

Leo Durocher was wrong

Matthew 5:1-5

September 30, 2007

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, the people gathered around him and he began to teach them ...

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

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

Blessed are those who are humble, for they will inherit the earth.

So, you're a nice guy. You drive the speed limit. OK, you drive five miles over the speed limit, maybe seven over on the highway, but the point is, you follow the rules. You don't litter. You don't cheat on your taxes. You try to do the right thing even when no one is watching.

You're polite. You hold the door for a lady, or even for another guy. You let the other person go ahead of you in line. You don't push your way forward, but wait your turn, even if sometimes it means you don't get a turn.

You quietly do your job. You do appreciate praise or recognition when you get it, but you don't go looking for it or make a fuss when you don't get it. You don't blow your own horn or play your own press agent. You don't make yourself the center of attention, but are content to watch from the sidelines.

You don't seek revenge or even raise a stink when you're treated unfairly. You just swallow your pride and put a lid on your anger and move on, because you're a nice guy!

But Leo Durocher pronounces your destiny: *Nice guys finish last.*

Some of you will remember Leo Durocher. He managed the Cubs for a while late in his career, and if he had made that statement while managing the Cubs, it might have been heard as an excuse! But he didn't. He made the statement while managing the winning Dodgers, referring to the rival Giants who had some pretty nice guys, some rather decent and amiable teammates, on their roster. They may be nice, he agreed, but they're going to finish last. Nice guys finish last. It takes something else, something very different from nice, to win.

You could make a strong case that Mr. Durocher was right.

Dick Jauron is a nice guy. He graduated a couple of years ahead of me at Yale and went on to play pro football and then to coaching stints with the Chicago Bears and the Detroit Lions. He is an intelligent man, a respectful leader, not one to scream and yell at officials or his players. He's a nice guy, currently the head coach of the Buffalo Bills -- who lost last week to New England 38-7. Point made! Dick Jauron has not won like Bill Parcells or Bill Belichick or Bill Cowher, whom few would accuse of being nice guys!

By all appearances Dennis Kucinich is a nice guy. He is almost certainly the most humble among the various candidates for his party's presidential nomination. After all, when he was a kid, his family lived out of a car for a while! But, you can be assured that as nice as Dennis Kucinich may be, he is going to finish last, or close to it.

You can think of your own examples. Isn't it true that pushy people get the breaks? That's what they say, isn't it: *You make your own breaks*? Winners are always pushing the envelope, testing the edges of what is expected, of what is acceptable, even of what is legal, looking for any angle, any little edge, to put them ahead. Who gets the attention? Who gets the recognition? Who collects the spoils? The ones who are nice? Or the ones who win, however they win?

Our culture celebrates winning. We celebrate the go-getters, the wheeler-dealers, the bold and the brash and the brazen, because winning is what matters. You want me to pay attention to you? Don't tell me you're a nice guy. Tell me what you've done lately. Tell me about your accomplishments. Tell me about your victories.

We often think the same way as a nation. It's winning that matters. That's why we do not hesitate to bend the rules, to open loopholes that allow us to torture detainees, to do warrantless surveillance of our own population, to go to war in violation of international law. Because it's all about winning, not about being nice. Nice doesn't get you there. War is hell and life is messy. You do what you have to do, because nice guys finish last.

Nice guys finish last. So says Leo Durocher and we believe him. But Leo Durocher was wrong!

Jesus saw the crowds and he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, the people gathered around him and he began to teach them ...

Blessed are those who are humble, for they will inherit the earth.

Jesus saw the crowds! He didn't making an abstract statement, a generalized observation. He spoke to actual people among the crowds. And he is speaking to actual people among this crowd. Jesus is speaking to you.

He is speaking to you who are humble, to you who are gentle and unassuming, to you who aren't used to being at the center of attention, to you who are used to being also-rans, bystanders, bit players. You are blessed! You nice guys, you nice girls, you are blessed! And you will inherit the earth!

You will inherit the earth. You may be used to little reward, little recognition, little attention. You may have watched as others have reaped all the fame and all the fortune and all the notoriety, but you will have the earth itself! Others have hoarded and exploited its resources for their own gain. Others have gathered and sequestered its wealth for their own use. But, in the end, it will all belong to you! You will inherit the earth!

What does it mean: *Inherit the earth*? It means that the earth, in all its beauty and in all its goodness and in all its bounty, is not something to be won, but something to be granted, as an inheritance, by its true owner. And its true owner is its true creator. The earth itself is a blessing, a rich and wondrous blessing, made for our enjoyment, made for our delight, made to be received as a blessing with gratitude and with careful and tender stewardship. And God will grant it, Jesus says, to those who are humble. You who humbly enjoy it now, not grabbing or grasping or hoarding or abusing -- you will enjoy it forever! Leo Durocher was wrong: nice guys will win. No, they won't win -- they will be given -- everything!

In this country, in this culture, we like winners. We measure a person by his victories, a business by its profits, a nation by its domination of the world order, a church by the number of its members and the grandeur of its facilities.

But Jesus likes nice guys. He says they will inherit the earth. He says they are blessed!