

## **Beatitudes: *Blessed When We Feel Spiritually Bankrupt* - week 2**

Rev. Scott McGinnis - First Presb. Church of Newton, KS - May 3, 2020

(Drawing from Rev. Darrell Johnson's book *The Beatitudes: Living in Sync with the Reign of God*)

We're continuing our series on the Beatitudes drawing from the book by Rev. Darrell Johnson, *The Beatitudes: Living in Sync with the Reign of God*.

Would you pray with me? *Loving Father, speak to us today through Your Word, so that we can know Your true loyal-love for us Your children. In Jesus Name, Amen.*

Let's start with a review of where we began last week in our introduction. We saw that if we separate the Beatitudes from the original context of Jesus announcing His Kingdom, then they can become frustrating, seem idealistic, or be used for oppressive legalism. But when we see that Jesus first spoke His Beatitudes right after announcing His gospel, His good news, then we learn they are a gift come to us, not a list of To Do's or Do Better's to weigh us down.

We also used Darrell Johnson's phrase, "*You lucky bums!*" to describe us who receive the gift of God's Kingdom, while knowing there's nothing we did or need to do in order to earn it. "*You lucky bums!*"

The emergence of "Beatitude people" is then a sign of God's Kingdom come to us. The only thing we have To Do is embrace His reign in our lives, to turn around and receive the love of God. When we've been embraced by

God and God's love for us, these Beatitudes begin to emerge in our lives. Hallelujah! Aren't we the lucky ones, when we know deep down He loves us? His love changes everything.

Today we're looking at the first Beatitude from Matthew 5:3, "**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**" This is the first quality listed of people for whom the Kingdom of God has come upon: "the poor in spirit."

I'd like to tell a short story from Rev. Darrell Johnson's book that gets at the hope of this Beatitude, hope when we feel poor in the things of God. When we think we don't have it all together.

*We were leaving the restaurant where we had been talking about Jesus' call to discipleship. "I am not going to make it," a friend said. "I simply do not have what it takes." He spoke in all seriousness and with a deep sense of sadness. "I see what Jesus calls me to do. He's calling me to a different kind of life. Given the massive needs all around us, how could He not? Given who He is, He has to call us beyond. I wouldn't want Him to call me to anything less. But I'm not going to make it - I just don't have what it takes."*

*Darrell continues, "I have good news for you my friend, and for anyone who feels the way he does: Yes, you are going to make it. The problem is, you have misunderstood*

*what Jesus is doing in His Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. Given the original context in which Jesus spoke, and given the performative power of His word, we are going to make it. Indeed, the fact that we feel we are not going to make it says that we already are making it."*

It's wonderful that Jesus begins on this note of the poor in spirit! It's where many of us find ourselves when we feel like the man in this story. When we're saying, *"I'm not going to make it in following Jesus' Way."* There's good news for us whenever we feel this way. *It's a sign we ARE making it!* Jesus' gospel is grabbing hold of us! We are becoming in sync with His Kingdom!

How so? The poor in spirit are those who are getting in on the Kingdom of God that know they have no way to buy. Most of us to some degree live as though God doesn't love us unless we jump through enough hoops to merit His blessing. Take away those hoops and we might be left wondering if we can ever approach God. Take away our list of To Do's and we can be left wondering what God thinks of us and if He even loves us.

During this Covid crisis a lot of our church routines and work have been taken away. I know for me it has been a little unsettling. I've been listening to Christian podcasts and audio books and there's been a refrain in what I've heard, *"Draw close to the heart of God in every season."* God having changed my church routines these past weeks: Yes, some routines that have made me feel I'm OK

with God. Having had those removed, I had a moment where I had to ask, where I stand with God? Adding to that, having been a student of the Good Neighbor Experiment, I've learned in the past two years how to see the world through God's abundance, rather than scarcity. In many ways this has been a time of abundance for me and my family.

And I've learned that in times of abundance, of receiving God's blessings, I can stop drawing close to God, like I've felt I need to during times of difficulty. This change from church routines that in some ways had kept me feeling OK with God, left me where I need to ask where I stand with God? When I asked, I felt I heard the heart of God for me, that He loves me. It nourished my soul.

How has it been for you without the routines of our Sunday services, times of worship together, your volunteering, and the in-person fellowship of our church family? For some maybe it's been a season where you've found yourself feeling distanced from God. For some it may be a time of new growth in your relationship with God, who's always with you.

Wherever you find yourself, the first Beatitude is for us when we know we have nothing with which to buy or merit God's favor. The first Beatitude gets at the foundation of the Father's love for us: He ALWAYS loves us, no matter what.

I want to ask you this week to put away your To Do's for God and to pause. Before we gather again for worship next Sunday, pause and listen for your Heavenly Father's gently words of love. It will nourish your soul like no act of service for God can do. You were made for this relationship. If you cultivate that closeness and tune your ear to the Father's kind words of love, you will have a resource for living stronger and more consistent than and religious activity will do.

The poor in spirit know that they/we have nothing with which to get the Kingdom of Heaven. It is a free gift of God's love. You lucky bums, it's yours! God's delight for you is to give you the fruit of His Kingdom!

You know I think of those encounters I've had with the Living God when I feel sinful and unworthy of being in His presence. Jesus first Beatitude tells me when I have those feelings, that I'm blessed, and I can listen for the Father's kind words of love.

Now that we know it is safe to draw close to the heart of God, why is "poor in spirit" always a sign of the Kingdom come upon us? Let me ask three questions to help us better understand Jesus' first Beatitude. We're going to ask:

1. What does "poor in spirit" mean?

2. Why is “poverty of spirit” a sign that the gospel is grabbing hold, that we are in sync with His in-breaking kingdom?
3. Is there ever a time when we are rich in spirit”?

The first question, **What does “poor in spirit” mean?**

There are two words for “poor” in the Greek New Testament. One (*penes*) describes people who have to work all the time because they own no property. The other (*ptochoi*) describes people who are so destitute that they are forced to beg from others. The first refers to those who only have the bare essentials; today we might call them the working poor. The second refers to those who have absolutely nothing and know it; they wouldn’t even have the ability to work.

It is this second word (*ptochoi*) that Jesus uses in this first Beatitude. **“Blessed are the destitute in spirit, the beggarly poor in spirit.”** Beggars come with empty hands and empty pockets; they have nothing to offer in return for food.

“Congratulations,” says the bringer of the Kingdom of God. “Right-on,” says the Savior of the world. “Right-on” are those who approach the Living God with empty hands; in sync are those who come with empty pockets. The poor in spirit are those who know that they have nothing with which to gain the Kingdom of God. The poor in spirit are those who come totally at the mercy of the Kingdom Giver.

Surprise! Yours is the glorious Kingdom of Heaven! You lucky bums! Let's get this party started.

Now, you may know that in the Gospel according to Luke there is a slightly different version of this first Beatitude. In Luke Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor" period. (Luke 6:20). Not "Blessed are the poor in spirit," like Matthew has. While that is different, it appears the two wordings are speaking of the same people. Not one message for those in financially bankruptcy and another for those spiritually bankrupt.

Let me explain. Throughout the Bible, we meet a God who is champion of the powerless. Israel was chosen by God to be the people through whom He will bless the whole world. Yet Israel was a powerless nation and they knew it. Yet God wanted to bless them and all people through them, ultimately it is through Jesus. In the Bible we see God's preference for the powerless, for orphans, widows, prisoners, aliens in the land, and the poor. This continues throughout the Bible.

God is the champion of the powerless. Yet nowhere in the Bible is material poverty held out to us as the ideal human condition. Nowhere in the story is the God happy when people are materially poor. It would then be wrong to take Jesus' words in Luke to mean "*It is good to be poor,*" and that only the materially poor inherit the kingdom of God. Although Luke does stress Jesus' teaching on the poor, Luke never romanticizes or celebrates material poverty.

Why then are the poor blessed in Luke's version of Jesus' Beatitudes? Why are the poor congratulated? Why "Blessed are the poor" (period)? I think because of the resultant attitude: The poor know they need help. The poor know they need God, and therefore, they live lives dependent on God. The poor have only one hope; their whole existence hangs on the goodness of God and God alone.

But then do only the poor receive God's Kingdom? Well, in Luke's Gospel, Jesus does pronounce a woe upon the rich, but not because they have much. It's because of the attitude wealth can produce, the attitude of not needing God, the attitude of thinking we can live independent from God.

There's a human problem we have. We can know God loves us, but all too often when God blesses us with good things and sometimes an abundance, we suddenly or subtly begin to treasure the good things above our relationship with God. The rich have (and we might all fall into this category in the Western world), the rich have, or we think we have, other grounds for hope than the Living God. And that other hope can draw us away from the heart of God, even when He gave us those good gifts. Well, good gifts can draw us away until a storm knocks our home to the ground or a recession decimates our retirement funds!



The destitute though are not shaken by disaster, for the poor are not deceived into thinking that riches are the grounds for being secure in the future. The poor do not inherit the Kingdom of God because they are poor. No, that would be a misunderstanding of the gospel - a kind of "salvation by social class." The poor who inherit the kingdom of God are the poor in spirit who stand in the world and know they are utterly helpless without God. And hallelujah! Good news! Jesus says it is the powerless, the spiritually bankrupt, those who feel inadequate in the things of God who experience the coming of His Kingdom. "Right-on," says Jesus, "in alignment," for theirs are the glorious benefits under God's Kingdom reign of love and kindness.

Therefore, the poor in spirit have laid aside all pretense; the poor in spirit have stopped playing denial games. And they hear from Jesus, they are "blessed," "you lucky bums," "in sync." You are free to draw close to the kind heart of God. You know the Hebrew word for God's love is *hesed*, it's God's loyal-loving-kindness. That's the love we need in order to flourish.

Now another question: **Why is poverty in spirit a mark of the Gospel-ized, those whom the Kingdom has come to?**

The Beatitudes are not natural human qualities. Rather, they are the result of having been grabbed by Jesus' gospel. Jesus did not come into the world looking for

Beatitude people He could then call into His Kingdom. No, He came into the world and called people to Himself, and then, as a result of the encounter and ongoing relationship with Him, these qualities began to emerge within them.

You see something happens when we encounter Jesus as He really is, beyond our inadequate images of Him - when we see Him in His Glory, full of grace and truth - we see ourselves as we really are. Loved by Him, yes, with an extravagant love! But also we see ourselves not yet the way we were made to be. When the light of His in-breaking kingdom dawns upon us, when the glory of His reign is revealed to us, we become aware as never before of how broken our lives have become. But don't run. He knew we would feel that way. Jesus even said, "We know sin because of Him." Just before going to the cross, Jesus said, **"If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sin..."** (John 15:22).

Truly, it is His presence that makes us aware of just how poor in spirit we are. When we see Him, we see the difference between who we are and who we were created to be. When we see Jesus as He is and ourselves not yet like Him, then like the tax-collector in Jesus' parable we cry out, **"God, be merciful to me"** (Luke 18:13).

That's a painful place to be. But then we need to remember His first message is for us, **"blessed are the poor in spirit."** We need to know it is safe to enter into a relationship with Him. It's safe. We need to remember His

message is for us, because of what do we do instead. Instead of receiving the good news when we feel poor in spirit. What do we do? We often do what the Pharisees did.

The Pharisees could go on and on about their spiritual achievements, because they were only comparing themselves to people. And as long as did that they could make themselves feel better before God. How sad? You know we can always find someone worse off than us to make us feel better. And it might work for a time.

But when we're confronted by the purity and compassion, the integrity and peace of Jesus, the illusion breaks, and we like Peter fall at Jesus' feet and cry out, **"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!"** (Luke 5:8). Peter is not suffering from a poor self-image. He has simply been struck by the infinite difference between who he is and who he was made to be as reflected in Jesus.

I am so glad Jesus began His description of the new humanity on this note! It gives me hope, it gives us hope. For when I read the New Testament I see the high calling Jesus calls us to and how could He call us to less? He can't. We need our world turned right side up, but we still have a hard time living His ways.

And then we hear "blessed," "congratulations!" "in sync" "you lucky bums" are those who hear and know they don't measure up to these standards, for theirs is the Kingdom.

That is good news. Blessed are the incompetent in things of God for theirs and only theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven! We only need draw near to God's loving heart.

How do you respond to this? It makes me question all our ideas of what we're supposed to do, other than just letting our Heavenly Father speak His kind words of love to our hearts. You know a relationship like that will result in the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. More than anything else from Christians our world needs us to live close to the Father's heart, to live that way. Draw close to our Heavenly Father, let Him speak His kind words of love to you. If we're living out of that love first, we will begin to see fruit. The fruit our world needs to see in us.

After considering this thoughtfully, I like that Jesus starts His Kingdom lesson with this first Beatitude. We don't have to have it all together with the things of God. He never said we do. Don't believe anyone who says you do. He knows us and we all get God's loyal-loving-kindness always.

The first Beatitude is then a kind of death to self-sufficiency. The poor in spirit know they do not have it all together and they've gotten past that. They're now just ready to receive. They've opened their heart to receive the love of God. Have you? Have you heard God's kind words of love for you today? If you're still and you listen, if you consider the abundant beauty of God's creation, if you

take in the wide-eyed wonder of a child, you'll hear the loving and kind words of our Father in heaven, "You're my child and I deeply love you." You will! You'll hear it. For He's always saying it to our souls.

Put away your To Do list for "proper" Christian living and listen for God's love. *He loves us, oh, how He loves us.* You're the apple of His eye.

Now to end, I have a question. **Will we ever be rich in spirit?**

Yes. Every time we are "poor in spirit," Jesus says, "Yours is the kingdom." Yours! All of it! The Kingdom. Everything God's glorious Kingdom entails is all yours. You're rich in: forgiveness of sin, deep cleansing, freedom, wholeness, freshness, wisdom, closeness, power, truth, hope, light, holiness, love, community, fullness, gifts of the Spirit, fruit of the Spirit, creativity, peace and joy - all yours.

*You lucky bums!* Let's get this party started.

*Thank you, Jesus, for these life-giving words in Matthew and Luke, right as You begin preaching Your good news. Thank You that You begin this way. Thank You that when we feel spiritually poor we are rich in You. Thank You that when we feel unworthy, You catch us in that thought and say, "Yours is the Kingdom of Heaven." We thank You for Your loyal-loving-kindness. Thank you for always showing us our Father in Heaven's love. In Jesus Name, Amen.*