

Matthew 5:3
Spiritual Poverty: the Key to Riches
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Last Sunday we looked at the historical circumstances of the Sermon on the Mount. We saw that Jesus preached this sermon a year and a few months after His baptism by John the Baptist, the event that marked the beginning of His public ministry. When Jesus preached this sermon, He was at the height of His popularity with the common people. Yet this was also shortly after the opposition of the religious leaders in both Judea and Galilee had reached a climax. The religious leaders had decided that they would have to somehow destroy Jesus because Jesus would not conform to their expectations nor submit to their traditions. At this critical time, Jesus spent a whole night in prayer, and then took action to organize and define His movement. He organized His movement by appointing His twelve apostles. And He defined it by preaching the Sermon on the Mount.

Today we are going to begin looking at the actual text of the Sermon on the Mount. And since the Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes, we will begin by looking at them.

Now these Beatitudes all have the same structure. They all begin with an ascription of blessedness. Then they each have a description of the blessed person. And then they each give a reason for the blessedness.

Let's begin by looking at the statement of blessedness. Each of these beatitudes begins with the word "blessed," a word which refers to genuine happiness. Happiness is a subject which interests everybody because everyone wants to be happy. The problem is that the world's standards are too low regarding happiness. The world is too readily satisfied with a happiness which in regard to the present, doesn't really fulfill, and which in regard to the future, doesn't really last. The sad irony is that the world is satisfied with a happiness that doesn't really satisfy in any real sense of the word.

Too many people are looking for happiness in temporary escapes from reality and in the numbing refuge of superficial pleasures. They are living from party to party, from thrill to thrill, from fantasy to fantasy. They are looking for happiness in all the wrong places.

God has defined for us in His moral law that realm where genuine happiness is found. We should regard God's moral law not as the walls of a jail designed to restrict our freedom. We should instead regard God's moral law as a protective fence like those which enable us to enjoy a day at the zoo without being attacked and eaten by wild animals. Again, God's moral law is not like the walls of a jail; it is like the fence around a school play yard designed to protect the children.

God's moral law consists of those ethical principles which reflect God's own moral purity. God's moral law consists of those rules for living which are rooted in God's own heart

holiness. God's moral law is that code of conduct which is consistent with God's very character. God's moral law is the silhouette of God's eternal righteousness traced out for us upon the canvas of creation.

When God created Adam in his original innocence, God imprinted this moral law upon Adam's heart as Adam's conscience. Then God placed Adam, the creature created in God's own image and after God's own likeness, in a world created to reflect God's own glory. God placed Adam in an environment that is by design congenial only to life lived in accordance with God's standards of morality. To live in accordance with God's moral law is to sail with the tail winds of God's blessing behind us. To live out of accordance with God's moral law is to sail against the head winds of God's curse upon us.

To change our metaphor, forbidden fruit may taste good for a moment, but all too soon it turns to gravel in the mouth. Ever since the garden of Eden, the world has been looking for happiness in forbidden fruit, and the results are always tragic. There is a deceitfulness to sin. It always promises happiness, but it always leads ultimately to misery. It also promises new freedom, but it always leads to a new degrading slavery.

Of course, sin deceives some more than others. There are those in the world who experience the more substantial happiness that comes from a relatively stable marriage and relatively responsible living. By God's common grace, some in the world realize more of the good life than others. Yet even here, there is

a hollowness and shallowness to this happiness when it lacks a true spiritual dimension. This happiness is based solely on earthly pleasures that are destined to fade away, and thus it has no hope for enduring. This happiness is based solely on outward circumstances and thus it cannot cope with tragedies that result in painful circumstances. This happiness does not include reconciliation with God, and thus it cannot satisfy the human soul, which was created for fellowship with the divine and communion with the eternal.

In contrast, Jesus is offering a happiness that is genuine, real and substantial. It satisfies the deepest inner longings of the human heart. It grows over time instead of fading. And it lasts into eternity.

Jesus gives us this genuine happiness by reconciling us to God our Maker both legally and morally. Jesus reconciles us to God legally through His work in our place as our legal substitute. Jesus pays the penalty for our sins by reckoning to our legal account before God the penalty He paid in our place and on our behalf through His own undeserved suffering, especially His suffering upon the cross. Jesus also reckons to our legal account before God the righteous record of His own sinless life of perfect obedience to the will of the Father. Jesus reconciles us to God morally by working in us through the Holy Spirit and giving us a new heart. Jesus takes away our love of sinning and replaces that with a deep desire to live in a way that pleases God. And, of course, the life that pleases God is the life lived in accordance with God's moral law.

God originally wrote this moral law upon the heart of Adam, but with Adam's fall into sin, humanity's conscience was dulled and distorted. So God has republished His moral law in a more permanent and object form in the revelation of Scripture. God's moral law is summarized for us, or, to use the quaint language of our Shorter Catechism, that moral law is summarily comprehended for us in the Ten Commandments.

In these Beatitudes, Jesus is explaining the one and only way to obtain this true and lasting happiness. The truly blessed life is the life in which we are reconciled to God, forgiven our sins and freed to live a life that is pleasing to God.

First, we have the ascription of blessedness, which we have just considered. After that, we have the description of the blessed person. The Beatitudes contain a progressive description of the effects of the regenerating grace of God upon the human heart.

Some ask where there is any grace in the Sermon on the Mount. They say that the Sermon on the Mount is all law and legalism and is therefore not for us today. Well, there is grace in the Sermon on the Mount, and we find it here in the Beatitudes. The blessed person is the person who has experienced God's regenerating grace. The Beatitudes contain in a logical order the changes which God effects in the sinful human heart when the Holy Spirit raises it from spiritual death to spiritual life.

Today we will look at the effect of regenerating grace we find in the first Beatitude. As a result of God's saving grace, we first become the poor in spirit. Jesus said, Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Now some people claim that Jesus is here talking about financially poor people. They believe Jesus is here saying, Blessed are the people with little money and few material possessions. Those who interpret the Beatitudes this way are often socialists, and they want the government to forcibly take money from the wicked rich people and to distribute it to the good poor people. There is a fatal inconsistency in this interpretation. If the financially poor are by definition the only truly happy and holy people, then the kindest thing one can do for them is to leave them in their poverty. If Jesus were saying, Blessed are the financially poor, then giving money to the poor would be the worse thing you could do to them because it would only destroy their state of true blessedness.

But that is not what Jesus meant. The truth of the matter is that one's financial position is not of itself a true measure of either happiness or holiness. There are poor people who are happy and rich people who are miserable. You will also find the wicked among both the rich and the poor, and you will find the godly among both the rich and the poor. People can be rich for sinful reasons such as cheating and stealing. People can also be poor for sinful reasons such as laziness or irresponsibility.

When Jesus said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, He was not talking about financial poverty; He was talking about spiritual poverty.

What does it mean to be poor in spirit? I believe we find the answer in question 31 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism:

Q. What is effectual calling?

A. Effectual calling is the work of God's Spirit, whereby, convincing us of our sin and misery, enlightening our minds in the knowledge of Christ, and renewing our wills, He doth persuade and enable us to embrace Jesus Christ freely offered to us in the gospel.

This catechism question describes the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, and notice what the Holy Spirit does first. He convinces us of our sin and misery. The poor in spirit are those who have been convinced of their sin and misery.

In our natural, fallen state, we are too proud to acknowledge our sin and misery apart from the saving work of Christ. This proud attitude is described in a poem called "Invictus" by William Ernest Henley. This poem goes like this:

Out of the night that covers me,
Black as the pit from pole to pole,
I thank whatever gods may be
For my unconquerable soul.
In the fell clutch of circumstance,
I have not winced nor cried aloud:
Under the bludgeonings of chance
My head is bloody, but unbowed.
It matters not how strait the gate,
How charged with punishments the scroll,
I am the master of my fate;
I am the captain of my soul.

This proud attitude of self-sufficiency is the opposite of what Christ was talking about when He said, Blessed are the poor in spirit.

We find an example of this proud attitude in the prayer of the Pharisee in Christ's parable of the Pharisee and the Publican in Luke chapter 18. Here is the prayer by the Pharisee:

'God, I thank You that I am not like other men; extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'

But here is what the parable says about the tax collector:

“And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God be merciful to me a sinner!'”

Jesus went on to say regarding the tax collector,

"I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The poor in spirit are those who, like the tax collector, recognize that they have sinned against God and are thus guilty before Him. They recognize that they are in spiritual debt and have no way to pay it off.

We can be blind to our spiritual poverty when we compare ourselves to other sinners. It is easy enough to find people more sinful than we are. It is only when the Holy Spirit brings us face to face with the holiness of God that we recognize our spiritual poverty. This was the experience of Isaiah the prophet. In a vision, Isaiah was brought before the Lord in His holy temple. Isaiah heard the seraphim crying out, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" Then Isaiah cried out, "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts." Even a holy prophet such as Isaiah sees His spiritual poverty when He is exposed to the holiness of God.

When the Holy Spirit exposes us to God's high and holy standard, and when the Holy Spirit transforms our calloused heart of stone into a heart of flesh, then we become painfully aware of our sinfulness and our spiritual poverty. We come to see our own righteousness as filthy rags, to use the language of Isaiah, or as rubbish, to use the language of the apostle Paul. That is what is meant by being poor in spirit.

We come thirdly to the reason for the blessedness of those who are poor in spirit. We read that theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The poor in spirit possess the one eternal kingdom, the one kingdom that will not fall or fade away, the one kingdom that will prevail in history. You see, recognizing our own spiritual poverty is the necessary prelude to our receiving true riches in Christ.

2 Corinthians 8:9

9 For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.

Ephesians 3:8

8 To me, who am less than the least of all the saints, this grace was given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ.

The riches that are ours in Christ are so great that Paul calls them "unsearchable." They are beyond any computation. They are an infinite ocean of grace whose shores cannot be seen and whose depths cannot be fathomed.

We have heavenly riches, an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and thieves do not steal.

We have heart riches. "In Jesus we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace." Ephesians 1:7

We have eternal riches. "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us." Romans 8:18

Conclusion:

The first Beatitude is a paradox. Those who are poor in spirit are those who obtain true riches in Christ. It is not until we recognize our own spiritual poverty that we are attracted to

Christ as the Pearl of Great Price and as the Treasure Hidden in the Field. It is not until we understand that apart from Christ, we can do nothing, that we see the need to abide in Him that we may bear abundant fruit.

As long as the prodigal son had money, he had no thought of returning home. It was when he in desperate poverty that he came to himself and resolved to return to His father.

Is Christ today revealing to you your spiritual poverty? I pray that He is. Christ won't fill you with His spiritual riches as long as you are full of yourself. Don't be like the church at Laodicea. Here is Christ's message to that church as found in Revelation 3:17:

17 ... you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'; and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked.

Don't be like that. Swallow your pride and acknowledge that you have sinned against God and have no means to pay your sin debt. Then turn to Christ and the riches of His grace. Depend upon Him to pay your debt to God. Say to Him, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." He will delivery you from the legal bankruptcy of guilt and from the moral bankruptcy of sin.