

"Poor"

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Date: 07 July 2024

Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0:00] Well, good morning, church. Would you turn with me to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 5? That is page 759 in the Pew Bible, Matthew, chapter 5.

This summer, we are beginning a series in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is probably one of the best-known passages in the New Testament, and probably one of the most practical as well.

But, you know, it's also, the Sermon on the Mount is also one of the most revolutionary. In fact, any serious reading of the Sermon on the Mount, you discover right away how countercultural it is, no matter what culture you live in.

And yet, as we'll see in the coming weeks, Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is the answer to one of the deepest questions of human experience.

The question of, what does it mean to truly flourish? How do I live a life worth living? Here is Jesus' answer in this great collection of teaching that we call the Sermon on the Mount.

[1:11] Now, I mean, if we're on so much of our religious life, right, it feels empty. And so often, the church looks just like the world with little substance.

But when we come to the Sermon on the Mount, it's like we stand on the shore of a great ocean, and it beckons us to come and to raise our sails and to explore the uncharted seas of what it means to be genuinely human, genuinely alive.

And we see that the seas won't always be easy waters. They will challenge us. At times, they'll threaten to capsize us. Much of what we thought our lives should be and do will have to be jettisoned, thrown overboard.

But the one who beckons us on this journey is a captain who knows the waters of existence better than any, for he created them. And the winds and the waves obey his voice.

So we're going to dive in to the Sermon on the Mount together. And we're going to do so very slowly. As you might know, the Sermon begins with a series of eight or nine, depending on how you count them, Beatitudes.

[2:17] That is a series of pronouncements of blessing. And this summer, we're just going to take one of those Beatitudes at a time, one a week for the rest of the summer. But we're going to begin by reading the whole kind of opening passage of the Sermon, Matthew 5, 1 through 12.

We're going to read these Beatitudes, as they're called, and then I'll pray, and then we'll explore them together. So let me read. Matthew 5, 1 through 12. Seeing the crowds, Jesus went up on the mountain.

When he sat down, his disciples came to him. He opened his mouth and taught them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[3:24] Blessed are you when others revile you or persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Now rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.

For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. All right, let's pray together. Father in heaven, how we long to find depth in our shallow world.

By your spirit, help us to hear your word, and become the sort of people you've redeemed us to be, through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. In his name we pray.

Amen. Amen. So today what we're going to do is a bit of an introduction to this section of the Sermon on the Mount, this opening section we call the Beatitudes. And I want to do something pretty simple this morning. You'll notice that each verse in verses 1 through 10 has the same structure.

First there's a pronouncement, blessed. Then there's a quality or a characteristic, right? The one we'll look at today, poor in spirit. And then there's sort of a reason or a promise, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

[4:27] So simply then this morning, what I want to do is just walk through each of those three elements. What does Jesus mean by blessed? What does Jesus mean by poor in spirit? What does he mean by the kingdom of heaven?

And I think if we kind of do that basic work this week, it will equip us in the coming weeks to grapple more with this section of Scripture we call the Beatitudes and to be able to really hear in these opening verses of the Sermon on the Mount what Jesus is really saying.

Because honestly, most of us, on our initial reading of the Beatitudes, we miss Jesus' point. We actually miss what he's saying.

And to see that, we need to consider the first thing. What does Jesus mean by blessed? What does Jesus mean by blessed? Now, if you're wondering why we call these verses the Beatitudes, it's because in the Latin translation of the Bible, the word blessed is the Latin word *beatus*, or in the plural, *beati*.

So these verses have come to be called in the West the Beatitudes. But what does blessed mean? Blessing is kind of a funny word, isn't it? And we don't really use it all that much anymore.

[5:36] Except when someone sneezes, right? We say, bless you. But why do we even say that, right? What does that even mean? Or I'm told that in the South, when someone says, bless your heart, right?

Like, but that's apparently not a compliment, I guess, right? So this word blessed has sort of become like an empty word for us. But it was not an empty word in the first century.

However, what we don't immediately see in our English translations of the Bible is that in the Greek, and especially in the Hebrew, there are two words that we translate into English as blessed.

One of those words in Hebrew that, of course, formed the background for the New Testament, one of those Old Testament words for blessed in Hebrew is the word *barach*, right? And that word is the word for God blessing us, right?

God showing his favor to us, making his face shine upon us, God accepting us. But there's a second word that we translate blessed in the Old Testament, and that word is *ashray*.

[6:42] And ashray is sort of the word that we find, for instance, in the opening verse of Psalm 1, where you remember how Psalm 1 starts, blessed is the man, blessed is the human being who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of scoffers, but is delighted in the law of the Lord.

But with that second word, with that Hebrew word we translate blessed in Psalm 1, ashray, here's the thing. That word doesn't primarily refer to God blessing us or favoring us.

That word is not a statement that this person has now received divine approval or reward or favor. Rather, it means actually something like, this person is truly flourishing.

It's as if someone comes to you and says, do you want to know who's living life as it's meant to be lived? Do you want to know who's living the good life, the fully flourishing life? It's this person.

They've found it. Blessed is the one. But the problem is, for most of us, blessed doesn't carry that second sense. I actually like how the New Living Translation translates Psalm 1.

[7:53] It says, Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, etc., etc., but who delight in the law of the Lord. Oh, the joys of that person. They know real human flourishing.

That's a life worth living. Do you see the difference between those two words? Barak is a statement that God favors you. You've won his approval.

You've received his favor. Asherah is different. It's a statement that you're engaged in a life worth living, a full and flourishing life. Now, here's the point. When Jesus begins his sermon with, Blessed are, which of those two did he mean?

At first, we think, right, he must be talking about God's favor, right? We're reading the Bible, after all, right? This is how you get God's blessing, we think. You try to be poor in spirit.

You try to be a peacemaker. Then it seems God will approve of you. He'll reward you. Blessed are those people who do those things. But that's actually not what Jesus means.

[8:57] Because when you open up the Greek translation of the Old Testament, you'll find that the same word that Jesus uses here in Matthew 5, makarios, makarioi, is actually used in Psalm 1.

And in all the other places where the Old Testament is saying, look, here's the one who's truly living. They've found it. There's the life worth living. Oh, the joys of that one.

Now, what does all this mean? It means that when Jesus opens a sermon on the mount, he's not saying, here's how you were in God's favor. Rather, he's answering one of the oldest and one of the most important questions human beings have ever asked.

How do I live a life of true, lasting worth? What's the shape of real human flourishing? You know, that's what the Greek philosophical tradition was striving towards and reaching towards for hundreds of years.

Going all the way back to Aristotle with his Nicomachean ethics, trying to develop, what does it mean to live the good life? And that's what the Jewish wisdom tradition in the Old Testament and in through the intercanonical period had been speaking to for even longer.

[10:10] And maybe you've wondered the same thing. What does it mean to really live? How do I find lasting happiness? You know, some translators have even tried to render Jesus' saying here in the Beatitudes, it's just that, happy are those who are poor in spirit, happy are those who mourn, etc., etc.

But you know, that word happy doesn't really get at the sense. Happy doesn't sort of have the depth of what we're searching for or what Jesus means. Because we don't just want to be happy, right? We want something deeper.

We want to thrive. We want to flourish. But the trouble is, we've lost our way. Think of all the ways we try to secure a life worth living, a flourishing life.

I think first we sort of try to find it in possessions or in accolades, right? If I amass enough stuff or accolades or professional awards or achievements, then I'll know what it means to flourish.

Then I'll know what it means to live a life that's satisfying to the soul. But you know, you don't have to read about human experience or examine your own heart long enough to realize that doesn't work. Right?

[11:28] But the reality is, a lot of Christians have kind of lost their way too. We sort of baptize that same thinking, but in sort of spiritual or religious terms. We think performance or producing numbers or making a big impact is what the Christian life is really all about.

But look at the trouble such thinking has caused. Even in our own day, even in the last five, ten years, how many prominent leaders in the church world have fallen in disgrace, even though externally, their ministries had big numbers and so-called influence.

You see, in the ancient world, they knew something that we've forgotten. They knew that the key to a truly flourishing life wasn't found in amassing wealth or success, and it wasn't found in being competent in external performances.

They knew that the key to a fully flourishing life wasn't found in your possessions or your performance, but in your character. Not in what you had, not in what you did, but in who you were.

You see, they knew that it wasn't simply about following the right rules, but about developing into a certain kind of person, a person with depth of what they called virtue.

[12:47] That was the path of flourishing. And at a certain level, we get this, don't we? You know, consider the athlete, maybe a basketball player, who trains for hours every day, the same skills, the same exercises, or think about the jazz musician who plays the same scales every day.

Why do they do that? They do that not so they can simply do the drills or run the scales, but so that in the moment, in the moment of the game, in the moment of the concert, when something new is called for, they can then meet the challenge.

They've so internalized and become so accustomed to their game or to their instrument, they've developed such virtue, such being, that in the moment, they can do something beautiful and satisfying and wise.

Even if that moment was totally unexpected, totally unique. You see, the same is true more broadly of our humanity, right?

Of course we need to know the rules. We need to know what's right and wrong, and we need to know what those rules are and what we should follow. We need to do the drills. We need to run the scales. Yes, but deeper than that, we need to become the kind of people, people of virtue, people of character, who will be able to act faithfully and wisely in every new situation that arises, when there maybe isn't a rule that tells us exactly what to do.

[14:21] So when Jesus says, blessed are, he's not saying, here's how you can earn God's favor. He's saying, here's the path of genuine flourishing. Here's the sort of person who lives life as it's meant to be lived, and he's inviting us into it.

He's opening the door and saying, come inside. Come inside and find a life worth living. Open your sails to the wind and brave the ocean.

Here are the deep virtues. Here's the deep character of a human person fully alive. And that brings us to the second part of our verse.

Because once Jesus starts enumerating those virtues, we're met with a surprise. We're struck by what he says. You see, if the Beatitudes are an invitation to the virtues, the character qualities of a human person truly alive, truly flourishing, at first they seem totally upside down.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Wait, what? The poor in spirit? They're the flourishing ones? How can that be? Doesn't common sense tell us that the rich in spirit have found the life worth living?

[15:38] Not the poor. Who wants to be poor? Sure. So what does Jesus mean by poor in spirit? Now some people think that Matthew here is sort of watering down a similar saying of Jesus that we find in Luke chapter 6.

In Luke chapter 6, Jesus says, just, blessed are the poor. Not the poor in spirit, just the poor. So this sort of theory goes, and you might run across this, this sort of theory goes that Matthew didn't like that sort of socially radical Jesus of Luke 6.

So, you know, who pronounces blessing on the economically poor, so he sort of softened and spiritualized Jesus' saying by adding poor in spirit. But you know, that theory, that theory cannot be right.

Because Jesus is saying both in Luke 6 and in Matthew 5 have their background, again, in the Old Testament scriptures. Who are the poor in the Old Testament?

Yes, on the one hand, the poor were those who lacked material and economic resources. And we find in the Old Testament that God's heart is near to those who are poor.

[16:46] He is their great defender. He rises them up, raises them up from the ash heap as we heard earlier in our psalm reading. But also in the Old Testament, in passage after passage, we also see that at a deeper level, at the most profound level, the poor are those who know they need God.

I sought the Lord, Psalm 34 says, and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant and their faces shall never be ashamed. This poor man cried and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.

This poor man cried. We could produce many passages like this one where we see that the poor is a description in the Old Testament of those who know desperately that they need God.

Whether it's their lack of external resources or it's their lack of internal resources, they know they don't have enough. They know they need God.

You see, we don't need to drive a wedge between Luke 6 and Matthew 5. On the one hand, a lack of external resources can drive someone to a deep dependence on God.

[18:07] But so can a lack of internal resources when you realize that your moral performance or your emotional resilience or your intellectual prowess can't save you and can't keep you and can't satisfy you.

When those internal resources give way and you realize you need God and God alone in utter dependence, then you are poor in spirit. And then Jesus says, you're blessed.

When you've stopped relying on yourself and brought empty hands to God, then you've begun to discover a life truly worth living.

You see, to be poor in spirit doesn't mean that you constantly beat up on yourself. It doesn't mean that you sort of wallow in self-deprecation. It doesn't mean you can never graciously accept a compliment.

You know, those are all forms of false, actually, spiritual poverty. No, genuine spiritual poverty is discovering the freedom. The freedom from having to be constantly managing your interior accounts.

[19:21] Am I smart enough? Well, I better invest in this. I better start reading that. Am I relationally connected enough? Am I liked or admired enough? Well, I better start connecting with this person, being nicer to that person.

I better not let people see my faults and failures. Am I morally good enough? I better do more good things, try harder, do better. We're constantly managing our self-centered spiritual portfolio to see if we can get the spiritual riches to accrue.

But it's a constant exercise in anxiety and pressure that never gives up. We frenetically try to make ourselves spiritually rich, but we find ourselves consumed more and more when we're less at peace and we're less at ease and we're less able to enjoy the life that's right in front of us.

And we find that we're not flourishing, but we're floundering. It's not blessing we experience, but whoa. On the other hand, genuine spiritual poverty to admit that we need God, to admit that we have nothing apart from what God gives, that is freedom.

And if you've ever been around someone who's genuinely poor in spirit, if you've ever been around someone who isn't trying to constantly manage their spiritual portfolio, but lives in the freedom of having nothing to lose and nothing to prove because they know that God is all they need, if you've been around someone like that, then you know how freeing it is.

[20:56] It's freeing just to be around that kind of person. Their presence is calming because they're not in the rat race anymore. They're not constantly measuring up their investments against yours to see how they stack up.

For a moment, the competition and the comparison that exists in so many of our earthly relationships seems to pause for a moment. And we can just meet one another as human beings and to relish in the gift of each other, to receive each other, and show genuine love toward each other.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who have stopped trying to amass their own spiritual wealth and have come empty-handed to God as their all in all.

And that brings us to the third part of the beatitude. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Now, what is the kingdom of heaven? What is the kingdom of heaven?

Well, the kingdom of heaven is sort of a phrase that's unique to Matthew's gospel, but it's his way of referring to the kingdom of God. Heaven there is sort of a reverential way of Matthew to speak of God, where God dwells in fullness.

[22:14] Heaven. So if Matthew here is talking about the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, then we find that all of the gospel writers speak of the kingdom of God. So Jesus is saying that the poor in spirit, they are the ones, they are the ones who participate in God's kingdom, in God's reign.

And we know that this reign of God, for the prophets in the Old Testament, they looked ahead to a time when that reign would begin.

But we know now, living on this side of the incarnation and cross and resurrection, that the reign of God isn't just a future reality, but God's reign of righteousness, God's reign of peace, God's reign of restoration has been inaugurated, has been begun, has been launched into the world in Jesus' own person and work.

Remember Jesus' words from earlier in Matthew's gospel, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. In other words, Jesus says, the reign of God is beginning right now through me.

Now, of course, we await a day when this kingdom of God will be consummated and there will be no more tears and no more evil and God will make all things new. We studied a lot about this summer in the book of Revelation, didn't we?

[23:39] But this restoring reign of God is on the move even now. When Christ ascended into heaven and sat at the right hand of the Father and sent down his spirit, the kingdom of God was, again, it was flung upon the world.

And who will participate in this reign? Who will be the ones? The poor in spirit. The poor in spirit.

You see, when God looks at the world, when God looks for those who will join his work in the world, he's not looking for the wealthy.

He's not looking for the people who think they're spiritually loaded and well-off. He's not looking for the people who think that, wow, God sure is lucky to have me on his team because I bring a lot to the table.

No. Friends, he's looking for the poor. He's looking for those who know that everything they have is grace and his grace is enough.

[24:53] of course, God can use your talents and gifts for his kingdom. But the poor in spirit realize that these gifts are just that.

They're gifts given to you, not earned. And such gifts are best used to glorify the giver. Hudson Taylor, the missionary, was once scheduled to speak at a large Presbyterian Church in Melbourne, Australia and the moderator of the service introduced the missionary, introduced Hudson Taylor in these eloquent and glowing terms.

He told the large congregation that Taylor, told them all that Hudson Taylor had accomplished in China and he sort of presented Taylor as our illustrious guest.

And Hudson Taylor stood quietly for a moment and then opened his message by saying, dear friends, I'm a little servant of an illustrious master. That's a good picture of what it means to be poor in spirit.

But of course, all this raises a crucial question, doesn't it? If the poor in spirit are the truly flourishing ones, if they are the ones who participate in God's reign, the question is, how do we become poor in spirit?

[26:15] You know, anyone who simply tried to, you know, proverbially sell off their self-made spiritual wealth, if you try to sell that off, you realize how hard it is. You realize how easy we slip into a conversation some good deed we've done, right, to look good.

You realize how unconsciously we begin to look down our nose at someone who isn't quite as accomplished or as successful as we are. You realize how anxious we still get when we see the success of a friend or a colleague wondering if will measure up.

There's something in our fallen human hearts that clings tightly to our self-made spiritual wealth. The truth is we can't simply make ourselves poor in spirit.

But what we cannot do for ourselves, God can do through the gospel. On the one hand, simply encountering God as he reveals himself in scripture, that begins the process.

I remember the story, I think it was Teddy Roosevelt, you know, Teddy Roosevelt is a great outdoorsman and he would take his guests outside. This is probably apocryphal, but I'm going to share it anyway because it's a good illustration. Whenever he was with friends, he would take them outside and he would have them look out at the stars or whatever they were looking at and then he would say, okay, I think we're small enough now, let's go to bed.

[27:38] Right? When we come to an encounter with God as he reveals himself, not just in nature but in scripture, that begins the humbling process.

John Flavel once said, they that know God will be humble and they that know themselves cannot be proud. But you know, there's a deeper level.

Why? Why do we cling so tightly to our self-made spiritual wealth? Why are we so afraid to open our hands and become poor in spirit? Because we're afraid.

We're afraid that without those spiritual riches that we've made for ourselves, we're afraid that we'd be nothing, that we'd be cast off, that we'd be destitute.

And you see, only Jesus can meet us in that place. because at the foot of the cross, we see, on the one hand, we see our total spiritual bankruptcy.

[28:46] We are so destitute. Our good deeds are so counterproductive to the kingdom of God that Christ had to be crucified for our sins.

but also at the cross, our deepest fears are meant. You see, at the cross, we're not left as beggars because he did all this for us.

Do you remember the song we sang? Two wonders here I confess, my worth and my unworthiness. Paul put it this way in 2 Corinthians 8-9, you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

When you see that Christ became poor for you, that he gave up the riches of heaven and emptied himself and became poor and a servant, when you see that he did that for you, then you have the real treasure, the real riches.

Then you have the kind of riches that enable you to sell off all of your self-centered investments and become truly poor in spirit. In other words, when you get Christ's righteousness credited to your account through faith in him, you can discard your self-righteousness and then you can know the blessedness of genuine spiritual poverty.

[30:29] But you know, for those of us who are in Christ and we've begun to experience that, how do we grow? How do we grow in this virtue of spiritual poverty? What sort of practices might help us more and more to become this sort of people that Jesus has redeemed us to be and that he's making us to be by his spirit?

Well, there's lots of things we could say here and we're going to get into a lot of them as we proceed through the Sermon on the Mount. But perhaps this morning we might just mention the practice of what I would call being more intentional about being on the receiving end.

In our pride, we like to be the ones who give, right? And of course, generosity is important, but if we are always the giver, then we are always the one in control to a certain extent.

We're always the one with something to give. Instead, we need to practice being on the receiving end. Practice being empty and getting something from someone else.

Receive a compliment and simply say, thank you. Receive the help of a church member. Receive the counsel of a friend or a small group member.

[31:52] Put yourself in the place where you need to receive. Of course, sometimes it's actually hardship or trials or suffering that will put us in that place, won't it?

Friend, thank God for those times, even if they are difficult. Not for the suffering itself, but because that in those times when suffering forces us to receive from others, we're learning more and more the virtue of spiritual poverty.

We're learning more and more what it means to be truly blessed. But you know, perhaps one of the greatest ways that we can put ourselves on the receiving end is at the Lord's table.

When we come to the Lord's supper, right, we are all on the receiving end. We come hungry and needy, admitting our spiritual poverty.

And in the bread, in the cup, we receive these signs telling us that Christ and Christ alone can feed us, and He has, and He will continue to do so.

[33:07] And you know, it's at the table, it's at the Lord's supper where we experience our greatest solidarity with one another. Because at the table, right, whether we are materially wealthy or materially poor, we all come as spiritually bankrupt in need of God's provision.

And if we can practice that kind of solidarity here with one another at the table, where we are truly one before the Lord, if we can do that practice here, if we can learn what that means, then we can go into the world and start to practice other forms of solidarity, working, living, listening alongside of those whom the world would consider marginal or unimportant or poor.

You see, the first step of practicing solidarity with the poor, to echo God's heart, the first step is to start it right here as we come to the Lord's table.

It all starts here, receiving these signs of the gospel, gospel, because here we're all receivers, each one of us. And you know, as we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we hear Jesus' words in this first beatitude, not just as an invitation, not just as a challenge, but at the table we hear these words as an assurance.

Jesus hands us the bread and the cup, we receive them, and we hear Jesus say, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Let's pray.

[35 : 02] Father, as we come to the table now, we ask for your grace. Would the bread and the cup make real to us again the great self- emptying of Christ?

Christ. Help us to see Christ as the one who modeled perfect poverty of spirit, but not just as a moral exemplar, as a Savior, his body broken, his blood shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

At this table, would we have a fresh realization of our spiritual poverty? Would we be able to say again, nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.

Naked, we come to you for dress. Helpless, we look to you for grace. Foul, we fly to the fountain. Wash us, Savior.

Wash us, we pray. Thank you for washing us. Fill us with your spirit as we take this meal together. In Christ's name, Amen.