Beatitudes (1): Rich Poor

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[0:00] chapter 5. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

As I was saying at the beginning of the service, the reason I'm here is that Colin asked if I wouldn't mind doing a series on the Beatitudes and I said yes.
So over the next few months, every two weeks, we'll be looking at one of the eight Beatitudes that we find in Matthew's Gospel. And of course, we're beginning at the beginning.
Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And this message of Jude may take just a little longer because by way of introduction, I want to make a few comments on Matthew's Gospel as a whole, and then on the Sermon on the Mount as a whole, and then on the Beatitudes as a whole, before we look particularly at this first Beatitude.
Why was Matthew's Gospel written? In general, Matthew's Gospel was written for the same reason as all the Gospels were written, namely, to encourage the faith of the first century Christian communities.
[1:40] Think, for example, of the beginning of Luke's Gospel, where he says that he is writing these things so that Theophilus might be certain of those things that he has been taught.

And then if you think of John's Gospel, John tells us at the end of his Gospel that these are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Son of God and the Messiah.
And although Matthew and Mark do not explicitly make that kind of statement, it's clear in the content and style of the Gospels that all of the Gospels are written in general for that purpose.
One could even say that the Gospels are the first apologetic documents of the Christian faith and the Christian Church.
But what about the particular circumstances of Mark's Gospel? Well, Mark's community was probably mainly Jewish, though not exclusively so, hence the large number of Old Testament proof texts showing that in the life and ministry of Jesus, Israel's promised Messiah had come.
[2:57] So Matthew's central message is, in Jesus, the kingdom and its messianic king has come.
Finally, it's worth noting that there are five blocks of teaching in Matthew's Gospel.

One reason why some people have called it the teacher's Gospel, the largest and no doubt the best known block of teaching is, of course, the Sermon on the Mount.
The other blocks are chapters 10, 15, 18 and chapters 24 and 25. This brings me to the Sermon on the Mount itself.
What is this Sermon on the Mount about? I think I'm right in saying this, that John stopped way back in 1978, called the Sermon on the Mount an Ordination Sermon.
Not a bad thought, given that, in a sense, the whole of Matthew is moving towards the Great Commission.
[4:07] And therefore, John Stott was no doubt thinking about the fact that here was the Ordination Sermon to launch the Disciple Ground and the Church out in mission to go into the world and to tell every teacher of the good news of the Gospel.

Less poetically, the Sermon details the character and conduct expected of disciples of Jesus. Or put it another way, the Sermon on the Mount depicts or describes the righteousness expected of disciples of Jesus.
And then, what about the Beatitudes themselves? How should we understand the nature of their pronouncements? There are three views I'm going to offer you.
Some people have described the Beatitudes as declarations. That is to say that Jesus is declaring who it is in this world will find true blessedness.

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Others have depicted them or understood them as descriptions. And they've said that the Beatitudes describe the character of the people of the kingdom.
[5:34] And still others have understood them as demands. These are the ethics of the demands of those that belong to the kingdom.

I would suggest that we can integrate all three of those views. To my mind, these three views are like different sides of a triangle.
The Beatitudes, you see, are a multifaceted portrait of the people of the kingdom, of disciples of Jesus. They're a unity.
We could also think of the Beatitudes as declaring and describing the spiritual genome and DNA of true disciples of God's kingdom.
Let me summarize these comments that I've made by way of introduction. I won't be making them again as we go through the Beatitudes.
[6:36] Matthew's Gospel, what's it about? It's about Jesus, the messianic king, and his kingdom.
The Sermon on the Mount, what is the whole sermon about?

It's about the righteousness required of kingdom disciples. The Beatitudes as a whole, what are they about? The Beatitudes identify the people of the kingdom.
Let's begin then looking at this portrait, starting with the first Beatitude under three headings.
Description, Declaration, and Destiny.
The Beatitudes. Description, Declaration, and Destiny. Now, the Beatitude, blessed of the poor in spirit, its position as the first Beatitude may suggest that this Beatitude is foundational.
Also, it's important to bear in mind that the Beatitudes come after Christ's calling of the first disciples. And so, Christian discipleship presupposes faith in Jesus as the Messiah.
[7:54] You don't become a disciple by obeying the Sermon on the Mount. You seek to obey the Sermon on the Mount because you're already a disciple.

And through believing that Jesus is the Messiah. So, what does poor in spirit mean? And what does it mean?
And what does it mean? And what does it mean? It surely doesn't mean followers of Jesus have no guts or resilience or tenacity or that they are insipid, wimpish doormarks.
Spiritless, spiritless, spiritless individuals. Surely, Jesus did not mean that. But does it mean that they are materially poor?
Yes and no. Because, you see, in the Old Testament, that's why I ask you to pay attention to all the readings and particularly to the references for the poor.
[9:07] In the Old Testament, the poor and needy generally were both materially poor, that is, powerless and often exploited and oppressed by the powerful and the rich.

While at the same time, those who put their complete, they were those who put their complete trust in God. Now, it's probably this aspect of the poor and needy that Jesus is drawing on here.
But, in my view, we must not evacuate their social status and material poverty as a community which Jesus identifies and identifies with, as stated very clearly in our readings.
Did you notice that, as you read from Isaiah 61, the first statement is that, from that prophecy, is that, I have been anointed to go and proclaim the good news to the poor.
Did you notice what he told John the Baptist's disciples to go back and tell John that the gospel and the good news is proclaimed to the poor?
[10:27] Did you notice what Luke said as Jesus looked on his disciples? Can you imagine that, Luke? And he looked on them and he said, Bless you poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

What about the meaning, the actual meaning of the word poor in this beatitude? Well, there are two words that were available to Matthew in Greek to use that word.
And one of those words suggests someone whose head is just managing to keep above the water. They just have enough and barely no more for their sustenance and their living.
That is not the word that Matthew uses. The word that Matthew uses here literally means someone who crouches.
And it is a picture of radical poverty and radical need. And so, I want to, as it were, bring these comments I've made about the poor in spirit and summing them up in three ideas here.
[12:00] In the way that Jesus uses this phrase, I believe, is pointing to a sense of acute spiritual need as opposed to a sense of self-sufficiency.

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You know, the parable, the famous parable of the publican and the Pharisee illustrates this. On the one hand, there is the Pharisee in the temple saying, I'm not like this person who's close to me and here is what I do.
And here was a picture in this Pharisee of self-sufficiency. But the publican would not even lift up his eyes, it tells us, and beat upon his breast and said, God, be merciful to me, the sinner.
Here is someone with an acute sense of their need before the infinite and holy God. And also, it depicts someone, I believe, who has humility contrasted with pride.
And of course, pride really is the mother of all sins, is it not? And surely it's pride that is the original sin. And here Jesus is saying, the proud will never enter into the kingdom of heaven.
[13:35] It is those that have that radical and acute sense of their need before the living God. And it is those that are humble enough to crouch, as it were, and cry out to him.

And the third element, I think, in this statement, blessed of the poor, is, I would put it this way, there's that wonderful verse, isn't there, in the Old Testament, and it says this, cease from man whose breath is in his nostrils.
And it's as if Jesus is saying, those that have their trust in the project of the human energy and human ability, they will not find the kingdom, and it's those whose trust is in none other than God himself.
Now, can I ask, does this beatitude describe you? Does it describe me? Is that where your trust is, in the living God?
Do you have that sense of acute need before God? And have you humbled yourself and crouched before him, as it were, and said like that publican, have mercy on me?
[15:05] But notice as well, that Jesus said about the poor in spirit, blessed. Notice also, it's the first word that falls from the lips of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

This wonderful word, blessed. What does it mean? Well, sometimes you and I say, I have been blessed with good health, or a nice family, a nice house, a nice car, and so on.
Is that all that this word, blessed, means? No. But Matthew uses a Greek word, and the Greek word that he uses for blessed, was also a word that was used of the gods.
And it was a word that was essentially saying, you know something, the gods experience a blessedness that transcends any human blessedness.
Is that all that this word means? No. Because, you see, we must remember that Jesus spoke in Aramaic.
[16:26] That was the language that Jesus spoke. And you see, in Aramaic, it's not simply a declaration, it is an exclamation.

In other words, if we had heard Jesus that day, this is what we probably would have heard him say, Oh, the blessedness of the poor in spirit.
Oh, the unimaginable and brilliant blessing of the poor in spirit. It's a wonderful word.
It carries with it a sense that the person to whom this word is applied is to be congratulated. Isn't that not wonderful?
It's that Jesus is saying, congratulations, you poor of spirit, you poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.
[17:31] No wonder someone once said, in the light of the Beatitudes, a joyless Christianity is unthinkable.

And then, finally, as we finish with this first Beatitude, the kingdom, they're not blessed because they're poor.
the blessing that Jesus is referring to is what is theirs. And what is theirs, he tells us, is the kingdom of heaven.
I want you to see in your imagination that what bears in bold capitals. And I also want you to see in your imagination the crowds that are around Jesus.
And let's think that the Sanhedrin are there. Let's think that the aristocracy are there. And the chief priests. And the scribes, the clever ones.
[18:31] And the Sadducees. And Jesus points to his disciples and points to the community of the poor materially, and yet, those that are following him and trusting in him.

And he points to them and he says, there is is the kingdom of heaven. Can you imagine the jaws dropping all around them that day?

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And notice, he says, is the kingdom of heaven right now? Because the kingdom of heaven is the breaking in of God's reign, is it not, in history, in the historical figure of Jesus Christ?
And it's the breaking in of this king into the proud and self-sufficient hearts of men and women. It is the offer of a stake in the new redeemed humanity.
It is to be part of the great new heavens and earth that is coming. it is to be with Jesus and with God forever and ever.
[19:48] It is to be enrolled and brought into a kingdom that cannot be shaken by any virus or any other power in heaven or hell.

And so, can I ask you, is the kingdom of Jesus your destiny? can it be said of you and I tonight, would Jesus be able to make that exclamation about us?
Oh, the blessedness that is yours. For yours is the kingdom of heaven. Are you one of the rich poor?
Amen. I may God bless these thoughts to each and every one of us. Now, we're going to sing again, this time in Psalm 74.
Psalm 74, verses 19 to 23.ud

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