

“The Poor in Spirit”

Introduction: Last week we began to dip our toes into what is called the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus’ most well-known teaching. We’re turning to this teaching in order to help us begin to think about what it would look like to have the light of Jesus shine in us and through us. Where might our light have grown dim? Where might we need to be recharged?

We explored the broader context into which Matthew places the Sermon and saw how it reveals that Jesus is one of those “don’t miss this guy” teachers. Jesus is that, we saw, because he is the long-expected fulfillment of prophetic hope, because he is the King who is bringing heaven to earth, because his authority and power extends far beyond any human teacher, and quite simply because he says it would be wise to listen to him and foolish not to!

At the same time, we noted that this body of teaching is not easy to put into practice. To personalize this a bit, I suggested that you read through the sermon a couple of times and ask yourself where you find yourself in sync with his teaching, where you find it ridiculous or impossible, and where you find yourself even arguing with Jesus! My hunch is that you didn’t have to read very far to begin to struggle. It’s likely that you didn’t even make it through the introduction, known as the Beatitudes, or blessings, which Margie just read for us, before you began to have issues with Jesus!

I. The Beatitudes

A. Let’s think about the Beatitudes in general and then work with “poor in spirit” for a bit. If we find ourselves being challenged by Jesus’ opening words, it’s likely because they are counter-cultural in nature. Jesus takes the values of the kingdom of the world and turns them upside-down, or really, he turns them right-side up again. And what they reveal are not things for us to do in order to enter the kingdom of God, but how our character will begin to change when the good news of God’s kingdom begins to enter us. In this regard, sometimes you’ll see the translation “happy,” instead of “blessed.” I’m not sure that happy works very well because happy is a subjective, emotional state and the Beatitudes describe a life that is truly life, a life that is getting in sync with Jesus, a life that has begun to flourish as God’s grace does its work in us, no matter how we might be feeling, no matter the circumstances.

B. Further, I use the word “begin” with the Beatitudes because as we have said, when Jesus arrived, he brought the dawning of God’s kingdom on earth. We won’t experience the fullness of the kingdom, the fullness of the life he holds out for us until he returns. And so the Beatitudes are bookended declaring the reality that the kingdom of God is ours, now, but there are also still a bunch of future “they will be’s” as well.

Paul lays out this already-not-yet nature of the kingdom of God nicely in the opening of his letter to the Colossians, as he encourages the church there to give thanks to God the Father,

who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. – Col. 1:12-14

There is a future inheritance we have qualified for, and there is also a present existence we have entered. It begins with the forgiveness of sins, but, as we said last week (quoting Dallas Willard), there is

a lot of room between being forgiven and being perfect! That growth, with the aid of the Spirit, is the aim of the Sermon. As we walk with Jesus we experience not perfection overnight, but progress over a lifetime. And we seek all of this not only for our own good, but so that we might shine with the light of Jesus into a world that desperately needs to see and be bathed in that light.

## II. Vile and Full of Sin I Am

A. The right-side up, countercultural nature of the Sermon begins in the very first statement Jesus makes: Blessed are the poor in spirit. Really? And Jesus doesn't stop there. He goes on: blessed are those who mourn and those who are meek? Who wants to be or do any of those things?! Blessed be those who hunger for the rights of others, who offer mercy, and who pursue purity and peace? That sounds like awful hard work! Blessed, even, are those who, as they follow Jesus, find themselves being hated and persecuted by others? No thanks...I didn't sign up for that...did I?! Nothing sounds easy here.

B. Another way to hear poor in spirit is found in an old 18<sup>th</sup> c. hymn written by Charles Wesley in which he declares, "Vile and full of sin I am . . ." (*Jesus, Lover of My Soul*). A similar sentiment is expressed in another oldie but goodie, *Rock of Ages*, which has the line, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling." How many of us, as one commentator poses the question, would put these statements at the top of our resume when searching for a job?! "I am vile; I bring nothing." No, we list all of our accomplishments, and seek to convey that we are a competent, confident, self-reliant person. If you want to get ahead in this world, you gotta believe in yourself, and know how to promote yourself.

C. We should note that Luke, in his summary of Jesus' teaching, says "blessed are you who are poor" (Lk. 6:20). Is there a difference between Luke's poor and Matthew's poor in spirit? I think they are getting at the same thing. Helpful might be to know that there are two words we find for "poor" in the OT. One describes those who have to work all the time because they own no property. The other describes those whose are so destitute that they are reduced to begging and to relying on the mercy of others. It is this second word that Jesus uses, the word that describes those that come with empty hands and empty pockets, those who have absolutely nothing, and know it. The fact is, money can control the poor just as much as it can control the wealthy. The poor, those who know they need help and so are willing to admit their bankruptcy and their need for God, are those who are in view in both cases.

Illustration: Later in his gospel, Luke records a parable told by Jesus which helps to flesh this out (Lk. 18:9-14). Jesus pictures two men, one a religious leader, a Pharisee, and the other a notorious sinner, a tax collector. Both went to the Temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed in this way:

God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.

Notice that the Pharisee was confident he was a pretty good person, and to build himself up and assure himself of this he compared himself to other, relatively nasty, people. But the tax collector knew that we all look pretty good when we compare ourselves to others, but when the holiness and righteousness and beauty of God is our standard, when the life of Jesus is our measuring stick, none of us measures up.

Such is reflected in how Jesus describes this tax collector:

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God have mercy on me, a sinner."

He would have had no problem singing: “Vile and full of sin I am,” or, “nothing in my hand I bring.”

D. We get a similar picture in real life when Jesus called a man named Peter to be his disciple. Peter hadn’t been too successful fishing but when Jesus directed him where to cast his nets, they became filled to overflowing. As he began to realize who Jesus was, and who he was in comparison, he said to Jesus, “Go away from me Lord; I am a sinful man.” In response, Jesus told him not to be afraid, that his poverty of spirit would be what God would use to do great things through him (Lk. 5:1-11).

E. A final picture is sketched by a writer named Brennan Manning who suggests that the poor in spirit are like the survivors of a shipwreck. All the things they used to rely on—past achievements, accumulated treasures, titles and degrees—simply do not matter. All that matters is the plank to which they are clinging.

What is poor in spirit? At its core, It’s a recognition that we don’t have it all together and that all we can do is empty ourselves and receive what God has for us. And what we find, remarkably, is that what God has for us is an extravagant love, a love that will never let us go, a love where true self-esteem, true confidence, true competence comes from. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us, as Paul writes (Ro 5:8). What we then find is the amazing truth that when we recognize our spiritual poverty, Jesus “switches the price tags,” as someone has put it. We find that we are really rich, that the kingdom of heaven is actually for us, that we are beginning to experience the life that is truly life.

A third hymn, one which we’ll actually sing in a minute, helps make the point yet again. It’s the famous *Amazing Grace*, written by John Newton. Newton was a skipper on an English slave-trading ship. Despite the ugliness of the business he was in, Newton thought of himself as quite a decent and successful chap. But then the light of the kingdom of heaven broke through and invaded his life and he came to the blessedness of recognizing his spiritual poverty. The hymn is his personal testimony, and a “wretch” is how he defined his spiritual poverty:

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see.

I often wonder about the many people who request that this hymn be sung at a particular event...do they really know what it is they are singing?! In the presence of Jesus, this slave-trader saw how far short of the glory of God he had fallen. What he saw was his poverty of spirit. Grace, which “taught his heart to fear,” as the second verse has it, helped him see who he really was, but grace then also relieved that fear as he came to know how deeply loved he was in the realm of the kingdom as he learned to cling to the plank that is Jesus.

In point of fact, as we gaze out onto the rest of the Sermon, we don’t have what it takes to be and do what Jesus teaches. But if we can, right from the start, recognize the grace that is God’s gift to us and acknowledge our emptiness and poverty of spirit, then we just might be amazed at how Jesus can fill us, shining in us and through us.