

May 17, 2015

# THE POOR IN SPIRIT

Matthew 5:1-12

## THE BEATITUDES

If the Beatitudes are seven in number, seven is a symbol of divine completeness. If they are eight, as most assume as they read this passage, they form a heavenly octave of harmony in the song of the Kingdom of Heaven. If they are ten, as some scholars try to suggest was Matthew's intention (for he shows Jesus as the new Moses, the new deliverer bringing a new law from a new Sinai through the Sermon on the Mount)... they are a new Decalogue, a new Ten Commandment.

Here Jesus is tracing the living law of the new kingdom. He proclaims, here, the character of the Christian life. He has seen the so-called righteousness of His day and joins issue with it. Through His proclamation of the Beatitudes, He is throwing down a gauntlet before the world's accepted standards. Jesus definitely had a tendency to turn things upside down. Where the world seems to say that material riches are a blessing, for example, Jesus turns and seems to announce the very opposite.

The Beatitudes come into clearer focus, however, when they are set against their legitimate opposites. The opposite of being poor in spirit is being proud in spirit. The opposite of those who mourn is those who are carefree, and ignorant of the true condition of humanity. The opposite of the meek are the assertive, the aggressive, the ambitious, people with a me-first attitude. The opposite of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness is those who are indifferent to moral truths. The opposite of the merciful is the vengeful. The opposite of the pure in heart is the mixed-up heart, the double-minded, the perverted in heart. The opposite of the peacemakers is the warmongers, the violent, the people who are out to get others. And the opposite of the persecuted is the compromisers, those who play it safe.

The Beatitudes may take on a fuller meaning as they are set against their opposites. But the most wonderful thing the Beatitudes seem to be doing is stating who is really blessed in the eyes of God!

## HAPPINESS/BLESSEDNESS

The meaning of blessedness in the Beatitudes is a divine sort of happiness. The highest kind of joy. A sort of incomparable bliss, an ecstasy that fills the heart so full its hearer is able to say, *my cup runneth over!* Jesus proclaims this almost transcendental state of being as a present endowment of the down-and-out, the voiceless and peaceful, and, it would seem obvious to any religion, of the righteous and faithful. The tense in each Beatitude is present, and yet, it seems odd to think that the humble would not possess the Kingdom... the mournful would not be comforted until some future time.

But everyone wants happiness, everyone wants this sense of fulfillment. And I believe that everyone, at one time or another, has had a taste of being happy. John Masefield has said, "The days that make us happy make us wise." But I believe that almost everyone here might have a different definition of happiness. And I think that most of us would agree that it is more an attitude than an achievement. It's more a state of mind than a goal to gain. Abraham Lincoln said that, "People are usually as happy as they make up their minds to be."

With respect to today's theme, let me share some other impressions about the meaning of happiness. First, think about how you would feel if you lost everything you have right now....and then

got it all back again. Sometimes, I think we would be happier with what we have if we weren't so unhappy about what we don't have. To be happy now, add not to your possessions, but subtract from your desires. The truth of the matter is that happiness comes, not so much in having a lot to live *on*, but in having a lot to live *for*!

However we may define happiness, Jesus defines it for us, from His perspective, in the Beatitudes!

### **BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT**

Heavenly happiness belongs to the spiritually poor. John Wesley believed that the Beatitudes comprise the several stages of the Christian course in life. They reveal the successive steps Christians must take in their journey into the Kingdom. And poverty of spirit is not only the first step, but the root from which all others grow. Real Christianity begins in becoming poor in spirit. This is the foundation of faith, the heart's doorway that opens for the winds of spiritual rebirth to enter in.

The poor in spirit are those who, whatever their circumstances, have an inward disposition that bears the marks of the much needed first step to all real substantial happiness. The spiritually poor are those who realize they have no spiritual wealth within them. Such people are convinced of the sinfulness of their human nature. They are guilty and ashamed when they consider their true condition. They see more and more of the faults and flaws that spring from their Fallen state. Wesley lists some of them: A pride or haughtiness of spirit, a constant bias to think of themselves more highly than they ought to think; vanity, a thirst after the esteem or honor that comes from the praise of others; hate and envy, jealousy and revenge; anger, malice, and bitterness; the love of the world; self-will; foolish and hurtful desires... The poor in spirit are conscious of how deeply they have offended by their tongue; if not by profane, immodest, untrue, or unkind words, then by conversations which are "*not good for edifying, as fits the occasion, that it may impart grace to those who hear.*" (Ephesians 4:29) And the list could go on forever. The poor in spirit are so encompassed with sin, sorrow, and fear, they are at that desperate point of crying out like a drowning man weary of his struggle, "Lord, save me!"

The poor in spirit are aware that all they can do is yield to God in their helplessness. They see more and more of the inward affliction that comes in knowing the true punishment they deserve. Such is spiritual poverty. Realizing we are sinners, and in need of salvation!

But it is more, much more. To be poor in spirit can include the material poverty that knows its need. It is not those who would boast of their poverty for to do so would make one proud to be humble. But it is those who are free from a love of money; free from coveting their neighbor's house, or wife, or manservant or maidservant or ox, or ass, or anything that is a neighbor's. Such a spiritual poverty refuses the cultural pressure to keep up with the Joneses. But, Wesley notes, that to be so free from such a love of money and things, to be free of this "*root of all evil,*" even by taking a vow of voluntary poverty, does not mean that someone is actually free from *all* evil. There are a thousand roots of evil. John Wesley says that if poverty of spirit were only freedom from coveting, from the love of money, and the desire of riches, it would coincide with or be a branch of purity of heart, the sixth Beatitude.

But we should still acknowledge the virtue of simplicity as an element of spiritual poverty. *It's a gift to be simple, it's a give to be free. It's a gift to come down to where we ought to be. ...And turning, turning, we'll come 'round right. And we'll be in the valley of love and delight!* (Old Shaker Hymn) Being

poor is not a blessing. Being happy with the essentials is. Being satisfied with enough to get by physically, socially, intellectually, and emotionally is a blessing!

There is named three other dimensions of spiritual poverty that are more relevant to us today.

1) Poverty of spirit admits its need. But our culture cultivates the sin of being proud of spirit with the ignorant phrase, "I'm doing fine." People are starving for attention, love, and knowledge; but they're too proud to admit their need, their lack of a sense of being loved, or, of having the understanding they so desperately need. People aren't friendly enough because everyone's just "fine." People who are too proud to admit they're hurting shouldn't be surprised if nobody seems to care.

Poverty of Spirit admits its need! Secondly...We are all helpless sometimes. Which are you? I've got a problem...can you help me? I don't understand...can you enlighten me? I don't agree with you... can we compromise? I'm lost...can you direct me? I'm tired...can you give me strength? I'm ready to give up...can you rescue me? I'm about to explode...can you calm me down? I'm wrong, I'm human, I made a mistake, I've prayed, I repent, God forgives me, I forgive myself, I'm sorry... Can you forgive me? Happiness begins in recognizing your deepest need and then discovering where that need can be supplied. Like the man in the desert dying of thirst who suddenly sites and oasis. He discovers happiness! Even before he gets there to take a drink. And we're all in a spiritual desert, we refuse to admit it. But we're helpless apart from God. Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return!

And finally, there is the dimension of spiritual poverty that considers our spiritual shortcomings... the poverty of our spiritual lives. All of us could probably deepen our spiritual lives. Many who are only nominal Christians have a shallowness to their faith. They might not even know it. Test yourselves: Do you read the Bible, do you study it? Do you pray? Do you worship regularly? Do you know the Scriptures well enough to win a Bible trivia game? We could all use more Bible Study in our lives. We could all grow closer to Christ. We could all learn a bit more. The poverty of our spiritual lives is sometimes appalling!

### **THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN**

The ultimate blessing is the Kingdom of Heaven! And you know what, it's in our midst! Galatians 5:22 lists the fruit of the Spirit: *"Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Against such there is no law!"* And what is love, but the life of God in the soul, having the mind which was in Christ Jesus; it's the image of God stamped upon the heart. It's the love of God who sent His Son not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him! And what is joy, but knowing that Jesus died in our place, accepting this, living it out as a child totally dependent upon God for anything good within. And what is peace, but the calm serenity of soul that knows Jesus is our brother! And patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control simply follow suit. These are the true needs. These are the things we should desire. These are the objects called precious by the poor in spirit.

Poverty of spirit begins where a sense of guilt and a sense of the wrath of God ends; and it is a continual sense of our total dependence on God for every good thought, or, word, or, work. Poverty of spirit begins with the admission of need, of helplessness, of desolation. It begins with the recognition that what we are is really nothing to be proud of, and then raises within us grace, the free gift of God. Poverty of spirit comes when we empty ourselves of our pride and a sense of self-sufficiency, and let God fill our cup. And blessedness begins when we see that God has poured Himself out for us so that we can say, *"My cup runneth over!"* Poverty of spirit is divine humility!