

There was a cult in Japan that stood outside of train stations all lined up in a row. They were not allowed to be a nuisance or hand out their newspapers but could hold them up for people to see. If someone wanted one, they were given one. What always struck me was that none of them were happy. They always looked as if they sucked on a lemon moments ago.

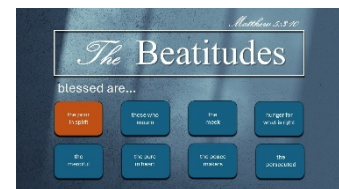
Also in Japan, our missionaries loved to collect things the Japanese discarded with the trash. TV's or furniture that were a few years old were often on the curb. One time Connie and I were invited to a garbage run with other missionaries. I reasoned with them: what does that say about our faith that we are so poor as Christians that we have to pick through their garbage? 'Hey, convert to Christianity and be poor like us. Our God does not take care of us.' My friends saw my point and made their garbage run at night.

I believe that relationship with God brings joy, love, and contentment – attractive qualities. People should see love, joy, and contentment in us.

From now through the summer, we will go through the eight beatitudes line by line – with just a few exceptions the next two Sundays.

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

The Beatitudes



Beatitude comes from the Latin word for being blessed. Some translations use the word 'happy.'

- They are little quips of wisdom, like a proverb.
- They encourage character qualities that the Holy Spirit works in us.

However, these qualities cannot be converted into a set of rules. Life in God's kingdom is recognizing that no one can meet God's standard.

- 'The standard set is nothing less than perfection, being like God.'
- Later in the sermon, Jesus says, 'Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt 5:48 NIV).'
- It is like the laws that Moses instituted – no one can really do all of them.
- Paul noted one of the functions of the Torah was to point out the sin in the human heart (Ro 7:7).

- Therefore, they are somewhat paradoxical as no one can attain the standard of the beatitudes.

The beatitudes show us our need of grace and how to please God. But they also point to the real source of peace, joy, and a good life – relationship with God.

Let's jump in.

1. Background.

'Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them (Mt 5:1-2 NIV).'

Jesus is teaching in Galilee and there is a large crowd, but this teaching is for followers, not the curious masses.

- This is not the 'Good News' for seekers or the curious 'but instruction to those who have already responded to that proclamation and now need to learn what life in the "kingdom of heaven" is really about.'¹
- It is about discipleship.

The promise in first and last beatitude is the same 'for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (vv. 3, 10).'

- Interestingly, God is not mentioned but inferred in the beatitudes. After all, 'it is God who will comfort, give the inheritance, satisfy, show mercy, and call them his children.'²
- These promises are fulfilled in the end times; they are future promises. However, the kingdom of God has already come in some form and so 'the advantages of being God's people can then be expected ... even though the full consummation of their blessings remains for the future.'³

All the other beatitudes flow out of this one.

2. Text.

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:3 NIV).'

¹ R.T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew NICNT* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), p. 153.

² France, *Matthew*, p. 159.

³ France, *Matthew*, p. 164.

Poor in spirit means to have a hunger for God.

There are three items to unpack in this sentence.

First, 'blessed' or 'happy.'

- Are 'commendations, congratulations, statements to the effect that a person is in a good situation' something enviable.⁴
- It does not mean they are happy, it means they are in a good situation, one 'which other people ... wish to share.'⁵

Second, the 'poor in spirit' clause. Luke simply says ...

Luke ...⁶

- 'Blessed are you who are poor.' Luke has a passion for those on the margins.
- Luke was a great writer. It means the same thing as Matthew's version but also causes people to remember the poor.
- 'The Bible nowhere teaches that poverty as such is a good thing.'⁷ Luke is saying, the poor are more likely to be dependent on God – and know their need of God.

Matthew ...

- 'The poor in spirit (NIV, NASB, ESV).' The most accurate translation. Most of the early Christians were poor, but they did not glorify their poverty.
- Here 'poor in spirit' is a positive thing.
- 'Those who know their need of God (NEB).' The most accurate meaning.
- It is the opposite of an arrogant, self-confident person who doesn't care about others or God.
- The poor in spirit are hungry for God. Are you hungry for God?
- 'Those who are poor and realize their need for him (NLT).'
- In other words, 'poor in spirit' is a relational term, not a monetary term.

⁴ France, *Matthew*, p. 160.

⁵ France, *Matthew*, p. 160.

⁶ Probably 'deriving from two separate traditions', France, *Matthew*, p. 164.

⁷ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1976), p. 34.

The opposite of 'poor in spirit' is being 'rich in pride' or self-sufficiency.⁸

The third clause is the blessing, 'for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'

- It does not mean we own a slice of heaven's real estate.
- It means we 'gladly accept God's rule ... (and) therefore enjoy the benefits.'⁹

Let's read it together before moving onto the application.

3. Application.

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:3 NIV).'

These days there is a lot psychology and sociology being preached in America rather than Jesus or theology.

- We are obsessed with our identities and self-esteem.
- If we are not trying to build ourselves up we are blaming others.

The beatitudes, point us beyond ourselves to character qualities we need for righteousness.

- But at the same time reveal life in God's kingdom is about Him and His grace.
- Are you hungry for God?

There are three principles for our daily life today. The first is ...

Applications.

1. We cannot do it.

We cannot achieve God's standard of righteousness by human means. The poor in spirit know 'that they cannot do it, that they are utterly incapable in and of themselves, and that any attempt to do it with their own strength is proof positive that they have not understood it.'¹⁰

Paul wrote,

- 'For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and all are justified freely by his grace (Ro 3:23 NIV).'

⁸ James Montgomery Boice, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1972), p. 20.

⁹ France, *Matthew*, p. 165.

¹⁰ Revised pronouns for context. Lloyd-Jones, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 34.

- 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast (Ep 2:8-9 NIV).'

Isaiah is succinct, 'all our righteous acts are like filthy rags (Is 64:6 NIV).'

Jesus taught right after the beatitudes 'that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees ... you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven (Mt 5:20 NIV).'

Impossible. The Pharisees spent their whole lives trying with all their might to follow the Law.

A famous Andre Crouch song, My Tribute, has a line in it that says, 'All that I am and ever hope to be I owe it all to thee.'

The second principle from this beatitude is ...

2. We must 'empty ourselves' by repentance.

Life in the kingdom of God is often topsy-turvey. It is like backing up a truck with a trailer on it the first time, you learn to go the opposite direction to get where you want to go.

- Want to be great? Become the least.
- Want to save your life? Lose your life.

Being poor in spirit is 'a product of repentance.'¹¹ Repentance is when we give up our self-reliance, our self-confidence, and belief in self.

- Being poor in spirit puts God on the throne. 'If one feels anything in the presence of God save an utter poverty of spirit, it ultimately means that you have never faced Him'.¹²

This concept is summarized by Paul: 'I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me (Ga 2:20 NIV).'

But let's think about this from Jesus' perspective for a moment. Yes, He went to the cross and died. But that journey began with an emptying out of himself.

- First, he emptied himself of His divinity. The bible says, '(Jesus) Who, being in very nature God ... ⁷ made himself nothing (Phil 2:6-7 NIV).'
- Then, he submitted His will to the Father's. In the garden he prayed, 'if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will (Mt 26:39 NIV).'

¹¹ France, *Matthew*, p. 165.

¹² Lloyd-Jones, *Sermon on the Mount*, p. 36.

We must empty ourselves of self to be filled with God and to enter a deep relationship with Him.

Are you hungry for God? Then be 'poor in spirit' empty yourself.

The third principle is that we should live transparently before God.

3. Be Transparent Before God.

There is a real good reason to live transparently before God. He already knows everything. Nothing is hidden from him (He 4:13).

Hans Christian Anderson has a tale that shows how pride can be our downfall. 'Many years ago, there lived an emperor who was quite an average fairy tale ruler, with one exception: he cared much about his clothes. One day he heard from two swindlers named Guido and Luigi Farabutto that they could make the finest suit of clothes from the most beautiful cloth. They said this cloth also had the special capability that it was invisible to anyone who was either stupid or not fit for his position.

Being a bit nervous about whether he himself would be able to see the cloth, the emperor first sent two of his trusted men to see it. Of course, neither would admit that they could not see the cloth and so praised it. All the townspeople had also heard of the cloth and were interested to learn how stupid their neighbors were.

The emperor then allowed himself to be dressed in the clothes for a procession through town, never admitting that he was too unfit and stupid to see what he was wearing. For he was afraid that the other people would think that he was stupid.

Of course, all the townspeople wildly praised the magnificent clothes of the emperor, afraid to admit that they could not see them, until a small child said: "But he has nothing on!" This was whispered from person to person until everyone in the crowd was shouting that the emperor had nothing on. The emperor heard it and felt that they were correct but held his head high and finished the procession.'¹³

- The problem with pride is that we don't know what we don't know. It's like walking around naked.

¹³ *Emperor's New Clothes* by Hans Christian Anderson, a Danish Fable, 1837.

- We cannot receive the blessings of the kingdom until we stop looking inside ourselves for self-esteem or looking to others to give value to our life.
- Rather, we should 'And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us,² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith (He 12:1-2 NIV).'
- Are you hungry for God?

C.S. Lewis wrote, 'The real test of being in presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small, dirty object.'¹⁴ – C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*

We only become who we were created to be when we bow before Him. Look at the attitude of these heroes of faith:

- Gideon, 'my clan is the weakest (Jdg 6:15).'
- David 'Who am I (1Sa 18:18)?'
- Isaiah 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips (Is 6:5 NIV).'
- Paul said his salvation was based on 'fear and trembling (Phil 2:12).'

Only when we are transparent before God, empty ourselves, do we receive 'the kingdom of heaven.'

Conclusion.

I remember back to our dating years; I was hungry for relationship. I was willing to sacrifice myself, giving up money and time to be with Connie. Are you hungry for God?

There is a remarkable passage in Isaiah I'd like to close with:

'For this is what the high and exalted One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: "I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite (Is 57:15 NIV).'

In the end, inheriting the kingdom of God is not about owning anything, it is about giving up ourselves to be with Him.

The reward of the kingdom, the blessing for giving it all up is, deep relationship with God.

¹⁴ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: MacMillian Publishing Co., Inc., 1976), p. 111.