

## Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

Man's history is peppered with blunders. Adam and Eve had it all, but forfeited the ease and bliss of the garden; they bought the lie that God's prohibition of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was, as the serpent told it, a power play to prevent the first couple from realizing their full potential. Adam and Eve paid a high price for trusting the adversary more than God. My friends, you gotta know who your friends are!

God repeatedly reaches down His hand to try to bring man in to share the bounty and blessings of those who draw near. The Jews enjoyed special privileges as the people of God, but became dissatisfied. They longed to be like the other nations who did not enjoy such proximity to God.

1 Samuel 8:4-10: "Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah, and said to him, "...Now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.' ...And the LORD said to Samuel, 'Heed the voice of the people in all that they say to you; for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me, that I should not reign over them .... Now therefore, heed their voice. However, you shall solemnly forewarn them, and show them the behavior of the king who will reign over them."

When Jesus arrives on the scene, He invites the Jewish people (and, by extension, via the Great Commission, all mankind) to come home to God and the good life in the Kingdom of Christ. This good news may be old news, but it is still the best news around. Listen to the invitation extended by Jesus in Matthew 11:27-30, "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father... Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

Once again God's people reject God as king, this time in human form as Jesus Christ. What does it mean to pledge allegiance to Jesus as King of Kings? That is really what the New Testament is all about, but Jesus' explanation in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, 6, and 7 is the single greatest summary of Kingdom life. Matthew offers the prologue to the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 4:23, "And Jesus went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom..."

Since the greatest command is love (Matthew 22:37-39) and love is active concern for the welfare of others, it is no surprise that Jesus kicks off this greatest of all sermons in the same way that David does the Psalms, by telling us how to promote our own well-being - "Blessed is..." "Blessed are..." This morning, we will look at the first beatitude from Matthew 5:3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven." .....

While Moses is known for his role in bringing the Jews the Law and the Ten Commandments, Jesus is known for the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes. Although only forty-two percent of Americans know Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, it is still the best known, if least practiced, of Jesus' teaching. Hase speaks of the Sermon on the Mount as the "Constitution of the Kingdom of God in the souls of men."

One of the beauties of Christianity is its global, cross-cultural reach. The Kingdom of Jesus Christ is not limited by fenced borders or great walls. No matter how oppressive human government may be, you may declare your primary allegiance to King Jesus and avail yourself of internal freedoms no

power can take away. Jesus invites those in Kim Jong Un's North Korea, Castro's Cuba and Ahmadinejad's Iran to enjoy the blessings of life in the Kingdom of Christ.

When we read the Sermon on the Mount, we learn the similarities and differences between Jesus' way of thinking and our own. Jesus is always right, so when we differ with Him we're on the wrong side of the argument.

The Beatitudes challenge us no matter how many times we read them. The Beatitudes upend the worldly philosophies that play in the media, schools and even in some churches. Consider the formula presented in Matthew 5:3-12: "Blessed are the poor in spirit?" "Blessed are those who mourn?" Haven't we been taught that the confident and cocky, the rough, rugged and unconcerned are the ones living "the good life?" "Blessed are the meek and merciful?" The world sees these as weaknesses. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness?" Oh no, we are told the key to the good life is going for the gusto – an all-out crusade to enjoy worldly pleasure in all its forms. "Blessed are the pure in heart?" Run that by the folks at work. "Blessed are the peacemakers?" This hardly compares with the "get the first lick in" mantra. The hardest beatitude to swallow, though, is the last, "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake..." We are a lot more comfortable with, "Don't get mad, get even!" But Jesus was right on the Mount and He is still right! The issue is: have we figured it out yet?

The word "beatitude", incidentally, comes from the Latin word "beatus" which means "blessed" and describes the special, spiritual kind of happiness God bestows on those content to abide within the confines of His guidelines for living. Robertson writes in his Word Pictures, "The Greek word here ... is an adjective that means "happy" which in English etymology goes back to hap, chance, good-luck as seen in our words haply, hapless, happily, happiness. 'Blessedness is, of course, an infinitely higher and better thing than mere happiness' (Weymouth). English has thus ennobled "blessed" to a higher rank than "happy." Robertson later proceeds to quote Vincent ...: "Shaking itself loose from all thoughts of outward good, it becomes the express symbol of a happiness identified with pure character. Behind it lies the clear cognition of sin as the fountain-head of all misery, and of holiness as the final and effectual cure for every woe. For knowledge as the basis of virtue, and therefore of happiness, it substitutes faith and love."

When Jesus says, "Blessed are..." He says these are the keys to the good life. Do we agree with Jesus? As is so often the case with Scripture, as one man put it, "If you want to live for God you must be ready to say and do what seems strange to the world. You must be willing to give when others take, to love when others hate, to help when others abuse." Matthew 5:3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

This is the first sermon in Jesus' public ministry and the first recorded sentence in his first sermon. If we never get the FIRST sentence right in the doctrine of Christ, how can we expect to be mature in Christ? Some Christians never even make it to first base! That was certainly true of the church at Laodicea. Jesus rebuked Laodicea in Revelation 3:16-18 essentially for NOT being "poor in spirit." "So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'--and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked-- I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see."

These Christians were self-assured and arrogant; they thought they had arrived; they thought they had no room to grow, nothing to learn. They used material prosperity to camouflage their spiritual inadequacy. This shortcoming is common among 21st century churches. Jesus saw through it then and will see through it in us!

The Bible speaks on behalf of the poor. Jesus says the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:20, "Blessed are the poor." David writes in Psalm 41:1, "Blessed is he who considers the poor; The LORD will deliver him in time of trouble." The wise man adds in Proverbs 17:5, "He who mocks the poor reproaches his Maker..." and Proverbs 19:17, "He who has pity on the poor lends to the LORD, And He will pay back what he has given." Speaking of Jesus, Emerson rightly states, "The greatest man in history was the poorest." And yet, poverty itself, as John Terry puts it, "is not a virtue any more than wealth is a curse." Thomas Adams adds, "There are God's poor and the devil's poor."

While Jesus says "Blessed are the poor" in the sermon on the plain (Luke 6), in Matthew 5:3 He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." These are not identical. He who is poor is not necessarily "poor in spirit". Patrick Henry's will put poverty in perspective: "I have now disposed of all my property to my family; there is one thing more I wish I could give them, and that is the Christian religion. If they had this, and I had not given them a shilling, they would be rich; but if they had not that, and I had given them all the world, they would be poor."

Compare Jesus' beatitudes to the world's beatitudes. The world says, "Blessed are the rich, intelligent, educated, powerful, charismatic, athletic, beautiful and fashionable." None of these make Jesus' list. While the world promotes putting self first, Jesus says in Mark 9:35, "If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." The world says the goal is to be number one, but the Bible teaches that, separate from what I enjoy in Christ, I am a nobody.

Who else articulated this idea? The apostle Paul wrote in Ephesians 3:8, "To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ..." Again in 1 Timothy 1:15, Paul said, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief." Of course, this wasn't always true of Paul. He had a major mid-course correction on the Damascus Road. Up to that time, he was the opposite of "poor in spirit" – he was conceited and headstrong, like a bull in a china closet, charging after what he felt was the enemy of his family's faith, set on destroying the church of Christ.

When Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit", consider it a warning against being obstinate. We see this trait in another Saul – King Saul. After flouting the command of God, he was told in 1 Samuel 15:23, "For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, And stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, He also has rejected you from being king."

Dave McPherson reports, "A U.S. Air Force transport plane with its captain and five man crew was flying over Alaska in the mid-50s when they entered an unusually fierce snowstorm. The navigator contacted an air base only to be told he had veered several hundred miles off course. Correct coordinates were given to the navigator, who continued to insist that his own calculations could not be that far off. Soon the plane ran low on fuel. The six men decided to abandon the plane and parachute to safety, but because of the seventy degrees below Fahrenheit temperature and winds that gusted to fifty miles per hour, they were all frozen within minutes of hitting the ground."

McPherson continues, "A friend of mine was part of the rescue team that discovered and retrieved the bodies three days later. As a result of the navigator's pride, five other people went to their deaths." One man's pride can cost a family eternal life; stubbornness can wreck the church. Don't be that man! Don't be that woman! Solomon said it well in Proverbs 12:15, "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, But he who heeds counsel is wise." Good counsel, that is!

Let's be honest: we all struggle with pride, insecurity or both. Pride and insecurity are incompatible with being poor in spirit. We may hide insecurity with false pride or hide our pride with false humility; we may even bounce back and forth between being proud to insecure and back to being proud again. The devil eats this up!

The biblical answer to low self-esteem is NOT high self-esteem, but esteeming Jesus and others. Paul writes in Philippians 2:3, "(I)n lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself." It's not about me! Again in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things THROUGH CHRIST who strengthens me." It's not about super-me, but about allowing Super Christ to work in and through little me. This is key to exercising godliness, demonstrating spiritual productivity and experiencing happiness and fulfillment.

McGarvey writes of the first beatitude in the Fourfold Gospel Commentary: "The poor in spirit ... feel a deep sense of spiritual destitution and comprehend their nothingness before God. The kingdom of heaven is theirs, because they seek it, and therefore find and abide in it. To this virtue is opposed the pride of the Pharisee, which caused him to thank God that he was not as other men, and to despise and reject the kingdom of heaven. There must be emptiness before there can be fullness, and so poverty of spirit precedes riches and grace in the kingdom of God." Being "poor in spirit" enables Jesus to be in charge. Don't call Jesus King and then act like you are Prime Minister with your OWN agenda. It doesn't work that way! That's why Jesus said in Luke 6:46, "But why do you call ME 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?" Jesus is not a mere figure head like Queen Elizabeth; He's the full-fledged King of Kings and Lord of Lords. He has all authority in heaven and in earth. The "poor in spirit" get that; they surrender all to His reign.

We have another good description of being "poor in spirit" in Isaiah 66:2, "But on this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, And who trembles at My word." Vittorio Alfieri said, "To err is human; but contrition felt for the crime distinguishes the virtuous from the wicked."

In Luke 17:10, Jesus was describing what it means to be "poor in spirit." He said, "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, 'We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do.'" Being "poor in spirit" is really about self-awareness; it is about being honest with yourself. Someone said, "They that know God will be humble; they that know themselves cannot be proud."

Booker T. Washington provides a powerful example. Shortly after he took over the presidency of the Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, Booker T. Washington was walking in an exclusive section of town when he was stopped by a wealthy white woman. Not knowing Mr. Washington by sight, she asked if he'd like to earn a few dollars chopping wood. How would you have reacted if you were Booker T. Washington? He had no pressing business at the moment, so the Professor smiled, rolled up his sleeves and performed the humble task she had requested. When he was finished, he carried logs into the house and stacked them by the fireplace. A little girl recognized him and later revealed his identity.

The next morning the wealthy white woman went to Washington's office apologizing profusely. "It's perfectly alright, Madam. Occasionally, I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides it's always a delight to do something for a friend." The poor in spirit are not too good to get their hands a little dirty, not too good to take the lower seat.

David Kenney shares a similar story from the famous gospel meetings from which came the Hardeman Tabernacle Sermons beginning in 1922. "N. B. Hardeman was chosen as the preacher rather than C. M. Pullias who was also a very effective evangelist...When the leaders approached brother Pullias about leading the congregational singing rather than preaching, his response was that he would be willing to sweep the floors in order to assist moving the meeting forward. L. L. Brigance assisted in some of the research and outlines of material used by brother Hardeman. It's reported that L. L. Brigance stated "I cannot preach like brother Hardeman, but I can load his gun." Pullias and Brigance demonstrated what Jesus meant by, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Stay with us until after our song, and we'll tell you how you can get a copy of this message...

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