

Matthew 5:3 (ESV) – 3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

WHAT ARE THE BEATITUDES?

We might look at the Beatitudes and be tempted to think that they only apply to the really special Christians, the exceptionally holy among us. But the Beatitudes are really statements of how God’s favor is shown to all of those who are born again in Jesus Christ. Each of them is true of each of the Christian, because of grace – the undeserved favor of God. As I said last week, Jesus Christ does nothing halfway; when He describes His people in these verses, He describes to the uttermost, as we would be if we were exactly like Him.

The Beatitudes are not natural traits or tendencies. They are works of the Spirit of God within us. I tend to be introverted, and self-critical. That doesn’t mean that I am poor in spirit. Others are afraid of violating the laws of God; that doesn’t make them hungry and thirsty for righteousness. This is what Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones calls “the glory of the Gospel”: the truth that “not only are we meant to be like Christ, we can be like Christ,” and we are being made like Christ by the Holy Spirit.

TRANSITION. Let’s give our attention to the first Beatitude, found in Matthew 5:3.

BLESSED.

Matthew 5:3 (ESV) – 3 “**Blessed are** the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

What does the world want? It wants happiness, enjoyment, satisfaction in this moment of time. This strange season of the coronavirus shutdown has revealed that people everywhere, not just America, are generally terrified of suffering and death. They are so terrified of death that whole economies are being ruined for generations to come. It’s like our world has just realized that people die, and that no one can be allowed to die, at least of COVID-19. I do hope that we all realize that we cannot prevent death, we can only change the time and the circumstances of death, and we can’t always do that. Our world is longing for happiness again, for enjoyment and contentment.

The problem is that while happiness might not be hard to define, knowing what will make us happy is almost impossible to define. There is no such thing as a permanent source of happiness. A person will say, “If only I had THAT, I would be happy.” Then they get it, and it

does make them happy for a short time, and then that happiness slips away like a morning fog. Worldly pleasure and happiness are like a mild itch; it feels better when you scratch it, but then you start itching somewhere else. Isn't it ironic? The very things that we think will make us happy usually cancel themselves out.

It's often said that the word "blessed" in the Bible – such as "blessed are the poor in spirit" – is the same as saying "happy are the poor in spirit." That's really not how "blessed" is used in the Bible. To be blessed means to be favored by God, not merely to have a subject experience, but to be the object, the recipient, of God's favor. What God's blessing grants us is not a momentary feeling – scratching the itch, as it were – but true safety and security in Christ.

And may I point out to you that Jesus did not say "blessed WILL BE" but "blessed ARE the poor in spirit"? The purpose of the Beatitudes is not to tell us what we can expect in heaven or some distant earthly future, but the blessings that we have received now. The blessings that are described in the Beatitudes aren't emotional experiences, but realities of our lives in Christ today.

TRANSITION: The first of those realities should immediately cancel out any thought we have that to be blessed is to be happy.

POOR IN SPIRIT.

Matthew 5:3 (ESV) – 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

BLESSED ARE THE POOR?

There are some who mentally erase the words "in spirit," and see only "blessed are the poor," as though financial poverty and economic hardship are advantages. There is no advantage to poverty. It is not money, but the love of money, that is the root of all sorts of evil (First Timothy 6:10). The poor can love money just as much as the wealthy.

BLESSED IN SPIRIT ARE THE POOR?

There are also some who might see this phrase as "blessed in spirit are the poor," as if those who are financially poor have other, invisible assets, or can expect that in heaven they will

receive more because they didn't have much on earth. Heaven doesn't exist to make up for what you lacked on earth; heaven doesn't exist to make up for what you didn't have here.

KEEPING IT ALL IN CONTEXT

We have to keep Scripture firmly in its own historical context and grammatical setting. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" takes its meaning from the Bible, and the Gospel, and the reason for which the Son of God took on human flesh: to save sinners for God's own eternal glory.

WHO IS POOR IN SPIRIT?

So, who does the Bible say is poor in spirit? The first thing to do is to search for the words "poor in spirit," and . . . they only occur here. That's okay; the phrase is not found anywhere else, but the idea of being poor in spirit runs throughout the Scriptures.

Let me give you two examples, one from the Old Testament, and one from the New Testament.

NEBUCHADNEZZAR

Nebuchadnezzar II was the king of Babylon for more than 40 years. His greatest enemy was Egypt, and in the process of warring against Egypt, he pillaged Israel mercilessly, eventually bringing most of the people of Israel to Babylon as captives, and establishing Israel as kind of a forward deployment area. (Israelites who remained in Israel eventually married Babylonians, and became known as Samaritans). Nebuchadnezzar had tremendous success as a king, and he grew incredibly proud. And then God stepped in.

The best summary of what happened is found in Daniel 5:19-22, where Daniel reminds Nebuchadnezzar's son, Belshazzar, what happened to his father:

Daniel 5:18–22 (ESV) — 18 O king, the Most High God gave Nebuchadnezzar your father kingship and greatness and glory and majesty. **19** And because of the greatness that He gave him, all peoples, nations, and languages trembled and feared before him. Whom he would, he killed, and whom he would, he kept alive; whom he would, he raised up, and whom he would, he humbled [Remember, Nebuchadnezzar had all this power because the Most High God gave it to him]. **20** But when his heart was lifted up and his spirit was hardened so that he dealt proudly [as though his power and glory was self-derived], he was

brought down from his kingly throne, and **his glory was taken** from him [The Lord gave, and the Lord took away]. **21** He was **driven from among the children of mankind**, and **his mind was made like that of a beast**, and **his dwelling was with the wild donkeys**. He was **fed grass like an ox**, and **his body was wet with the dew of heaven**, **UNTIL HE KNEW** that **the Most High God rules the kingdom of mankind and sets over it whom He will**. **22** And you his son, Belshazzar, have not humbled your heart, **though you knew all this ...**

Nebuchadnezzar had no reason for pride; the Most High God, who rules over the kingdom of mankind, and sets over it whom He will, gave him all of his power and wealth and privilege. Nebuchadnezzar was spiritually bankrupt, but didn't know it. So the Lord God treated him with mercy and kindness – if you don't think it was kindness, just remember that Nebuchadnezzar was not dumped into a river when he was out of his mind; God protected him. And in the end, Nebuchadnezzar made the good confession of faith:

Daniel 4:37 (ESV) – 37 Now I, Nebuchadnezzar, praise and extol and honor the King of heaven, for all his works are right and his ways are just; and those who walk in pride he is able to humble.

By the grace of God Nebuchadnezzar came to understand that he was poor in spirit, and that while he may have had power over other human beings, he was utterly subject to the purposes and will of God. No one can say for sure, of course, but I firmly believe that we will see Nebuchadnezzar in heaven.

Before we move on, I want to point out Daniel's words to Nebuchadnezzar's son, Belshazzar: "And you his son have not humbled your heart, though you knew all of this." The lesson taught to Nebuchadnezzar was not just for him; it was for his son as well. It is for all people, because we see the events preserved for us in Scripture. No one should ever think that if God really wanted them to be humble, He would intervene in their lives as He did in Nebuchadnezzar's life. The lesson has been taught; we are expected to learn.

THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

Is there a New Testament example of being poor in spirit? Of course. In Luke 18:9-14 we read,

Luke 18:9-14 (ESV) – 9 He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt [that is, people who were **NOT poor in spirit**]: **10** "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax

collector. **11** The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. **12** I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' **13** But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' [The Greek text says "THE sinner"] **14** I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

It's a familiar story to most of us. The Pharisee is the good, religious man, who keeps the Law. The tax collector is the hated man, who worked for the Romans and preyed on his own people. Tax collectors made their money by extorting what they could from the people. Matthew, the author of this Gospel, was a tax collector. Luke says that the story is a parable, otherwise I would be tempted to think that it was actually about Matthew.

The Pharisee reminds God of how good he is compared to other people, and how diligently he keeps God's Law. The tax collector is full of guilt and remorse and misery, is unwilling to even look upward (which was the typical Jewish posture for prayer), but loathes himself (he beats his breast), and cries out for mercy as a sinner. When they returned home, the tax collector had been justified, and the Pharisee had not been.

Let me make two quick comments about this. **First**, the Pharisee NEEDED to be justified just as much as the tax collector, otherwise Jesus would not have said that he went away without being justified. **And second**, even though its a parable, we can easily imagine that the Pharisee left with a high opinion of himself, in spite of the fact that he was still dead in his sins; and we can also easily imagine that the tax collector still felt wretched about himself, in spite of the fact that he had been justified. You cannot feel your relationship with God. Let me repeat that: you cannot feel your relationship with God. As soon as someone decides that a relationship with God is something that is to be emotional experienced, they are vulnerable to the lies of the devil. Being forgiven and justified is not about feeling better about yourself, but being in a state of reconciliation before God.

So, who is poor in spirit? Nebuchadnezzar, after God broke him into little pieces. The tax collector, whose eyes were opened by the Spirit of God to his own wretched condition. Not the Pharisee, who had every reason know his own spiritual bankruptcy, but because he accepts his own opinion and the opinion of other sinners, remains deluded about his own spiritual poverty.

Being poor in spirit means being aware of our own sinful state, our complete depravity, knowing that we are full of wickedness, and that we have no defense before God. The Westminster Confession of Faith and the London Baptist Confession of 1689 say the same thing about the work of the Spirit in opening the sinner's eyes to his or her actual condition before God. "It is a Gospel grace, in which those, who are made aware by the Holy Spirit of the many evils of their sin, by faith in Christ humble themselves for it with godly sorrow, hatred of it, and self-loathing."

Poverty of spirit is the recognition of your own sinful state before God. It exists where there is godly sorrow for our sin, hatred of our sin, and loathing of our sinful flesh. This is a work of the Spirit of God. If you know the reality of your own sin, and grieve over it, and hate it, and hate your own flesh for loving sin so much, then the Spirit of God has done that work in you. Praise God that His Spirit forces His people to see and acknowledge who they really are.

TRANSITION: But, how can this sort of knowledge be a blessing?

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

Matthew 5:3 (ESV) — 3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

This must be made very clear: receiving the Kingdom of Heaven is NOT a reward God gives to those who make themselves poor in spirit. It is the promise God makes to those whom HE has caused to recognize that they are poor in spirit.

John the Baptist preached that the Kingdom of God was *at hand*; that it would appear any moment.

Jesus preached that the Kingdom of God was *at hand*; that in Him it had arrived on the earth. The Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of God, is God's inner rule over the hearts and minds of His people, and the eternal rule of God over the nations. It is a present reality for those of us who have been reconciled to our God and King, and is a future reality when the Lord brings all rebellion to an end with the final judgment. In that final judgment, heaven and earth will pass away, as Peter writes:

2 Peter 3:10 (ESV) – 10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed.

It is that earth and Kingdom that we shall inherit. Do I need to say that when Jesus says “theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven,” He does not mean that we will have ownership or supreme authority in His Kingdom.? America is MY country, but that doesn’t mean that I possess it or have authority over it, does it? Of course not. Well, the Kingdom of Heaven is our true country, our true nation, our true homeland, not in the sense that we will own it, but in the sense that it is there we belong.

LET’S BRING THIS HOME.

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To be blessed by God is to be the recipient of His favor. It comes as a gift – it is not something that we either earn or deserve. It is given just as freely – the Father is under no obligation to bless anyone. We receive it freely, without charge. He gives it freely, of His own sovereign grace.

To be poor in spirit is to be brought face to face with your own sinful state. I can’t teach anyone how to become poor in spirit, because it is not a human work, but something the Holy Spirit does within God’s elect in His time, in His way.

The undeserved favor given to the poor in spirit is to be full citizens and subjects of the Kingdom of God, led by the Holy Spirit, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, fully subject to the Father in every respect; and as a result of God’s gracious gift, enjoying every benefit and privilege and responsibility of being citizens and subjects of the Kingdom of light.

By our birth as Adam’s race, and by our own deeds, we deserve nothing but judgment. By the kind grace of God, we who are made to understand our spiritual poverty become the beneficiaries of God’s Kingdom. It is our home, our country, our city.