

The Be-Attitudes: 1. Poor in Spirit

Matthew 5.1-12 [King James Version]

Mason United Methodist Church

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Several weeks ago a friend and I were visiting in my office discussing various scenarios that occur in the life of a believer. We talked about the fact that some experiences were absolutely delightful, while others were the pits. The discussion centered on the way life and people about us have a tremendous effect on our life experience, within in the church and outside of it. We can be elated when things are positive and make us happy and in the pits when situations, or people, disappoint us. It was during that conversation that the “idea light” went on in my mind and I decided to tackle the issues in the Beatitudes.

During the next two months it is my intent to present a series of discourses from Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount; and I have titled the series THE BE-ATTITUDES. This series will consist of a weekly message on each of the eight Beatitudes in the first ten verses of Matthew 5, and close with a follow-on summary message from verses 11 and 12: *God blesses you when you are mocked and persecuted and lied about because you are my followers. Be happy about it! Be very glad! For a great reward awaits you in heaven* [The New Living Translation, 1996].

The word used to describe the eight teachings in this passage is the plural of the word Beatitude, a word that is not found in the English bible; but it is derived from the Latin word *beatus* meaning “happy” or “blessed” and are words that are very close the original Greek word that Jesus used in his teaching. That Greek word is *makarioi* which means “happy, supremely blessed and fortunate.”

The California pastor/evangelist Robert Schuller wrote a book in 1985 titled The Be (Happy) Attitudes (a copy of which is in our Mason Church library) and commented on the eight positive attitudes that can transform your life. The dichotomy in these eight proclamations is that the Beatitudes are in tremendous contrast to the worldly notion of *blessedness* and *happiness*. To some people they just don’t make sense and seem almost a contradiction in the mind. The Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount also defied the great expectations of an earthly kingdom which the Jews of that day thought the Messiah would establish. How, indeed, can a kingdom be established by the *weak* and the *meek*?

So now we launch into eight Beatitudes that might seem like oxymorons of our faith: oxymorons where two dissonant words are joined together for depth of explanation such as *found missing*, *sanitary landfill*, *deafening silence*, *military intelligence*, and a *short sermon*. And in some respects the Beatitudes are like oxymorons, inverting everything that the world would consider right and sensible, like many of Jesus’ teachings from other biblical passages that go against conventional wisdom such as *love your enemies* and *he who would save his life must lose it*.

Jesus did have a way of getting people’s attention; and his words were so powerful that they were recorded in the gospels nearly a century after they were spoken.

Several thousand persons were gathered on the day Jesus spoke the words to his disciples we now know as the Sermon on the Mount.

William Barclay suggests in his multi-volume compendium work The Daily Study Bible that the Sermon on the Mount is not one single sermon which Jesus preached on one definite situation; it is the epitome, the distillation, the summary of his constant teaching to His disciples. It has been suggested that, after Jesus definitely chose the Twelve, He may have taken them away into a quiet place for a week or even a longer period of time, and that, during that space, He taught them all the time, and the Sermon on the Mount is the summary of that teaching [Volume 1, page 80]. In fact, it is likely that what we know as Matthew's record of the Sermon on the Mount is a three-chapter summary of the basic teachings Jesus would deliver again and again over his three years of itinerant ministry.

Barclay further comments that Jesus began to teach when he had sat down. When a Jewish [sic, since *Jewish* Rabbi is duplicative] Rabbi was teaching officially he sat to teach. Often a Rabbi gave instruction when he was standing or strolling about; but his really official teaching was done when he had taken his seat. So, then, the very intimation that Jesus sat down to teach His disciples is the indication that this teaching is central, that it is official, that it is the very essence of His teaching [Ibid]. This qualifier suggests that what is coming is tremendously important, and that the hearers should *listen up*.

“Poor in spirit” is a difficult phrase to understand. The word for “poor” in Greek [*ptochos*] literally means “having nothing, reduced to begging.” While monetary poverty can be inferred from these verses, Jesus was speaking about *spiritual poverty*. A person can be financially poor and still be arrogant and prideful. Another can be rich with money and property but still be *poor in spirit*. King David in our Old Testament is a great example of this: in spite of being a king he had a **humble and contrite heart**. In his own spiritual poverty he wrote the words recorded in Psalm 51: *Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a **steadfast spirit** within me* [verse 10]. *Restore to me the joy of your salvation and sustain me with a **willing spirit*** [verse 12]. *The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a **broken and contrite heart**, O God, you will not despise* [verse 17].

The opposite of “poor in spirit” is “*proud in spirit*.” The *pride* of life is one of the three roots of sin and independence from God: *The world offers only the lust for physical pleasure, the lust for everything we see, and pride in our possessions* [1 John 2.16]. Using other words, poverty of spirit is the root of all virtue; and in this regard, the first beatitude is the root from which all the other beatitudes grow.

To be poor in spirit really means to realize that we are spiritually bankrupt [*ptochos*], that we cannot save ourselves. In his Expositor's Bible Commentary, Carson explains, “To be poor in spirit is not to lack courage but to acknowledge spiritual bankruptcy. It confesses one's unworthiness before God and utter dependence on [God].” In other words, to be poor in spirit means to be *humble*. Note that the root of the word humble is the Latin *humus* meaning “ground” or “dirt.”

One of the best biblical illustrations of poverty of spirit (or humility) is another story told by Jesus as a parable about the Pharisee and the Publican in prayer [Luke 18.9-14]. In this parable Jesus tells about two men at the synagogue for prayer time: a certain religious leader (a Pharisee, one who follows the *letter of the law*) and a Publican, a dishonest tax collector who knew he was being dishonest. As Jesus told the story, both men were engaged in prayer. The former demonstrated *arrogance and pride*, and the latter *humility and deep sorrow* (poor in spirit).

The religious leader had “I trouble” (read *big ego*) when he prayed, “I thank God I’m not like others – especially that publican over there – since I never cheat, I don’t sin, I don’t commit adultery, fast twice a week and give a tenth of my income to the synagogue.”

The publican, on the other hand, knew he was sinning and couldn’t even lift up his head in prayer. He beat his chest in sorrow and said, “God be merciful to me for I am a sinner.” He was humble, and found justification. As Jesus finished the story he said, “*The [publican] returned home justified before God. For the proud will be humbled, but the humble will be honored.*” [verse 14]

Ironically, one Sunday school teacher after retelling that parable to her class invited the children to pray saying, “Let’s thank God that we’re not like that proud Pharisee.”

Another excellent example of being humble is found in Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15. The younger of two sons demanded his inheritance early from his father’s estate. This was a real slap in the face to the father, and was as if the younger son were saying, “I wish you were dead. Give me my share now.” The father complied. The son took off and lived the high-life with his friends until he came to the end of his money – and his friends.

Later, the young son realized that the pigs he was feeding were eating better than him, and decided to humble himself and go back home. He practiced his speech over and over again, “Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, I am no longer worthy of being called your son.” He intended to ask for a job on his father’s farm; but his dad welcomed him back with open arms (in fact was watching the horizon for his son’s return, much as he must have been doing for a long time) and threw a celebration feast for him.

Tragically, the older brother was angered by such lavish behavior on the part of his father toward the recalcitrant brother – and he refused to be a part of the party celebrating his brother’s return.

The younger son exercised humility and received a blessing. The elder brother would not accept his brother’s behavior and return – was angry – and chose to remain in the comfort zone as his anger fed his ego. The opposite of “poor in spirit” (humble) is “proud in spirit” (arrogant), a reaction that was demonstrated in spades by the angry elder brother.

It seems that Jesus was trying to get across an important point, not only in the teachings of the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, but in continuing to teach through parables that taught how humility resulted in blessing. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is given to them.”

The *kingdom of heaven*? Isn't that something that is out there in the future? Or is it something that can be experienced in the here and now? Jesus taught in Luke 17.20-21 having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, “The kingdom of God isn't ushered in with visible signs. You won't be able to say, ‘Here it is!’ or ‘It's over there!’ For the kingdom of God is among you.” That means the kingdom of God is *here and now* as well as something to be established permanently in God's own time schedule.

As I was wrapping up the manuscript of this sermon yesterday, my brother-in-law Joe Green's church newsletter arrived from Tennessee in the afternoon mail. Pastor of Alcoa First United Methodist Church in a suburb of Knoxville, his article spoke directly to the very things with which I had been laboring throughout last week with regard to this first parable.

A member of the British Parliament took his 8 year-old daughter to visit Westminster Abbey. The awesomeness of it struck the little girl. As she stood looking up at the columns and studying its beauty and grandeur, her father said, “Sweetheart, what are you thinking?” She said, “Daddy, I was thinking how big you seem at home, and how small you look in here.”

God's presence has a way of humbling us. And that's good, because when we empty ourselves, God has a useful vessel. Your Bible overflows with examples of those who did. In his gospel, Matthew mentions his own name only twice. Both times he calls himself a tax collector (there are worse names, I'm sure, but in April I can't think of any). In [Matthew's] list of apostles, he assigns himself the eighth spot. John doesn't even mention his name in his gospel. The 20 appearances of the name “John” refer to John the Baptist [Jesus' cousin]. John simply calls himself “the other disciple,” or “the disciple whom Jesus loved.” Luke wrote two of the most important books in the Bible, but never once penned his own name. Paul, the Bible's most prolific author, referred to himself as “a fool” (1 Corinthians 15.9). Five years later he claimed to be “less than the least of all the saints” (Ephesians 3.8). In one of his final epistles he referred to himself as “the chief of sinners” (1 Timothy 1.15). As Paul grew older, his ego grew smaller. King David wrote no Psalm celebrating his victory over Goliath [the giant]. But he wrote a public psalm of penitence confessing his [adulterous] sin with Bathsheba (Psalm 51).

Humbling ourselves before God – *being poor in spirit* – allows us to be able to say, “Help!” in the midst of the worst life can throw at us. When we can come to that point, we are stepping over the threshold of *the kingdom of God* so that we can live life on Jesus' terms of promise recorded in John 10.10 (The Message): “I came so [you] can have real and eternal life, more and better life than [you] ever dreamed of.”