

7.10.05

The Poor In Spirit

Matthew 5:1-3

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

“When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them saying, **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.”**”

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is found in Matthew chapters 5-7; it contains the heart of Jesus’ teaching. In less than 20 minutes you can read the sermon in those three chapters aloud. I’m hoping to do 24 sermons on the Sermon on the Mount so it will take me until next February! As I thought about that I was remembered the story of the woman who walked into a church and told the usher she’s like to sit in the front row. The usher looked at her and said, *“You don’t want to sit in the front row, our pastor is long winded and boring.”* The woman replied, *“Do you know who I am?”* *“No,”* said the usher. *“I’m the pastor’s mother.”* *“Do you know who I am?”* asked the usher. *“No,”* said the mother. *“Good,”* said the usher and he left.

In the midst of a mass of raw humanity gathered to hear Jesus on that mountain, Jesus teaches on the meaning of the availability and nearness of God. In front of him were people of every condition, and so he said and I am paraphrasing, *“Blessed are the spiritually bankrupt, the deprived and deficient, the spiritual beggars - when the kingdom of God comes upon them.”* The poor in spirit are blessed as a result of the kingdom of God being available to them in their spiritual poverty. Today the words “poor in spirit” no longer convey the sense of spiritual destitution they originally were meant to convey.

Jesus did not say, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit because they are poor in spirit.”* He didn’t think, *“What a fine thing it is to be destitute of every spiritual quality or attainment. It makes people worthy of the kingdom.”* We remove the much more profound meaning of Jesus’ teaching about the availability of the kingdom by replacing a state of spiritual emptiness or impoverishment – which is not good in itself – with some supposedly praiseworthy attitude that “qualifies us” for the kingdom.

The poor in spirit are called “blessed” by Jesus, not because of their merit, but because precisely in spite of and in the midst of their regrettable condition, the grace of God has come to them in Jesus. One Christian writer (Alfred Edersheim) put it this way: “In the Sermon on the Mount...the promises attaching to the so-called “Beatitudes” must not be regarded as the *reward* of the spiritual states with which they are connected, nor as their result. It is not *because* a man is poor in spirit that his is the Kingdom of

Heaven, the connecting link is in each case Christ Himself: because He..., “has opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.”

The Beatitudes are not spiritual goals that we must strive for, so much as they announce that the kingdom of the heavens is available to all people, even those who are poor, meek, and mournful. The blessedness Jesus talks about in the Beatitudes is in the kingdom, not in the condition. When Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in the spirit,” he didn’t mean, “How happy and fortunate you are to be poor or poor in spirit,” but in spite of their despair and desperation, they are invited freely into God’s kingdom by grace.

For the next six weeks I will be preaching on the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12.

Beatitude means blessed. The Greek word (makarios) translated as “blessed” refers to the highest type of well-being possible for human beings. Interestingly, it is also the term the Greeks used for the kind of blissful existence characteristic of the gods. However, the Beatitudes are not teachings about how to be blessed or how to do anything. **They are explanations and illustrations of the availability of the kingdom of heaven through personal relationship with Jesus.** The theme of the Beatitudes is the availability of the kingdom of heaven to everyone – even people who were looked down upon, disregarded, ignored, or thought NOT to be blessed by God. According to Matthew 4:24, Jesus’ audience includes “the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics” who had been cured by Jesus. That God’s son Jesus began his ministry by rolling out the welcome mat to folks with all kinds of problems tells us much of God’s character. In Jesus’ time as well as our own there are those who associate health, wealth, and power with God’s blessing, and illness, poverty, and weakness with God’s disapproval or even cursing. Jesus comes proclaiming and demonstrating through his ministry that God is concerned for and loves everyone. A point Jesus is making is the conditions described in the Beatitudes don’t keep us from entering or being a part of the kingdom of heaven. This is good news for a lot of people.

The gospel of Jesus is that the kingdom is open even to those who were usually considered second-class citizens. Jesus spoke to and welcomed not only the up and in but the down and out. The shock of the beatitudes would have been the idea that people who didn’t think they were eligible or qualified for anything, were able to enter the kingdom of God. God can bless people just because God chooses, or because of their need or because someone asks God to.

One of the best movies I've seen in quite some time is *Cinderella Man*, starring Russell Crowe as Jim Braddock, an American boxer in the 1920's and 30's. The film contains something as rare as an empty road on the Cape in July, a very positive portrayal of a marriage and a family. During the Great Depression the Braddock's, like so many Americans, struggle mightily to survive, barely having any food, having their electricity and heat shut off during winter, frequently without work, they are dirt poor. The Braddock's and their friends and neighbors, as poor as they are, know they are in urgent need of redemption. They know they are dependent on God and they are interdependent, they look out for each other. They understand their security lies not in things but in each other. They have no exaggerated sense of their own importance, and not much privacy. The poor can distinguish between necessities and luxuries and they may acquire a long-suffering kind of patience while they struggle to hold on to hope.

Finally, at their lowest point, Jim is unable to pray any more. He says to his wife, "*I'm all prayed out.*" Without two nickels to rub together, seemingly totally out of opportunities, looked down upon by others, he and his family are the type of folks Jesus is telling, "*The kingdom of heaven is yours.*" We associate kingdoms and kings and queens with palaces, wealth, jewels, and power, not with the poor. Yet Jesus says, even to folks who have nothing, they are invited to have a share in the kingdom.

The beatitudes are not attitudes that secure God's blessing. They are not "be happy attitudes," that would be salvation by attitude if not by our own doing. The Beatitudes are not directions on how to attain blessedness, if they were, we'd have to be poor, mourning, or persecuted to be among the blessed. "The Beatitudes are not teachings on how to be blessed. They are not instructions to do anything. They do not indicate conditions that are especially pleasing to God or good for human beings. They are explanations and illustrations, drawn from the immediate setting, of the present availability of the kingdom through personal relationship to Jesus. They single out cases that provide proof that, in him, the rule of God from the heavens truly is available in life circumstances that are beyond human hope. The Beatitudes simply cannot be 'good news' if they are understood as a set of "how-tos" for achieving blessedness. They would then only amount to a new legalism."¹

"The key to understanding the Beatitudes is they serve to clarify Jesus' fundamental message: the free availability of God's rule and righteousness to all of humanity through reliance upon Jesus himself. They do this simply by taking those who,

¹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, p. 106.

from the human point of view, are regarded as most hopeless, most beyond the possibility of God's blessing, or even interest, and exhibiting them as enjoying God's touch and abundant provision from the heavens. This fact of God's care and provision proves to all that no human condition excludes blessedness, that God may come to any person with his care and deliverance. God does sometimes help those who cannot, or perhaps just do not help themselves. The religious system of his day left the multitudes out, but Jesus welcomed them all into his kingdom. Anyone could come as well as any other.

They still can. That is the gospel of the Beatitudes."²

Like in the Lord's Prayer, there is also a community dimension of the Beatitudes – they are addressed to “The poor in spirit, those who mourn...” Being a part of the kingdom of heaven is to be involved with other people who have their own struggles and issues, with whom we share the journey.

The Beatitudes encourage us to ask, who in today's world are in life circumstances that are beyond all human hope and would be comparable to such an audience as Jesus spoke to that day? What would Jesus say to them? Spiritual zeroes also enjoy heaven's care. Considering that Jesus spoke the Beatitudes to those living in deplorable conditions, what Beatitude might Jesus speak to you because of a condition about you that seems deplorable or embarrassing?

The Beatitudes are not commands to be obeyed, they're not a set of rules, they are not to be seized, they are simply to be received as good news.

In New York City, there are eight million cats and eleven million dogs. New York City is basically just concrete and steel, so when you have a pet in New York City and it dies, you can't just go out in the backyard and bury it. The city authorities decided that for \$50 they would dispose of your deceased pet for you.

One lady was enterprising. She thought, I can render a service to people in the city and save them money. She placed an ad in the newspaper that said, “When your pet dies, I will come and take care of the carcass for you for \$25.” This lady would go to the local Salvation Army and buy an old suitcase for \$2. Then when someone would call about his or her pet, she would go to the home and put the deceased pet in the suitcase.

She would then take a ride on the subway, where there are thieves. She would set the suitcase down, and she would act like she was not watching. A thief would come

² Willard, 116.

by and steal her suitcase. She'd look up and say, "*Wait. Stop. Thief.*" The people who stole those suitcases got a real surprise when they got home.

If we're not careful, we can be like those New York thieves. Chasing after happiness, we grab after things we think will bring enrich or bless our lives; however, when we get it, it doesn't deliver what we hope. What we need more than anything is given to us by God's grace as a gift that is why Jesus says, "**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.**"

Each Beatitude contains a promise of a better future through a relationship with Jesus and God's grace. The poor receiving a kingdom; that is turning the world's order on its head. And that is what the gospel does.

We can all be thankful that we are invited into Jesus' kingdom in spite of conditions that we think might exclude us, such as being materially poor or poor in spirit.

Gracious God, we thank you that we are invited into the kingdom of heaven in spite of conditions that we think might exclude us.

Lord Jesus, you fed the hungry, healed the hopeless, welcomed those without refuge, and you often slept outside with no house to call your own. Your daily life led you among the wretched of the earth, the beggars, the abused and the outcast, the orphaned and forgotten, and those who bear the bitter fate of cruel misfortune or their own foolish mistakes. You knew that there is nothing at all blessed in the kind of desperation that is present in the cities of the world as well as in the rural parts of the third world.

Lord teach us not to be possessed by our possessions, rather let us be defined, not by what we have but by who we are and whose we are. In Jesus' name, Amen.

See also Deuteronomy 8:11-18, Isaiah 57:14-16.

Isaiah 57:15, "For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite."