August 9, 2015

“The Beatitudes: The Poor in Spirit”

Matthew 5:3

**FCF**: Our struggle with humility

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Jesus has made clear the way our lives should be.

(magnet) We should then heed and pursue it.

**SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:**

Humility is a hard to thing to come by. It faces more resistance than we know. C. S. Lewis gives us devilish insight into this in his classic, The Screwtape Letters (READ quote):

*I see only one thing to do at the moment. Your patient has become humble; have you drawn his attention to the fact? All virtues are less formidable to us once the man is aware that he has them, but this is especially true of humility. Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, “By jove! I’m being humble”, and almost immediately pride—pride at his own humility—will appear.*

You see, as though humility wasn’t hard enough, we have this very real spiritual opposition.

And then there’s the problem of examples. Where do we look for models of humility? We certainly can’t look to the realm of politics. Just listen to the candidates (from both parties) running for office in 2016. Listen to the boasting, to their accomplishments and grand plans.

Nor can we look to the refuge of innocence, our children. Imagine the scene. Your little one is fumbling with their chubby fingers to work those shoelaces. You offer to help and what is the response? “NO! I can do it all by myself!” Which can be good. It can also be maddening.

Humility is hard to come by. It’s compelling and winsome. But fleeting and elusive.

**SCRIPTURE READING**: Matthew 5:1-12

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

**SERMON INTRODUCTION:**

Communication is never easy. For starters, we tend to forget it’s two-way, speaking and listening. Then there’s the problem of definitions, the meaning of the words we use. And words can shift in their meaning. Historians tell us this has been the case for as long as there have been words and speakers to speak them. Here are a few examples. “Nice” once meant silly, foolish, simple – not the compliment of today. “Awful” meant things worthy of awe. “Hussy”, believe it or not, once referred to a housewife. “Gay” used to mean keenly alive or bright in color. Such lists can be amusing. But it is vital to know what words mean. Especially with high stakes.

Jesus speaks here of the one who is “blessed”. But what does that mean? Some translate this as “happy” but that is too subjective, too much weight given to our feelings. Others translate it as “joyful”, giving it deeper roots but this is still prone to being misunderstood. The Greek original is *makarioi*, meaning “fortunate”. That is, this is describing someone we should envy, someone we should want to be like. It refers to deep flourishing, the way our lives should be.

The Beatitudes consist of eight of these. That is, not eight separate groups of people – as if some could be one thing and some another– but eight things true of all. That is, each of these virtues is to be true of every child of God, every disciple of Christ, every citizen of the kingdom.

Jesus has made clear the way our lives should be. We should then heed this and pursue it. But what would that mean? Well, there are three questions we should be asking. First, who is He speaking of? Second, why are they blessed? And then, third, how can this be true of us?

1. **WHO ARE THEY?**

So, first, who is Jesus speaking of here? What does it mean to be poor in spirit?

1. *The Poor in Spirit*

Understand this is pointing to something beyond material want, beyond economic status.

1. The poor

The word here refers to someone in extreme poverty, destitute, a sustained lacking and distress. For Jesus’ hearers, because of the Jewish context, this meant turning to and trusting in the Lord.

1. In spirit

In fact, for Jesus to say “the poor in spirit” is just to press the point harder. He is speaking of being utterly dependent upon God, with nothing to offer, coming to Him with only our need.

1. *Without Resources*

It is to know yourself to be spiritually bankrupt, without any resources of your own.

1. To save themselves

Without any resources to save yourself, without any goodness or merit to bring to the table. It is to know that the best of your efforts is null and void. And zero times even 100 tries is still zero.

1. To follow Christ

To be poor in spirit is to know you have no resources to save yourself. And no resources to follow Christ. We can’t even do that in our own strength. We are totally dependent upon the Lord. Jesus couldn’t have made this any plainer for us in His teaching (READ John 15:5-8).

To be poor in spirit is know your need and to then be ever looking to the Lord.

*Illustration:*

And the truest model we have of this is Jesus Himself, the only One who has the resources for life within himself. Yet, He lived a life of dependence. We see it in how He faced temptation and His reliance upon God’s Word. We see it in His devotion to prayer – seeking guidance in choosing the disciples, seeking strength in the Garden before His trial and death.

*Application:*

To be poor in spirit is to live in dependence in everything upon the Lord. That is, not being self-directing. Not going our own way but looking to His Word for our wisdom.

It also means not being self-reliant, looking to our strength and ability. But rather seeing prayer as being essential and central, not just in times of crisis but with daily constancy.

Jesus has made clear the way our lives should be. We should then heed and pursue it.

1. **WHY ARE THEY BLESSED?**

Blessed are the poor in spirit. But why? Why are such people said to be blessed?

1. *The Kingdom of Heaven*

Because theirs is the kingdom of heaven. That should be familiar (READ Matthew 4:17).

1. Definition

Again, what is the kingdom of heaven? It is the gospel, the good news, of the restoration of the rule and reign of God. The sure and coming return of things to the way they were meant to be.

1. Possession

Jesus says that, for those who know their need of Him and lean into Him, that kingdom is theirs. Not the high and mighty but the poor and weak. They are included, participating, celebrating.

1. *The Times of Possession*

But when? When will this be theirs? What sort of timeframe does this involve?

1. Future

Certainly, there is a future element here. The king has to return for this full blessedness to be true. For the kingdom has yet to be consummated. It has come but not yet come in full.

1. Present

That said, it has still come. There is a present element here. It has not been consummated but it has been inaugurated. So we can still enjoy the promises of the Lord and His presence with us.

Listen and feel the astonishment here (READ Matthew 5:3). This is a grand reversal.

*Application:*

Earlier, I said that the beatitudes are describing not eight different types of people but one. That is, every follower of Jesus is to be poor in spirit, mourning, meek, and so on. But let me add this. Each of the blessings is for every Christian as well. That is, the promise of the kingdom of heaven is not for an elite group but for us all. Christian, do you know that?

Think about this from a future standpoint. Think how this frees us, how this enables us to face real disappointments today. For the story isn’t done. The best is coming. Which means we also have no need for a bucket list, for a selfish set of plans bent on grabbing all we can now. No! We can rest content in what we have. Why? We have so much to look forward to.

And what of now? We have a king. And this king’s word is true. His ways are always good. And His love is always sure. For the poor in spirit, yours is the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus has made clear the way our lives should be. We should then heed and pursue it.

1. **HOW CAN THIS BE TRUE OF US?**

But all of that begs a question. How can we be so blessed? How can this be true of us?

1. *Not by Looking at Yourself*

That’s a reasonable question. Let me suggest that it begins with not looking at yourself.

1. Trying hard

It begins with not trying so hard, not working so hard, not making it about what you do. This is where the monastic movement got off track, with making disciplines equated to deserving.

1. Making things worse

All of that just makes things worse. Frankly, it will make you neurotic. Like Martin Luther before he understood the gospel, constantly obsessing over the slightest slip up or mistake.

1. *Not by Looking to Others*

So we don’t look to ourselves. But nor are we to be looking to others.

1. Foolish assessment of ourselves

By that, I mean we are not to be making these foolish assessments of ourselves and all we think ourselves to have done and now deserve, all our works and what they warrant. That has to stop.

1. Dismissive assessment of others

For those foolish assessments of ourselves are connected to our dismissive assessments we make of others. We start comparing, one sinner measuring themselves by what they see in another.

1. *But by Looking to God*

No, the gospel frees us from all that foolishness. And it begins by looking to God.

1. The standards set

We look at the standards He has set. And how woefully we fall short of His law and commands. We face our sins of omission and commission, our transgressions of thought, word, and deed.

1. The Son He sent

We let ourselves be humbled to the dust by the standards He has set. And we fix our eyes on the Son He has sent. There we see what it cost Him. And there we see what we’re worth to Him.

(READ Matthew 5:3) How can this blessing be true of us? By looking to God.

*Illustration:*

Knowing our need to know this, Jesus told stories to work these truths into us. They’re called parables. One of these goes like this. And note the context (READ Luke 18:9-14).

How can this blessing be true of us? Not by looking to ourselves or others but to God.

*Application:*

How can we look to God? What does that mean and how can we do it? Let me suggest something simple, practical, and obvious. Read the Scriptures. Specifically, as long as we’re in this study of Matthew, listen to this eyewitness account. Be intent, dialed in on this, and ask for the Lord’s help in seeing Him through the eyes of those there, hearing Him through their ears.

The idea being this, that He would have the same impact upon us now as He had upon them. That His holy perfections and high demands would drive us down to our knees in humility, laying us low. And that then His mercy and grace would fill our hearts with hope.

Jesus has made clear the way our lives should be. We should then heed and pursue it.

**CONCLUSION:**

(READ Matthew 5:3) This is so counter to the spirit of the age, the way of the world, the values of our culture. In all honesty, there is a part of us that does not admire such a trait but despises it. We’re more naturally comfortable with self-confidence, self-assurance, self-reliance.

That’s why it’s so hard to find – whether in politics, with our children, or within our own hearts. Where then do we find it? At the pool or the beach. Think with me. You see a man in the deeper water, literally in over his head, struggling to swim and beginning to sink. You also see the lifeguard, watching and waiting. You wonder, “*What is he waiting for? Why doesn’t he jump in?*” Then you remember a course you took years before. The trick with saving someone from drowning is to do it in a way that keeps you both from going down. Someone who is drowning is panicking. They will grab and pull anything nearby. So the lifeguard has to wait. To wait for what? To wait until that man is weak enough to save. Weak enough to save.

That’s the way God is with us. And it’s also what Jesus says His followers look like. It’s a mark of His disciples, citizens of His kingdom. (READ Matthew 5:3) Jesus made clear the way our lives should be. We should heed and pursue it, asking Him to make us like this.

**PROPOSITION**: (anchor) Jesus has made clear the way our lives should be.

(magnet) We should then heed and pursue it.