

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

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[0 : 00] We're going to be looking at Matthew 5, if you'd like to turn there. And Matthew 5 is the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.

And what we're going to look at over the next 10 weeks are the Beatitudes in particular. And those Beatitudes are qualities that every Christian is meant to have.

And they're probably something that may be quite familiar to you. You may have actually memorized them as a child. That was one of the things I did. I didn't go to an Anglican church when I was young.

And so we actually memorized scripture at that time. And we actually got to know these. And I think they're fairly close in my mind.

But one of the things that I remember thinking about was here are lists of things that Christians do. And you pick and choose which ones fit you the best. And there's probably six or seven out of the eight that might not.

[1 : 00] But there's one or two that is sort of a natural gift that you might have. But you know, Jesus is not saying that. He's saying that this is a whole package that goes together.

That all Christians are meant to have all of these qualities in their life. In fact, they come by virtue of the fact that Jesus has brought you into his kingdom.

And interestingly, each of the lines that Jesus actually writes about starts with the word blessed.

And that word is a word that is strange probably to worldly terms.

Because that word blessed means happy. And it means happy in a much different sense than we have in this world.

A difference from the happiness that the world strives for. Because the world defines happiness or blessedness as being able to fulfill our desires and being respected.

[2 : 00] It talks about happiness in a sense of an absence of pain or suffering or disappointments in hard times. And what it really means is a fulfilling of your dreams and feeling fulfilled.

And the world teaches us that this happiness is what we have a right to. And we strive for that. And the values in our lives are around attaining that right to be happy.

But interestingly, that definition of happiness is dependent upon an absence of evil. And an absence of suffering. And hard times.

Because once those come, the happiness that the world defines actually is swept away. But when the Bible says the word happy, it means something very different.

It has a stronger and a deeper meaning. Probably it's more helpful to talk about joy. But there is this sense of a deep, strong happiness and well-being.

[3 : 03] There's a person, there's a theologian by the name of Jonathan Edwards, who is the greatest American theologian. He lived during the time of the Great Awakening in the 18th century in New England.

And he actually tells us the difference of Christian happiness. What's distinctive about it? He wrote a little essay called Christian Happiness, which is very helpful.

And in it he says that the difference about Christian happiness is it is not dependent upon our outward circumstances. It's not dependent on the things that happen to us and around us.

And he says there's three reasons for that. The first is that worldly evils can actually do no lasting harm to the Christian soul. They can't do lasting harm to us.

Because even though all of us experience deep pain and loss, it cannot harm our souls. In fact, God works through affliction to bring about our good.

[4 : 07] And that's why the letters from Paul say that our earthly pain is achieving for us an eternal weight of glory. There's no comparison in that glory that God has for us through our suffering to the

suffering.

He talks about it as being light as a result. And secondly, Christian happiness is not dependent on outward circumstances because these are spiritual joys and satisfaction that Christians have now in this life.

And they cannot be taken away. He says, and I quote, We'll talk a little bit more about that.

But these are things that Christ has done for us. They are spiritual joys. They're not dependent upon what happened in this life. They are always with us. They are what carry us through life.

And finally, the third reason for this happiness not being dependent on outward circumstances is because of the joyful hope looking forward.

[5 : 24] The assured expectation of completion of happiness eternally. It is because of the joy of heaven that is always before Christians that we have this happiness through all occasions.

And that's the deeper understanding of happiness or joy that Jesus is referring to in these Beatitudes when he says, Blessed are you. And it's an important corrective for us because often we have our sights so fixed on a worldly definition of happiness that we actually miss out on the greater happiness that is ours in Jesus Christ.

Yesterday there was a big piece on the news about somebody, we don't know who it was, that won \$30 million in the lottery in New Brunswick.

And so they interviewed a gas station attendant who had become a major local star for selling the ticket. And when you see these kinds of news articles or stories, inevitably, at least for me anyway, maybe not for you, we sort of fantasize about what would I do if I won \$30 million in the lottery.

And it sort of gives you a thrill to think about it. And it's the thrill of worldly happiness. You think this would bring great freedom. You wouldn't be dependent upon anybody. You'd have a lack of anxiety.

[6 : 48] You might even get more respect from other people. It might actually make you feel good about the amount of good that you could do with \$30 million. But you know, the revealing thing about that fantasy or thinking through what you would do with the money is it shows a desire for control over your happiness.

It shows that this is what's within us. We want to make sure that we have a handle on that happiness. That with money, I can produce or achieve happiness.

But of course, that kind of happiness is crushed when things go wrong. It leaves us when the afflictions and the hard times of this life hit us.

It's not strong or lasting. And apparently last year, I read this when I was reading up on lotteries through that story, but apparently last year there was a lottery winner who died a week after collecting his winnings.

And, you know, isn't that a picture of how happiness is transitory and ends, despite the fact we think we have control over it? Well, Jonathan Edwards teaches that humans are too easily sidetracked by this shallow happiness, that we actually strive for that.

[8 : 03] And he says, to actually look after this happiness is not worthy of so noble a creature as a human being. That's the way he put it. We're created by God.

We have this nobility because he has done this. Why would we go after a shallow, transitory happiness? And what he says is, here is what true happiness and joy is.

This is what it means to be blessed. He says, It is the pleasures of loving and obeying, loving and adoring, blessing and praising the infinite being, the best of beings, the eternal Jehovah, the pleasures of trusting in Jesus Christ, in contemplating his beauties, his excellencies and glories, in contemplating his love to mankind, and to us as well, in contemplating his infinite goodness, and his astonishing loving kindness, the pleasures of communion of the Holy Spirit, in conversing with God, the maker and governor of the world, the pleasure that results from doing our duty, in acting worthily and excellently.

These, these are the pleasures, that are worthy of so noble a creature, as man is. And isn't that great? That is the definition of true happiness, that comes out of the gospel.

And you can hear Edwards, actually reveling in God, and reveling in our response to him, as well.

And none of that description, which fills him with such joy, none of that description, is compromised by bad circumstances, and suffering.

[9 : 46] Well, it's that happiness, that Jesus shows us the way into, in verses 3 through 12. And it's an important corrective for us, because those eight qualities, that Jesus talks about here, would never show up, in any kind of best-selling book, on how to achieve happiness.

You know, Jesus says, deep happiness belongs to those, who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst, for righteousness. For the merciful, and the pure in heart, and the peacemakers.

And those who are persecuted, for Jesus. It's a puzzle, for the world to say, doing these things, involves true, lasting happiness.

And so we need to look at these qualities, a little bit more closely. And I want to begin, by looking at verse number 3. And to remember that, all of these qualities, that Jesus is talking about, cannot be accomplished.

We can't achieve them, by hard work. In fact, we can't attain them. They're actually gifts, from God, who saves us. And we are meant to let, what Jesus has given to us, in the gospel, these things, to let those things, change us, and shape our lives.

[11:06] And in fact, it challenges us, to see how the gospel, will shape our own lives. So the first one is, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom, of heaven.

And that beatitude, is the key to all the other ones. Because it starts, with this blessing, because no one, can come into the kingdom, of heaven, without being poor, in spirit.

The way that the kingdom, of heaven is yours, is because you came to it, with a poverty, of spirit.

God, put it into your heart, that you could come to him, with nothing.

And in fact, the other beatitudes, come out of this one, because this one is about, emptying oneself. And it comes, it's about coming to God, with empty hands, spiritually, so that we can be filled.

So that we can be filled, by the other seven, beatitudes. And I think, you know, if we're thinking about, what does it mean, to have a poverty of spirit, to be poor in spirit? The best illustration, of this, is to look at Luke 18.

[12:11] Maybe you can turn there, on page 77. And, there's no better place, to look for illustration, than Jesus teaching. So what he did here, in Luke 18, verse 9, is he said, to some who were confident, of their own righteousness, and looked down, on everybody else, Jesus told a parable.

And in verse 10, he says this, two men went up to the temple, to pray, one a Pharisee, and another a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up, and prayed about himself.

Isn't that revealing? God, I thank you, that I'm 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, standing far off, would not even lift up, his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God be merciful to me, a sinner. I tell you, that this man went down, to his house, justified, rather than the other.

For everyone, who exalts himself, will be humbled, but he who humbles himself, will be exalted.

You see what Jesus, is teaching here, that to be spiritually rich, is to be the Pharisee, confident in one's, own righteousness.

[13:36] And in our particular, culture, this is a massive temptation, to be confident, in what we have, and have rights, before God. And in fact, there's a story, probably that illustrates this, about a Sunday school teacher, who read this parable, and at the end of it, said, okay, at the end of our teaching, let's pray together.

And she began by praying, Lord, we thank you, we thank God, that we are not like, the Pharisee, in this story. You see, this understanding, of being self-sufficient, and respectable to God, because we're very, respectable, to others.

We're not like, that Pharisee, or that tax collector. But to be poor, in spirit, is to cry, with the tax collector, God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

It's to say the same thing, that he said. And to come, to God, with our hands, empty, spiritually, and truly, to acknowledge, your utter need for God, to fill you, with his forgiveness, and his grace.

Very simply, that's what, spiritual poverty is. And I think, a wonderful expression, of this, actually comes, from a verse, from the hymn, Rock of Ages. And you know, Top Lady, who wrote it, first published, Rock of Ages, in the context, of an article.

[14:58] And in it, he wrote that, as England, just as England, could never pay, her national debt, this is even back then, 150, 200 years ago, so no one, by their own merits, could ever satisfy, the justice of God.

And then he put the words, of the hymn, in that article. And one of the verses, is this, Nothing in my hand, I bring, Simply to, thy cross I cling, Naked come to thee, for dress, Helpless, look to thee, for grace, Foul I too, the fountain fly, Wash me, Savior, or I die.

He's expressing there, what spiritual poverty, is all about. He is talking about, spiritual, empty hands. He's talking about, a complete dependence, on Jesus, to be the Lord, of your salvation. And this is something, that Jesus is teaching, to every one, of his followers. If you turn back, to Matthew 5, at the very beginning, in verse 1, there has been, large crowds, and Jesus takes aside, a few disciples, the people who are really, committed to him.

And these are the ones, that Jesus is teaching, the Beatitudes to. They are ones, who have received Christ, and are committed to him. And he's teaching them, and therefore, he's teaching us, to continually, be spiritually poor.

[16:30] Because that is how, you've come into, the kingdom of God, in the first place. That is how, you have received, all of the spiritual riches, of God. You have come saying, Lord, I have nothing to give you, and I need you, utterly, and completely.

And so the question, that we need to end with, is, how does this bless us? How does it make us happy, to be able to, come to God, with spiritual poverty, and be poor spiritually?

Well, there's two ways, that this blesses us, and makes us happy, at least. I'm just giving you two. The first is, that we cannot be filled, until our hands are empty.

Until we are emptied. That's a very basic thing, that God gives us. It's what Jesus said, when he says, you know, if you want to find your life, you need to lose it. And surely, if we try to control, our happiness, and fulfillment, God will not override us.

If we try to tell God, that we have a right, to a certain happiness, we will settle, for a poor, worldly definition, of happiness. But God's nature, is to give grace, to the empty handed.

[17:44] And his grace, is often what we do not expect. We experience his forgiveness, and his love, and his sustaining help, in surprising ways, when we trust in him.

And I think that, maybe you have seen this, in your own life, but one of the most common lessons, that God teaches us, is how to trust him. He teaches us, through circumstances in our life, to learn to say, I need you, and I depend upon you, for your grace.

I don't know, what is going to be coming. I can't control, the goodness that could come to me. There is an uncomfortable, loss of control, when we do this. But God is faithful, and he brings us happy, and it brings us happiness, to see his faithfulness, work out in our lives.

It brings happiness, to see him provide, and to work, in powerful ways, and to give us blessings, that we would not have known, or asked for, or imagined. That's first of all, he makes us happy, because he's able to fill us, when our spiritual hands are empty.

But secondly, when we recognize daily, our utter need for God, our gratitude is renewed. And this brings happiness. It cultivates, a thankful spirit.

[19:02] And the happiest people I know, are those who are the most, thankful to God. It does change, the way that we look at life, the way that we think, the way that we speak, to be thankful people.

And I believe, that Jonathan Edwards, was so exuberant, about the pleasures, of knowing God, and his grace, because he was poor, in spirit. That's what made him joyful.

That's what made him, have this happy sense. And that's Paul too, the apostle of the free spirit. He was astonished, at how lavish, God's grace is. And his joy, is ten times, greater than any winner, of the lottery.

And that's why, Jonathan Edwards' writings, are filled with the love of God. Because he understood, this, about himself. When we try to create, spiritual wealth, by thinking we are, self-sufficient, or self-confident, and self-assured spiritually, we are actually holding on, to a cheap imitation, of what God offers to us.

We can't receive, or even see, the spiritual wealth, that only God can give us. If we can't receive, God's grace, we cannot, be thankful.

[20:14] But what, spiritual poverty does, is to open our eyes, to the wonder, of God's grace, to what he gives us, to the definition, of his happiness, in our life.

And this little verse, blessed are the poor, in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom, of heaven, actually opens, the eyes of our hearts. And it actually helps us, to see the riches, of the gospel for us.

And to actually come to God, asking for it, knowing that we are, dependent upon it. May God give us grace, to be formed, by this wonderful fact, that we come to God, with nothing.

And we receive from him, everything we need. Amen.