to your own deep, true self: the divine intelligence from which you originated. Handling whatever is here the way you would deeply admire (the way your innate, divine intelligence would love to be) is “God’s righteousness”, the spiritually mature way he scripturally hopes for us to learn to be in the world. To actualize the divine mind within you, handle the present moment well, according to that inner wisdom: in this moment, then in the next, then the next... one can just trust that the future will take care of itself; no need to fear. This is what Jesus is saying: seeking “first” that kingdom of God within you refers to where you first focus your attention and intention. When you intend to make good things happen for all involved in this moment, your innate intelligence will guide how to do it: the look on your face, the way you say it, the feeling you convey. Having intention to bless this moment and all in it (as Jesus did) is key.

People usually already have the answers to their stressful problems within them, if they can just access that inner wisdom. Accessing this inner intelligence requires first getting quiet—and out of the old (often cynical) “us vs them” mind. Let’s do a little exercise for a moment. Imagine *the kind of person you deeply admire and love to be around* (this could be your beloved partner, a dear friend, or even someone at work). Before reading on, write down some of their characteristics that draw you to them.

[Writing]

Might your list include some of the following?

- Integrity: true to who they are (pure in heart)
- Honest, worthy of your trust
- Humbly able to listen and respect
- Kind, compassionate: lift you, bless your life (no judgmental putdowns)
- Bring sense of calm strength, hope (unruffled equanimity)
- Wisdom in difficult circumstances

You'll recall these are the very characteristics Jesus has been describing in the Sermon, and who he called "blessed" in the Beatitudes: those who actualize their divine intelligence. Note how we each are inherently drawn to these ways of being. Jesus said, "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them (Matthew 7:12). This means handling things that arise by the internally defined list above. But also note an interesting twist Jesus puts on this "golden rule." This rule had previously been described by Confucius, Buddha, and Zoroaster, but all in the negative form: "Don't do to others what you don't want done to you." Jesus turns this around into the positive form: What *to do*, rather than what not to do. He turns the old prohibitions ("Thou shalt not") into "Do good as God would." This principle of stating desired behavior in the positive is an important principle for changing behavior.

Visualizing the Answer

The fastest way to change old undesired habits into what you want *instead* is to visualize (and thus experience) being the new way. Words create, so clearly, in words, state the new, wise way you want to respond to a problematic situation (like writing a script). Then visualize being that way in that situation (a spiritual creation). But this needs to be done in the positive: what *to do* rather than what not to do. (e.g., "Respond with patient kindness", rather than, "Don't get angry".) The brain can't deal well with a "don't", because you can't create a picture *not* doing something. Trying to not do it creates a picture doing it instead. (If you wanted to lose weight, try telling yourself, "Don't even think about chocolate cake!" What happens? There's the picture and that cake is looking pretty desirable.) The creative brain needs to see what *to* create instead (in much detail) in order to elicit the behaviors and physiology to bring it about. Interestingly, an Old Testament passage describes the process. First, let's realize that our own deepest, most heartfelt "law" lies in our inner wisdom, the "Kingdom of God within." So, again, leaving the little, competitive, egoic mind and being true to one's deep, innermost, divinely inspired values (the law of the large "I am"), is really being true to God's ways (his "law"). With that perspective, here is how Joshua 1:8-9 [personalized] reads:

"This book of [your deepest] law shall not depart out of your mouth; but you shall meditate therein day and night, that you may observe [yourself] doing according to all that is written therein: for then you shall have good success. Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not afraid, neither be dismayed: for I the Lord your God am with you wherever you go."

The most common way we depart from our inner law is by blaming others for making us do so. ("He *made* me so angry! I *have* to be upset when he...!") Instead, the passage advises not being fooled by such blame. Instead, it counsels that we meditate at least twice a day, to visualize being as that wisdom guides. By doing this, successful handling of the situation is promised. No need to fear: if we allow it, we can feel God's presence, insight and power to do it.

This is like learning the play the piano: The music is created and scripted in detail. Then one figures out how to play it, moving it from the page into action. Then that action is practiced repeatedly until it starts to become automatic. Before long the playing of the music moves out of the conscious, mechanical parts of the brain and into a natural flow,

nanced by one's soul: beauty and grace is created. Once learned, the "practicing" of a behavior can often be done in a mental visualization nearly as effectively as in mechanical action.

Transformative Process

So here is a health science-proven process (also suggested by these scriptures) for rather quickly transforming an old, unwanted behavior into one consistent with deeper wisdom:

1. **Conscious awareness:** The Hindus would say, "Call your power back."): They would say your power lies in your spirit, who you really are. Refuse to blame any longer: "I am in charge of me, it isn't." "I can respond any way I deem most wise." This step is a huge part of the transformation.
2. **Identify and clarify your inner wisdom:** "So how do I want to be?" This involves
 - (a) Getting still: disengage from old (little-ego) thinking (often using cognitive and relaxation techniques), then,
 - (b) Clarify your deep values ("give yourself to God"). Perhaps use meditative and reflective techniques; then write out the words of your new script in *great detail* (including your physical details: tone of voice, look in your eyes, intent of your heart...)
3. **Visualize being this way.** This is best done in two steps:
 - (a) "Out there": You watch yourself as if in a movie of the challenging situation responding as desired. (Who is watching this movie of you? This is the larger self— the seer— watching and guiding the functioning self: how to handle it well. When that feels OK, then-
 - (b) Put yourself *in* the movie. Visualize the whole thing from within you, seeing out through your eyes, *experiencing* the situation. Note how it *feels* doing it this new way. Repeat the whole visualization process at least three times (or more, to implant it in different levels of memory) until it begins to feel natural, *to flow*.

In New Testament parlance, spiritually transforming from the "natural man" little-egoic self to the larger "I am" is called repentance, and the above meditative visualization process may be the fastest way to do it. The Sermon's transformation principles are at the heart of Jesus's teaching. And the "kingdom at hand" Jesus talked about could be read "immediately available within and around you." "And Jesus said, For judgment I am come into this world, that they which see not might see." (John 9:39). The little self can't see well the inner suffering that drives problem behaviors, or the answers already right there within them; that's why some of the seemingly most difficult teachings of the Sermon ("love your enemy") are the most profound. Jesus slowly told his stories (parables), "The kingdom of heaven is like..." to help us see what we already know, to bypass our resistance and thus to transform. This life-stress resilience can be learned, but to do so most effectively takes practicing it *experientially*. Just talking doesn't change much.

Summary

Let's return again to Jesus's summary of his intended effects of his teachings, summarized in this remarkable Sermon:

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. (Matthew 7:24-25)

This then is the culmination described in the final Beatitude: A divine type of resilience and equanimity in the face of whatever comes up in life. Here are some definitions of such equanimity:

- Filled with inherent power: Strength
- Composure
- Serenity
- Patience
- Lives his/her inner truth: Love
- Cannot be provoked to be different than he/she inherently is

And thus Jesus teaches a key purpose for our being here: **To come, through experience, to love, incorporate and become his magnificent wisdom.**

Endnotes

¹ "The Impact of Stress on Health," in Keith J. Karren, N. Lee Smith, and Kathryn J. Gordon, *Mind-Body Health: The Effects of Attitudes, Emotions and Relationships* (San Francisco: Pearson Higher Ed, 2014 [5th edition]) Chapter 2, pp. 29-60

² G. E. Richardson, "The Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency," *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 58 (2002): 307-321. Also: G. E. Richardson, B. L. Neiger, S. Jensen, and K. L. Kumpfer, "The Resiliency Model". *Health Education*, 21(1990): 33-39.

³ As defined by The World Health Organization. (Health is not just the absence of disease.)

⁴ Karren, Smith and Gordon, *Mind-Body Health*, pp. 447-448.

⁵ Frankl, Viktor. *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston, Beacon Press, 2006)

⁶ Compare Exodus 3:14, where Moses asks God who he is, and God answers "I am who I am" (New King James Version and Revised Standard Version), implying he has fully actualized who he really is at his essential core.

⁷ Karren, Smith and Gordon, *Mind-Body Health*, pp. 325-326. Also see M. J. Donohue, Intrinsic and Extrinsic Religiousness: Review and Meta-analysis," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 48 (1985): 400-419.

⁸ N. Lee Smith, "Anger, Hostility and Health," in Karren, Smith and Gordon, *Mind-Body Health*, Chapter 7 (see pp.153-154).

⁹ See Neil Douglas-Klotz, *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco, Harper, 1990) pp 83-85.

¹⁰ Genesis 1: Note how at each step in creation, God plans, then says what He wants to do, then in the next verse he actually does it. (And note how chosen words create.)