

Mark Scandrette

Author of Practicing the Way of Jesus

**The
Ninefold
Path of
Jesus**

**Hidden
Wisdom of the
Beatitudes**



| InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *The Ninefold Path of Jesus* by Mark Scandrette.

Copyright © 2021 by Mark Scandrette.

Published by InterVarsity Press,
Downers Grove, IL. www.ivpress.com

The Way of Trust

Own Your Poverty, Live with Open Hands

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

MATTHEW 5:3

We greet the world with a cry and a scream, with clinched fists grasping after what we so desperately need. None of us remember the shock and drama of being born, but have you seen a baby's birth? I vividly recall the moment when my wife, Lisa, gave birth to our first child, Hailey. Hailey was warm and safe inside her mother's body. Everything she needed came through a tube into her belly. Then suddenly she was thrust into a cold, harsh world, naked, gasping for breath, and bombarded by bright lights and loud noises. Red-faced and crying, she squeezed her tiny fists in protest.

Our brains are wired to detect danger. Primal anxiety keeps us alive at birth. The fight-or-flight response activates the amygdala, increasing heart rate and blood-sugar levels, giving a temporary boost of energy to react. But when our brains become flooded with adrenaline, we can't think clearly, and it's hard to calm down. That's why a baby needs a caregiver's soothing voice and touch.

An anxious response can be activated even when there isn't imminent danger—by the sound of a car alarm or when a loved one is late and doesn't call. Our constant scanning for potential danger can result in hyperarousal and chronic stress. An instinct, designed to keep us alive, can quickly become a threat to well-being.

At the beginning of his teaching on the hill, Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Luke's account simply says, "Blessed are you who are poor." What does it mean to be poor? Poverty is when a person doesn't have enough or when they feel like they are not enough. Something is lacking materially or emotionally.

? What's your poverty? Where in your life do you feel like you don't have enough or are not enough?

When I posed this question to a group in East Africa, one person said, "I don't have the fees to pay for my children's schooling." Another said, "My son was born without the ability to eliminate. The surgery costs three

hundred dollars, but we don't have the money. And if he doesn't have the surgery soon, he will die!"

I am grateful not to be in this incredible predicament. But we each have places in our lives where something is lacking. Ultimately, none of us have enough. We each experience loss, loneliness, and disappointment. Eventually, we will all get sick or injured or grow old and die. While we each experience lack in our lives, those of us with control-oriented personalities feel particularly pained by our vulnerabilities. We act aggressively to ensure that we are never dependent, out of control, or lacking anything.

**First instinct:
Closed-handed
anxiety**



When we become aware of what we lack, our first instinct is to grab and grasp, holding on to whatever we believe will make us feel safe and secure. It's an instinct of closed-handed anxiety. Not letting go. Imagine closing your hands and squeezing until your knuckles are tight. How does that feel? Tense? Stiff? Uncomfortable? That's a position of anxiety, and it's the source of the worry, striving, and greed that pervade our world.

What makes you feel anxious and closed handed? I feel anxious when I think about political and economic uncertainties in our world today. I often worry about getting all the things done on my to-do list. Sometimes I worry about my children. Will they thrive, find good partners, and live the values I've taught them? I worry about having enough money to pay for expenses when I'm too old to work. But more than anything else, I worry about whether I'm competent and successful.

When I mention my work insecurities, people are quick to assure me that I am competent—yet it's still something I often feel anxious about. Our worries aren't always rational but feel very real to us.

PRACTICE *Confronting worry.* If you were to make a list of the top five things you tend to worry about, what would they be? Take a moment to make a mental list or write them down.

At Ninefold Path events I ask people to anonymously write their worries on sticky notes. We post them to a wall and look at them together. Participants are often surprised by the raw honesty of what is shared and the private burdens that people they know carry. Here are a few examples:

- ▶ I worry I'll never find love and that I'll die alone.
- ▶ I worry about having money to buy groceries for my family.
- ▶ I worry about whether people like me or just put up with me.
- ▶ I worry that I will never overcome my addiction.
- ▶ I worry that I am missing God's path for my life.
- ▶ I worry that I'll never get out of debt or own a home.
- ▶ I worry about the climate crisis and the future of the planet.
- ▶ I worry that I can't think of any worries. Am I in complete denial?

We don't all have the same worries, but there are predictable patterns to the kinds of things we tend to worry about: (1) money, job, and finances; (2) physical and mental health; (3) relationships and the well-being of those we love; (4) esteem, identity, and significance; and (5) anticipating future difficulties, pain, and uncertainty.

It is a sacred trust to hold each other's worries. Sharing your worries with another person can help you feel more normal and less alone. They can help you see your situation from a larger perspective.

In groups I often ask, "Why do you think we tend to worry?" Inevitably someone will say, "We worry about the things we can't predict or control." Another person often adds, "I think we worry because we care. How can we not care about the people we love and conditions in our world?"

It can help to clarify that worry and concern are not the same. When I'm concerned about something, it motivates me to action. If I'm alerted to the weight I've gained around my middle, I can take action by making new food and activity choices. If I'm concerned about a loved one's physical or mental health, I can provide support and assist them in exploring treatment options. In contrast, worry is a heightened state of alarm that changes nothing. The dreaded thought just loops on repeat. This is why Jesus said, "Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life?"

An anxious thought might wake you up at night, cause you to lose concentration, or distract you when you are spending time with someone. It zaps energy and paralyzes action. Worry even manifests in our bodies. Where do you hold it? In your stomach? Forehead? Chest? Neck and shoulders? Lower back?

Imagine being significantly free of worry and anxiety. What would that be like? Deep peace. Sound sleep. Full

attention. Is that a quality of life you desire? Do you think it's possible?

In the teaching on the hill Jesus said, "Do not worry about your life." The apostle Paul echoed this when he wrote, "Do not be anxious about anything." When I hear the instruction "Do not worry," I'm tempted to feel shame because I do worry. But I'm learning to receive these instructions from Jesus as a gentle invitation into a better way. What would I have to see and believe differently about the nature of reality that would allow me to be less anxious?

Jesus knew by experience that it is possible to live in openhanded trust. He was once in a boat with his disciples when a terrible storm came up. They were completely freaked out while he napped in the back of the boat. He lived and practiced the reality of divine care and presence. The reality is that nothing can separate us from what is most essential to our well-being. Not disappointment. Not sickness. Not even death can separate us from the care and presence of our Creator. This is why the ancient poet King David once wrote, "[*Adonai*] is my shepherd, I lack nothing."

The Posture of Openhanded Trust

If you gently open your hands, how does it feel compared to clenched fists? Relaxed? Peaceful? Relieved? That's the posture of openhanded trust. When faced with the

inevitable lack in our lives, we have a choice. We can follow instincts and close our hands in white-knuckled anxiety or open our hands in childlike trust.

Learning to Be Openhanded

What practices might help us move from closed-handed anxiety to openhanded trust?

Open your hands to receive the good. Have you ever gotten a new shirt and suddenly seen people wearing that color or print everywhere you turn? We notice what we pay attention to. Many of us are fatally attracted to bad news. When we



**New posture:
Openhanded trust**

focus on potential threats, we often miss the good. Fear and negativity are instinctual, but we can choose to be thankful. "Give thanks in all circumstances." Both ancient Scripture and contemporary psychology affirm the potency of gratitude.

PRACTICE Gratitude. Take a moment right now to open your hands to receive the good. What are you appreciating about this day and this moment? What can you see, hear, touch, taste, and smell right now that makes you feel alive and connected to what is good? When you look back over your life, where do you see evidence that you are cared for and loved?

Open your hands to share what you have. Anxiety breeds a sense of scarcity and greed. Gratitude fuels a sense of abundance, contentment, and generosity.

One time in northern Uganda a man approached me putting his hand to his mouth to gesture his hunger. Around the world hundreds of millions of people lack access to basic nutrition, health services, clean water, and public safety. Much of the inequality we see stems from greediness, corruption, waste, and the long-term effects of colonization. I'm curious to understand how my sisters and brothers in these places experience their lives. I have a friend from Uganda who now lives in the United States. When I asked him how he compares living in poverty with living in affluence he said, "I know I'm

supposed to say I'm grateful to have a better life in the United States. But honestly, I feel lonely. In Kampala I was surrounded by friends and family. We didn't have much, but we had each other. We knew how to care for one another, and we made our own fun." Independence breeds a sense of scarcity. Poverty is not a blessing. But when you know you can't make it on your own, it may be easier to be openhanded and live interdependently.

We are meant to be part of the flow of abundance: to open our hands to receive what we need and share what we have with others. Jesus taught his followers to be radically generous when he said: "Sell your possessions and give to the poor" and then "They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need."

Inspired by this, I was once part of a group who challenged each other to sell or give away half of our possessions. Our experiment was deeply transforming. We decluttered our closets and homes. It exposed our unhealthy and consumptive spending patterns. We learned to be more content. And we experienced the joy of sharing resources with our neighbors in desperate circumstances around the world. "It is more blessed to give than to receive" is a truth proven by both research and experience. You can cultivate a posture of openhandedness by asking yourself each day, *What do I have that I can share with others? Time? Money? Or possessions and food that someone else can use?*

Open your hands to express your desires. When I am planning time with one of my children, I'll ask, "What do you want to do?" As moody teenagers they sometimes reply, "I don't know" or "I don't care." I love it when they know what they want and tell me, "Dad, can we get boba tea and go for a walk on the beach?" Relationships are strengthened when we have the courage to express our desires and seek to satisfy one another's needs.

I meet a lot of people who believe it's wrong to have desires. Or they hesitate to name their desires because they're afraid of being disappointed. One of the most compelling questions Jesus ever asked is, "What do you want me to do for you?" What if the Creator of the universe wants to have an interactive relationship with you in which you express your deepest longings? In the teaching on the hill Jesus invites us into this dynamic: "Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened."

These words are sometimes taken to mean that all you have to do is ask, and if you have enough faith, you'll get whatever you want (health, wealth, prosperity). Has this been your experience? For most of us it hasn't, and it's led to a lot of disappointment. If we look at Jesus' words more carefully, he is telling us how to set our intentions and move toward the good in our lives. In order to ask,

you have to know what you want. Sometimes I am half-hearted or conflicted about what I want. It's a step just to get in touch with your desires, pausing to ask, What do I want and why?

Asking is just the beginning. We need to put effort and discipline into it. Jesus invites us to seek and knock. What can you do today to move toward the good you desire? Investigate. Look for opportunities. Talk to the right people. Advocate for yourself. Keep knocking until a door opens that you want to walk through.

To some degree we all get what we want. Maybe not all we want but what we most deeply desire ends up finding its way to us. If you are skeptical about this, try writing down one desire each day for a month and see what happens.

Open your hands to let go of expectations. What might your worries reveal about your attachments? We may tell ourselves, *I can only be truly happy if I find a life partner, get my dream house or a particular job, or _____.* It's dangerous to make your sense of well-being contingent on a particular outcome. What if you don't get what you want? Or what if you do? You may get what you want only to discover that you are still unsatisfied. Clarifying true desire is part of the process. An object or outcome might be a symbol of what you truly long for. A car or clothing item might represent your desire to feel admired,

respected, or worthy. A house might represent your desire for security and stability. A life partner might represent your desire for companionship. Career success might represent a deeper desire to feel purposeful and make a difference. Don't get stuck on specific outcomes. Focus on deeper longings. What do you want that you can actually experience today?

I know many people who struggle with faith or have lost faith because something in their life didn't go according to plan. They didn't get a particular job or into the school program they wanted. They had a miscarriage. An important relationship ended. Or a loved one died unexpectedly. Of course, these are difficult experiences, but they are also normal. I'm convinced that many of our prayers are recitations of our worries and attachments: *God, give me what I want or else!*

I have some bad news. Many of the things you worry about will come true. Ultimately, we don't get what we want. A time will come when all your accomplishments will be in the past. Some goals and dreams you have will never come to pass. Relationships you hoped would heal or become closer will reach an impasse. People you care about will leave you or pass away. And after all these losses and disappointments, you will get sick or injured and die. If our life satisfaction is contingent on always getting what we want, we are in big trouble!

Jesus invites us into radical trust: believing that nothing can separate us from what is most essential to our well-being. The divine presence is with us through whatever difficulties we face. It's an invitation to live with open hands, giving our sacred consent, and speaking a radical *yes!* to life, no matter what may come. It's an invitation to trust that the One who made us will bring us through.

When I'm struggling to move from anxiety to trust, I take a few deep breaths, open my hands, and recite these words:

Creator,
my life is in you.
I receive this moment as a gift.
All that has been and what lies ahead remain a
mystery to me, kept hidden.
But I trust in the love that spoke this world
into existence.
I say yes to whatever this day may bring.
Only let me see and cherish what is real.

How have you closed your hands? What are you holding on to? How does it feel to live this way?

Independence makes us feel we live in scarcity. We didn't make ourselves, and we don't have to make it on our own. We can learn to trust in the abundant provision of a good Creator. We are invited to open our hands, to live in gratitude, satisfaction, and generosity. To share

what we have with one another and to see where that takes us.

This Beatitude invites us to move from closed-handed anxiety to openhanded trust: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

May we own our poverty, celebrate the reality of abundance, live with open hands, and walk in the way of trust.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/the-ninefold-path-of-jesus