**Flexibility and other Be-attitudes**  
**a meditation for China Teachers**

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**Flexibility:**the ability to flex; to bend without breaking; to spring back when bent out of shape: to adapt to new surroundings; to “give” when under stress; to yield.

**Consider the Bamboo**

graceful symbol of China, beautiful in its usefulness;  
firmly rooted in its soil; adapted to its environment;  
raw material for creative applications to daily living needs;  
useful for shelter, for construction, for furniture, for food;  
giving aesthetic beauty for decoration;  
as a flute it makes beautiful music;  
a symbol of strength and humility;  
*“li mian you kong”*(“it has emptiness within”).

This is an exciting time of beginnings for you. God has given you a call and has inspired in you a vision of service for him and of witness to the Chinese people. No doubt you are filled with many emotions: excitement over the adventure ahead of you, humility over feeling inadequate for the task, grief over separation from family and friends, anxiety over encountering the unknown, and—hopefully—joy over the fact that God has led you in your journey of faith to this unique place and time.

I am frequently called on to define our overarching goals. We exist to proclaim Christ and to strengthen the witness of the church in places where access to the gospel is restricted. We seek to do this through prayer, presence, and proclamation which will lead to establishing the church in areas where it does not exist, and to strengthen it in areas where it is weak. Your prayers, your presence, your personal evangelism and Christian service are the most important resource we have in this task of incarnational proclamation of the gospel.

It may be helpful as you move to your assignments to look for inspiration and guidance from the wisdom of Jesus as he began his ministry in a world that was unreached and waiting for the perfect revelation of God’s love and truth. I invite you to look to Jesus’ teaching in what we know as the “sermon on the mount.” Lest you slip into your Sunday School mind and hear his words with detached religious interest, I suggest that you listen to them as practical, down-to-earth advice for how to live out your daily lives in China.

**“Be-attitudes, not do-attitudes”**

Your most important assignment is to be a living witness for Christ, a vessel filled with the grace of God readily offered to those you meet. You may be called to perform a variety of activities, and you will want to do many things, but being a witness through who you are and how you live is most important. You cannot do this in your own strength. That is why Jesus begins with an admonition to humility;

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

The greatest enemy to the Kingdom’s work is pride in yourself. I do not say self-confidence or faith, but pride. You may be proud of your citizenship as an American, or of being better, brighter, or more beautiful than anyone else in your home town, but you must be willing to empty yourself of this pride so that there will be room for the Kingdom of Heaven to be at the center of your identity. Modesty is a strong cultural value for the Chinese; they often begin a public speech with an apology or self-denying remark. The popular Chinese saying, “casting a brick to attract jade,” may sound lacking in self-confidence, but it is really an expression of respect for others. The Scripture has another: “humble yourselves and you shall be exhalted.” We might say, “don’t be too proud of where you come from; look forward to where you are going.” God has brought you to China. It is a good place to get a new perspective on nationalism, egotism, and selfishness.

**“Blessed are those who mourn; they shall be comforted.”**

I mentioned the grief over separation from loved ones at home. You will experience another kind of grief: grief over the pitiful condition of a society which does not acknowledge God as creator or Jesus as Lord. This grief is good: it is in touch with reality and not numbed by denial. You will meet people who are grieving. Some may grieve over a lack of opportunity for educational, social, or personal opportunities for improving life’s condition. A sensitive, compassionate response to this grief instead of a condemnation of the government or economic condition may be the most effective beginning to a true sharing of the good news of the gospel. Listen to your students and your colleagues when they dare to share their burdens, and offer a word of hope and the promise that Jesus gives to us all: God understands and His love will comfort you because he has promised that the way things were and the way things are is not the way things will always have to be. Remember this when you yourself are grieving. Here’s some advice: be patient, be prayerful, and wait for opportunities to give an authentic witness. After trust is built (and this may take a long time) you may be surprised at what your Chinese friends may confide in you. Sharing their fears and their spiritual burdens is a precious and holy gift that will give you if you have given them reason to believe that you will offer comfort *(“anwer"*in Chinese). You may find opportunities to offer *“anwer"*in real life situations: a Chinese friend tells you about her family’s difficulty in the past, or someone tells you about his rejection by a friend. Or a student shares despair over being placed in a dead-end job. How will you respond?

**“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”**

Chinese culture, through the historical influence of Confucianism and the more recent ideological propaganda of Communism, can have a strong moral sense. In the past, especially before 1989, there was a lot of idealism and emphasis on being a person of good character. Every year the party sponsors campaigns to strengthen morals and ethics. But slogans are only words; if their message is not taught by living example, cynicism may be the result. The same is true of what you want to share. Only if your life is characterized by a hunger and thirst for righteousness will any verbal witness have integrity. For most of you the English language will be your main medium of exchange. It is a second language to the Chinese and thus they may often doubt what they hear. There are reasons for this: the nature of the Chinese language (i.e., the same sound may represent several distinct meanings) and the fickleness of the winds of political education campaigns undermine their faith in the spoken word. Chinese may doubt what they hear, but they will believe what they see. It’s true: “one sight is worth ten thousand words” really is an ancient Chinese saying. Chinese people primarily learn with their eyes. If they are confused over the sound of a character, they may ask the speaker to trace it on their hands to be sure of its meaning. Teachers, this means that if you want your students to get the homework assignment right, write it on the blackboard. If you want them to understand that God loves them, show them with your life.

**“Happy are the kind and merciful, for they shall be shown mercy.” (TLB)**

Traveling in China, I often have occasion to meet people who have come to believe in Jesus through the witness of foreign teachers and the faith of Chinese Christians. Others I talk to may not be Christians, though many of them may be acquainted with Christian people. I like to ask them to describe the Christians they know—what qualities do they have? If there is a common denominator in their responses, it is “kindness.” They are touched by acts of kindness which are not evident in the lives of non-believers. They expect kindness from family members, but are often astounded that strangers, even foreigners, can treat them with kindness. Family values are strong in China and there is a solid code of conduct expected among family members; that’s what is meant by “filial piety.” A challenge for you is to follow the Scripture’s instruction: treat older women as your mother, young women as your sister, men as fathers and brothers. Chinese even call non-family members *“ayi"*(auntie), *“shu–shu”*(uncle), or *“da*ye” (grandfather), etc. out of respect and to teach their children how to relate to them. Under God our Father, we are all one big family (the Chinese word for “everybody” is “dajia", which literally means “big family”). And did you know that “kind” is from an old English word that means “family”, as in “kin”? One of the most radical teaching of Jesus to the Asian mind is the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan treated a foreigner in need, a Jew, in the way a good Jew (or Chinese!) would be expected to treat his own brother! This story, coming from the One who taught us to pray, “Our Father…” should teach us something about kindness as a Christian virtue.

**“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”**

This teaching not only tells us to look for God—to expect to see Him even in whatever isolated corner of China we may be in—but it also tells us how we may find him there. It is a challenge to be pure in motive, innocent in our intentions, trusting and trustworthy in our relationships. It tells us to live a clean and honorable life. Nothing will destroy your witness or impair your ability to see God more than an impure heart. You can’t see the beauty of creation clearly if your windows are dirty. There is great simplicity and wisdom in these few words, and your soon-to-be ­experienced radical reduction in lifestyle from the affluent comfort of late 20th century America to that of a stranger in a strange land—and that land a relatively poor developing country—will help you to see it. You may soon find yourself dreaming of McDonalds, movies, and money, and if you allow these desires to cloud your heart, you will not see God in China, and the Chinese will not see God in you.

**“Blessed are the peacemakers, they will be called children of God.”**

You may go into China quoting, “I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” and you will experience a loss of peace in your own life. Spiritual warfare is real, and l don’t mean to belittle the struggle against principalities and powers waged in prayer, but I believe that Jesus is here telling us that if we take up the challenge of being ministers of reconciliation between God and those separated from Him by sin, and between persons who quarrel, complain, and argue among themselves, He will be our Heavenly Father. And He will treat us with kindness.

**“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness…”**

This last be-attitude is perhaps the most sobering, but it – like the others – carries God’s promise. Perhaps you have heard stories of persecution and unjust treatment of some people in China, and maybe some of you expect to encounter persecution. Our experience as foreign Christians in China tells us that this is unlikely. Foreigners are generally treated well and in most cases the Chinese will treat you better than they treat their own compatriots–but my word for you is that if you do encounter persecution, let it be because of righteousness and for no other reason. The qualifier in the statement is “because of righteousness,” not “because you defied the laws of China and disrespected the rules and guidelines of your school.” You are not exempt from that sometimes unpopular requirement of the Christian life–obedience–just because you are far away from the ethical influence of church and family. That is even more reason to live up to the highest standards of Christian behavior. The entire theme of Jesus’ sermon is how we should behave as his disciples. If God gives you the grace to live up to his expectations and then you are slapped in the face with misunderstanding and people misjudge your motives out of jealousy and spread false rumors about you, just listen to these words from the Living Bible translation of Matthew 5:11-12: “…wonderful! Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a tremendous reward awaits you up in heaven.”