

Sermon Notes
The Way of Jesus: Blessed are the Poor in Spirit
Matthew 5:3

Introduction: Heaven or Hell

A story is told of a man who had a dream in which an angel showed him two doors. One was marked “Heaven” and the other, “Hell.” In his dream, the man first approached the door marked “Hell.” Inside was a terrible scene. There was a large cauldron of soup simmering in the middle of the room but the people gathered round it were starving and emaciated – skin and bones. There were moans of pain and misery and their eyes were hollow. Curiously, there were large very large spoons surrounding the large pot of soup and from time to time one of the people would try and lift the spoon to try and feed himself. But the spoon was too heavy for one person to lift and if the poor soul did get it lifted, he would fall over backwards before he could dip it in the soup. The angel told the man, “most people in have spent their entire time here trying to feed themselves but fail time and time again.” “What an awful place,” the man thought. “There is no hope here.” Shaken, the man closed the door and went over to check out the door marked, “Heaven.”

Inside, he saw a similar, but altogether different scene. There was the same simmering cauldron of soup but the people were laughing and singing and dancing. Their bodies were the perfect picture of health. Confused, the man asked, “Why the difference?” “It’s very simple,” the angel replied, “The people in heaven have learned to feed each other.”

In the kingdom of heaven, everything is about community, with the attitude bent towards serving one another. On the other hand, in hell, everything focuses on serving yourself – to benefit yourself – because you are the most important person. From the earliest days, godly people have understood that the root of all evil is pride. It is the first of the seven deadly sins. Pride isolates us. It destroys our ability to connect with others. Obsession with oneself is the defining mark of a disintegrating soul. Pride is the gateway to hell. Satan fell from God’s presence because he would rather reign in hell than serve in heaven.

If the root of all evil is pride, then the root of all goodness is humility. It is the gateway to the kingdom of heaven. Indeed, our text for today puts it simply:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matt. 5:3

While pride is the first of the seven deadly sins, poverty of spirit is the first of the beatitudes. Jesus began there for good reason. In all of the Sermon on the Mount, it is the matter of first importance. I've been both excited and intimidated to prepare and deliver this message to you. This has been a week of many distractions. It has been a challenge to prepare this sermon. I don't think that is an accident. Satan, the enemy of your soul and of this church, would prefer that we skip over this message. To hear it with an open heart has the potential to radically change us. And for that reason, I want to take just a few moments to prepare our hearts before we delve into the word.

Song of Preparation: Jesus, I Come

Out of my bondage, sorrow and night, Jesus, I come; Jesus, I come.

Into Thy freedom, gladness, and light, Jesus, I come to Thee.

Out of my sickness into Thy health, Out of my want and into Thy wealth,

Out of my sin and into Thyself, Jesus, I come to Thee.

What does the “kingdom of heaven” mean?

Let's say the verse again together:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The first thing I want to make clear is what Jesus was *not* saying. Jesus was not saying if you are poor in spirit then you will go to heaven when you die. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was addressing how his disciples should live life today. We hear the word heaven and we immediately think that it must be referring to what happens to us when we die. If Jesus wasn't talking about the afterlife; what did he mean by the phrase, “kingdom of heaven?” Matthew was writing to a primarily Jewish audience. Out of reverence, the ancient Jews would rarely say the

name, “God.” All of the other gospel writers used the phrase, “kingdom of God.” In Matthew’s gospel, “kingdom of heaven” means the “kingdom of God.”

Several years ago, when I was teaching a course called, “Understanding the Christian Faith” I would ask the students on a test what was the meaning of the “kingdom of God.” Though I taught them and coached them for the test, it seems that less than a third of them ever got the answer right. Many of them thought that the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven was where we went when we die. It was very frustrating. You think you’re a good teacher but when your students keep missing the question...well, then you’re the failure. If college students consistently misunderstand the concept of the kingdom of God, there’s a good chance that there may be some misunderstanding here.

The kingdom of God is the *rule and reign of God*. When Creation fell at the rebellion of Adam and Eve in the Garden, a different dynamic entered into the cosmos. Men and women could choose who would be their god. The result, of course, is the brokenness of this world. John the Baptist came to prepare the way for the rule and reign of God. Jesus preached the same message: “repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” By saying that the kingdom was at hand, John and Jesus were saying that God’s rule and reign was just about to come into force in the world. The message of repentance was clear: turn from being your own god and follow the one true God. But Jesus did more than just preach and teach about the kingdom. He also demonstrated acts of the kingdom through his miracles and healings. Every time Jesus performed a healing or another miracle, he was overturning the brokenness of the world and making it right. He was demonstrating what the rule and reign of God looks like. Finally, when Jesus defeated the power Satan, death, and sin through his death and resurrection, he brought in the kingdom of God. Before Jesus ascended back into heaven he said, “All authority in heaven and earth has been given unto me.” (Matt. 28:18) But why, Pastor Bob, some will ask, are there still problems in this world if the kingdom of God started with the Jesus’ resurrection? It is because we still have the power to choose God or reject him. Theologians put it this way: the kingdom of God is now, but not yet. What that means is that the kingdom has already begun, but it is limited. It will come in its fullness when Jesus returns to reign on the earth.

So let me summarize what the kingdom of God means in a couple of bullet statements:

- The kingdom of God (kingdom of heaven in Matthew's language) is *God's rule and reign*.
- The kingdom of God is *now, but not yet*. We're not waiting until the end of the world for God's kingdom. It is now...but it is limited. That is why Jesus taught us to pray, "your kingdom come, your will be done, (say it with me) *on earth as it is in heaven*."

A constant biblical theme...

Let's say the verse again...

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Some translations have used the word, "happy" in place of blessed. I don't think "happy" quite captures what Jesus had in mind. When we say "happy" we usually mean a state of emotional lightness and satisfaction. The Greek word used here, *makarios*, is much more than an emotional state. It is a "state of good fortune," the "place you want to be." A good translation would be "spiritually prosperous." Reordered, the beatitude would say, "Those who are poor in spirit are spiritually prosperous."

To any of Jesus' followers who knew the Old Testament, this teaching would not have come as any surprise. Poverty of spirit, or humility, is regarded as one of the highest virtues throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, just as pride is universally condemned. In the closing chapter of the book of Isaiah, God declares:

...this is the one to whom I will look:
he who is humble and contrite in spirit
and trembles at my word.

Isa. 66:2

The psalmist declares in Psalm 138:

All the kings of the earth shall give you thanks, O Lord,

for they have heard the words of your mouth,
 and they shall sing of the ways of the Lord,
 for great is the glory of the Lord.
 For though the Lord is high, he regards the lowly,
 but the haughty he knows from afar.

Psalm 138:4-6

The New Testament quotes Proverbs 3:34 twice:

God is opposed to the proud,
 But gives grace to the humble.

The stories of the Old Testament tell of God's favor for the humble and his opposition to the proud. The most revered leader in Jewish history is Moses, who humbly led a rebellious nation while God severely punished the arrogant people who opposed him. Samuel thought he would anoint one of handsome and rugged older sons of Jesse. Instead, God chose the youngest, David, who wasn't invited to the anointing because he was out doing the dirty work of tending sheep. The great lesson from the Book of Job is humility. In his suffering, Job became increasingly bitter towards God. In defending himself, he said, "Like a prince I would approach [God]" (Job 31:37). It is when Job finally became "poor in spirit" that he received God's overflowing blessing:

"I know that you can do all things,
 and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted.
 'Who is this that hides counsel without knowledge?'
 Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
 things too wonderful for me, which I did not know...
 I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear,
 but now my eye sees you;
 therefore I despise myself,
 and repent in dust and ashes."

Job 42:2-6

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This first and most important beatitude is beautifully illustrated in a story from Luke's Gospel. A Pharisee named Simon invited Jesus to come to a feast at his house. While Jesus was there, a prostitute came in and began to interact with Jesus. She was weeping and she washed Christ's feet with her tears. Then she took a bottle of perfume that cost a year's wages and anointed Jesus with it. Can you imagine what everybody was thinking? This was scandalous, to have a woman of low repute come into this righteous man's house and interact with the Rabbi! Luke tells us that Simon was thinking that if Jesus really knew who the woman was, he would be repulsed by her and reject her worship. Jesus finally spoke up and told a parable about forgiveness to Simon. The one who is forgiven much loves much. But the one who is forgiven little, loves little. Simon didn't think he needed to be forgiven, so he didn't extend even common courtesy to Jesus. But the poor woman, who probably deemed herself as low as any animal lavished her love on Jesus, who forgave her. The woman, who was poor in spirit was lifted up but the proud Pharisee was rebuked. John Stott, in his wonderful commentary on the Sermon on the Mount says this:

In our Lord's own day, it was not the Pharisees who entered the kingdom, who thought they were rich, so rich in merit that they thanked God for their attainments; nor the Zealots who dreamed of establishing the kingdom by blood and sword; but publicans and prostitutes, the rejects of human society, who knew they were so poor they could offer nothing and achieve nothing. All they could do was cry to God for mercy; and he heard their cry. (p. 40)

You see, God gives grace to the humble, but he stiff-arms the proud.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

When we look carefully at this beatitude we observe that Jesus isn't promising anything in the future. He is saying that the poor in spirit already possess the kingdom of God! This is the paradox of the Kingdom. Jesus shows us that the only ones who are complete are those who know they are falling apart. I like the way Eugene Peterson translates this in *The Message*, "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and

his rule.” That’s the rule and reign of God in your life. Knowing you’re running on empty is more a blessing than a curse.

What About You? What About Us?

We don’t like it when things go badly for us. We don’t like it when we’re at the end of our rope. We get defensive. We get mad. We redouble our efforts. That’s pride, and God resists us when we’re like that. Like the woman who anointed Jesus’ feet at the Pharisee’s house, we are much closer to God when we are broken than when we think we’re doing well.

So how do we live in this state of “poverty of spirit?” Do we have to look for trouble? I don’t think so. Trouble has a way of finding us. Humility, brokenness, poverty of spirit is a choice. It’s a continual lifestyle of surrender to God. When tension and difficulties arise in the life of a proud person, they get mad and fight harder. But when tension and difficulties arise in the life of a humble person, they ask God if there is anything in their life that they need to change. That’s what it means to live in the kingdom of God.

And lest we think that poverty of spirit means that we go around with a sour look on our face, know that it brings overwhelming blessings as well. Those who are poor in spirit don’t have to prop themselves up all the time so that people will have a high view of them. They have nothing to hide because they are fully exposed. They are not trying to be something that they are not. This is true freedom. This is true heaven. Wouldn’t that be a relief?

In our story about the two rooms representing heaven and hell at the beginning of this message we observed that pride isolates people but humility brings us together. I’ve never been to an AA meeting. But it takes humility to say that you’re an alcoholic or an addict. It’s pride that keeps an addict from being healed. Those who deal with their problems alone, it seems, are destined to be destroyed by them. Friends, that’s why we need each other. We need each other on the deepest level. We need to be known at the deepest level. In his wonderful little book on the beatitudes and the seven deadly sins, Jeff Cook says, “Total exposure is not a requirement to enjoy heaven; total exposure is what enjoying heaven looks like.” (p. 46) But we find that very

hard. We find it very hard because we are a proud people. And that's not a virtue in the kingdom of God. The Bible says:

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.

James 4:8-10

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

I can only wonder what would happen to First Baptist if we became a church full of people who were poor in spirit. It's not an easy path. Like James said, the pathway to humility is wretched, paved with mourning and gloom. But the state of being poor in spirit is a place of true freedom and blessing. You don't have to defend yourself or prop yourself up because you're fully depending on God. This will be hard to receive, but as your pastor, I feel compelled to tell you. As painful as it was, the church split that we experienced four years ago was a tremendous blessing. It was a tremendous blessing because it humbled us. There was no sense of triumph because you won the argument. No, there was mourning and, I'm sure, no small amount of tears. Even so, after the dust settled and even though we lost a lot of people, there was a sense of peace and God's presence the Sunday after the big split. You see, it's because we recognized our own poverty and dependence on God. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

One of the favorite pastimes of Christians is to talk about the church. What's right with it and what's wrong with it. And what really needs to happen to make it successful. Inevitably, someone will suggest that what we really need is revival. I agree. But hear me: "We will never meet God in revival until we first meet him in brokenness." (Nancy Leigh DeMoss)

Response: "I Shall Not Want" and "Lord I Need You"