

Rev. Robert W. Brown

SERMON

**Beatitudes 1: *The Blessing of Emptiness??!***

SCRIPTURE READING – **Matthew 5:1-3**

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

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

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***“You are blessed.”***

These are the very first words of the very first teaching that Jesus gives to his disciples. Jesus sees the crowds gathering like the venue doors just opened at a Grateful Dead show. He knows that his ministry is about to go viral in a big way. So he scampers up the mountain to get a bit of distance and quickly huddles up his disciples to give them the locker-room speech.

He looks at each of them and says, “Before we begin this journey, you really need to know something. This is **not** going to be an easy path and there **will** be times that you will wish you never met me. So as we begin, through it all, whatever comes, it is critically important that you remember this one thing - **you are blessed.**” This is the path to ultimate liberation and connection with God.

He clarifies who the blessed of God are with eight specific characteristics or traits that identify all followers of Christ. These famous wisdom sayings of Jesus are known as the Beatitudes. “Beatitude” is one of those religiously exclusive words like “chancel”, “narthex” or “covenant”. Rarely, if ever, are they heard outside of a religious context. Churchy words are a pet peeve of mine because the inherent beauty and meaning is mysteriously hidden in a cloak of pointless and archaic vocabulary. So let’s start by shedding the disguise and think of the beatitudes as supreme blessings or the ultimate happiness, or extreme blissfulness.

These 9 short verses, known as The Beatitudes, are a summery of all the teachings of Jesus. This is the syllabus that will be demonstrated in all his

actions for the rest of his ministry. The Beatitudes can actually teach us how we might live in perpetual state of well-being no matter what circumstances life brings. They spell out the way a follower of Jesus will walk.

This is why Jean and I thought it would be good to spend the summer months diving deep into each supreme blessing that Jesus teaches. Buckle up while we begin in prayer...

*Holy God of all blessing, thank you for sending Jesus and preserving these sacred teachings for us to absorb. Open our hearts to understand. Help us to grasp the full meaning and may we have the courage to truly follow in the Way of Jesus. AMEN.*

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

**What?** I thought the blessed were the one’s rich in spirit. The one’s with optimal health, fat bank accounts and well-behaved children. The blessed are esteemed throughout their community and have acquired professional acclaim. I thought the “poor of spirit” were to be pitied. They are the fallen backsliders who just weren’t praying hard enough or long enough. The TV preachers strongly imply that the poor in spirit are caught up in sin and victims of their own bad choices. Yet, right out of the gate, Jesus flips the script on us and says, “You’ve got it backwards. The poor in spirit are actually the ones who are blessed!” Does he mean that the guy at the stoplight begging for money at Alewife station is living in extreme blissfulness? If that’s the case, I’m getting my dollar back!

When I read “poor of spirit” I immediately think of financial poverty, mental disorders and physical infirmities. I think of the oppressed and marginalized. How can they be blessed? These are all the things I’m not. In fact, these are the very issues that threaten my peace and destabilize my feelings of bliss and well-being. He says that theirs is the kingdom of heaven, so maybe Jesus is saying that all their suffering and hardships will one day be resolved in the hereafter. Oh good, I feel better now. You can keep my dollar. God bless you.

But here is the problem. I’m trying to make sense of this lesson exclusively through my own point of view as a sis-gendered, privileged, white male. Certainly my experience is important and it does frame my reality, but to come to grips with the Gospel I must be open to larger point of view. What might “blessed are the poor in spirit” say about God’s priorities in the world, beyond my own narrow reality?

Theologian Cynthia Bourgeault opened my eyes in her book, *The Wisdom Jesus*. She writes, "From a wisdom perspective ... "poor in spirit" designates an inner attitude of receptivity and openness; one is blessed because only in this state is it possible to receive anything." Bourgeault is saying that "poor in spirit" has more to do with an inner emptiness, a willingness to let go of all your assumptions and predispositions in order to make room to receive God's blessing.

She goes on to retell the classic Zen parable of a young seeker, who wanted to become the student of a certain great master. He is invited to an interview at the master's house. The student rambles on and on about all his spiritual experience, his past teachers, his insights and skills, and his pet philosophies. The master listens silently and begins to pour a cup of tea. He pours and pours, and when the cup is overflowing he keeps right on pouring. Eventually the student notices what's going on and yells, "Stop pouring! The cup is full."

The teacher says, "Yes, and so are you. How can I possibly teach you?"

To begin to grasp the Way of Jesus we must empty our cup of all certainty and pour out the false mythologies that seduce us but can never satisfy. Our education does not guarantee happiness. Our wealth does not assure our well-being. Our desire for relevance and influence is both insatiable and fleeting.

To be poor of spirit is to recognize our own frailty, vulnerability and mortality. It is to give up your ambitions of success and greatness and stop striving toward anything. Only the one who is empty and poor of spirit will be capable of receiving God's blessing because the only thing left to hold on to in that breathtaking poverty is the presence of God in all its fullness and joy. To be empty is to be free because there is nothing left to protect. The true blessing comes in the emptiness. God's mercy and love will always manifest most clearly in the void of surrender. Only when we dare to lay down every pretense and risk letting go of every false identity will we then be positioned to receive the kingdom of heaven.

This in depth study of The Beatitudes is going to seriously challenge the social order that we live in. To take these lessons seriously should scare you a little bit but that is how you will know that you are close to understanding them. It begins by emptying out and making room. Can you trust emptiness as a blessing? The only way to know is to let go.

