

Poor in Spirit

Matthew 5:2-3

One of the events that stands out as a turning point in my life was the church I joined when I was a junior in high school. I had become a Christian, and I hungered for God's word. The liberal Episcopal church I had attended since infancy failed to proclaim the gospel and they failed to effectively teach God's word. So I began attending an evangelical church with family friends.

And I began attending a Bible study taught by a new pastor. He came just months after I did. He was young and energetic, and he led this Bible study in his home. It was for high school students, and as best I can remember there were about 10 of us there. I don't remember who all of them were, but I remember what we studied. He called it the beattitudes. I had no idea what that word meant and I had no idea where it came from. I only knew that it was a title given to this series of blessings that Jesus speaks in the sermon on the mount in Matthew 5.

So, in case you are wondering what that word means, it comes from the Latin translation of the Bible where the heading of this section in Latin comes into the English language with that word that was so strange to me then, "Beattitudes." It comes from the Latin word for the word in English, "Blessed..." Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. Etc.

These beattitudes came into my life again rather forcefully when I began reading a lot of good books about doctrine and theology after graduating from college. One of those books, one I would recommend to every one of you, was by Martin Lloyd-Jones, a series of sermons entitled simply, "The Sermon on the Mount." And as I read those chapters, I was captivated, for he was a man who managed to penetrate deeply into my mind and

soul simply by the words he had written in a book. It was like he knew me in a very personal and specific way. I would put that book into a small group of books that I read during that pivotal time 40 years ago that legitimately transformed my mind and changed my life.

And so we begin a study of the beattitudes this afternoon with a broad declaration of,

I. THE BLESSING OF GOD.

Let's begin with that simple word, "Blessed..." Indeed, there verses describe so perfectly the blessings of God, but they do so in a way that is rather revolutionary. Counter-cultural and counter-intuitive. They are apparent contradictions, statements of irony, contrasts that exemplify just how blessed the blessing of God really is.

Blessing might well mean "happy," but only if you define "happy" with more depth and substance than the mere superficial silliness so much of life seems all about. So the reference isn't to surface emotions, nor an emotional reaction to the surface issues of life. Just look at who is blessed with this happiness: the poor, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst, and those who are persecuted. So it isn't the sort of happy-clappy experience so consistently desired by many in modern-day worship. It isn't this superficial, artificial, sentimental, sugar-coated pretense that all is well. In that sense, God doesn't promise you happiness. God doesn't promise that you will feel good all the time, and if that becomes your goal, you are setting yourself up for failure.

But God does promise blessing. Blessedness. Happiness. Essentially, this is the state of prosperity or blessing that comes when a superior bestows his blessing. And so this happiness that

Jesus defines, this blessedness, is the experience in the heart of the ones who knows that he has received God's blessing.

He knows that God's pleasure, God's delight is upon him. That God has blessed him with good. That is happiness.

So often the world things happiness is that which comes from prosperity, outward success. Happiness is enjoying money, enjoying comfort, enjoying health. Happiness is the emotion you feel when everything is going your way, when all your desires are satisfied, and when all your needs are being met. The trouble with that sort of happiness is, of course, that it is not only elusive, it is impossible. And those who pursue that worldly happiness often find themselves the most miserable.

But happiness is not tied to your external circumstances. Jesus certainly makes that plain here. Happiness is not tied to the level of prosperity you enjoy, for as we see tonight, this blessedness comes first to the poor. And if I may say it carefully, happiness is not tied to your surface emotions, though those are the ones we are most familiar with. True happiness, true blessedness, is a matter of what Jonathan Edwards would identify as the affections. Not mere emotions or self-control denying passions, but rather affections, which defined this way: "The affections are no other than the more vigorous and sensible exercises of the inclination and will of the soul."

So the affections are the work of the soul, the working of soul. Not just how you feel, but much deeper. The condition of your soul. And if you want a clear illustration of the difference, consider the experience of the death of a loved one, in the Lord. The death of dear believer. Well, on the surface, it is hard to deny the emotion of sorrow. Nor is there anything inappropriate about the sorrow of grief. But in that sorrow, when a beloved Christian

dies, there is a much deeper experience of joy, is there not? Joy, like this true happiness, belongs to the realm of the affections. Deeply rooted in the soul of a human being created in the image of God.

So happiness is the experience of living under God's blessing. Before we begin and go any further, that is a very useful starting point and a question well worthy pondering. Will you pursue that sort of happiness, rather than the happiness which the world offers as the enjoyment of stuff? Will you pursue true happiness, as God defines it? If so, here it is. The definition of true happiness, the experience of being a recipient of God's blessing. The experience of knowing that your life brings him honor and glory. The experience of the heart, the experience of the soul, to receive that blessing.

Jesus is pronouncing that blessing to his disciples, and who gets it? Who is to be blessed? Who is it who will truly and deeply be happy?

II. THE RECIPIENTS OF GOD'S BLESSING: THE POOR IN SPIRIT.

This is, of course, entirely contrary to the wisdom of the world. Blessed are the rich, the world says. Blessed are the prosperous. Blessed are the successful. The healthy and the wealthy. And you, of course, are told that you would be happy if you had those things too!

Now, blessed are the poor. Luke's gospel leaves it at that, not even recording the description, "poor in spirit," but that's not a contradiction. The meaning is the same. Matthew records the fuller, explicit words while Luke emphasizes the obvious paradox.

Blessed and happy are those who have nothing. The poor.

The poor in spirit. There are many ways in which that can be explained or defined, and I have chosen three. Three descriptions of those who are truly happy, truly blessed, and I label all three of them as aspects of godliness. I believe it is well to begin with,

A. The godliness of proper humility.

Lowliness of mind. Poverty in the realm of pride. A spiritual poverty, as it were, that keeps you from exalting yourself. It keeps you from thinking more highly of yourself than you ought.

This sort of humility is clearly described in,

Phil. 2:3 “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

There, not only is true humility defined, but exemplified. Jesus had every right to think of himself highly, more high than any other man for he was also God. But he refused to regard himself in that light, “but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, ...he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death.”

Paul puts it so well in,

2 Cor. 8:9 “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”

Humility means you give up the pursuit of your own glory. It

means you abandon your own self-advancement and self-interest. And it means that you relate to other people as more important than yourself.

Humility is directly related to how you look upon others. It is what Paul describes in,

Col. 3:12 “Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, 13 bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.”

Similarly,

Eph. 4:1 “I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, 3 eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

1 Peter 5:5 “Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”

Blessed are the poor in spirit. I believe there is also emphasis in those words upon,

B. The godliness of complete dependence upon the Lord.

Here is where the whole emphasis upon suffering and tribulation is helpful. Blessed are you when you are put into a position of dependence. Blessed are you when you are deprived of this world's security, because then you have opportunity to live out what is so vital to the fullness of blessing before God. The secret of learning contentment, the secret of learning to trust in

God when you are absolutely unable to trust in yourself.

Thus this great sermon on the mount will end with these words,

Mat. 6:31 “Therefore do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or What shall we drink? or What shall we wear? 32 For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. 33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you. 34 Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.”

This is the poverty which was so absent in the church at Laodicea, who thought themselves rich and prosperous. The angel of the Lord had a harsh and pointed word for them:

Rev. 3:16 “So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth. 17 For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. 18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see.”

They thought they were rich and beautiful. God had to tell them they were poor and naked. Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who, in their poverty, know what it is to depend upon the Lord. They know that life is more than food and the body more than clothing. They have learned the secret of contentment, the blessing of dependence.

It is not that there is a virtue in being poor, for poor's sake. It is not that it is more spiritual to be poor, or more godly to be in

need. But the blessing to the poor in spirit comes to those who have learned to depend completely upon God for every material need of their life. Happy are the poor in spirit.

And, thirdly, the poor in spirit refers to,

C. The godliness of a contrite heart.

Contrite means crushed. Lowly, not in the sense of depression or any other psychological malady, but lowly in the sense of humbled by the awareness of sin. Humbled by the awareness of the greatness of the glory of God, contrasted with my own feeble and foolish existence so characterized by sin.

Blessed are you when you bow down before the Lord in humble and contrite confession of sin. And do you know the great blessing? God is there! God dwells with the contrite. Listen to the prophet Isaiah,

Is. 57:15 “For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite. 16 For I will not contend forever, nor will I always be angry; for the spirit would grow faint before me, and the breath of life that I made. 17 Because of the iniquity of his unjust gain I was angry, I struck him; I hid my face and was angry, but he went on backsliding in the way of his own heart. 18 I have seen his ways, but I will heal him; I will lead him and restore comfort to him and his mourners, 19 creating the fruit of the lips. Peace, peace, to the far and to the near, says the Lord, and I will heal him.”

Two places, we are told, where God dwells. In heaven, in the high and holy place. And one other place, “and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit.” With such a blessing promised, “to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the

contrite.”

To make that personal, consider David’s words in Psalm 51, where he prays with such deep repentance for his sin. After confessing his sin, we read,

Ps.51:15 “O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. 16 For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. 17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

You see, a broken and contrite heart is a sweet smelling sacrifice before the Lord. Repentance is sweet! A broken and contrite heart is sweet to the Lord, so well pleasing to him. People of God, listen to the tenderness of,

Ps. 34:17 “When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears and delivers them out of all their troubles. 18 The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.”

That’s the blessing. The Lord is near! The Lord draws near when your heart is broken over sin. The Lord saves when your spirit is crushed. One of the most tender promises of God is given in this context, a promise Jesus fulfills,

Is 42:3 “...a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench.”

The recipients of God’s blessings are the poor in spirit. The humble. Those with child-like trust and dependence in all their need. And those broken-hearted in repentance over their own sin. Blessed are the poor in spirit. “For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

III. THE REWARD OF GOD’S BLESSING: THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

What a glorious reward. What an appropriate recompense. Those who are poor shall inherit everything. And the emphasis, of course, is not upon the material world. It is not a description of a socialistic utopia or the success of communism. Rather, it is God making all things right.

The ultimate blessing of the covenant is land, and while the OT patriarch Abraham was looking for that promised land in a literal, geographic fulfillment, the reality of the promise is clear throughout the Bible. The promised land is heaven, the kingdom of heaven. And believers in Jesus Christ are joint-heirs with him of that very kingdom. That’s the blessing. That’s our happiness, that we are citizens of a heavenly kingdom.

Heb. 11:16 “But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city.”

Such a blessing. Such happiness.

Heb. 12:28 “Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, 29 for our God is a consuming fire.”

And what is that kingdom now? What is that blessing now? It is within us, Jesus said. The kingdom is within us. It is a spiritual kingdom made evident and visible in the church. And the church, as the Kingdom of God, shows forth our communion with God. Our community with God. Even now, in the spirit, we are made citizens of that heavenly kingdom. We are members of our earthly kingdoms in the flesh, but we belong to God’s kingdom as well. Such is the blessing of the poor in spirit.

A. The kingdom as a definition of our community with God.

We are, in fact, the body of Christ. We are the temple of God. We are the household of God. We are the dwelling place of God. We the church, here and now, we as citizens of that eternal kingdom enjoy our status as members of the family of God.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. That kingdom is obviously, also an expectation of future glory. And the promised blessing to the poor in spirit is the expectation of that glory.

B. The kingdom as an expectation of glory.

It is ours, in Christ. It is ours, with Christ. And it belongs to those who are now characterized as poor. The kingdom of heaven is not given to the rich and powerful. It does not flow to those who enjoy the riches of this world in abundance. Rather, Jesus' identifies the poor in spirit. And it is they who shall enjoy the glory of this true happiness.

People of God, as you worship this afternoon, as you offer your sacrifices of worship together, and as you live out your life as a living sacrifice in the days that will follow, never forget, happiness belongs to those who are poor in spirit, for it is they who know of God's mercy and lovingkindness.

Ps 51:17 "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise."

Ps. 34:18 "The Lord is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit."