

Be Attitude- The Wealthy Poor

Readings: Matthew 5:1-12; Luke 18:9-14

Text: Matthew 5:3

Over the course of the year we are going to look at the sermon on the mount...
More specifically...the beatitudes.

The Sermon on the Mount has been described as the greatest message ever given...
The wisest words ever spoken.
And they are spoken by the greatest preacher ever to live...
The wisest person who ever lived.

While it is true that the words of the beatitude stand quite well on their own...
I think that it is important that we put the words spoken by Jesus in their right context

Then we can better appreciate the impact of the words on those original hearers and
the impact on us today.

At the beginning of his public ministry, in Luke 4, we read how Jesus stood up in the
synagogue and read from Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has
anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for
the prisoners and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim
the year of the Lord's favour."

Then he told them that he was the one who fulfilled this prophecy.

From that time, Jesus began to preach what he called "the good news of the kingdom
of God" to Israel, and he began to act in fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy.

The beatitudes of Matthew 5 are about that Kingdom life,
and they are addressed to Kingdom people.

Today's passage starts, 1Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside
and sat down. His disciples came to him, 2and he began to teach them...

Jesus is preaching to his disciples...the faithful remnant of Israel...
Those waiting for God's salvation.

But you need to be clear that Jesus is not saying that living like this you will earn
God's blessing.

Some people think Jesus is saying these are the kind of works you must do to gain
eternal life.

But that is not the right way to interpret this passage.

Those who are called blessed by our Lord are assumed to be true believers already. Their works are the result of God's grace, and not the means of their earning God's eternal salvation.

And while this message is for believers, it also speaks to unbelievers. To the believer it gives guidance for living as members of the covenant community.

It shows up areas for improvement.

To the unbeliever it provokes a response of despair in human nature.

Questioning if there are people who live like this.

And that despair is meant to drive them to God's grace and mercy.

As the eager group gathered around Jesus, they really didn't know what they were about to hear.

They knew that this man was an extraordinary person.

They had heard of His miraculous power and radical teaching.

And they were hungry.

They wanted a word from God.

They wanted a word that would make a difference in their lives.

What they would hear would be a word unlike any they had ever heard.

And Jesus begins with a bombshell!

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

For us it seems to have a pleasant ring to it but...

That one sentence would have had a shattering impact on anyone who understood what Jesus was saying.

The idea that those who are **poor in spirit** are **blessed** is a radical one indeed.

It flies in the face of all that we are taught today.

It was even a radical idea in Jesus day.

Conventional wisdom teaches that poverty of spirit is something to be avoided.

It is a bad thing, not something which will be blessed.

It turns the world up-side-down

And so we need to ask three questions about this phrase...

1. What is the meaning of blessed?
2. What is meant by 'kingdom of heaven'?
3. What does it mean to be 'poor in spirit'?

Firstly, what does 'blessed' mean.

When Jesus used the word he got the people's attention.

He repeats it another 8 times in driving home his message here in the beatitudes.

Some modern versions put the word ‘happiness’ in place of the word ‘blessed’. This word is helpful, but inadequate in bringing home the impact of what Jesus was saying.

The Age, this past week ran a story about happiness. The Australian Unity Wellbeing Index, the twice-yearly survey of the nation's health, is measure of people’s happiness.

You know who are the happiest people?

THE happiest Australians are aged over 76,
with a household income between \$61,000 and \$90,000.

The report found:

‘Four out of the six happiest groups had household incomes of more than \$150,000, but the index found that the very rich were not necessarily happier than the rest of us: money loses its ability to reliably raise wellbeing beyond a household income of \$100,000.

Poverty, however, was a recurring factor among the unhappiest Australians.

Altogether, the relationship between money and happiness is relative: a mere \$7143 is enough, on average, to raise the happiness of individuals on less than \$15,000.

Blaise Pascal stated it this way: ‘All men seek happiness. This is without exception. Whatever different means they use, all men tend towards this end. Some go to war, others avoid it, but all have the same desire in view...it is the motive of every action of every man, even those who hang themselves.’

You will often hear people say,

‘Happiness is what life is all about’ or ‘happiness is all that really matters’.

It is relentlessly pursued in marriage and divorce;

in wealth or vows of poverty;

in working hard or taking it easy;

in eating or in dieting;

in drugs and alcohol or in organic gardening.

People look for happiness in sport, television, music, holidays, writing, acting, and even the seedier aspects of life like pornography, robbery, rape, violence.

Yet even with this relentless drive for happiness, the fact is that it remains endlessly elusive.

In the movie ‘the pursuit of happiness’ Wil Smith’s character questions why the term ‘the pursuit of happiness’ has been put in the American declaration of Independence along with ‘life and liberty’.

He concludes that it is there because it always will remain an pursuit and is a goal that can never be achieved, because on the way to reaching one goal of happiness many other good things are left by the side of the road.

This pursuit of happiness is not something new.

In the pages of the Old Testament, Solomon, the man who had everything, reflected on his life and concluded, 'My heart took delight in all my work, and this was the reward for all my labour. Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.' (Eccl 2:10-11)

A clue as to why happiness is so elusive comes from the origin of the word.

It is derived from the word 'hap' which meant chance or luck.

So happiness then becomes dependant on our circumstances,
on happenings, on things largely outside of our control.

And the other problem is that people are looking for happiness in all the wrong places.

They are trying to find inner satisfaction,

while ignoring the only one who can meet their need.

People are trying to be their own masters...trying to find happiness apart from God.

[Clip from Nicky Gumble]

So if 'blessed' is deeper and wider than 'happiness' what is it?

The Greeks used the word 'blessed',

not to talk about how a person should be feeling, but what they were/are.

Blessedness then is not connected to an emotion,

but a part of your character, your person.

John Stott says, 'The Beatitudes are not an indication of their feelings but a declaration of God's assessment of them.'

It becomes a description of the inner spiritual condition of the person in the sight of God.

So 'blessedness' is only something God can give and it is independent of our circumstances.

That's why Paul and Silas could pray and sing while being held in prison after a flogging.

And this blessedness is related to your spiritual condition.

John Blanchard writes, "...to be blessed by God is to know his gracious favour in a marked way. That favour is related to (but not a reward for) spiritual characteristics

such as obedience, righteousness and faith, yet in the beatitudes one further element is added: God blesses the people concerned in ways that specifically reflect their spiritual characteristics. In the first beatitude the blessing God bestows is the kingdom of heaven.”

So we have a bit off a handle on who the blessed ones
What does it mean to inherit ‘the kingdom of heaven?’

I think that, without going into much detail, the kingdom of heaven phrase that Matthew uses is equivalent to ‘kingdom of God’ that the other writers use.

Matthew wrote primarily for the Jews, many of whom refused to use the name of God in any way, substituting it for other words, in this case ‘heaven’.

The kingdom of heaven is a *supernatural kingdom*.
So it is a kingdom that is beyond our earth,
it does not originate on earth,
nor use earthly means and has no earthly limitations.

The kingdom is also a *spiritual kingdom*.
The kingdom Jesus set up was not a political empire,
not a super power to wipe out opposing armies.

When questioned by Pilate as to whether he was the king of the Jews,
Jesus replied, my kingdom is not of this world...my kingdom is from another place.’

This kingdom is not spatial but spiritual; its capital is not in Jerusalem but in heaven;
it is not a democracy but a theocracy.

And this kingdom is an *everlasting kingdom*.

And this privilege of being invited into the kingdom of heaven is the puchline of the beatitude (not, blessed are the poor in spirit0.

You have been invited into the kingdom!

**Now we need to look at who is invited in
And that is the ‘Poor in Spirit’**

What does it really mean to be poor in spirit?
Let’s begin by trying to describe what it doesn’t mean.

What Poverty of Spirit is NOT...
First of all, being poor in spirit does not mean financial poverty.
Spiritual poverty is not a matter of money.
Certainly money can be a problem for us spiritually.

But the real issue of being poor in spirit has to do with the heart.

Second, being poor in spirit does not mean being biblically illiterate.

It's not how much you know, but how much you obey and apply.

Third, being poor in spirit does not mean thinking poorly of yourself.

Some think that if they just put themselves down enough they will be poor in spirit.

God doesn't want us to think poorly of ourselves,

he wants us to think properly of ourselves.

The issue isn't proper loathing of self, but proper leaning on God.

Okay, so if poverty of spirit isn't being financially poor, biblically illiterate, or putting oneself down, then what is it?

What Poverty of Spirit IS...

There are two words used in the NT for poverty.

The first is *penes* which speaks of the person for whom life is a struggle.

It is the reverse of affluence.

The person who is *penes* somehow manages to get by.

The second word is *ptochos* which speaks of absolute poverty, being destitute, bankrupt.

This is the word used here in this first Beatitude.

To be poor in spirit really means to realize that we are spiritually bankrupt, that we cannot save ourselves.

Don Carson explains, "To be poor in Spirit is not to lack courage but to acknowledge spiritual bankruptcy. It confesses one's unworthiness before God and utter dependence on Him."

One of the best biblical illustrations of poverty of spirit is the story that Jesus told about the Pharisee and the Publican from Luke 18:9-14.

Luke introduces the story with the words, "To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable." (vs. 9)

Those who are confident of their own righteousness and who look down on everyone else are certainly not poor in spirit, right?

In the spiritual sense they have completely missed the boat!!

In this parable of Jesus, he tells about a certain Pharisee who went to the temple to pray.

Now this is commendable. People ought to pray, right?

But this man promoted himself in prayer, rather than humbled himself in prayer.

He prayed, “I thank God I am not like other men...I fast twice a week...I give tithes.”

Note his arrogance and pride in all he has done or is doing.

The Pharisee was one of those “holier-than-thou” types.

He thought that God really loved him because of how righteous and holy he was

He was kind of like the guy who wrote the book, “Humility and How I Attained It.”

That is self-righteousness.

That is not being poor in spirit.

The other man that Jesus told about in the parable was quite different.

He stood back in humility...he would not look up toward heaven...he beat his breast as an expression of deep sorrow over his sinfulness.

His prayer was not elegant, nor long, all that he could say to God was, “Have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Jesus said, “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The tax collector went home justified, not because he had done more right things, but because he had the right heart – he was poor in spirit.

How Can I Know If I am Poor in Spirit?

First, The poor in spirit have a broken and contrite heart.

The person of spiritual poverty knows that they are a sinner who is spiritually bankrupt.

They know that they are not righteous and cannot be righteous without God’s grace and power.

They know that they are saved not by works, but by God’s grace.

Knowing their failure to live up to God’s standards brings them great remorse as they look to God for mercy.

Second, The poor in spirit are humble.

To be poor in spirit means to have an absence of spiritual pride.

Pride says look at me and how good I am.

Humility says that any goodness in me comes from God.

Pride causes us to compare ourselves with others,

and says look at how much better I am than you are.
Humility causes us to compare ourselves with God
and recognizes how far short we fall.

And if we are in any way more righteous than others,
it is because of God's grace and help.

Third, the poor in spirit are dependent on God.

One of the most important lessons for us to learn is to stop relying on ourselves, and to depend more on God.

The poor in spirit learn to walk with God expressing continual dependence.

The poor in spirit don't trust in themselves, they recognize their ongoing need for God.

How Can I Become Poor in Spirit?

The answer is not to look at yourself or try to do it yourself.

Poverty of spirit has to do with humbling ourselves before God and expressing a broken and contrite heart.

Poverty of spirit has to do with emptying ourselves of all spiritual pride, and expressing our dependence on God for salvation and for transformation.

Poverty of spirit leads us toward the salvation by grace through faith that God offers, and poverty of spirit becomes the foundation for all the other beatitudes that lead to maturation.

It is to the **poor in spirit** that the promise comes of the **kingdom of heaven**.

We come to Christ with our empty hands.

Like in the great hymn by Augustus Toplady, 'Rock of Ages'

Nothing in my hands I bring,
Simply to thy cross I cling;
Naked come to thee for dress;
Helpless, look to thee for grace;
Foul I to the fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.