



LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

St. Matthew 5:3

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I want to start this morning by jumping straight into our text and reading the first part of the Sermon on the Mount – the part that we know as “The Beatitudes.” If you have your Bibles with you, open them to the fifth chapter of St. Matthew’s Gospel and follow along with me:

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. (Matthew 5:1-10)

These are some of the most familiar words that Jesus ever spoke. Even the non-Christian sees that there’s something important here, even if he doesn’t really understand it all. When Jesus tells us, “Blessed is so and so…” and “Blessed is such and such…” even the ears of the natural man, still living in his fallen state perk up. Even if we were only to consider Jesus as great teacher or spiritual leader of the past and not the Son of God, there’s something here that catches our attention. On the most basic level, to be blessed is to be happy – and that is, after all, what we all want. And so when Jesus says that this is the way to be blessed, or to be happy, even the natural and fallen man or woman gives him their attention.

But what does Jesus mean when he uses the word “blessed”? A lot of modern translations use the English word “happy” to translate the Greek word used by St. Matthew – and happy does carry across *some* of what it means, but it’s really too

shallow of an idea. The problem is that “happy” is a subjective state. Remember that Jesus is talking to his disciples here – to people who have heard his message and taken it to heart. He’s not describing what they might *feel* like. What he’s doing is making an *objective* judgement about *them* – about the state that they’re in and about their standing before God. When he calls someone “blessed” he’s not talking about what they might think of themselves; he’s describing what *God thinks* of them, and on account of that, what they truly *are*. And in the end that’s what really matters: not what we think of our selves, but what we actually are in God’s eyes.

This wasn’t an idea that was new with Jesus. He’s preaching here and as he preaches about being blessed, what he’s really doing is expounding on an Old Testament concept that every Jewish person would have already understood. Look at Psalm 1:

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night. (Psalm 1:1-2)

Whether or not Jesus might have actually quoted a verse like Psalm 1:1 to the people gathered to hear him, when he started with those words “Blessed are…” everyone’s mind would have immediately remembered those Old Testament passages like Psalm 1:1. The whole idea of “blessing” was at the heart of the Jewish identity. Going back to the time of the Patriarchs and to the Exodus, over and over God had called his people into a covenant with himself. His promise was that if they followed him, he would bless them, and that if they turned their backs on him, he would curse them. His original promise to Abraham started as a call to follow him and grew into a pledge to bless him, to make him a blessing to others, to bless those who blessed him, and that through him and his children the whole world would be blessed. At Mt. Sinai, after he had rescued his people from their slavery in Egypt, God repeated his promise and his covenant, this time to the entire nation that had descended from Abraham. In Deuteronomy 28 we have his promise to bless them in their obedience (28:1-14) and then his promise to curse them in their disobedience (28:15-68). What he was telling them was “I will be your God, and you will be my people.” The whole point of his covenant was to restore them to the fellowship with him that had been lost since Adam and Eve’s first sin.

And so when Jesus says, “Blessed are…” the people there on that day two-thousand years

ago didn’t just think of being blessed as being happy; they understood that Jesus was talking about fellowship with God and covenant grace. The problem was that the Jews had forgotten what it meant to be God’s covenant people. They were taking a mechanistic view of the Law – obeying the letter, but not the spirit of it. They were following God in externals, but not in internals. People were looking for a Messiah who would usher in God’s Kingdom by rebelling against the Romans and throwing them out, re-establishing the old glory days of David and Solomon. And now Jesus comes and says, “Bless are…” And everyone listens, because everyone wants that blessedness. Jesus begins with the Old Testament idea that they all knew, but then he crushes all of their misconceptions and wrong ideas about what it means to be blessed and how we become blessed.

Even Jesus’ closest disciples didn’t get his message at first. Jesus’ message can be just as difficult for us today, because even as modern people – even as modern Christians – we still look to be blessed or to find happiness in the wrong places just as so many of the ancient Jews did. When Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” or “Blessed are those who mourn,” we want to say, “Wait a minute, Jesus, those people by definition aren’t what we think of as blessed or happy?” J.B. Phillips described our worldly idea of how to be happy this way:

- Happy are the pushers, for they get on in the world.
- Happy are the hard-boiled, for they never let life hurt them.
- Happy are they who complain, for they get their own way in the end.
- Happy are the blasé, for they never worry over their sins.
- Happy are the slave drivers, for they get results.
- Happy are the knowledgeable men of the world, for they know their way around.
- Happy are the troublemakers, for they make people take notice of them.

In total contrast, Jesus tells us that the way to be happy or blessed is to remember our sins, to mourn, to be meek, and all those things that go contrary to our nature. It’s as if Jesus sneaked into the display window of life and changed all the price tags. Everything’s the opposite of what we think it should be.

But that’s part of the key to God’s Kingdom. It’s telling that Jesus begins and ends the Beatitudes with the Kingdom. He begins with “Blessed are the poor in spirit, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” and he

ends with “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” Jesus reminds us that all of this is a *Kingdom* mindset. The Christian is different from the non-Christian because his citizenship is in a different kingdom and because he follows and lives under a different constitution. The Kingdom of the World tells us that our sins aren't really that bad and it tells us that we're really pretty good. The World tells us that we can be happy and content by either ignoring and squashing the guilt we incur for our sins or by trying to make up for them by doing good. But in the Kingdom of God the first thing you have to do in order to be blessed and happy is to remember your sins and mourn for them. We have to acknowledge that our sins are far worse than we're inclined to think of them, and that because of that we can never make up for them with good works. The man or woman entering the Kingdom of God says with the Psalmist:

Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no deceit. (Psalm 32:1-2)

The Beatitudes describe a Kingdom People. We need to understand that the Beatitudes are for Christians. These are the norms for Christ's Kingdom. So if you're a Christian, that raises the question: What do you really desire? If you went home this afternoon and made a list of the thing you really want for yourself how would it compare to these eight characteristics on Jesus' list? This is an important questions, because what Jesus is telling us here is that the only life that he blesses is the one that's characterised by these values. And not just one or two – all of them. Each one of these Beatitudes that we'll be studying is tied to all the others. When it comes to gifts and talents, God has made us a diverse people, but when it comes to our *character*, all *eight* of these Beatitudes apply to each of us. This is the character that is blessed. This is the lifestyle produced by God's grace within us. And so when you wonder why your life isn't characterised by the Beatitudes, it's probably because you're not living in God's grace. We're like a bottle with a cork in the top bobbing around in the water. God's grace is all around us, but we aren't letting it in. We're still trying to meet God's standard on our own. But that's not grace. We need to pull the cork out – then and only then can the grace get inside. Then God's grace won't just surround us, but it will fill us and the more we're filled the more we'll sink into that saving and sustaining grace and be overcome by it.

Lets look more closely at the character Jesus describes. The first three Beatitudes focus on who we are before God – it's the natural place to start since the whole idea here is how we live in God's Kingdom. Jesus begins: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” If we have the right understanding of the nature of the Sermon on the Mount to start with, it makes perfect sense that Jesus starts here.

He's not talking about being materially poor. He's not talking about having a bad self-image or anything like that. Again, the Jewish people hearing him say this would have immediately understood what he was talking about. “Poor” in Israel was almost a technical term with theological implications. When Jesus talked about being poor, his words would have immediately brought to mind the words of the Psalmist:

This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles. (Psalm 34:6) or **As for me, I am poor and needy; but the Lord takes thought for me. Thou art my help and my deliverer; do not tarry, O my God!** (Psalm 40:17)

To be poor in Old Testament terms is to be weak and helpless, to be dispossessed, and to be unable to defend or take care of yourself. But more than that, the poor are those who know their own need. The Psalmist also says:

Let the oppressed see it and be glad; you who seek God, let your hearts revive. For the LORD hears the needy, and does not despise his own that are in bonds. (Psalm 69:32-33)

The poor know they're poor. They know that that they're bankrupt, and because they know their own poverty they trust in God as their only hope. They're driven to him because they know they have no hope in themselves or anyone else.

But Jesus isn't talking about just being materially poor. He's talking about being poor *in spirit*. In some cases it may be easier for a poor person to be poor in spirit too, because their material situation helps drive them to God, but the two don't necessarily go together. It may be hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but it can be just as hard for the poor. We all know people who are materially poor and yet trust only in themselves, who are full of pride, and whose only care is for the money or things that will lift them out of their poverty. To be poor in spirit isn't the opposite of

being rich, it's the opposite of being rich *in pride*. The person who is poor in spirit is the person who knows his sins and knows that he can do nothing but cry out to God for mercy. Jesus illustrated what it means to be poor in spirit when he told the story of the Prodigal Son – the young man who demanded his inheritance so that he could go off to a foreign city and live it up, but who ended up penniless and feeding pigs so that the farmer would at least let him sleep with the pigs at night in a warm place. When he hit rock bottom he realised that the only place he could go was back to his father, but he also knew that he could only go back to beg for mercy – he could never go back and demand his rights as a son, because he had proven himself unworthy of that sonship. Augustus Toplady described what it means to be poor in spirit in his well-known poem:

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 fountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

In the idea of being poor in spirit we see the paradox of the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus' Sermon is only for those who know that they can never live by it. Later in this same chapter Jesus tells us, “unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Then he tells us, “you must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” The only way to *do* the Sermon on the Mount is to first understand that we can't meet its standard and that the only way we can be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees and to be perfect as our Father is perfect, is to make Jesus' perfect righteousness our own.

I like to think of poverty of spirit as being an empty vessel. Like that bottle in the water, we need to pull out the cork and let it be filled by God. In our natural state we're full of ourselves. I think of someone like St. Augustine, who was a man of the world. He was a student of the great philosophies as he tried to figure everything out, but he also tried to find satisfaction in all the things the world points to for success and happiness. He was a Fourth Century party animal, but when God reached out to him he emptied himself and was filled by God's grace. Martin Luther was a totally different sort of person, but he was full of himself too. He became a monk in his pursuit to please God, and through his life as a monk and as a young priest he spent his days trying to make up for the sins he was so ashamed of. He understood the holiness and justice of

God, but he was convinced that he could earn God's approval through his good works. As humble a show as he put on, at it's core was the fact that he was rich in pride – he was full of himself – until the day he finally realised that he couldn't earn God's grace. Then he emptied himself and God filled him back up.

I think that Luther especially, serves as a reminder of what every true saint has experienced: that the only way to find ourselves poor in spirit is through a direct confrontation with the holy, just, and living God. We can't do it on our own. We can't force ourselves to be poor in spirit. Our tendency is to compare ourselves with other people, instead of to Jesus and instead of to the pure holiness of God. And if we're comparing ourselves to other people, it's always easy to find someone less holy than we are. We need to look at Christ. We need to be overcome by his example of holiness and say, like Isaiah did, "Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips... for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

C.S. Lewis described our problem when he wrote: "Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good—above all, that we are better than someone else—I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil. The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or see yourself as a small dirty object. It is better to forget yourself altogether." If you feel anything in the presence of God other than true poverty of spirit, it means that you've never truly faced God and been in his presence.

There's a danger here for Christians. Even when we don't intend to become prideful over our own religious or spiritual achievements, it's our natural tendency to do so. I don't think there's any pride more deadly than pride that's rooted in our religion. It's easy to be proud of our knowledge – how many people do you know who are Christians, but lord their theological book-learning over everyone they know. It's easy to be proud in our external piety – how many people do you know who have to tell everyone they know what their prayer or devotional life is like. For some Anglicans it may take the form of a showy display of excessive manual acts in worship, but depending on your churchmanship, it could just as easily be taking pride in the simplicity of your worship. It's easy to be proud in our defence of orthodoxy – and I think this is probably the place where we find the most danger. We have preserved

and defended God's truth, but have we defended it so that we can have a superior attitude and treat everyone else uncharitably? Pride that's based on real virtue has the greatest potential for self-deception. And so we have to be careful. What's the point of great learning, or great piety, or theological orthodoxy if we end up forgetting this most basic point because of it! What's the point of right theology, if it doesn't point us to righteous living. What's the point of preserving the Gospel, if we ourselves forget to live it. What's the point of proclaiming that salvation is by grace and faith alone, if we end up proud that we've done so and think that in doing so we've somehow merited God's favour!

Jesus condemned the Church at Laodicea because they had ceased to be poor in spirit. In Revelation we read:

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. (Revelation 3:17)

Jesus reminds us at the beginning of his great Sermon that we need to start with the understanding of where we truly stand before God. The Kingdom is for the poor, not the rich; it's for the feeble, not the mighty; it's for the children humble enough to accept it, not to the boasting soldier who takes it by force. Jesus ruled out the Pharisees who thought that they were spiritually rich and full of merit. He ruled out the Zealots who thought that they could establish God's Kingdom by force and the sword. Jesus ruled out the "religious" people of the day and turned instead to the "publicans and sinners" – to the rejects who knew that they were unworthy – to those who knew that all they could do was cry for mercy. Charles Spurgeon said that "The way to rise in the Kingdom is to sink ourselves." We need to see that same kind of helplessness in ourselves too – because we're just as unworthy and just as helpless as those "publicans and sinners."

And so we need to ask ourselves if we're truly poor in spirit. We need to look at ourselves and ask how we really feel about ourselves and how we approach God. What do we say? What do we do? What things do we pray about when we enter God's presence? Do we come before him humbly, acknowledging his holiness and thanking him for his mercy and grace, or do we come before him with nothing more than "Gimme, gimme, gimme!"

And once we've examined ourselves, we need to turn to God's Word. We need to

learn his Law. We need to see his character as Scripture shows it to us. And then we need to contemplate standing in his presence. Calvin tells us, "He only who is reduced to nothing in himself, and relies on the mercy of God, is poor in spirit." Only God's Law and the example of Jesus Christ can reduce us to that nothingness. Only they can teach us that we can never stand in God's presence without the righteousness of another.

But in that reduction to nothingness we find not only our salvation, but also our hope. Remember that Moses began his ministry standing before the burning bush with his shoes off and protesting that he was incapable of doing God's work on his own, yet once he had emptied himself, he was filled with the Spirit and led God's people out of Egypt. Remember that it was the humble Gideon who insisted that unless the Lord were to go with him, he'd rather stay hidden in his winepress threshing grain, but in humbling himself before God he made himself useful. He was filled with the Spirit too and with God's help led his people to victory. We need to be like Moses and Gideon. We need to empty ourselves and humbly submit ourselves to God's sovereignty, falling on his mercy, for truly this is the only way into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Please pray with me: Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us both a sacrifice for sin and an example of godly life. Hold him always before us as your holy standard. But, we ask you, remind us always that his is a standard to which we can never attain. Let us be humbly driven to receive his righteousness as our own. Empty us, Father, we ask you, that being empty ourselves, you may fill us back up – fill us with your grace and make us into vessels worthy of your service. Through your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord, we pray. Amen.