

The Beatitudes (Matt 5.3-12)

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The Sermon on the Mount is the most comprehensive teaching from Jesus on the role of the believer in cooperating with the grace of God. To pursue a life built around obedience to the teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is to build a life that has sure and sturdy foundations that will not be shaken in times of trial and testing.
- B. This picture of a life in partnership with grace of God is centered around the things that God has defined as valuable (“blessed”), the things that stand in the way of that pursuit (Matt 5.21-48), and practices that facilitate and promote the growth of these values within our hearts (Matt 6).
- C. Jesus invites us to intentionally order our lives around these teachings. It is not enough to hear the words of Jesus and accept them, we are invited to *obey* them through intentionally pursuing cooperation with God’s grace in response to his teaching.
- D. The centerpiece of the Sermon is an invitation to a “perfect” life — one that is singly ordered and oriented around pursuing complete and whole obedience to God in every season of our lives.

⁴⁸You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect. (Matt 5.48)

- E. It is important to understand that Jesus here is not outlining a call for moral perfection (this is an unfortunate result of using the English word ‘perfect’ in translation). Rather, he is outlining and calling for a wholehearted devotion to God and his ways throughout every stage of our maturity in the Christian life.¹ The foundational aspect of the sermon is a call to pursue *wholehearted obedience to Jesus* in complete partnership with his grace.
- F. Jesus’ message in the Sermon on the Mount can be seen in some ways as a “charter” of God’s new kingdom people who are joined to Jesus by faith. In the ministry of Jesus (God-with-us), the kingdom of heaven was breaking into the world. In this Sermon, Jesus gives the most explicit portrait of a life oriented around his kingdom.

II. THE VALUES OF GOD’S KINGDOM

- A. The Sermon on the Mount begins with Jesus’ statement about the value-system of the kingdom of heaven. Every culture, society, and kingdom throughout history has a set of values that undergird its concepts of success and worth. These are embodied and embedded within the cultural practices, and often times are given symbols or artifacts as status symbols within the culture (i.e., money, power, influence, etc.).
- B. These symbols and values can be excavated by looking into the prevailing ways that people understand success and worth that are expressed in what people give their lives away to pursuing (time, money, etc.).
- C. The kingdom of heaven is no different. Jesus declares that there are symbols and qualities that are the “metrics of success” in the kingdom of heaven. These are marked by the statements at the beginning of this teaching as embodying a state of “blessedness” before God.
- D. Another way to think about values is to talk about the ideas of satisfaction and fulfillment (what is the “good life”). Every society in human history has presented a picture of what it believes will provide true and lasting satisfaction (wholeness, happiness, joy, etc.) to people.

¹ The Greek word *teleios* (here translated ‘perfect’) does not carry the idea of moral perfection, but of “wholeness”, “devotion”, or “orderliness”.

- E. Humans are hard-wired to orient our lives around what we believe will provide us the most true and lasting fulfillment. Whatever we picture in our minds as providing us true and lasting fulfillment (money, status, freedom, etc.) will be the things we orient our actions around attaining.
- F. The eight beatitudes operate like invitations into holding and embodying the things that are truly great in God's economy and kingdom. These are like fruits that we must cultivate by the grace of God in partnership with the Spirit's activity in our lives. They are supernatural gifts that are given and grown.
- G. These eight fruits are the "litmus test" for our growth in grace and godliness. In many ways, these are the measure of our real and true impact in the kingdom of God — not the size and scope of our ministry or the number of disciples we convert/make/etc. Possessing these fruits (and seeing them grow) define a life of love and spiritual maturity that is at the heart of a life oriented around God's kingdom.
- H. We desire to be individuals (and a church family) whose lives are built upon the value system of the kingdom of heaven. Jesus promises that those who *hear* and *practice* his words in the Sermon on the Mount — particularly the call to the blessed life outlined in the beatitudes — will have a sure and steady foundation built upon the rock. This foundation will not be shaken when the storms of life come and test our lives.
- I. Each of these eight markers runs counter to the ways that the world defines success, growth, maturity, and greatness. Because of this, we must *intentionally* and *consistently* reorient our lives by God's grace to see these realities as truly blessed. If our minds and hearts are captivated by the cares of this life, or by the patterns of this world (what our culture/age defines as valuable), then we will not see these realities as markers of a blessed life before God.
- J. This is an active pursuit that requires the setting of our heart, the filling of our mind, and the use of our will.
 1. **Setting of our heart:** We purpose to orient our lives around these values and the activities that Jesus outlines as means to partner with his grace (i.e., acting in the opposite spirit of the sins he outlines and utilizing the means of grace he gives us). This will be weak and immature throughout our lives, but we consistently realign our hearts with his values and set ourselves to pursue them when we realize we have pursued other values.
 2. **Filling our minds:** In order to value these things, we must familiarize ourselves with them and ask God to help us *see them* as valuable (Rom 12.2). This happens over time (slowly) as we meditate on God's word, God's character, and ask for a spirit of wisdom and revelation (cf. Eph 1.17-18).
 3. **Utilizing our will:** We must make real *choices* that seek to embody and cultivate these fruits in our lives. This means that over time our practices/habits change. This is *empowered* by God's grace.

III. UNDERSTANDING "BLESSING"

- A. Each of the statements found in this passage begins with the same word: "blessed". It is important to understand the meaning of this word in order to rightly understand what Jesus is teaching in this section.
- B. The Greek word that is often translated "blessed" is the word *makarios*. It is a word that does not have a simple translation into English (some translations use "happy", "flourishing", and other glosses). Within the world in which Matthew wrote his gospel there was a rich history related to this word.
- C. In the Old Testament (written in the Hebrew language) there are two words that are both translated into our English Bibles as "blessed". The first of these words (*brk*) deals with the concept of what God will do in covenant relationship in response to obedience to his people (Deut 28.1-14). Within this framework, there is often an *if-then* type relationship related to covenant faithfulness.

D. The second Hebrew word (*asr*) is more often used in wisdom literature (Psalms, Proverbs) and it is a *descriptive* word about someone who lives within a state of blessedness (e.g. Ps 1.1-2). As such, this word is intended to give a portrait of a life that will experience true and ultimate flourishing/wholeness/satisfaction. Used this way, this type of “blessedness” also serves as an invitation into a way of life that results in true flourishing. These types of wisdom invitations are meant to conscript our imaginations of what “the good life” looks like, and only then enlist our desires to orient our pursuits accordingly.

'Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; ²but his delight is in the law of the Lord (Ps 1.1-2)

E. When the Hebrew Bible was translated into the Greek language (in the century before Jesus' life), the word *makarios* (word used in Matthew 5) is **never** used to translate the first concept of blessing (*if-then*), and is **always** used to translate the second (the *state* of blessedness).

F. This is important because it demonstrates that the beatitudes found in the Sermon on the Mount are the second kind of statement (like the wisdom tradition of the Old Testament). In other words, Jesus is not telling us a formula of how to gain the blessings of God (i.e., *if* you act or become poor in spirit *then* God will bless you). Rather, Jesus is portraying the state of a person who experiences the truly whole (fulfilled, satisfied, flourishing) life — and invites us to imitate and embody the practices that would lead us toward such a state of blessedness.

G. This concept also helps us make sense of the promises at the end of each beatitude. Jesus is not saying that the mindset or activity outlined in the beatitude (i.e., poverty of spirit, mourning, showing mercy, etc.) will *earn* the blessing of the kingdom, or comfort, or mercy — as if it is something that is owed to them. Rather, he is declaring that people in the state outlined in the beatitude (those who have turned to him in repentance and have aligned their lives in accordance with his ways) are those who are the most blessed because they will experience the full measure of the life giving grace and abundance of God's rule and reign in their lives.

H. One of the most profound realities of the beatitudes is the seeming *paradoxical* nature of these statements to our natural minds. Each of them cuts against the grain of what our natural minds would see as “blessed”, and invites us to orient our lives by faith in accordance with Jesus' words — even when it seems that they are promises that run counter to our experience.

IV. OVERVIEW OF THE BEATITUDES

A. **Poor in spirit:** the way we *see* our lives in light of our sin and our inabilities.

B. **Mourning:** the way we *feel* in response to our poverty of spirit and in the gap between God's desires and the reality of the brokenness of this world.

C. **Meekness:** to possess a 'servant spirit' in the use of our natural strengths in relation to others — using our resources (time, money, reputation, etc.) for the purpose of serving without any regard for receiving gain from them.

D. **Hunger and thirst for righteousness:** possessing a sustained faithfulness to seeking God with wholehearted devotion that longs for the in-breaking of his presence and his purposes.

E. **Merciful:** a disposition of treating others with a tender spirit even in the midst of their weakness. We seek to walk with mercy toward others (even our enemies and adversaries), just as we have received mercy from God in the midst of the multitude of our failures and shortcomings. We recognize that God has not dealt with us in an exacting manner in the face of our weakness, but has looked with compassion upon our desperate state.

- F. **Pure in heart:** Walking in purity of thoughts (turning from anger, lust, bitterness, etc.) and in our motives (not seeking selfish gain or walking in envy, ambition, etc.).
- G. **Peacemakers:** seeking to bring the grace of peace to broken relationships.
- H. **Enduring persecution:** bearing reproach for the name of Christ in the midst of the fallen world. Those who stand with fidelity to the truth of God’s word and the person of Christ will be opposed (reviled, mocked, persecuted, etc.) in this life.

V. POVERTY OF SPIRIT: THE FOUNDATIONAL BEATITUDE

- A. The foundational, or chief virtue in the life of the kingdom is poverty of spirit. To be poor in spirit is to rightly *see* ourselves and our need in light of God’s great design for us and our own inability to attain this (both by our limited capacities *and* because of our sin).
- B. To be poor in spirit is to understand and rightly evaluate that we are spiritually poor — not spiritually rich — in ourselves. We do not possess within ourselves the means (power, virtue, righteousness, wisdom, etc.) to experience and impart deep spiritual life. We must *see* our great need for God and his grace to experience the depths of what he has called us to walk in.
- C. There are three aspects of poverty of spirit that I believe are contained within this beatitude. These are each ways of *seeing*, or assessing ourselves in light of the truth.

- 1. First, we are poor in spirit when we see the gap between **God’s holiness and our sinfulness** (cf. Isa 6). When we more clearly see the glory of God and the ways that we have fallen short of his glory through our own sin and rebellion, our hearts are invited into a posture of desperation and need.

¹In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up... ⁵And I said: “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” (Isa 6.1, 5)

²³for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3.23)

- 2. Second, we are poor in spirit when we see the gap between **God’s highest purposes for us in Christ and our own ability** to attain to the fullness of these in our own strength. From beginning to end, the Christian walk is one of dependence and need. We are not only needy because of our sin, but because of our creatureliness. Even in a state of redemption we have need of the Spirit to *enable* us to walk in the fullness of our inheritance in Christ Jesus.

¹⁹to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God (Eph 3.19)

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it. (John 14.12-14)

- 3. Lastly, we are poor in spirit when we **renounce our personal rights** in response to the call of Jesus in salvation. The call of the gospel is a call to come and die in order to find *true life*. This stands in stark opposition to the latent self-centeredness that each of us naturally possess.

²⁴Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

²⁵For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matt 16.24-25)

- D. To be poor in spirit is opposite of the spiritual condition of the church in Laodicea. They believed that they were spiritually rich, and in need of nothing. Their wealth and comfort had deluded them to believe they needed nothing before God. However, the true conditions of their lives were spiritually bankrupt before God.

For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. (Rev 3.17-18)

- E. Throughout the Scripture, God has promised to dwell with those who were contrite (crushed) in spirit and humble and lowly.

²But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit... (Isa 66.2)

- F. The idea of being poor in spirit cuts against our latent self-righteousness and self-centeredness. We are called to not think highly of ourselves, and to humble ourselves in the sight of God.

³For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think... (Rom 12.3)

¹⁰Humble yourselves before the Lord (Jas 4.10)

- G. ***Theirs is the kingdom:*** Jesus declares that those who are poor in spirit are already in a state of “blessedness” because they are possessors of the kingdom of heaven. Although we await the full consummation of the kingdom at the return of Christ, the promise to those who are poor in spirit is that they will experience realities of the kingdom in this life now. This includes a heart that is alive in God, experiencing his presence, and being used as a vessel of his presence for others.

VI. OUR VISION TO CULTIVATE POVERTY OF SPIRIT

- A. Throughout our lives we must partner with God’s grace to receive poverty of spirit and continue to cultivate it. There are ways that we are invited to pursue this reality in our lives.
- B. One of the most consistent ways to cultivate poverty of spirit in our own life is to fill our minds with a vision of what God desires to impart to us in Christ Jesus — both in our personal walk before him and in our ministry to others.
- C. The vision and promise of the New Testament is that those who are joined to Christ are invited to be participants in the very life of God himself. This is not simply a theological concept but is meant to be a lived reality that we are invited into even in this life (*by faith*).
- D. We are called to experience the depth of God’s life (his love, his power, his grace, etc.) in our own personal life — and we are called as his image bearers to impart that life to others.
- E. Realization of this high calling quickly puts us face to face with the reality that we do not possess the abilities in our own selves to produce this life — either in ourselves or in others. The more we understand the potency of the life that God has promised us in Christ, the more we are aware that we cannot produce it according to our natural abilities.

¹⁸For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out... ²⁴Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? ²⁵Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Rom 7.18, 24-25)

- F. One of the most reliable ways to cultivate a vision for the deep things of God in our lives and in our ministry is to read spiritual biographies and the history of revival.

VII. A CULTIVATION OF DISCONTENT

- A. One of the difficult realities of cultivating poverty of spirit throughout this life is that there will be a great measure of discontent that we experience.
- B. As believers we must learn to live in tension between possessing gratitude for all of the great gifts that God has given us, *while* not being content with anything less than all that God has for us.
- C. This requires that we not lose sight of the promises of God as it pertains to experiencing the depths of his life in our hearts and among others as we minister to them. This does not mean that the *size* or the *scope* of our impact will necessarily be large or grand (or outwardly impressive) in this life.
- D. We must not mistake worldly visions for success as what God would define as success. We can do this by comparing ourselves with others — either through puffing ourselves up or feeling unnecessary condemnation and insufficiency. The only tool for evaluation of our lives is the word of God.
- E. The Laodiceans (see Rev 3 above) confused their wealth, status, and ease of life as *blessings from God*, when their hearts were in fact wretched and poor. Often times believers in prosperous circumstances lack this foundational beatitude (which is why Jesus also said simply, “Blessed are you who are poor”, Luke 6.20). The tendency of our hearts to distort and pervert the good gifts of God and use them to cover our feelings of need and desperation is immense.
- F. We must continually (through many seasons of life) press into God for greater measures of his love, his life, his power, and his grace experience in us. Do not let anyone (no matter how well intentioned) talk you out of pressing in for the full measure of what God has for you in this life.

VIII. A CALL TO POVERTY OF SPIRIT IN A SELF-FOCUSED WORLD

- A. Jesus commanded his disciples to be careful to what we *listen to* what we accept as the truth in how we evaluate the world.

²⁴And [Jesus] said to them, “Pay attention to what you hear: with the measure you use, it will be measured to you, and still more will be added to you.” (Mark 4.24)
- B. One of the primary ways that poverty of spirit is undermined in our contemporary world is through the prolific exaltation of the self. This has become ritualized in our habits and normalized in how we relate to the world around us.
- C. This includes our obsessions with self-fulfillment, self-actualization, self-realization, and even self-care.
- D. There are places where these prevailing messages have been accepted and adapted by even well-meaning believers. We must guard against the deceptive nature of the prevailing winds of this age and pursue what Jesus lays out as the way to truly find fulfillment and satisfaction — by following him in the way of the cross and growing in poverty of spirit.
- E. Paul warns of the temptation to desire our ears to be tickled and find people to teach us the things we already wanted to hear.

³For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions... ⁵As for you, always be sober-minded (2 Tim 4.3, 5)