

## Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

Matthew 5:1-3

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Turn with me in your Bible's to Matthew 5:1-3. Matthew, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, pens the following Words:

*Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:1–12*

The Old Testament is the book of Adam, whose story is tragic. Adam was not only was the first man on earth, but also the first king. He was given dominion over all the earth, to subdue and rule it (Gen. 1:28). But that first monarch fell soon after he began to rule, and his fall brought a curse—the curse with which the Old Testament both begins and ends. The New Testament begins with the presentation of the new Sovereign Man, One who will not fall and One who brings blessing rather than cursing. The second Adam is also the last Adam, and after Him will come no other ruler, no other sovereign. The first king sinned and left a curse; the second King was sinless and leaves a blessing.<sup>1</sup>

### **WRONG VIEWS OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT**

#### 1. Restoration

If we can just get everyone to apply the Sermon on the Mount, we can produce the Kingdom of God on earth. Wars will end, peace will reign, and we will see renewal in our communities.

#### 2. Elaboration of the Mosaic Law

The Pharisees were misrepresenting the law, so Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount simply explains the Mosaic law, giving it a higher spiritual content. The Sermon on the Mount does explain the law at certain points, but it also goes beyond it, for it penetrates to the heart.

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<sup>1</sup> John MacArthur, *Matthew 1–7*, The MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), 132.

### 3. Not for me

Some conclude that the Sermon on the Mount has nothing to do with modern Christians. They say that Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount to the Jews to inaugurate the Kingdom, but the Jews didn't believe His message. They hold that Jesus will reintroduce the Sermon on the Mount during the Millennium where it will serve as the rule for the Kingdom age. The problem with this view is that every teaching found in the Sermon on the Mount is also found in later books of the New Testament, especially the epistles. If the Sermon on the Mount is not for us, then we must question if much of the rest of the New Testament is for us. We are the intended recipients of this glorious teaching!

## WHY SHOULD WE STUDY THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

### 1. Jesus died to enable us to live the Sermon on the Mount.

*For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. Titus 2:11-14*

### 2. Nothing shows me my absolute need to be born again as the Sermon on the Mount.

The Beatitudes crush every particle of self-righteousness. They reveal our utter helplessness apart from the grace of God. Martyn Lloyd Jones says, "There is nothing that so leads to the gospel and its grace as the Sermon on the Mount." The teaching in this sermon certainly sets a high standard. If we take it seriously we realize that we cannot attain it and therefore cannot merit salvation. It is the end of the way of law and drives us to seek salvation in Christ. It shows us what life is like in the Kingdom of God. It removes all complacency. No follower of Christ can say, "I have done all I should," No matter how far we have traveled along the Christian road, the Sermon on the Mount tells us that there is more ahead of us.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. It is one of the best means of evangelism.

The world is looking for and desperately needs true Christians who embody this teaching by the power of the Holy Spirit. Jones says, "What the church needs to do is not to organize evangelistic campaigns to attract outside people, but to begin herself to live the Christian life."

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<sup>2</sup> Leon Morris, *PNTC: The Gospel According to Matthew* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1992), 91-92.

## **GENERAL LESSONS TO BE DRAWN FROM THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT**

1. The Sermon on the Mount is a description of what every Christian is to be.

The Sermon on the Mount is a description of what every Christian is to be, not a description of some exceptional, elite subclass of Christians. Just as the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit is to be ripening in every Christian's life, so every follower of Christ is meant to exemplify, at least in bud form, every quality contained in the Beatitudes. Unlike spiritual gifts where you are given one and I am given different one, the character qualities contained in the Sermon on the Mount are meant to be evident in the life of every believer. As a matter of fact, each character quality in the Sermon on the Mount implies the other. You cannot be "poor in spirit" without "mourning" and you can't "mourn" without "hungering and thirsting for righteousness".

2. The character qualities in the Sermon on the Mount are a result of natural tendencies.

No man naturally conforms to the character described in the Sermon on the Mount. Each of these is produced by grace alone and the through the Spirit's operation in us. In other words, nobody is like this by birth or nature. The Beatitudes show the non-Christian that he cannot please God by himself – because he cannot live up to His requirements. On the other hand, the Beatitudes show the Christian, who has been justified by faith, how to live in order that he might please God. The whole sermon presupposes that a person has accepted the gospel and become a new creation. For if not, he has no hope of living up to Jesus' words.

3. The real point of the Sermon is to show the difference between a person saved by grace and a lost person.

There is not a single sentence of the Sermon on the Mount that is not pointed at the contrast that exists between a Christian and a non-Christian. Perhaps the key verse of the sermon is Matthew 6:8 where Jesus tells his disciples, "Do not be like them..." It should not be our ambition to be as much like everybody else as we can, though we happen to be a Christian, but rather to be as different from the world as possible. Our ambition should be to be like Christ. The glory of the gospel is that when the church is absolutely different from the world, she invariably attracts it.

## **OUTLINE OF THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT**

Jesus addresses the citizens of His kingdom:

1. The Christian's character - Matthew 5:3-12
2. The Christian's influence - Matthew 5:13-16
3. The Christian's righteousness - Matthew 5:17-48
4. The Christian's piety – Matthew 6:1-18
5. The Christian's ambition – Matthew 6:19-34
6. The Christian's relationships – Matthew 7:1-20

## 7. The Christian's commitment<sup>3</sup> – Matthew 7:21-27

Our study brings us to the Beatitudes or “beautiful attitudes” of the Kingdom of God. Here, Jesus instructs all believers as to what their character is to look like as a result of the regeneration and change of heart that occurred at salvation. The first four beatitudes (poor in spirit, mourn, meek, hunger and thirst for righteousness) focus on our vertical relationship with God. The second four (merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers, persecuted) are centered on our horizontal relationship to man. Let's look back at our text:

*Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

### **JESUS WENT UP ON THE MOUNTAIN**

There are undoubtedly parallels here between Jesus and Moses. Moses went up and received the Law from God on Mount Sinai. Here, in our text, Jesus goes up on the mountain to explain the implications for the Law to His disciples. Hebrews 3:1-6 tells us that Jesus is the greater Moses. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus gives his own authoritative interpretation of Moses' law. Jesus said, “You have heard it said... But I tell you...” The Sermon on the Mount exposes the heart and drives us to our need for a Savior and Redeemer.

### **HE SAT DOWN**

This is the authoritative posture of a rabbi.

### **HE OPENED HIS MOUTH AND TAUGHT THEM**

Matthew writes, “And He opened His mouth and taught them.” What is the significance here? Why do you suppose Matthew says that Jesus “opened His mouth”? This is actually a Hebrew idiom that indicates something of great importance is about to be said. Matthew is letting the reader know that the very words of God are coming; an authoritative word was at hand. It's interesting to note that the very final words of the Sermon on the Mount read, “When Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes” Matthew 7:28-29.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> John R. Stott, *The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity press, 1978), 24-26.

<sup>4</sup> R.T. Kendall, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Minneapolis, MN: Chosen Books, 2001), 24-25.

## I. THE BLESSING

*Blessed are...*

What does it mean to be blessed? A quick glance at each quality commanded by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is accompanied with a pronounced blessing. If you were to look up the word “blessed” on the average Greek lexicon, you will most likely see the definition “happy”. While it’s true that the Greek word μακάριος (makarios) does carry the idea of happiness, it carries another meaning that I think better fits the context of Jesus’ teaching; to be approved of by God. To interpret the word μακάριος as “happy” is to see the Beatitudes more as emotional attitudes rather than ethical responsibilities. Whereas happiness is a subjective state, Jesus, in the Beatitudes, is making an objective statement or judgment about Christians. He is declaring not what they will feel like if they keep His Word, but rather what God thinks of those who obey and exhibit these qualities.<sup>5</sup> Having said that, there is a clear link between our pursuit of holiness / godliness and our happiness! Matthew 5:3 is better translated: Approved of by God are the poor in spirit.

## II. THE BEATITUDE

*the poor in spirit,*

### MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE POOR IN SPIRIT

1. Poor in spirit doesn’t mean materially poor.

If Luke’s account (6:20) was all that we had, Jesus’ words could possibly be interpreted as material poverty. Luke says, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of heaven.” If Matthew 5:3 refers to material poverty, then it would be an unchristian thing for a believer or any other person to seek to alleviate the burdens of the needy and destitute. We know that isn’t the case, because Jesus commends giving and serving the needs of others. It is interesting to note that God doesn’t sanction material poverty in any passage of the Bible. Jesus certainly warned those with material wealth, but he never condemned it.

2. It’s not the conviction that one is of no value at all. It doesn’t mean the absence of self-worth.

3. It doesn’t mean shyness, weakness, or lacking courage.

4. It doesn’t refer to a showy or false humility.

Self-righteousness or moral pride will damn the soul. Jesus made this clear in the account of the tax collector and the Pharisee:

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<sup>5</sup> John R. Stott, 33.

*Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Luke 18:10–14*

## **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE POOR IN SPIRIT**

The Greek word “poor”, πτωχός (ptochos), has the idea of crouching like a beggar. It is the picture of a person who crouches about, wretchedly begging. Such a person is fully dependent on the giving of others and cannot survive apart from outside help. Thus, an excellent translation is that of “beggarly poor”. We could translate our passage so far: Approved of by God are the beggarly poor in spirit... or approved by God are those who are so desperately poor in their spiritual resources that they realize they must have help from outside sources.

To be poor in spirit means to understand that you are spiritually bankrupt before God. It means that we have nothing in the way of merit to offer God. We have nothing to offer, nothing to plead, nothing with which to purchase the favor of heaven. It's the absence of pride, self-assurance, and self-reliance. To be poor in spirit means to be humble, to have a correct estimate of oneself (cf. Romans 12:3). It's not a false humility that says, “I'm nothing; I'm not worth anything; I can't do anything.” Rather, it is honesty about our desperate condition before God and an understanding that apart from Christ I cannot please God.

John Wesley once said, “[The poor in spirit have] a deep sense of the loathsome leprosy of sin which he brought with him from his mother's womb, which overspreads his whole soul, and totally corrupts every power and faculty thereof.” It's interesting to note that the first beatitude is one of the strongest statements in the Bible concerning the doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone because it shows a person's complete inability to please God by any human effort.

*Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to Thy cross I cling;  
Naked, come to Thee for dress  
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;  
Foul, I to the mountain fly;  
Wash me, Savior, or I die.*

Another way to think about the phrase poor in spirit might be the word “brokenness.” Brokenness is evident when you realize you have no bargaining power with God. You can do only one thing: ask for mercy. You ask for mercy when you have nothing to give in exchange, you have nothing to offer. You can't broker a deal with God. You simply come before Him and ask Him for mercy.

It means the absence of defensiveness. You are no longer explaining yourself, excusing yourself. It's the absence of finger pointing. There will be no finger pointing, at God or others, when you are broken. The one who points the finger needs to be broken.<sup>6</sup> Does this describe you?

You will never find a greater antithesis to the worldly spirit and outlook as you do in this verse. The world emphasizes self-reliance, self-confidence, self-expression, believe in yourself, realize your potential...Poverty of spirit is the opposite of the proud selfishness and self-sufficiency that we see in the world today. The world has its own ideas of blessedness. Blessed is the man who is always right...Blessed is the man who is strong... Blessed is the man who rules... Blessed is the man who is satisfied with himself...Blessed is the man that is rich...Blessed is the man who is popular... Blessed is the man with the achievements.

Friends, poverty of spirit is an indispensable sign of grace. No one can truly know Christ without being poor in spirit. There are most likely scores of individuals in churches throughout our community, prominent "Christians," who do not know Christ, because they have never come to a place of spiritual bankruptcy. They have never confessed, "There is nothing in me to commend me to God."

The Church at Laodicea was not a good example of what it looks like to be poor in spirit. In Revelation 3:17 John quoted them saying, "You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked." This visible church for all its Christian profession, was not truly Christian at all. Self-satisfied and superficial, it was composed, according to Jesus, of blind and naked beggars. But the tragedy is that they refused to admit it. They were rich, not poor, in spirit.<sup>7</sup>

#### COME YE SINNERS

*Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched,  
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;  
Jesus, ready, stands to save you,  
Full of pity, joined with power.  
He is able, He is able;  
He is willing; doubt no more.*

*Let not conscience make you linger,  
Nor of fitness fondly dream;  
All the fitness He requires  
Is to feel your need of Him.  
This He gives you, this He gives you,  
'Tis the Spirit's rising beam.*

#### HOW DO YOU BECOME POOR IN SPIRIT

How does one become poor in spirit? The answer is that you do not look at yourself or begin by trying to do things yourself. The way to become poor in spirit is to look at God! You cannot truly look at Him without feeling your absolute poverty and emptiness. Martin Lloyd Jones said, "If a man feels anything in the presence of God other than utter poverty of Spirit, it ultimately means that he has never faced him." Poverty of spirit comes as a result of humble repentance and faith.

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<sup>6</sup> R.T. Kendall, 27.

<sup>7</sup> John R. Stott, 40.

Jesus teaches that the Sermon on the Mount is only for those who know they cannot live by it. This is the same as the Law in the Old Testament; it was given to drive men to God for mercy. Preaching the standards of the Sermon on the Mount to an unbeliever is like trying to tell a wolf not to eat a sheep. Unless the wolf has a new nature, the sheep is dinner with wool on.

There must be an emptying of self before there is a filling with the things of God. We must become poor in spirit before we can become rich in God's blessings. Spiritually, there must be a falling before there is a rising, an emptying before a filling, and a humble repentance before conversion. There is no one in the Kingdom who is not poor in spirit. It is the fundamental characteristic of the Christian and of the citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. All of the other Beatitudes are a result of being poor in spirit.

### **HOW DO YOU KNOW IF YOU ARE REALLY POOR IN SPIRIT**

1. He that is poor in spirit is weaned of himself.
2. He that is poor in spirit is a Christ-admirer.
3. He that is poor in spirit is ever complaining of his spiritual state.
4. He that is poor in spirit is lowly in heart.
5. He that is poor in spirit is much in prayer.
6. He that is poor in spirit is content to take Christ on His own terms.
7. He that is poor in spirit is an exalter of free grace.<sup>8</sup>

### **CHRISTIAN GROWTH REQUIRES AN ONGOING POVERTY OF SPIRIT**

Poverty of spirit is essential for spiritual growth. Just as no one can come to Christ without being poor in spirit, no one can continue to grow apart from an ongoing poverty of spirit. We don't come to Christ confessing our spiritual bankruptcy and then begin to think that we are less needy of His sustaining grace and mercy after the fact. A perpetual sense of our spiritual insufficiency is what brings us under the waterfall of God's blessing. We never outgrow being poor in spirit.

### **III. THE PROMISE**

*for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Just as the eight qualities in the Beatitudes describe the responsibilities of every Christian, so the eight promises that follow them are the sure privilege of every believer. It is probably better to understand these promises as consequences instead of rewards. Here in verse 3 Jesus says, "For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." There is a word that is repeated in verses 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10. Can you find it? It's the Greek word "αὐτός" translated "they" or "theirs" and it has an antithetical meaning to it. In other words, it carries the idea of "these people" rather than "those

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes: An Exposition of Matthew 5:1-10* (Edinburgh, UK: Banner of Truth, 2007), 38-41.

people” who will inherit the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is saying, “Divine favor rests on those who are poor in spirit for theirs, and theirs alone, is the kingdom of heaven.” In the strict sense, the kingdom belongs to God alone – and it’s often said to be His. But here, Jesus is emphasizing the fact that membership in the kingdom is the inheritance of all the people of God.

Let me close with one last thought. Are the promises that follow the Beatitudes to be understood as present or future? Do we experience them now or are they reserved for later? I think the answer is yes! It is interesting to note that the promise connected to the first and last Beatitude is in the present tense (theirs is the kingdom of heaven). The last beatitude concerning the persecuted has a definite future tense (great is your reward in heaven). But the six middle Beatitudes in verses 4-9 have a simple future tense verb (shall). Having said that, Jesus spoke Aramaic and it’s likely that this verb wasn’t present when He spoke.

We experience God’s comfort now (v.4), we are beginning to inherit the earth now (v.5), our hunger and thirst for righteousness can be quenched in this life (v.6), we receive the mercy of God now (v.7), we can see God now, at least in part, in the person and work of Christ (v.8), and we are sons of God now through faith (v.9). While the full blessing of the Kingdom of Heaven awaits us, there is something significant about our present experience of these promises! We enjoy the fruits now while the full harvest is to come.<sup>9</sup>

### **HELPFUL INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 5:3**

Approved by God (pleasing to God) are the beggarly poor in spirit, who understand that they have nothing in themselves to commend themselves to God and look to Him alone for grace, for theirs (and theirs only) is the Kingdom of heaven.

### **CLOSING BENEDECTION:**

Hear this benediction from God, through the prophet Isaiah, as we bring our corporate worship to a close, “But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” Isaiah 66:2. And all God’s people said, “Amen!”

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<sup>9</sup> John R. Stott, 34-35.