“BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT”

Matthew 5:1–16

Key Verse: 5:3

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

 We live in an era of self-confidence. “Believe in yourself,” we’re told, “and you can do whatever your heart desires.” While there might be some truth in that, Jesus seeks to set us on a quite opposite path, a path of brokenness and of seeking something far greater, something out of this world. Today we’re looking at what’s known as “the Beatitudes,” or “Blessings.” They’re probably the most famous, most profound words of Jesus ever recorded. They’re so simple and beautiful, yet so challenging. At first they seem like a random set of virtues to which we should aspire. But in fact, they’re all connected, and each beatitude seems to be a process required to get to the next one. Jesus is basically showing us what it really means to repent and believe the good news of the kingdom. Today we especially want to think about the first beatitude, the key to all the others: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

In Matthew’s Gospel Jesus has just resisted all the devil's temptations. In a world of spiritual darkness, he’s called “a great light” (4:16). He started shining his light by saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (4:17) His light got brighter when he called disciples to follow him (4:18–22). Then his light began to spread everywhere as he went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people (4:23). Large crowds followed him (4:25). After this brief description, Matthew records Jesus’ “Sermon on the Mount,” the first of five major discourses of Jesus in Matthew’s Gospel. We’re going to be studying his sermon over the next seven weeks. Basically, in these words Jesus is calling people to follow him and resist the trends of this world.

At the end of chapter 4 large crowds had come to Jesus from all over, with desperate problems. They brought friends and loved ones who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed. Jesus didn’t hide or run away; he healed them (4:24). His healings were proof that the kingdom of heaven really *had* come near. These people experienced Jesus’ healing grace, and now they’re following him *because* of that grace. It shows us why anyone should follow Jesus and listen to his teachings: because that person has experienced his grace.

Read 5:1,2a. It seems abrupt, but Jesus changes his focus from healing to teaching. Why? He had great compassion for these people, but he wanted to go deeper than just dealing with their immediate problems. He wanted them to start living as members of the kingdom of heaven. It says Jesus “went up on a mountainside and sat down.” It was a great location where his voice could carry and be heard by all. It also says, “His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them” (1b,2). The word “disciple” means “learner.” Their coming to him shows their eagerness. They’d left everything to follow Jesus, learn from him and live by what he said. And he’s training them to listen to his words so that they would not only live by them but also teach them to others (28:20a). It was a kind of open classroom, where not just the disciples but everybody could hear what Jesus was saying. The crowds had heard many Bible teachers in their day, but they were amazed at Jesus’ teaching (7:28,29).

And what’s the first thing he said? Read verse 3. Jesus first mentions the poor. No doubt many of the people there, listening to Jesus, were poor. His disciples, who’d left their jobs to follow him, were also suddenly poor. James 2:5 says, “Listen, my dear brothers and sisters, has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?” But according to Matthew, who used to be wealthy as a tax collector, Jesus was addressing not just the materially poor, but those who are “poor in spirit.”

If this is the first quality Jesus teaches us to have, what does it mean to be “poor in spirit”? It’s mentioned in the Old Testament. The psalmist often says he's “poor and needy” (Ps40:17; 70:5; 86:1; 109:22), but he doesn't mean financially broke. It’s just the opposite of being self-sufficient. Often we try to act like we don’t need anything or anybody. Physically or materially we may not need help, but our souls are all in desperate need of God. Without God, we have no real meaning or purpose. Without God, no matter what else we may have, we’re unfulfilled. Without God, even the joys of this world leave us feeling empty. Those who are “poor in spirit” are those who are keenly aware of their need for God.

Jesus’ starting out with “the poor in spirit” harks back to Isaiah’s prophecy. Isaiah 61:1 says, “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted…” According to this verse, to be “poor in spirit” is similar to being brokenhearted. It describes someone who’s been overwhelmed by disappointment or grief. We can be brokenhearted about many things: a lost relationship, a broken dream, and especially our own failures. In this busy, tough world, people who are brokenhearted or poor in spirit can be left in the dust. But the Bible tells us that God is paying close attention to such people. Isaiah 57:15 reads: “For this is what the high and exalted One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.” God has always been especially concerned with the poor, the brokenhearted, those who are contrite and lowly in spirit. It means those who deeply realize their sins against God, who know they can’t fix themselves, who come to God depending only on his mercy. In his song of repentance David wrote, “My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise” (Ps51:17). As we’ve seen, Jesus called people to repent because the kingdom of heaven has come near (4:17). To be “poor in spirit” means to accept this message, to acknowledge that the way we’ve been living is wrong, that we need to change, that we need God’s mercy. When challenged by the truth, often we get defensive. Self-righteous people especially don’t like to be told they need to repent. But Jesus said it’s the poor in spirit, the repentant, those deeply aware of their need, who receive the kingdom of heaven.

Then he goes on. Read verse 4. To “mourn” means to feel grief or sorrow. But just as Jesus wasn't referring only to the materially poor, he doesn't mean only those grieving over somebody’s death. He’s referring to mourning over what we’ve done, especially grieving over how we’ve treated God. Have you ever done that? David was Israel’s best king. He had a close relationship with God. But even *he* committed adultery, then murdered to cover it up. When the prophet Nathan confronted him, he confessed, “I have sinned against the LORD” (2Sa12: 13). But David didn’t just pay God lip service. He started mourning over his sin. He fasted and prayed. As king he’d sinned against Bathsheba and her husband Uriah his loyal soldier, against his own God-given wife and children, and against his people. But he said to God, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (Ps51:4a). It’s hard to mourn, even when we’ve hurt all the flesh-and-blood people around us; it’s even harder for us to mourn when we’ve offended God. But the Bible calls it “godly sorrow.”

The Apostle Paul had to rebuke the Corinthian believers rather strongly because of some sins they’d been committing. He was worried how they would take it, but when he found out they took it the right way, he wrote: “…yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (2Co7:9,10). When Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn,” he was talking about those with godly sorrow over their sins against God. Sometimes, we even can have godly sorrow over others’ sins. The psalmist wrote, “Streams of tears flow from my eyes, for your law is not obeyed” (Ps119:136). The prophet Jeremiah knew of such mourning. He wrote, “If you do not listen, I will weep in secret because of your pride; my eyes will weep bitterly, overflowing with tears, because the LORD’s flock will be taken captive” (Jer13:17). Jesus says when we learn to mourn over our sins and even over others’ sins, we “will be comforted.”

Read verse 5. Here Jesus is loosely quoting from Psalm 37:11, which reads, “But the meek will inherit the land and will enjoy peace and prosperity.” In the world, the proud and tough seem to succeed. But this is saying just the opposite. It’s like Jesus’ saying, “The last will be first.” But what does it really mean to be “meek”? This word in Greek is also translated as “gentle,” “humble” or “mild.” We can be meek toward God, meaning not insisting on our way or our ideas, not stubborn or rebellious, but humble enough to really listen to God, learn from him and follow him. We also can be meek toward our fellow human beings, meaning humble enough to be with them and make friends with them, no matter who they are. The first three beatitudes are connected to each other. When we’re “poor in spirit,” we learn to “mourn” over our sins, and when we mourn over our sins, we become “meek” or gentle and humble. God blesses the meek.

Matthew was writing his Gospel mainly to the Jews. Because of their strict law-keeping religion, many of them tended to be self-righteous. Their self-righteousness made them so proud toward God and so judgmental and harsh with people who sinned. He knew it because he had been on the receiving end of it. As a tax collector Matthew was severely judged and condemned by his fellow Jews. But Jesus was just the opposite. Jesus graciously invited him to follow him and showed him his grace and mercy. Matthew is the only Gospel writer who recorded Jesus’ words: “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (11:29). Sadly, today Christians have a reputation of being the most self-righteous, harsh, judgmental people. How can we be gentle and humble in heart, meek like Jesus? The only way is when we’re united with Jesus in his death and resurrection through the work of the Holy Spirit (Php2:1; Ro6:5–8). This power of the gospel changed Paul from a self-righteous and cruel Pharisee to a meek and gentle, mother-like shepherd (1Th2:7,8). The power of the gospel can change us, too.

Read verse 6. Just as he wasn’t talking about physical poverty or human mourning, he doesn’t mean literally hungry or thirsty. Then what does Jesus mean to “hunger and thirst for righteousness”? He means to long to live in a right relationship with God, and, to long to be more and more like God. Many think they’re okay the way they are. Even Christians can become very complacent. But Paul, perhaps the greatest example of a truly fruitful missionary, earnestly sought to keep growing spiritually. He wrote, “Not that I have already attained all this…but I press on…Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead…” (Php3:12,13). He really wanted to be more like Christ. Only when we’re poor in spirit, when we mourn over our sins, when we’re meek, can we have such a hunger and thirst to be like God. When we have such a hunger and thirst for righteousness, Jesus says we “will be filled,” meaning God will respond, God will satisfy us with himself and enable us to grow to be more like him.

In the second half of the Beatitudes Jesus is describing people who’ve begun this process of growing more and more like God. Read verses 7–9. The greatest aspect of God’s righteousness is his mercy. In Matthew Jesus repeatedly challenges us to go and learn what it means: “I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (9:13; 12:7; cf. Hos6:6). When we’re poor in spirit, mourn over our sins, become meek, seeking to be right with God and to be more like him, we cannot *but* become merciful like God. Jesus says God will show mercy only to the merciful. And, as we experience and show God’s mercy, Jesus says God purifies our hearts. Our hearts can’t be pure with our own effort, but only as God’s mercy begins to dwell there. The more his mercy purifies our hearts, the more we can see God, meaning the more God’s presence becomes real to us, and the less our minds and hearts are occupied with our sinful desires and the ways of this world. When we’re full of God’s mercy and our hearts are purified, Jesus says we become peacemakers. Just as God made peace with this sinful world by sending his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins (1Jn2:2), so we become people willing to do the hard work of being peacemakers. We help people come to Jesus and be reconciled to God (2Co5:20). We also help fellow believers to forgive one another and be reconciled. It’s so hard to do it, but Jesus says those who do it “will be called children of God,” meaning those who’ve proven that they really *are* like their heavenly Father.

Read verse 10. Jesus mentions again, as he did in verse 3, our real reward: “the kingdom of heaven.” It’s surprising that such repentant, merciful, pure-hearted, peace-loving people get persecuted. It shows how evil the world is. We shouldn’t be surprised when people treat us badly on account of our faith in Jesus. Read verses 11,12. Persecution is a sign we’re doing something right.

When we live by his Beatitudes, Jesus says we become salt and light in the world (13–16), meaning we become a good influence. He challenges us not to lose our saltiness, meaning not to start compromising with sin, and not to hide our light, meaning not to be ashamed of our faith in Jesus, but to go out into the world and live as salt and light. Instead of being influenced, we need to influence. The only way to truly be salt and light is to struggle to accept Jesus’ Beatitudes and live by them in our personal lives.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” May God bless us to realize our desperate need for him and mourn over our sins against him. May he help us hunger and thirst to grow in him and become more like him: merciful, pure, and peacemakers in this hostile world.