

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 specific 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 the present moment. The problem, of course, is that while happiness is not too hard to define, knowing what will make us happy is almost impossible to define. That’s because there is no permanent source of earthly 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; you can make it feel better by scratching, but you’ll start itching somewhere else. Isn’t it ironic? The very things that we think will make us happy usually end up making us unhappier than we were before we had them.

The word “blessed” – as in “blessed are the poor” – does not mean “happy.” To be blessed means to be favored by God, not merely to have a subjective experience. It means being the

object of His favor. His blessing doesn't just scratch the itch for a moment, but brings true contentment in Christ.

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.

How we are to take this phrase, “Blessed are the poor in spirit”? Some mentally erase the words “in spirit,” and just say “blessed are the poor.” But that’s not what Jesus said. Others rework it in their minds, so that it says “blessed in spirit are the poor,” as if those who are financially poor have other, invisible, intangible riches.

KEEPING IT ALL IN CONTEXT

We have to keep Scripture firmly in its own historical context and grammatical setting. The Scriptures give us the context for “blessed are the poor in spirit.” It sits within the Gospels, and is spoken by the Savior who came to save sinners for God’s own eternal glory. It’s interesting that this is the only place in the Bible where “poor in spirit” is used, but the idea runs throughout Scripture. Let me give you two examples, one from the Old Testament, and one from the New.

Let’s turn to Daniel 5.

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.

Daniel 5:18-22 gives a summary after the fact, as Daniel speaks to Nebuchadnezzar's son, Belshazzar.

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 ...

Who gave Nebuchadnezzar everything? The Most High God. Who took everything from Nebuchadnezzar? The Most High God. Nebuchadnezzar was merely a creature, and a sinful creature at that, so he came to believe that his power and glory were part of his nature: he became proud. The Most High God treated Nebuchadnezzar with grace and mercy – if you don't think so, just remember that he wasn't unceremoniously dumped in a river while he was out of his mind. And in the end, Nebuchadnezzar made what I believe is a saving 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.

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 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. The tax collector was justified, and the Pharisee was not.

The fact that Jesus tells us that the Pharisee was not justified means that he was in need of it, but we can easily imagine that he returned home with a high opinion of himself. This prayer was another brick in the wall of his self-righteousness.

And, the fact that the tax collector returned home justified doesn't mean that he immediately felt that HE was right with God; it does tell us that he knew that God had shown him mercy and kindness in spite of his sin.

Let me remind us all, myself included, that we cannot FEEL our relationship with God. I'll say that again: we cannot FEEL our relationship with God. Those who insist that a right relationship with God can be experienced emotionally inevitably end up chasing that experience, and are vulnerable to the deceptions of the devil. Being justified is not about how you feel about yourself, but about God giving you full credit for the righteousness of Christ. If there IS an emotion connected to justification, it would not be pride or happiness, but relief and peace. Nevertheless, you cannot FEEL your relationship with God.

Nebuchadnezzar and the tax collector were poor in spirit; they knew, by the grace and work of God, their own sin, and God's mercy. Belshazzar and the Pharisee were blind to their own spiritual poverty. Early this morning, around 3:20 or so, that storm hit Norfolk. A bolt of lightning hit so close to our house that the explosion of sound happened at the same time as the light. That'll wake you up in the morning. A minute or two later police cars and fire engines filled our street. As it turns out, lightning struck a gazebo in the backyard of some neighbors about four or five houses away. When God decides to show us our spiritual poverty, it often comes as suddenly and unexpectedly as that lightning bolt. It doesn't gently nudge us to awareness; it comes explosively and shockingly. We recognize that we are just creatures, and sinful creatures at that, subject to the will and judgment of God.

This is a work of the Spirit of God. If you have come to 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, even though it comes like a lightning bolt out in the dark.

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.”

What is the Kingdom of God? It is the rule of God over His creature. It is internal, as we are subject to Jesus Christ as Lord. It is external, as He brings all of creation into alignment with the perfect will of God. It is present today, as we trust and follow Christ moment by moment. And it is future, as we look to the day when Jesus brings all things to a close, separates His elect from the wicked, confines the wicked to hell, and creates a new heavens and new earth as a place where He will dwell with His people for eternity. By our own nature we deserve nothing; by our own works we deserve judgment. By the grace of God in Jesus Christ we receive everything.

I think I should emphasize that the Kingdom of Heaven is not a reward that we get for being good people, or for making ourselves poor in spirit. No one ever realizes that they are poor in spirit, as Jesus intends it here, apart from a sovereign work of the Spirit of God.

LET'S BRING THIS HOME.

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To be blessed by God is to be the recipient of His favor. It comes to us as a gift; it is not something that we either earn or deserve. And God gives it just as freely; He is under no obligation to bless anyone. He blesses us freely, of His own sovereign will.

To be poor in spirit is to be brought face to face with your own creatureliness and 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.

I can tell you how not to be poor in spirit. For instance, believe that you are good, and can do anything you set your mind to. Take credit for all of your strengths and abilities. Ignore your petty sins as meaningless. Write off your serious sins as mistakes, or blame them on someone else. Point out others whom you think are worse than you, so that you look good in comparison. Tell yourself that everyone does it, so its ok. Insist that while God can rule the universe any way He likes, He has no authority or control over you; you can repent, or not, whenever you like. You get the idea.

My brothers and sisters, it is by the grace and mercy of God that He shows us our own spiritual poverty both as creatures and as sinners, even when that realization comes as suddenly as a blast of lightning at 3:15 on a Sunday morning. It is by His grace that we have any sense of how low we are as creatures, and how wretched we are as sinners. It is because of that spiritual poverty that we mourn our condition (the second beatitude), that we are meek and humble (the third beatitude), that we hunger and thirst for real righteousness (the fourth beatitude), that we experience true mercy toward others (the fifth beatitude), that we abandon sin and long for holiness (the sixth beatitude), and that we resolve to live peacefully with others, as far as it depends on us (the seventh beatitude).

Redemption is completely dependent on the righteousness and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; this includes the awareness of being poor in spirit. It is the kindness of God that leads us to repentance, and that made a way for our redemption through Jesus' cross.

Let's pray.