

Introduction

Americans thrive on a good rags to riches story. One such story is that of Oprah Winfrey who overcame prejudice, abuse, and poverty to rise to a point of great worldly success and influence. She makes about \$224 million per year. It seems like a lot. OK. It is a lot in earthly terms. But in one declaration, Jesus tells the ultimate rags to riches story. And you might be a part of it.

[Read Text and Pray]

We come this morning to the first of the beatitudes. I agree with Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who says poor in spirit is the "fundamental characteristic of the Christian and of the citizen of the kingdom of heaven, and all the other characteristics are in a sense the result of this one." It is imperative that we lay hold of what Jesus is teaching here.

I. The Declaration.

Jesus declares at the outset of the sermon, "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

A. Jesus is declaring a fact. This is not a mere possibility or something for which to strive. It is not a wish that Jesus has for his disciples nor even a probability. Each of these statements that we call the beatitudes are declarations. Jesus is seated speaking with all authority and as the maker, sustainer, and ruler of the created universe. Blessed are the poor in spirit is a statement of fact for Jesus.

Here at the beginning of his ministry the emphasis of Jesus is on the happy and joyful condition of those who exhibit the characteristics of the citizens of the kingdom. They are blessed. They are blessed by God.

B. This fact of blessedness is wonderful indeed. Jesus went about preaching the gospel of the kingdom and giving a glimpse into the joy of the kingdom by healing people from their diseases and dysfunction. The

joy and excitement reflected by those who were healed illustrates the deeper and greater gladness of those who belong to the kingdom.

This gladness drips off the word "blessed." "Blessed are the poor in spirit." The Greek word here is makarios. The basic definition of the word is happy. The text itself helps us out with understanding the word. Matthew uses it 9 times here in verses 3-12. And there in verse 12 are two words which are used in place of "blessed" which appear to convey the heart of what Jesus means when he says blessed. The two words are "rejoice and be glad." That idea is also expressed by Peter in his first epistle. He declares, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." He describes what is laid up for believers in heaven and the hopeful expectation of the revealing of Jesus when he returns. And he states to the saints, "though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and full of glory."

C. Clearly there is a distinction between the nature of happiness which Jesus declares and what the world commonly thinks of. Jesus is talking about a happiness that can be experienced even in the midst of persecution. It is not shallow and frivolous. It is the kind of deep resonating joy which can rejoice even when encountering trials. It is this kind of joy which prompts Paul and Silas to sing praises in prison in the middle of the night.

D. The point that stands out is here is that the citizens of the kingdom of heaven are basically and fundamentally happy people. They are genuinely, deeply, and everlastingly happy. They have reason to remain happy even when their earthly lives are turned upside down. They have the kind of joy that can weather disappointments and storms and sorrows and pains. Happiness is a foundational element of who they are.

But we are going to see that the happiness they experience is not because they seek happiness. Happiness is not their goal. But they are the ones that find it.

All people desire to be happy. We spend our lives in pursuit of happiness. At least our natural lives. And in our natural lives, we are our happiest when our circumstances are the most to our liking. Circumstances we like . . . happiness increases. Circumstances we do not like . . . and our unhappiness spikes. But many who refuse the gospel do so because they are convinced that they won't be happy following Christ. The world has its ideas of what will make it happy, and denying oneself and living for someone else just does not fit them. Worshiping God, fleeing sin, and serving others selflessly seems boring at best and downright repulsive at worst.

Jesus is not saying that we should seek happiness first and foremost. But he is teaching that those who enter the kingdom are the ones who actually find happiness. Oh the irony of truth in the face of human foolishness. Humans want to be happy so they seek happiness. They reject God because they want to be happy. But truth be told the only way to experience real happiness is to quit seeking it and seek the kingdom of God. It is just like with life. Jesus said that whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever would lose his life for Jesus' sake will find it. In the same way, go, search for happiness, you might experience happy moments, but that happiness comes and goes. Ultimately it will go away completely. But if you would have real and lasting happiness, quit seeking it. Remove happiness from the altar in your heart. Put Jesus Christ there and you will be joyfully and eternally happy.

II. The Identification.

Who are the people who belong to the kingdom? Who are the people who are happy? What do they look like? What do they act like? That is what these beatitudes are about. And it is quite an astonishing picture. The people whom Jesus identifies as happy do not look to the world like the kind of people who should be happy. It starts right here in Matthew 5:3.

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

A. Jesus is not talking about people who are poor in worldly goods. These are not the poor in general, but the poor in spirit. Martyn Lloyd Jones rightly says, "The Bible nowhere teaches that poverty is a good thing. The

poor man is no nearer to the kingdom of heaven than the rich man, speaking of them as natural men. There is no merit or advantage in being poor. Poverty does not guarantee spirituality." In fact, says Lloyd-Jones, poor people put their trust in riches just as the rich do. They are jealous of the rich and dream of what they would do if only they had the resources of the rich. This condition is not the blessed one about which Jesus speaks. Jesus speaks not about the poor, but about the poor in spirit. And that is to say Jesus is focused on a person's spirit, his attitude toward himself. This is the matter at the heart of this beatitude.

B. In speaking of the poor in spirit, Jesus is not referring to a person who wallows in self-pity. The poor in spirit are not like Eeyore, a sad victim of all of life. This is the person who bemoans how badly "life" has treated him. He really is a pessimist and a complainer. So in the Winnie the Pooh stories, Eeyore loses his tail. Kanga knits him a new one and hangs it on him. Eeyore says, "It's an awful nice tail, Kanga. Much nicer than the rest of me." He is determined not to be happy. He can see no change on the horizon. Things are bad and they are not gonna get any better. This attitude is not what Jesus means when he says poor in spirit.

C. In the third place, when Jesus speaks of the poor in spirit, he is not speaking of those who are naturally timid and lacking in courage or who never take the lead. Spiritual poverty is not the equivalent of being shy or quiet.

D. For Jesus, being poor in spirit is the equivalent to a sick person who admits he is sick and cannot help himself. For Jesus announced that it is the sick who need a doctor not those who are well. He declared that he came to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance. One who is poor in spirit sees himself not as someone who has a spiritual cold, but as a dying man laden with cancer. He sees himself before God and he concludes his health is completely consumed with death. He is nothing, has nothing, and can do nothing, to cure himself. He cannot endear himself to God. He is the opposite of those who trust in themselves that they are righteous. He sees no righteousness in which to trust. He owns the confession of Isaiah 64:6. He says, "We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our

righteous deeds are like a polluted garment. We all fade like a leaf and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.”

E. Not only is the poor in spirit conscious of his helplessness and unworthiness. The poor in spirit are also conscious of their poverty. The word Jesus uses here for POOR is noteworthy. There was a common Greek word for poor and this is not it. The common Greek word for being poor was penichros. That word is found in Luke 21:2. Luke writes that Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, and he saw a POOR widow put in two small copper coins. (That’s the common word for poor.) And Jesus pointed out that this widow gave out of her poverty. She was very poor, (penichros) but she had something to give. On the other hand, Luke 16:19-31 records Jesus’ account of a rich man who wore the finest clothes and feasted sumptuously every day. At his gate WAS LAID a POOR man named Lazarus. The word here for poor is not the common word (penichros) but another word (ptōchos). And here is what you need to know about this word. MacArthur says it comes “from a verb meaning ‘to shrink, cower, or cringe,’ as beggars often did in that day. Classical Greek used the word to refer to a person reduced to total destitution, who crouched in a corner begging. As he held out one hand for alms he often hid his face with the other hand, because he was ashamed of being recognized. The term did not mean simply poor, but begging poor.” [MacArthur, Matthew, 145]

The poor widow came into the temple in her own strength. Though poor, she came with two coins to drop in the offering box. But Lazarus had no such resources. He was completely impoverished. He was destitute. He was not simply poor but begging poor. He did not come in his own strength. Jesus said he WAS LAID at the gate of the rich man. He had no strength to bring himself. He had no strength even to sit there. We was laid there. Moreover, he was repulsive. He was covered with sores. He was so weak and so incapable, he could not even keep the dogs off of him from licking his sores. And yet his desires were meager. He just desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Now that, brothers and sisters, is poor. That is not penichros. That is ptōchos.

And with that in mind, when we come to Matthew 5:3, and we hear Jesus say, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," it is this that he says, "Blessed are the ptōchos. Blessed are the destitute in spirit. Blessed are the beggar poor in spirit. Blessed are those who in a spiritual sense recognize that they are nothing and can do nothing but hope for a crumb from the table of God.

Now it is true that every human being is poor in this way, but few are the human beings who recognize themselves in this way. In fact human beings are so destitute, so blind, so dead, that such a recognition comes only by the grace of God.

Lloyd-Jones puts it this way: Being poor in spirit "means a complete absence of pride, a complete absence of self-assurance and of self-reliance. It means a consciousness that we are nothing in the presence of God. It is nothing, then, that we can produce; it is nothing that we can do in ourselves. It is just the tremendous awareness of our utter nothingness as we come face to face with God."

MacArthur says it like this: "To be poor in spirit is to recognize one's spiritual poverty apart from God. It is to see oneself as one really is: lost, hopeless, helpless. Apart from Jesus Christ every person is spiritually destitute, no matter what his education, wealthy, social status, accomplishments, or religious knowledge. . . . The poor in spirit are those who recognize their total spiritual destitution and their complete dependence on God. They perceive that there are no saving resources in themselves and that they can only beg for mercy and grace. They know they have no spiritual merit, and they know they can earn no spiritual reward. Their pride is gone, their self-assurance is gone, and they stand empty-handed before God."

What a stark contrast with the world in which we live! You know when people make a significant accomplishment whether athletic or academic or surviving a difficult life-circumstance, an interviewer will ask them, "How did you do it? What enabled you to hang in there the way you did?" Much of the time you will hear a reply like this, "I just believed in myself. I knew I could do it, so I just stayed in there and kept trying. I knew nobody else was going to do it for me, so I did it for myself." The mantras of this world

are rely on yourself, believe in yourself, and express yourself. But as long as you try this before God, you are not poor in spirit.

I want to show you a couple biblical examples of being poor in spirit. First, there is Isaiah. He recounts in Isaiah 6 how he saw the Lord high and lifted up and the train of his robe filled the temple. The seraphim in flight before him were crying holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, the whole earth is full of his glory. And the thresholds of the temple shook. And Isaiah was overcome by the glory of the Lord, and he cried, "Woe is me for I am undone, for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell among a people of unclean lips." Woe is the opposite of blessed. In Matthew 23, Jesus spoke the opposite of the beatitudes. He pronounced woes. Seven times, he said woe to scribes and Pharisees. These were people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous. They were not poor in spirit. And he speaks woe to them. On the other hand here is Isaiah speaking woe to himself because he is poor in spirit. Woe is not unto him from God but blessing. He was assured his guilt was taken away and his sin was atoned for.

And then there is the Apostle Paul in Romans 7. He says these things of himself: "I once was alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin came alive and I died. Sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment deceived me and through it killed me. Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what it good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. I am sold under sin. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is in my flesh. I am a wretched man! Who will free me from this body of death? That is poor in spirit. Rightly then did Paul exclaim, "Thanks be to God through the Lord Jesus Christ!"

Isaiah was poor in spirit. The Apostle Paul was poor in spirit. Both saw nothing but wickedness when they looked at themselves. It was not because they were more wicked than anybody else. It is because they recognized the reality of wickedness. The same wickedness fills each of our hearts as it did theirs. The question is do we recognize it? Do we SEE the wretchedness of our hearts? Do we understand the corruption of our best

works? Do we see that we are like poor, impoverished Lazarus lying at the gate of God with nothing to commend ourselves to him?

E. Are you poor in spirit? The importance of this question cannot be overstated. Because if you are not poor in spirit, you will never be part of the kingdom of God. You cannot be saved if you will not be poor in spirit. You have no hope of reconciliation with God. The promises of joy and gladness in the kingdom will not be upon you for all eternity. The shallow hollow short-lived happiness you experience from time-to-time here on earth is the only happiness you will ever have.

F. What can one do to be poor in spirit? There are two things you can do if you are not poor in spirit. One. Look to God. The people who are poor in spirit are not people who compare themselves with other people. They are men and women boys and girls who look to God. Comparing themselves with other people, they will always see someone who is worse, someone who makes them look good. But when you see your blood stained sinful garments against the unstained, pure white holiness of the holy and glorious character of God, then you will see something of the wretch that you are. Look to God. Two. The second thing you can do is this. Pray. Ask. Beg. Seek. Tell God your helplessness and hopelessness. Acknowledge him and ask him to show you your hideous estate. It is in this very sermon that Jesus says to ask and you will receive, seek and you will find, knock and it will be opened to you. If you want to be poor in spirit he will have to be the one to open your eyes.

III. The Explanation.

How is it Jesus can say that the poor in spirit are blessed? This disposition is such the opposite of what people naturally associate with blessing and happiness. How can Jesus say, blessed are the poor in spirit? He answers the question, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." These are those who both now and future for all time possess the kingdom of heaven. They belong to it. They are citizens of it. They are the saved. These are the ones whose sins are washed away by the blood of the lamb. They have given up on a kingdom in this world. Losing their lives for his sake they find them. These are the ones for whom Jesus is preparing a place. They will be with him where he is for all eternity.

Conclusion

The poor beggar Lazarus is a vivid illustration of our spiritual condition. All he could do was hope that the rich man in front of whose house he lay might have mercy and give him some crumbs.

But I have good news this morning. The poor in spirit have great hope and great assurance. The God of the universe will not bless the poor in spirit with mere crumbs! Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is not a few crumbs from his table. No, theirs is the kingdom of God itself. He brings us into his own house and makes us part of his family. He loves the poor in spirit. And not just a few crumbs, he gave his only begotten son. His own son was sacrificed as a substitute for sinners on the cross at Calvary. Jesus died in the place of the poor in spirit to bring them to God. He who knew no sin became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in him, so that whoever will believe on him will have eternal life.

And thus does Jesus declare, Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.