

Blessed Are the Bankrupt

Matthew 5:3

This evening we are beginning a short series of sermons on the Beatitudes entitled "The Blessed Life."

We live in a world where every single person is seeking the blessed life according to the path which they believe will lead them there. We live in a culture persuaded that the American Dream is the path to the blessed life. Get yourself a nice wife, a nice job, a couple of kids, a nice house, a nice car – and then wind it all up with a nice retirement. The good life.

It's not a bad life. It's just a wasted one – at least if that's actually what you are living for. I love the beatitudes because they turn the American Dream upside down and call us to live a life formed by the realities and values of the kingdom of heaven.

Back when I was a child, I clearly remember from time to time going to the local high school to see a travelogue. We would listen in astonishment as these traveling men showed their slides of distant lands and strange customs.

The Beatitudes are like a travelogue of the kingdom of heaven. These are the customs of kingdom people, the principles of the kingdom culture. They are gloriously out of step with the principles of this age and the kingdom of this world. They are counter cultural, counter intuitive, counter self-reliance and self-centeredness. They are the marks of a life lived for the glory of God. In other words, they are in perfect accord with the kingdom of heaven.

What is the blessedness of the beatitudes?

Terry Johnson: The Greek word here represents a **status** in relation to God rather than a subjective condition of the heart...The point is to describe what God thinks of them and does for them – not how they feel.

The blessedness of these beatitudes is a promise of being approved, favored, delighted in – by God! **Isn't that what you most deeply want?**

We think that what we want is to have our needs met, our physical and emotional desires satisfied. But experience shows us that no matter how well your physical appetites are met, no matter how deeply your emotional needs are fulfilled – the heart remains hungry for something more. And that something more is nothing less than this: to be the recipients of God's love, approval, and delight.

This list of virtues is not, first of all, a list of things we must do in order to merit the kingdom of God. Rather, they are the virtues which characterize the kingdom and those who belong

to it. This morning we were reminded that Jesus is a King. This evening we are reminded that he has a kingdom – and these are the values, priorities, and principles of that kingdom. This is what gospel people look and live like.

I. The Nature of Spiritual Poverty

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

What does it mean to be “poor in spirit”? Is it just another way of saying “depressed” or “melancholy”? This time of year people often feel “poor in spirit,” just kind of blah. Well...no. He isn’t talking about a state of mind or of the emotions, but a state of the heart. It is a spiritual poverty he has in mind.

The Greek language has two separate words for “poor” reflecting two different levels of poverty. There are those who are poor, who have a hard time making ends meet, and then those who are utterly destitute, completely without! For instance, we all recognize that there is a vast difference between the “poor” in this country and the poor in Haiti, Sudan, or India.

Jesus uses the more severe term for “poor,” The word that means abject poverty, the most miserable and wretched neediness possible.

“Blessed are those who are utterly destitute and bankrupt before God.” Remember, Jesus is speaking these words to a Jewish audience, to people who had come to assume that God was pleased with them for their ethnicity and religious practice. They had the law, they had the temple, and they had the priests and the sacrifices. They had so much to offer to God!

And Jesus, in the middle of all that religious fervor and pride, says, “Blessed are those who have nothing to offer to God.” This is another way of saying, “Blessed are the prostitutes and the tax-collectors. Blessed are those who realize that there is not a single solitary reason why God should love them or save them. Blessed are the bankrupt.”

Of course, everyone stands before God that way. Whether we realize it or not, everyone, by virtue of sin, is spiritually in the most desperate poverty imaginable. So Jesus isn’t simply saying, “Blessed are the bankrupt,” but, “Blessed are those who **realize** it! Blessed are those who have embraced the truth of their need, who are profoundly aware of their insufficiency before God.”

But what does that look like? What does that feel like? Let me give you two examples from Scripture of men who woke up to the reality of their horrifying spiritual poverty. Both were good men, religious men, believing men.

The first example is from Isaiah 6. Isaiah was a prophet, a good man, a godly man. He certainly would have been well-respected by the religious people of his day. But one day he had a vision in which he saw God in all his glory, and the angels of heaven were worshiping him without ceasing, calling out "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts." And Isaiah's reaction is alarming. He doesn't stand there and appreciate the view. He collapses with terror. "Woe is me, for I am ruined. I am undone. I am found out, laid bare, revealed as a bankrupt sinner." Jesus says, "Blessed."

Do you ever worry about being "found out"? Do you worry that someday, people are going to see who you really are? Blessed are those who realize they have been found out by God!

For our next example, let's consider that dear apostle named Peter. In Luke 5 we read of Jesus taking Peter on a fishing trip.

Luke 5:4-8 *[Jesus said,] "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch." And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets." And when they had done this, they enclosed a large number of fish, and their nets were breaking. They signaled to their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both the boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord."*

Peter was very comfortable with Jesus. That is, until the reality of Jesus as the holy Son of God laid Peter bare.

This is what poverty of spirit feels like. It is a deep recognition of the vast gulf between a holy God and sinful creatures. It is a conviction down to the marrow of your bones that you have nothing to offer God. You are just laid bare before him.

Terry Johnson: "The poor in spirit are characterized by the closed mouth. They have no illusions about themselves. They are no longer making excuses, no longer rationalizing their behavior or making false claims about their virtues. They have seen the darkness of their own heart. They confess that their heart is deceitful and desperately wicked, that in them is no good thing. They see the smallness and weakness and poverty of their souls."

Have you ever been there? Poverty of spirit is what happens when you come to grips with the truth of yourself before the truth of God.

You see, this beatitude isn't simple a caution against pride. It is a caution against living the way we usually live. We feel comfortable living with a "faith" in God, like Peter and Isaiah did before they met God. We feel comfortable living before God, believing in him, and recognizing that to some extent we need him, but are lacking that profound, acute

awareness of our desperate and culpable bankruptcy before him. We just don't naturally take our sin or God that seriously!

And the truth of our blind self-righteousness is revealed in the way we treat other people; the way we are quickly impatient with their sins and easily justify our own.

People who are poor in spirit are not offended by the splinter in someone else's eye because they are painfully, humbly aware of the log within their own.

We need God to open our eyes to the reality of who we are and who he is so that we can be the blessed ones in the kingdom of God.

II. The Blessedness of this Poverty

As you know, Jesus clarifies the blessedness of each beatitude. "Blessed are the poor in spirit – **FOR theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**" Jesus is promising the most blessed reality possible. This is everything the heart was made for and most deeply longs for.

- To be given the kingdom of heaven is to be given God as your Father and Jesus as your lover and glorious Lord and King.
- To be given the kingdom of heaven means that God will give you an eternity with him, experiencing his glory, in a new heaven and earth with all the saints and angels of God.
- To receive the kingdom of heaven is to know that every promise of grace and blessedness for this life and the next is sealed to you in Christ Jesus. "Praise be to the God and Father of our LORD Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ" (Eph. 1:3, NIV).

Blessed are the bankrupt. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Notice, the present tense. "Blessed **ARE**" – not "will be" – "for theirs **IS** the kingdom." The kingdom belongs to them now. In what sense? The greatest blessedness of the kingdom is already theirs. God is already present with them.

- **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."*
- **Psalm 91:1** *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High shall abide in the shadow of the Almighty.*
- **John 14:23** *Jesus answered him, "If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."*

The blessedness of spiritual poverty is that God gives all the infinite riches of his grace to those who know and confess their need of it.

III. The Path to Poverty

How can we gain this blessed poverty? The key is learning to see ourselves in light of the truth, holiness, and grace of God. We need to come to grips with God.

His staggering greatness. The God without beginning or ending, who creates and upholds all things by the inestimable power of his word.

His frightening holiness. When I begin to sense the beauty and majesty of the holiness of God blazing like a sun before me, the ugliness and shamefulness of my sin begins to become clear. I see my sin not simply as a rule I broke, but a horrifying offense against the perfect person of God. Excuses and rationalizations vanish.

His shocking grace. We need to embrace the wonder of the grace of God. The cross of Jesus Christ stands as the irrefutable proof of our sin and God's wrath against it, and God's fierce willingness to forgive us of it. And then we need to run to him to receive it – day after day.

Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling.

Naked, come to thee for dress. Helpless look to thee for grace.

Foul, I to the fountain fly. Wash me Savior, or I die.

And the promise of the gospel is that those who come to the cross as naked, foul, bankrupt sinners are clothed, washed, and given the eternal riches of heaven.

The poor in spirit are not sad, downcast people. They are the happiest people of all. They are freed from the burden of their debt before God. They are freed from the hopeless struggle of trying to earn the favor of God. In confessing the truth of their poverty, they have discovered the wealth of free love and grace. Have you? Amen.