

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

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[0 : 00] I will extol the Lord at all times. His praise will always be on my lips. My soul will boast in the Lord. Let the afflicted hear and rejoice.

Glorify the Lord with me. Let us exalt his name together. I sought the Lord and he answered me. He delivered me from all my fears.

Those who look to him are radiant. Their faces are never covered with shame. This poor man called and the Lord heard him. He saved him out of all his troubles.

The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him and he delivers them. Taste and see that the Lord is good. Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.

Fear the Lord, you his saints. For those who fear him lack nothing. The lions may grow weak and hungry, but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing.

[1 : 08] Let's move on to Luke chapter 18 verses 9 to 14. So Luke 18, starting from verse 9.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable. Two men went up to the temple to pray.

One, a Pharisee, and the other, a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself. God, I thank you that I am not like other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get. But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, God, have mercy on me as sinner.

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

[2 : 31] This is the word of God. Now, let's have a look at this first beatitude. Let me read it for us. Now, when Jesus saw the crowd, he went up on a mountainside and sat down.

His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. He said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Many of us face a fork in the road, moral decisions daily. Decisions that we have to take that will have an impact on ourselves, have an impact on others, and will, in some senses, shape the direction of our lives.

And recognising how many moral decisions we make, it's important to ask the question, what is it that guides us? I think it's true to say that for many people, they are struggling without a moral compass.

There are no guiding poles. Sometimes that's by choice. I don't want to listen to any claim to absolute truth or authority.

[3 : 47] And with no objective standard to direct. Perhaps that's why Jonathan Dodson, in a recent book, suggested that we, certainly in the West, are facing a good crisis.

What does goodness look like? John Stott wrote a very helpful book on the Sermon on the Mount, and he argues in that book that the church should be a Christian counterculture.

That we should be following Jesus' manifesto, as set out in the Sermon on the Mount. That the sermon, as a whole, teaches us about life in the kingdom of heaven.

For those who have repented and believed that Jesus is God's promised King and Saviour, now how should we live? What are the values, the ethics, the behaviours, the way of speaking and relating that identify the people of God?

And so right at the beginning of the sermon, Jesus gives us these eight beatitudes. Eight core marks of character and conduct that should be true for all and every Christian.

[5 : 04] These are ideals to pursue, which as we'll see, are actually very countercultural. And so let's ask ourselves a fundamental question as we begin.

We're thinking about the beatitudes. What does it mean to be blessed? Eight times Jesus says a certain group of people are blessed. Well, the language of blessing is covenant language.

It speaks to us of the life that God favours, the life God approves of. This involves happiness and true joy, but it's more than happiness.

It speaks of God's objective assessment of a person's life. But what we'll see is that pursuing these values will bring us to enjoy the reality of God with us, which is the very heart and the goal of the covenant, God's desire to be with his people.

To live with these values in our lives is a way to enjoy the blessing of God's smile on us. So let's think about what it means when Jesus says blessed are the poor in spirit.

[6 : 20] What does he mean by that? Well, it's to acknowledge spiritual bankruptcy before God.

It's to come to him in humble dependence. This is our most basic posture as Christians. Nothing in my hands I bring.

Simply to your cross I cling. It's the ideas behind the hymn Rock of Ages that we will sing. We can look to the Bible for some examples of this.

So Daniel read from us a Psalm of David, Psalm 34. And what's happening there in Psalm 34? Here is David singing of deliverance, being delivered from enemies and threat and accusation.

And he acknowledges he is the poor man with no hope other than his trust in God. He is saved and honoured because he depends and trusts in his God.

[7 : 26] On Sunday morning we thought about Psalm 32. Psalm 32 speaks of a believer being restored to fellowship with God after sinning.

And that's entirely a gift of God's grace. And there's a sense of joy at that amazing blessing. And so there's this understanding in the life of David that salvation from beginning to end is a gift of God's mercy and grace.

And he is happy to embrace his spiritual poverty and need. We see this too laid out in the teaching of Jesus, not just in our beatitude.

So again Daniel read the parable of the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax collector. We could summarise the prayer of the Pharisee in a sense as he is coming before God.

But he's talking about himself and he's saying, God I'm a spiritual success story. I'm not like any of the others. Compare that with the tax collector.

[8 : 36] Who beats his breast. Lowers his head and acknowledges before God. I am and I have nothing. And he pleads for mercy.

He doesn't claim a right to that. But he pleads God's mercy as a sinner. He knows himself. And the sting of the tail for those listening as Jesus describes it is that the one who is justified, the one who has right standing before God, it is the sinner who acknowledges he is spiritually bankrupt and who looks to God for mercy.

We see it too in the parable of the prodigal son. Now remember that son who treated his father shamefully, went off and spent half the family money on reckless living and he finds himself in a desperately poor situation.

And Jesus says he came to his senses. Compare it with the elder brother. The elder brother at the end of the story who comes to his father all angry.

He says, you know, I've been slaving away. I deserve a feast. I deserve something from you. The prodigal. As he comes home, he comes home determined to confess. I have sinned before heaven and before you.

[9 : 54] I am no longer worthy to be called a son. Make me a servant. His humbling, his acknowledging his spiritual bankruptcy and having no claim. And simply confessing to his father who enjoys the feast.

It's the moral wreck. The one who is honest and who seeks for mercy. If you're listening on Sunday morning, maybe you'll remember Augustine.

Who said the beginning of knowledge is to know oneself to be a sinner. And by extension, to know God to be a merciful saviour.

So the poor in spirit are those who have had their illusions shattered. By a revelation from God.

By the grace of God. So not standing and claiming I am good and upright. Rather acknowledging I am not good before a holy and perfect God.

[10 : 52] Rather than claiming rights. The poor in spirit acknowledges God is not obliged to accept me. All I have or all I can claim is from his mercy.

Rather than the self-righteous imagining there is a ladder of achievement to get to heaven, to get to God. The poor in spirit recognises I cannot and I do not earn God's favour.

So the humble in spirit, the poor in spirit acknowledge that they desperately need God's rescue. And there's a wonderful paradox in this beatitude.

Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit. For theirs is the kingdom. To embrace that poverty is the path to riches and to the kingdom of heaven.

But maybe thinking about this, you have a question. How is that a life of blessing? How does admitting that we are weak and helpless, how is that a good thing?

[12 : 01] And this is the challenge to our way of thinking. This is where Jesus presents a Christian counterculture. Because we live in what's sometimes known as the selfie generation.

Sometimes known as the age of big me. A time when we are encouraged to focus on our personal brand. When there is so much attention on finding your true and authentic self.

And that we have to construct and reconstruct multiple identities for ourselves. Because we are central.

Do you notice how different that is from the language of Jesus? The world encourages us to value. Find yourself. Not die to self.

Prove yourself. Not humble yourself. Be true to yourself. Not submit to God. And admit your need.

[13 : 09] So again, how can we say being poor in spirit is blessed? I think one reason is because acknowledging our poverty of spirit deals with our greatest problem.

See, fundamentally, your problem and mine is not a failure to love ourselves. Despite all the language of self-help psychology and counseling. We spend so much time and attention on that.

But our greatest failure, our greatest offense, is our failure to love God. The great offense is that we have treated our creator shamefully.

We have engaged in open rebellion. We have taken to the streets. We have shaken our fist. We have overthrown God so that we might sit on the throne of our own lives.

To place self at the center where God and God alone deserves to be. And Jesus, in his words, corrects that wrong thinking.

[14 : 18] So that we can understand to be truly me means I need humility before God, my creator. And I need to be reconciled to that one relationship above all others that truly matters.

So that we would cry, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. That like the tax collector, we would pray, Lord, have mercy on me, the sinner.

That rather than running from Jesus, we would run to King Jesus for redemption and for restoration. Because what Jesus has come to do on the cross in taking our sins and taking that which separates and that which brings on us the wrath of God is our greatest need.

And acknowledging that deals with our greatest problem. Jesus can also say the poor in spirit are blessed because he promises the greatest reward.

What does he say? He says to acknowledge spiritual poverty and to come with empty hands and to look to God for salvation from beginning to end is to receive blessing.

[15 : 37] And what's that blessing? It's the blessing of the kingdom of heaven. So what is that? It's life under the rule of God, in relationship with God, enjoying the favour and blessing of God.

That's life as it is meant to be lived. And that's the great hope of the future that we can enjoy in part now in the present.

And that, according to Jesus, is true riches. And this is promise. When we humble ourselves and acknowledge our spiritual need, when we look to God for mercy and for grace, then we will receive the kingdom of heaven.

Statement of fact. Now compare that with the exhausting nature of find yourself and prove yourself. And if you've lived that way, trying to prove yourself either before God or before your peers or people in your workplace, you will understand how exhausting that is.

There's that rollercoaster of pride or despair because it's all on us. So on our good days, we feel wonderful because we outperform all our colleagues and our paper gets published and we receive accolades.

[16 : 55] But then other times there's despair because we fail terribly. We miss that promotion, whatever it might be. It's exhausting when life is all on us.

But here's the great promise of this beatitude. Jesus is the king who offers you the keys to the kingdom. Though we are poor, we are invited to the king of infinite riches, to be satisfied, to find joy in him.

So that for those who have been born again, and Jesus is speaking to those who have already received new life, that for those who have the eyes of faith, there is nothing better than life with God.

Sinclair Ferguson put it this way, Jesus in Luke chapter 4.

So after the beginnings of his public ministry, he comes to his hometown in Nazareth. And he opens up, we're told, the scroll at Isaiah chapter 61, which begins, The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.

[18 : 35] He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, for this wonderful picture, that the hope of the poor in spirit, the spiritually bankrupt, the desperate, the unable to please God and to attain God's favour, is that Jesus has come, in the power of the Spirit, to bring good news.

To bring good news as the king who brings in the kingdom. And then what does Jesus do immediately after that? He drives out those with evil spirits.

Those who are utterly helpless and desperately needing rescue. And Jesus from the beginning shows, here's what my kingdom is about.

It's bringing hope to those who are hopeless before God and who are willing to acknowledge that. In a world that's focused on self, will you and I be ready to acknowledge our spiritual bankruptcy and the reality that everything that we have and we need comes only from God.

Let's pray. Lord God, we recognise the challenge of this first beatitude. We are by nature proud and self-centred people in so many ways.

[20 : 14] But we ask that you would show us the importance of being poor in spirit and coming with empty hands and asking you to fill us and recognising that we are a great sinner but that you are a great saviour.

Thank you for King Jesus. Thank you for his perfectly humble and obedient life. Thank you for his sacrificial death. Thank you for the victory of his resurrection.

May you help us to trust in him to enjoy riches in the kingdom of heaven life with you now and forever. Amen.