

Matthew 5:1-3 (1984 NIV)
Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

Introduction

The Beatitudes in Matthew 5:1-12 serve as a preamble to a longer teaching by Jesus. This teaching runs from Matthew 5-7, and is commonly known as the “Sermon on the Mount”.

Jesus’ disciples—those who belong to the Kingdom of God—are not to be like the rest of the world. Jesus maps out the difference in the Sermon on the Mount. The people of Jesus Christ have a different standard of righteousness. The Sermon is prefaced by some virtues that characterize the disciple of Jesus Christ. These virtues are traditionally called the Beatitudes.

There are altogether eight beatitudes—v.3, v.4, v.5, v.6, v.7, v.8, v.9, and v.10 (which is expanded further in vv.11-12). Each of these beatitudes begins with the word “Blessed” and carries a promise. But the challenge in each of them is, humanly speaking, so radical that it is not easy to grasp the full import.

It is like this story of a couple during the Great Depression in America. They went window-shopping one evening because they didn’t have money to buy anything.

They walked past a fur store and a beautiful jacket caught the eye of the woman. She stopped and said to her husband, “I really like that jacket. Do you think you can buy it for me?”

The man thought for a moment and replied, “My dearest, extenuating circumstances perforce me to preclude you from such a multiple extravagance.”

The woman was dumbfounded for a moment and she replied, “That’s bombastic language. I don’t get it.”

The man nodded his head and said, “That’s exactly what I mean.”

I don’t know about you. But when I first read the Beatitudes, I found it very difficult to make good sense out of them. I said to myself, “Wow! These are deep sayings. I don’t get it. What do they mean?”

What are the Beatitudes all about? Well, Jesus tells them to show us what a disciple looks like. They point out to us how we can have the approval of heaven.

As we begin this series on the Beatitudes, let’s realize that if we want God’s approval more than anything else in the world, then these words have the

power to change us dramatically. So the searching question is, “How much do you want God’s approval?”

Let’s begin by looking at the first beatitude.

I. What the 1st Beatitude Means

Verses 1-3 reads:

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

So Jesus went up the mountainside and preached to His disciples (and the crowds) the Sermon on the Mount beginning with the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12. Notice that the form in which the Beatitudes are presented in your English Bible is not the same as the other verses that follow. The form is one of poetic structure—like that found in Psalms and Proverbs. Jesus began His sermon with a poem in the substance of the Beatitudes.

And you know what that means? It means He wanted the Beatitudes to be easily remembered and recited like nursery rhymes—His people were to learn them and pass on verbally to others.

So the first beatitude is: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

What is the meaning of “blessed”? Some understand it as “happy” but that really is a misunderstanding. Happiness relates too much to superficial excitement. So is the word “fortunate”—it relates too much to external circumstances.

The word “blessed” is best understood as “being divinely approved”. It relates to a status in relation to the Lord rather than a subjective emotion of the heart or condition of circumstance. In other words, those who are “blessed” are the ones whom the Lord is pleased, not those who merely have pleasant feelings or are in favourable circumstances. It describes how the Lord thinks about them and does for them in view of how they live.

Now then, how do we understand “poor in spirit”? In some ways this is a strange way to begin the Beatitudes. When you read, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” you aren’t immediately certain what Jesus means. But what does it mean to be “poor in spirit”?

Perhaps the best way to answer that question is to say what it doesn’t mean. It’s not a reference to material poverty. Jesus didn’t say, “Blessed are the poor in property,” but “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Very few poor people would

call their poverty a blessing from God. As a natural tendency, people work hard to stay out of poverty.

What then is being poor in spirit? Let us first examine what it is not.

- Does it mean owning nothing? No, it is not necessary to be poor in material things in order to be poor in spirit. Poor in spirit is an attitude of how we attach ourselves to material things rather than the actual possession of material things.
- Does it mean we do not need to take care of ourselves? It is not to renounce all things and wait for God to drop us manna from heaven. No, with anything that we have we are called to be good stewards, considering how it should be properly used to take care of and serve ourselves and others.
- Does it mean that we need to degrade ourselves? No, we are to humbly acknowledge God as the source of all of our blessings and use them wisely. We are not to view our blessings a curse or a sign of unrighteousness.
- Does it mean having a poor spiritual life? No, we are called to deeply develop our spirituality and come closer to God.

Well then, what does “poor in spirit” mean? We can paint two pictures of being poor. “Poor” can mean you have very little to get by. “Poor” can also mean you have nothing at all. It’s the difference between being down to your last dollar and being totally broke. The word for “poor” in the first beatitude is one that describes a person who is utterly helpless and completely dependent on others—absolutely bankrupt. To be poor in spirit means to recognize your true spiritual condition before God. It is the exact opposite of being rich in pride. It means to recognize your spiritual bankruptcy in the eyes of God.

What then is poverty of spirit?

- It is a sense of powerlessness in own selves.
- It is a sense of spiritual bankruptcy and helplessness before God.
- It is a sense of moral uncleanness before God.
- It is a sense of personal unworthiness before God.
- It is a sense that if there is to be any life or joy or usefulness, it will have to be all of God’s grace.

This case was reported in the newspapers some years back—an elderly taxi driver was sentenced to 12 months’ jail. He was involved in a minor accident with another man. Both men got out of their car and had a heated argument. When the taxi driver decided to drive off, the other man stood in front of the taxi and refused to move away. In anger, the taxi driver drove forward, hitting the man who fell on the bonnet. The taxi driver braked his car abruptly and the man was flung off, hitting his head on the road.

The man was sent to the hospital. He slipped into a coma and died about a month later.

As for the taxi driver, he seemed nonchalant about the whole incident. He went for a holiday with his family after his trial had ended. He lamented that his retirement and long-time “clean record” on the road had been ruined by this one incident.

“Good thing I don’t have to work to support my family any more. My two children are grown up and doing well,” he said.

When asked if he had any regret about what happened, he replied, “I do have regrets because a person has died. If he didn’t die, I won’t. But I don’t feel 100 percent guilty. Maybe 70 percent ...”

The judge who sentenced him remarked that the incident “easily qualifies as one of the worst cases of rash driving that has come before the court”. He added, “Regrettably, I did not detect any remorse from the accused. He seemed to think the deceased was to blame for putting himself in harm’s way by standing in front of his taxi before he drove off.”

Indeed, this is a picture of the human nature. By nature, we find it very difficult to admit liability; that we are at fault. The human nature is to approve ourselves in some ways because it really hurts to admit that there are absolutely no merits in us to deserve anything. Even in the presence of God, we want to be somebody.

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This first beatitude is a call to admit and accept the total bankruptcy of our soul before God—that we are indeed nobody and so cannot come before Him and demand anything from Him. When we so acknowledge our poverty of spirit, God will approve us and make us part of His Kingdom.

Obviously, this Kingdom virtue does not square with that of the world.

II. Why the World Rejects the Poor in Spirit

The virtue of the world says these things to us all the time:

- You must prove yourself.
- You must be somebody.
- Being good is not enough, you must be No. 1.

This is the virtue of a “can do” society.

When my younger daughter Stacey was two years old, we enrolled her in a play school that's nearby our home. Our intention was to give her opportunities to relate and interact with other children. I remember that I was quite surprised to see her bringing home a report book at the end of her first term in play school. She was graded from a scale of A-D on behaviour, number, speech, reading, writing, story, playtime, general knowledge, music and rhythm, and handicraft—10 items altogether. Just think about it, our “can do” society is already assessing how well people measure up on the “can do” scale even at the tender age of two.

What are the voices around us telling us? The voices we hear are always drumming into us the message that we can only be approved if we prove ourselves.

We hear these voices all the time. So everyone in society is affected in some way.

I remember when I was 2nd year in seminary, one Baptist church asked me to preach in their Sunday service. I told the director of the seminary about it. He said, “Good for you. Now, go and preach to God’s people. Be a blessing to them and a good representative of the seminary.” I thought I was going there to represent myself until he reminded me that I would be there to represent the seminary as well.

I didn’t realize the pressure would be that great until that Sunday when I was there to preach. I was early, about an hour before time. That’s how eager I was, or how nervous I was. There was no one in the church yet. So I went to a nearby coffee shop to have a cup of coffee. I downed the cup of coffee real fast, and ordered another. Again, I finished it in quick time. I looked at the time and I had about another 45 minutes to go. And when you had two cups of strong coffee almost one after another, your throat would feel dry. Suddenly, I said to myself, “Oh dear! I hope I don’t lose my voice!”

Anyway, I make my way to the church, was greeted by the worship leader, prayed with him, and waited for my time to preach as the service began. At one point, I turned around to look at the congregation. To my horror, I saw an American missionary walking in with his wife. I asked myself, “What on earth is he doing here? He’s supposed to be on home leave in the US.”

You know why I was so uncomfortable seeing him? It is because he was my preaching professor in seminary. He and his wife had just returned after a short home leave in the US. And they were regular worshippers in that church!

Anyway, when it was time for me to preach, I walked up to the pulpit. Thank God, I did not lose the strength in my voice. When I was midway

through my sermon, I noticed the missionary took out a little notebook from his pocket and wrote something on it. I said to myself again, “Oh dear! Did I say anything wrong or heretical? What flaw or fault of mine is he noting down?”

After the service, I went over to this missionary and his wife and greeted them. After some pleasantries, I ventured to ask, “I saw you noting down something about my preaching just now. Is there anything I could have done better?”

He was surprised and replied, “No, I think you did very well as a first-time preacher. I praise the Lord for that.”

“But I saw you taking out your notebook and writing down something.”

He paused for a moment and said with a hearty laugh, “Oh! I just remembered an appointment I had not entered in my diary. And I was just noting it down at that point.”

I was rather relieved when I heard that. But when I took time to reflect later on, I realized what had really happened. Instead of trusting the Lord to use me to bless His people, I was more concerned about proving myself—I could not afford to make a bad impression because I was there to represent not only myself, but also the seminary.

It can happen to anyone in our “can do” society—living life to prove that there is something in us that deserves the approval of others. So there are people today who may be top performers yet are feeling very miserable in life. Why? Because they are trying to like what they are doing (that’s pressure), and not doing what they like (that’s passion). They are performing under pressure but not with passion.

But the first beatitude reminds us to be poor in spirit—to know and admit that there’s nothing in us to merit God’s love for us; to live life with nothing to prove because we know God loves us unconditionally in Jesus Christ. The ultimate approval and significance we can have come from the Lord. We need Him; we depend on Him.

Most sceptics would say: “If that is so, then your Christian faith is a crutch. You cannot be self-reliant and self-dependent. Only cripples are not self-reliant and self-dependent. This is offensive to our self-image.” So the world’s answer to this spiritual bankruptcy (this sense of unworthiness before God) is an inflated self-image.

But the Lord’s answer to our sense of unworthiness is not self-image, but divine grace. He will come to us and help us. Blessed are the people who feel keenly their inadequacies, their failures, their helplessness, their unworthiness, and their emptiness—who don’t try to hide these things behind an inflated

self-image. They are honest about these things and driven to the grace of God. These are the ones who are learning to live well in life yet with nothing to prove because they know God still approves of them in spite of their failures and limitations.

The world looks down on failures and rejects them. So we need to look successful in order to survive in this world. But here is the startling truth: God accepts failures. He wants people who see their failure and run to Him for help. To the spiritually bankrupt, Jesus opens the door of the Kingdom and says, "Come right in. This place is made for you." This simple truth explains the end of the 1st beatitude: "... for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit. Because they can never earn it on their own merits, God gives it to them as a gift in His grace.

Conclusion

How then are we to be poor in spirit and live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ?

- One, live life with a strong vision of God's greatness. When the great prophet Isaiah saw a vision of God's greatness, he saw also his own smallness. He said, "Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD ALMIGHTY" (Isaiah 5:5).

The poor in spirit are characterized by closed mouth. They have no illusions about themselves. They make no excuses. They stop rationalizing their behaviour. They see and admit the darkness, smallness, weakness and poverty in their souls. They recognise their spiritual wasteland.

When we see how great our Lord really is, we will have no shame admitting our smallness before Him. Like John the Baptist, we need to ask the Lord to help us say each day, "Christ must increase, I must decrease."

- Two, live life with a deep appreciation of God's grace. The struggle of human ego is due to our quest for significance in life. And I believe to search for significance is not necessarily unspiritual. In fact, I believe God planted this desire in us. The real concern is not whether you desire significance or not. The real concern is where you find your ultimate sense of significance.

For one who belongs to the Kingdom of God, his significance is not in him being somebody in this world. His significance is anchored in the realization that he is a child of God who is loved and accepted by Him in Jesus Christ, even if he may seem insignificant in this world. His sense of significance is not anchored upon what he can do, but what

God has done in Jesus Christ. No need to pretend that all is well when it is not. No need to pretend that you can when you really cannot. Indeed, even if you have become a fool in disgrace, you can still be honest with God because He is full of grace to forgive, accept and allow you to try again.

Some of us may have worked hard all week for the approval of others, but we still have not gotten it. Or when we get it, we often cannot keep it for long.

Pray that the Lord will help us empty ourselves so that He can fill us with Himself, approving us in our spiritual poverty with these words, "Blessed are you the poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven."

Amen!