

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. Lent is a forty day period between Ash Wednesday and Easter excluding Sundays. It is a time of self-examination, self-reflection, repentance and spiritual growth for Christians. Every now and then, as Christians we need to take some time, listen to God and to see where our life is headed. Thus, Lent is a time when we should be asking ourselves: “Who is Jesus Christ to me? What is my personal relationship with Him? What must I do to grow closer to Him?”

To help us address these questions during Lent this year, I want us to study the Beatitudes as contained in the fifth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, the first twelve verses. The Beatitudes are one of the most beloved sections of Matthew; it forms the beginning of what is known as the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount gives us guidance for living the Christian life. It is not a set of rules and regulations to be followed, but a picture of the life that we can have if we let the Holy Spirit have His way with us.

Now it is generally assumed that the Sermon on the Mount in Chapters 5 through 7 is a collection of Jesus’ sermons and teachings, and was not one very long sermon. It's been said that a good sermon has a good beginning and a good ending, which are not far apart. A preacher once stood up and said: “I have so much to say, I don’t know where to begin.” To which a little boy quickly replied: “Could you start somewhere near the end?”

The term beatitude comes from a Latin word which means “happiness.” The Beatitudes are eight blessings; each one is like a proverb, precise and full of meaning. Each one includes a topic that forms a major biblical theme. Each Beatitude consists of two phrases: the condition and the result. In almost every case the condition is from a familiar Old Testament context for which Jesus provides a new interpretation. Together, the Beatitudes present a new set of Christian ideals that focus on a spirit of love and humility.

When we first read these statements of Jesus, they seem like simple concepts; however, after you dig into them, you realize that they are quite challenging. It is also important to remember that they are a package deal, not something that you can pick and choose from. Thus, we can’t pick the ones we like and ignore the more difficult ones. As Christians, we should, and must, display each of these characteristics in our daily lives. In the Beatitudes, Jesus is not saying “live like this in order to be saved;” He is saying “live like this because you are saved.”

In his book *The Applause of Heaven*, Max Lucado states: “the Beatitudes are not a summary of independent sayings, but rather a step-by-step description of how God rebuilds the believer’s heart.” In the Beatitudes, Jesus promises “blessings” to all who will follow Him; to all who decide to live their lives each day by His example. In a sense, the Beatitudes show us how Jesus wants us to live as His followers. Thus, this is an excellent passage to study during Lent as we

examine our lives and try to grow closer to the Lord over the next few weeks. So listen to the Beatitudes as recorded in the fifth chapter of Matthew, verses 1 through 12.

Read Matthew 5:1-12

Over the next four weeks, we will discuss one or two of the Beatitudes each Sunday. But before we look at the first one, let's discuss the difference between the terms "blessed" and "happy" that appear in different translations of the Bible. Now my personal Bible uses the term "blessed," while some Bibles use the term "happy," which I think misses the point. The use of "happy" does not seem to capture all that is intended here in this text, primarily because the meaning of "happy" has been devalued with its constant use today. Human happiness is an emotion that is dependent on chance and what's happening around you.

However Christian blessedness is something that comes from within; something that only God can give. Here in the Beatitudes, Jesus is talking about an inner joy and peace that can only come from being in a right relationship with God; it does not depend on what is happening in the world around us. The emphasis is not on the blessing to be received, but on the condition of the heart and mind that makes it possible for a person to experience the blessings of God. Each Beatitude is an announcement of someone who enjoys the blessings of God.

With this background, let's look at the first Beatitude as recorded in verse 3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Another translation of the Bible says: "Happy are people who are hopeless." While the *Message* paraphrases it this way: "You're blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and His rule." Now I know that it seems strange to begin talking about happiness by saying "blessed are the poor in spirit;" because in our today's world, it is unusual to say that anyone who is poor or hopeless is blessed or happy.

To better understand what Jesus was getting at, we need to go back to the Old Testament passage from Isaiah 61 which states: "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor." In the fourth chapter of the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus was visiting His hometown of Nazareth and was asked to read in the synagogue, He chose this particular passage from Isaiah. When Jesus had finished reading and sat down, He announced to the congregation that today this passage was fulfilled in their hearing; in other words, Jesus is the one Isaiah was writing about.

This passage from Isaiah gives us some insight into what Jesus meant by "the poor." Now while we tend to think of "poor" primarily in terms of financial status and material possessions, it can also refer to the quality of work. When I was in Socorro, a little girl came up to me one Sunday after worship and gave me \$20. I asked her if this was for the offering, and she said no, it was

for me. I thanked her and asked her why. And she said that her grandfather had told her that I was the poorest preacher he'd ever heard.

Now in this passage, while poor can refer to those who have little money or material possessions, there is also a spiritual side to it. Isaiah used this word to describe the people who had been taken into exile in Babylon. They were of course poor, having lost all their land and possessions; but they were also afflicted and oppressed, they were powerless and without hope, they were desperate. They had no resources to fall back on; they had to depend on others for survival. Their physical poverty was intensified by the poverty in their spirit. To these people, Isaiah brought good news; they would soon be delivered from bondage. In the same way, Jesus fulfilled Isaiah's promise by proclaiming the "good news" of God, freeing us from the bondage of sin. He does not make us rich in earthly possessions and power, but He fulfills our greatest need. You are not poor in God's sight if you are poor in the spirit!

So, in this first Beatitude, the term poor is used to describe the person who has realized their own helplessness, and who has put their whole trust in God. The *J.B. Phillips Bible* paraphrases verse 3 as follows: "How happy are those who know their need for God, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs." Once a person recognizes their utter helplessness, their sinfulness and puts their trust in the Lord, then they will become completely detached from material possessions which cannot bring them the happiness or security that they are searching for. In addition, they will become completely attached to God who alone can give them the love, hope and strength that they need for life. The person who is poor in spirit is the one who realizes that material things mean nothing in life, and that God means everything. They ask God to do for them what they can't do without Him. People who are "poor in spirit" are those who are humble before God. As Max Lucado described it: "We are beggars in God's soup kitchen."

Now before we go on, we need to realize that this beatitude does not call poverty a good thing; because it is definitely not. Jesus would never call anything blessed where people are homeless, don't have enough to eat and lack proper access to health care. This is the kind of social injustice that all Christians should aim to eliminate, and thus, this is the focus of our outreach ministries. The poverty that is blessed is the poverty of spirit, when a person realizes their own lack of resources and need for God, and finds their help and strength in God. The poor in spirit are those who have the heart of the poor, the humble attitude of the poor, and are totally dependent on God. This attitude of poverty is what brings us to the proper place where Jesus can help us.

Jesus says that the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are poor in spirit. So what is the Kingdom of Heaven? If we take the two petitions of the Lord's Prayer: "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" together we get the definition. The Kingdom is a community where God's will is as perfectly done on earth as it is in heaven. This means that

only those who seek to do the will of God's will be included in the Kingdom. And we can only do God's will when we come to the realization that without God we are helpless, and thus, we put our complete trust in Him. Your lifestyle will no longer be determined by what you have or do not have, but by who you are in relationship with God.

Now one way that we grow in this relationship is to give God complete control of our lives; in other words, surrender our life to God. Surrender, now there's a negative sounding word. Let's face it, we are a control society. We want to control every aspect of our daily lives, and even in some cases the lives of those around us. So to ask us to give up control of any part of our life is unheard of today. We live under the misconception that to give God any control of our life is to lose our individual freedom; however, in reality we only really start living when we let go and let God. Jesus told us in John 10:10 that He came so that we may have life and have it more abundantly; life beyond anything we ever imagined. In Matthew 6:33 Jesus says: "Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." In other words, put me first in your life and you will be blessed.

When you consider the things that prevent us from giving God complete control of our life, pride is at the top of the list. In our pride, we fail to assume responsibility for our mistakes and admit that we are wrong. To enter the Kingdom of God we must be willing to assume the role of a beggar; to admit our need for God and His help. This requires humility. In the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of John, we find that Jesus' disciples were not willing to wash each other's feet before the Lord's Supper, assuming that it was the job of the servants and below their dignity. But Jesus deflated their egos and pride by taking a towel and washing their feet, showing that the greatest of all is the one who serves. In our world today we see a lot of people striving to be at the top of the social or career ladder, but very few reaching for the towels.

Are you trying to impress others or do you reach for the towels? Are you poor in spirit? A footnote to our passage refers us to Mark 10:14 where Jesus says: "Let the little children come unto me, do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these." In Matthew 18:3 Jesus urges us to become like little children in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Jesus was telling the disciples and us today that unless we are willing to accept God in the simplicity of a child, we will never get in. To truly receive Jesus into our hearts and experience the grace, forgiveness and love of God, there must be childlike qualities in each of us. These qualities include the innocent trust of a child, the realization that we are dependent on God, and the willingness to freely accept God's gifts of love and grace. In other words, to grow closer to God, we must be a kid again!

In His teachings on the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus turns the world upside down; His way is contrary to the ways of the world. The world says:

Blessed are the strong, for they shall rule the world.  
Blessed are the mighty, for they shall rise to power.  
Blessed are the rich, for they shall inherit the earth.  
Blessed are the influential, for they shall be favored.  
Blessed are the popular, for they shall be loved.  
Blessed are the gifted, for they shall be followed.  
Blessed are the beautiful, for they shall be admired.

But Jesus says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Jesus is saying that if you really want to live life as it was intended from the beginning of time; if you want to experience peace, joy, happiness and hope in your life; if you want a closer relationship with me, then put my Father and Me first in your life, lean on us and we will carry you through life. Which way are you following: the world's way or Jesus' way? During these days of Lent, may each of us strive to be poor in spirit! Amen