

Living the Good Life: The Virtue of Humility

Matthew 5:3-5

One of the realities of social media is that you can curate the image of yourself that the world sees. The idea is that you can take the selfie 15 times until you get the one that you think looks best and then you post that picture for everyone to see. When this sort of presentation happens day after day, an image or picture of your life is presented to the world that is carefully controlled and is therefore, fake. It's not the real you or the real life that you live.

It's pretty simple to fake it to the world on social media, but you know what's not easy to fake? Humility. And humility is probably the most distinct of Christian virtues. The ancient world was built on an honor/shame system, which is quite different from the way you and I think about what is right and what is wrong. In our culture we think in terms of the guilt of my individual conscience, but in ancient times you knew something was wrong when the community perceived the action as honorable or shaming.

Think about what has become the center of our Christian faith, the cross of Jesus Christ. The practice of Roman crucifixion wasn't just designed to kill, it was designed to humiliate and bring shame. Hebrews 12:2 tells us that Jesus endured the cross because he despised the shame of it. Humility was not valued in the ancient world, honor was. To be humiliated or put low was one of the worst experiences a person could imagine. And Jesus comes along and flips that entire paradigm on its head. Listen to these words in Matthew 11:28-29.

To be like Jesus we must pursue the virtue of humility and that is exactly where Jesus begins describing the good life in the Sermon on the Mount. So, turn to Matthew 5 this morning and we are going to be studying this first set of 3 virtues or character qualities that we must develop if we are to live well. These are found in verses 3-5 and let me read them to you.

Now, there's a lot we could say about each of these Beatitudes, but here's how I want to approach each of these 3 this morning. First, I want to explain the virtue being given, then I want to explain how that virtue results in the outcome described in the second half of each Beatitude. Then, I want to show you how each of these are counter-cultural descriptions of the good life. If you remember

from last week, this first word shows us that Jesus is describing the qualities necessary to live the good life or to flourish. But these qualities are not what we expect. They are counter-cultural.

So, 3 parts to help us grasp each of these virtues. But before we jump in to the first one, I want to make something clear about the relationship between the first part of each of these beatitudes and the second. For example, look at the first one in verse 3. We have a character quality given in the first part, then we have what appears to be an outcome or a reward in the second. It's vital for us to grasp the relationship between the two parts.

Think of the relationship between the "blessed" quality in each beatitude and the "reward" portion as intrinsic. Let's say you are going to arrange for your child to take piano lessons. There are two ways to try to motivate your child to play scales and practice weekly. You could say, if you will practice for 1 hour a day for the next year, I will give you \$500. Or, you could say, if you will practice for 1 hour a day for the next year, you will be able to play your favorite music on the piano.

The first motivation is a mercenary motivation. It's not wrong, but the outcome of getting \$500 doesn't flow intrinsically or naturally from the activity. The second outcome of being able to play your favorite music well is intrinsic to the activity of practicing. It is the natural result of acquiring the skills and putting in the practice.

The relationship between the flourishing portion of each beatitude, where the virtue is given, is intrinsic to the outcome in the second part. Those who are poor in spirit are those who receive the kingdom. This is not a mercenary motivation. The outcome of receiving the kingdom flows naturally from being a person who is poor in spirit.

So, with that connection in mind, let's look at **3 Aspects of the Virtue of Humility that Define Kingdom Disciples.**

1. They are Poor in Spirit (v. 3)

What does it look like to possess the quality of being poor in spirit? This word "poor" is used throughout the Bible to speak of those who are stuck in material poverty. It's the same way you and I use this word today. They are destitute and without material goods.

Believe it or not there's an OT passage that provides background for this first section of the Beatitudes and it's Isaiah 61:1-4. This same word "poor" is used there to speak of the exiles of Israel. It's hard to picture someone who would fit the description of "poor" better than an exile. No longer in their home. No access to a familiar job or web of relationships that support and sustain.

Of course, in the Beatitudes we have the added designation of being poor in spirit, so Jesus is not primarily describing those who are materially destitute. Those who are poor in spirit recognize that they do not possess anything of spiritual value on their own apart from God. They are humble, they are needy, and they know it. One author described it this way:

"Membership in the kingdom of heaven and God's blessing are supposed to belong to the spiritually wealthy, the spiritually together, the righteous, the rich, and the beautiful. Here the blessings of God are promised to the spiritually poor, the wretched, the wayward, those who come to Jesus in perpetual need because they are empty and they know it." - J. De Waal Dryden

But keep in mind that we are talking about a virtue, or a disposition here. This is a way of being in the world that characterizes the believer. It's not something you grasp one time and then move away from. This is a quality that defines kingdom disciples. It's a characteristic that we grow into.

Being poor in spirit means I know I have spiritual needs and so I look away from self and to God to meet those needs.

There are two very deadly counterfeits to spiritual poverty. First and most obvious is spiritual pride. Rather than looking to God for sustenance I look inward to self as the source and spring of meaning and happiness. The other counterfeit is spiritual worthlessness. Rather than recognizing my spiritual poverty and turning outward to God I turn in and soak in shame. The problem with both spiritual pride and spiritual worthlessness is that both are fundamentally about the self at the center. Instead, Jesus says the good life comes from recognizing my complete and total lack of spiritual resources and rather than turning to self in pride or shame, I turn to God and depend on him to meet my spiritual needs.

What is the outcome of this virtue being cultivated? Look again at verse 3. Only those who know their own poverty and turn to God in repentance and faith will

enter the kingdom, but here is the promise that when this quality defines you, you will possess the kingdom. This phrase pulls together all the biblical expectations and hopes concerning the messianic age.

Certainly, you can see how incredibly counter-cultural this is? The good life as one of spiritual poverty? Come on. In our society the good life is said to be lived by the one who can provide for all the needs he or she has. He is self-sufficient. He wants it, he gets it. But Jesus explains that humans were created to live as dependent creatures. Nothing is more abrasive to the American spirit than calling us to live at the mercy of another.

Last year I read on a book on humility called *Humble Roots* by Hannah Anderson. Hannah describes trying to explain the content of her book before she wrote it to a family friend. She stumbled around and basically ended up saying, It's about humility and I think we all need more humility. Her friend responded, I can write that book for you in 3 words. You're. Not. God. And that friends, is the essence of poverty of spirit.

2. They Mourn (v. 4)

Let's start here with the counter-cultural reality of this statement. If the beatitudes are really about living the good life, in whose universe is mourning a description of a life well lived? Mourning is done by someone who has lost something or whose life has not unfolded the way they had hoped. But again, the Beatitudes show us that the path to a life well lived doesn't follow current cultural wisdom. So, who is Jesus describing here when he says the ones who mourn are living well?

To understand this virtue we have to see that Jesus is alluding to Isaiah 61 again. This passage is proclaiming hope to Israel while they are in exile. Let's start in verse 1. When you get to verse 2 you need to know that this word "mourn" is used 3 times in verses 2-3.

The ones who are mourning here are mourning because of their exile. We've already described the difficulty of living in exile, but here they aren't just mourning because circumstances are hard. They are mourning over the reason they are in exile in the first place, their sin.

The virtue being called for is the recognition that the world and even one's own life is not as it should be. God's kingdom has not yet arrived, and we still live in a sinful and broken world. God's promises seem to lack fulfillment now, and this brings grief. People who exhibit this character quality feel the brokenness of the world deeply and can empathize with the injustice experienced by others. One author defined it like this:

"As a virtue, mourning means a disposition that opens itself to grieve unrighteousness, human depravity, and brokenness wherever they reveal themselves." - J. De Waal Dryden

The mourning here is not just over things lost or difficulty in this life. I'm not just mourning because things aren't going the way I would like them to. Mourning in this sense makes the connection between the difficulty of life and the tragedy of human sinfulness. It's vital to make that connection or else the outcome promised here will not come to pass. Notice verse 4.

Intrinsic to this virtue of mourning is comfort. Why? When we connect the brokenness of the world to man's decision to reject God in the garden, we can then turn that mourning into comfort because God has promised to address our brokenness by addressing human sin. True mourning understands where we are in the story of Scripture and knows that God has promised to straighten the broken paths. Listen to the promise of God's help in Isaiah 61:2-4.

The mourning described here cannot be divorced from ultimate hope in God's eschatological restoration and reign. And particularly that God's reign has been inaugurated through Jesus and will one day be complete. Those who mourn are not content with the status quo of life on earth. They are filled with expectation and hope in a new day.

Living life well requires appropriate mourning because mourning reckons with the world as it is and anticipates the world as it will be. True mourning is rooted in trust in God's plan.

3. They are Meek (v. 5)

If the first beatitude has to do with our disposition before God, we are poor in spirit, this one has to do with our disposition toward others. The meek are those who have been humbled before God and so do not throw their weight around

with other people. They don't seek to dominate others. It's the word that is translated "gentle" in Matthew 11:28-29 and is used of Jesus. Think about how Jesus carried himself throughout the final hours of his life, especially when he was being beaten and slapped and spit on. He was meek.

Some of you may have heard meekness defined as strength under control. That's helpful in some ways because meekness is not passivity or weakness. The real focus of the virtue of meekness here is on the reason for that strength that is under control. The meek person can stay under control because he has entrusted himself to God's care.

What is the intrinsic outcome of meekness? Look again at verse 5. Psalm 37 is the background to this statement from Jesus and notice how this Psalm begins in verses 1-2. There will always be evil doers in the world, but rather than being overly concerned with them, we ought to wait on the Lord and trust in him. Trust in the Lord leads us to this quality of character, gentleness or meekness. If you keep reading Psalm 37 in verses 10-11 you find out the culmination of this quality of meekness. The meek will inherit the land. Of course, this meant the land God had promised to Israel.

But notice what Jesus says in Matthew 5:5. If you are a Jew listening to these words, it's like there has been an expansion of the land God has promised and now it will entail the entire world as under the rule and reign of Christ and Jesus is promising that the meek will rule with Him.

Keep in mind that during the time of Jesus there were Jews called zealots who used physical violence and force to try to get the Romans out of their land. This is the exact opposite of meekness.

The meek are those who do not respond to difficulty and oppression with anger and outrage but instead humbly trust God's timing and sovereign hand. The reality is that this character quality fits one to reign with Christ by possessing the earth in Christ's kingdom. Christ's disciples do not take possession by force but are ready to reign because of the development of gentleness in their hearts.

Of course, all of this is shockingly counter-cultural. Our culture views the meek as spineless and as those who are pushed around by the strong. Think about it, who ends up possessing land in our society? Who wins the day? The strong, the savvy,

and the harsh. Jesus says that those who are fit to reign with him and who will truly live the good life are those who are placing their lives in the hands of a sovereign God. They are meek.

And the meek, along with those who mourn, and those who are poor in spirit, are those who will have the good life. Keep in mind, as we talked about last week, that Jesus is not giving commands here. He's painting a beautiful picture, and this week it's a picture of humble reliance on God, expectation that He will make things right, and gentle dealings with people that fit us to reign with Jesus. I don't know about you, but that's a portrait my heart longs to imitate. But the picture's not done yet as we'll see next week.