

The Poor In Spirit

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[0 : 00] Okay, for our text this evening we're returning to the Beatitudes from Matthew chapter 5, beginning of the Sermon and the Mount.

And Cori last Sunday evening did a kind of introductory message based on the Beatitudes and this evening I'm going to look at the first of them. We're going to go through them each individually. So Matthew chapter 5, we're reading from the beginning again. There's Bibles at the side if you want to take a Bible and look at it this evening. I'll not be moving too far from this passage, although I will be referring to one or two other messages this evening.

So seeing the crowds, he went up onto the mountain and when he sat down his disciples came to him and he opened his mouth and taught them saying, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

So that is the first Beatitude. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. And I guess kind of deliberately we have dovetailed a little bit with the morning series on Proverbs and so there'll be some things that I will copy and plagiarise entirely from Cori from what he said this morning because it fits in and dovetails very well with this evening's theme as Cori was looking, if you weren't here this morning, pride and humility from Proverbs.

[1 : 25] But as you saw last week, the Sermon on the Mount really is the most comprehensive teaching that comes together, the most comprehensive teaching from Jesus about being a disciple of Jesus, of being a follower of Jesus.

And I think it is critical to understand it and understand its uniqueness. And there's at least four things I think it's helpful for us to remember both with the Beatitudes and with the whole of the Sermon on the Mount.

The first thing is that it's not a set of guiding principles. You know, if I do my best, if I try my hardest to follow the Sermon on the Mount, the teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, God will accept me. So it's not really a set of guiding principles for life. But what it is, is a message that challenges our deepest instincts, particularly our deepest instincts for being self-reliant and claiming my own rights and saying, I've earned this before God.

I'm entitled, as we saw this morning before God. And I want just to be living my best life, however I feel that best life should be. It challenges that deepest instinct.

[2 : 37] The third thing it does is that it exposes our spiritual poverty. When you read the Sermon on the Mount, you should come away from it because I certainly come away from it, and I'm sure we all do, saying, this is impossible.

I can't do this. I fall short. So it exposes our inability in many ways. It highlights our spiritual poverty. We can't live the way that we are encouraged to live here.

But the fourth thing it does, hopefully, encouragingly is it reveals the riches of our life in Jesus Christ. It reveals how we can live as we put our trust and faith in Jesus Christ, because we've come from Christ from death, we've come into life with Him, and this is how we are both called and empowered to live through Him.

So it's maybe a challenge to us in the sense it exposes our own individual poverty before God. But it is also a great encouragement because with the Spirit of God, we can live the kind of life we're encouraged to do here.

So the Beatitudes speak about our life in Jesus Christ. And in some ways, we probably... Well, no, I shouldn't say this. We shouldn't take them individually.

[3 : 55] Of course we can take them individually, but we must remember that they are also a package. They come as one.

It's not that we have eight different characteristics that a couple of Christians at the back of the church there will have the first two, and then a couple down here will have another two, and they're spread out in the Christian church.

Some have some of the characteristics, others don't have these same ones. These are eight characteristics that to a greater or lesser degree should be evident in every believer.

So we should all reflect the characteristics of the Beatitudes in our Christian life. In many ways, it's a bit like the nine fruit of the Spirit that we have in Galatians.

So that it's not individual fruits that one person's patient and another person's kind. It's that every Christian should bear all of these fruit in our lives to a greater or lesser degree.

[4 : 56] And the same is true of the Beatitudes. We should reflect them all. Now, I've been sitting over 32 years, I have to check back. I've never preached individually through the Beatitudes.

I've preached a number of sermons on all of them, but I've never preached them individually, so it will be an instinct challenge to do so. But I think we want to remember at the outset that the Beatitudes are taken as one.

Of course, we can look at them individually, but they are characteristics that should reflect every believer. Because they reflect what it is that the Holy Spirit is working in our lives and in our hearts that make us like Jesus.

So these eight Beatitudes are game changers for us. We should be cultural radicals if we are living by the transformation that the Holy Spirit is working in our lives.

We're revolutionaries, absolutely. We should be, and ought to be, non-conformists. We should be the most radical of people in society because of what Christ has done for us.

[6 : 06] We're mold breakers. That's what we are in Jesus Christ. Every Christian has that privilege of being transformed, as we saw this morning, from the inside out by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And I think today more than any day, possibly, that should provoke questions from other people about our lives. If we are living a beatitudinal life, if we are living a life that's reflecting the blessing of God in our lives because of grace that has touched our hearts, then we should be living in a way that provokes questions from others.

And that makes sharing our faith the easiest thing in the world, at one level. Because the interest is coming from outside ourselves.

We're not having to push it. We're not having to wedge opportunities in. We're not having to force and kick the door down with people to speak about spiritual realities.

But because this radical life that we have in Christ that is revealed to us here should provoke questions in other people. And of course then, how we answer is the great challenge.

[7 : 20] But the beatitudes then speak of a life of blessing. As Corey mentioned in the introduction last week, Macarios, it's a great word which speaks very much about the blessings or the benefits that God confers on us through our faith in Jesus Christ.

Now a lot of translations will have happy. Happy is the man, happy is the person, happy is... And that's a legitimate translation, but it's a...

I think in English it just... It's a bit weak. It doesn't really capture... Because I think maybe happy, the word happy has changed a little bit. For us, happy is very much a response that we have to our circumstances or to our relationship we might have that's good and the love that we're enjoying.

So we're happy because of that. What is blessing is what God confers on us because of grace that He gives us, the benefits of belonging to Him.

It's a little bit like... And some of the Americans who are with us today at lunch might have experienced it for the first time, so I don't think they have it so much in the States, is diluting juice.

[8 : 33] Because they sometimes make the mistake of taking a whole glass of orange diluting juice and not diluting it. I've been in that company of many who have done that and felt very ill and sick as a result.

But you know, diluting juice takes just a little bit of concentrate and then lots of water and I think it's kind of like that. Happiness is like that diluted juice.

It's kind of much weaker. Whereas blessed is kind of like the concentrate. It's much more concentrated and much more...

There's a greater depth to the word than happiness. So next time you have some Chiora, you'll remember that particular picture.

It's something outside of ourselves. It's not simply an emotional response to good experiences that we might enjoy. It's the blessing of knowing God's grace received through faith.

[9 : 32] And we know that it has strong Old Testament connotations with that. That... In other words, it's a relational word. It's being in relationship with God.

You know, the great, erotic blessing that we sing here when our children are baptized or when our grown-ups are baptized. The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to the you. The Lord turn His face towards you and give you peace. It's the opposite of the separation that sin brings, isn't it? It's the fact that His face is turned towards us and we see...

It's a great just illustration of what it means to belong to Christ is that God's face is turned towards us in blessing and in favor because of what Jesus has done.

It's the brightness of His face. It's the grace, the peace. It's the beatific vision, isn't it? It's seeing His beauty and the beauty of what it means to belong to Him.

[10 : 31] And the whole idea of the blessing here, the beatitude is that it comes from turning from sin and self-reliance and coming to Christ for salvation and true life and then knowing what it means to live with Christ as Lord, relational being key.

And the blessing that's spoken of in these beatitudes has a present aspect. We're blessed now as believers. We're clearly blessed now belonging to Christ, but it also has a future dimension as we also saw when we were looking on Wednesday night at Habakkuk.

Habakkuk. There's this powerful recognition that what we have in Christ is now, but also promise and the beatitudes are full of that.

You know, blessed are those who won't, they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, they will inherit the earth. So there's both a present and there's a future reality in the blessings of God.

So this beatitude, blessed are the poor and spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God. And I think Corrie mentioned this last week that the first beatitude here is really foundational.

[11 : 50] It's a foundational reminder from which all the other beatitudes flow and it speaks about receiving the kingdom of heaven.

Discipleship, belonging to Jesus is founded on the recognition of our spiritual poverty before God. Not a popular message. Our need, our impotence before God. Take note of some of the things it doesn't say about the blessed person.

It doesn't say blessed are the confident, blessed are the self-assured, the popular, the successful, the theologically astute, the regular churchgoers, the morally upright.

Doesn't say any of these things. There's a foundational beatitude that says blessed are the poor and spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. It's the divine turning upside down principle that we have.

[12 : 48] It's what God does. As He turns things upside down for us, we see it in different ways in Jesus' teaching and the New Testament and the apostolic message. First Corinthians 1, 18, for the message of the cross, what is it?

It's not wisdom. No, it's foolishness. It's foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it's the power of God for it's written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent, I will frustrate.

It's this recognition that what the world regards as foolish, God in His wisdom reveals as the truth. Or it's what Jesus says in Matthew 16, whoever wants to save their life will lose it.

Whoever loses their life for my sake will find it. It's the divine turning upside down principle that we recognize that His ways are not our ways.

And in order to become rich in God's eyes, we need to become poor. We need to recognize the place of spiritual poverty.

[13 : 51] Now the Bible speaks about poverty in different ways. Just very briefly mention some of the different ways that the Bible speaks about poverty. It talks about those who are poor because they're bone idle and lazy.

You get that in Proverbs. People who have become poor because they will not do a stroke of work. They're just bone idle and lazy. And the Bible says that people who are like that need to repent.

They need to change. They need to make sure that they change from being like that because that's sinful. Then it talks about the poor because of circumstances out with their control.

Either born into poverty or they become poor because of a drought or other circumstances out with their control.

And the Bible calls on everyone to help people in that position and those who have money to share it with those who don't have or goods or materials or food or whatever it might be.

[15 : 02] The third class of people that are called poor in the Bible are those who are poor because of injustice or oppression. Those who are abused or those who are enslaved or those who are treated badly by those who reveal power over them.

And the Bible calls us to deal with that injustice. It calls us to stand up against injustice and against oppression and to defend those who are poverty stricken in that way and those who have no voice. Bible's very strong in that in terms of justice. Now those who are poor because of circumstances out with their control or those who are poor because of injustice or oppression are not the kind of poverty that's being mentioned here in this beatitude.

The Bible does speak a lot about other kinds of poverty, but here it's not speaking about those who are materially poor in that circumstance.

In other words, God isn't saying here, Jesus isn't saying here that there's inherent virtue in being poor. It's not saying blessed are those who have no money because well, they're going to get the kingdom of heaven when they die.

[16 : 20] It's not saying that. It's not speaking primarily about material or of poverty at that level. Although, although the good news of Jesus Christ does resonate in a special way for those who have nothing in this life, and we mustn't forget that.

And it's Jesus who says it's harder for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven than a camel to go through the eye of a needle. And there is a sense in which those who are oppressed and poverty stricken have more ownership of the gospel potentially because of their situation.

But this is primarily speaking about those who have come to recognize that before Christ, before God, for righteousness' sake, they have nothing to offer.

They are poor in spirit. They have nothing to bring, in other words, to God. It's the great sin of the Laodicean church who Jesus wanted to vomit out of his mouth because they were neither hot nor cold.

And He said, you say to them, He said, you say I'm rich. I've acquired wealth. I don't need a thing. But you don't realize that you're rich and pitiful, poor, blind and naked.

[17 : 38] And so He's exposing a poverty of spirit, or a lack of a poverty of spirit that the church in Laodicea have. And it's that poor in spirit that we read at the beginning in Psalm 70 in our Call to Worship, it's the psalmist often talks about himself as this poor man who cried, and it wasn't a material poverty.

It was a poverty of value before the living God. And here what we have this poor in spirit clearly refers to a poverty, and this what it links so beautifully with this morning, a poverty of arrogance, a poverty of pride.

That before Christ we have a broken spirit. Our pride and our self-reliance and our shaking our fist heavenward and our standing before Him as if we are God has all gone.

And that is to be the ongoing home turf of Christian character. That's to be the ongoing attitude of mind we have before God that we come to Him recognizing in and of ourselves we have nothing to offer simply to His cross we cling.

Now can I just make an awareness comment here because I think it's worth saying, and I think again, Cori maybe mentioned it this morning, being poor in spirit is not a qualifying virtue by which we earn God's favor.

[19 : 11] It's not like kind of false humility. Being poor in spirit isn't, it's not like we say, Cori was talking this morning about humility, you know, I'll try and be really humble and God will be pleased with that.

It's not that we say, okay, okay, right, I'll be really poor in spirit and then God will accept me. Because that's just another works righteousness, isn't it?

It's just another way that we're trying to earn favor before God. It's simply a mark of us having recognized we come with nothing and we offer nothing, but we receive everything by His grace and by His favor.

So being poor in spirit is recognizing our spiritual poverty before God that we can't make ourselves right with God.

We can't earn our way back into His favor. We are lost and dead indeed spiritually, but that He comes in His grace and touches us and redeems us as we cry out to Him with nothing and receiving everything.

[20 : 17] So briefly, what are the characteristics, other many characteristics of being poor in spirit? I'm just going to mention three very quickly. One is, and I mentioned this in our first prayer, it's recognizing how big God is.

Poverty of spirit enables us to recognize God is big, we're small, in a right kind of way.

Not that we're worthless, we're unworthy for sure. We're image bearers of the living God, we're precious at that level. But it's recognizing that He is the center.

Have you ever thought how difficult, do you ever think, if you're kind of philosophically minded you might think like this sometimes, do you ever think of not being the center of your universe?

It's really hard. It's really hard not to be the center of your universe. It's really hard not to think that everything revolves around you because we're self-conscious and we're at the center of our consciousness.

[21 : 32] But it's prayerfully seeking to recognize actually we'll be gone pretty soon. And God is at the center of the universe.

God is the one who is sovereign. And recognizing His bigness in many different ways. I think the smaller we shrink God, the more self-reliant we become.

Isn't that right? There's a kind of clear parallel there. If our God is small, then we don't cry out to Him. We don't really need Him on a daily basis.

We become prayerless and spiritually weak. So if you're never praying and if I'm never praying, it's because we can fit God in our pocket.

He's very small. He's not infinite and He's not eternal. He's not unchangeable. He's a small God. And so we become self-reliant.

[22 : 28] I'll get on in my own without God, without recognizing His gifts and His power in our lives at a daily basis.

So we go back to His Word and we find the revelation of Himself and His creative power and His glory and His purity and His riches and His judgment and the fact that we will stand before Him. And if we fall short as we do, if we always fall short of our own standards, which we often feel, how much more will we fall short of the standards of the judge of all the earth?

Which is why we rely on His incredible salvation. We will never seek grace unless we see our need for grace.

We'll never seek forgiveness if we don't think we're really that bad before God, because our whole life is comparative, just comparing ourselves with other people.

[23 : 36] The second thing is that we marvel at the cross. I think that's why God has given us it in the form of the sacrament as well, to remember again and again. His incarnation is remarkable.

His life is astonishing. A life of anonymity in many ways, rejection and then violence and then death. The cross itself, three hours of darkness. God forsaken of God, where Paul says, for you know that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor so that you through His poverty might become rich.

So there's this incredible swap that goes on, this incredible paradoxical reality of the eternally rich one becoming poor so that we can know the riches of His forgiveness as we recognize our need of Him.

His love, His forgiveness, His eternal life, His face, His face shining on us like the great prodigal father running out with open arms to receive His child home.

[24 : 52] My sins nail to a cross. Brilliant, astonishing, wonderful truth. So recognizing how big God is, marveling at the cross, these are two of the characteristics I think of poverty of spirit.

And the third is really a follow on from this morning is just humble dependence, a daily humble dependence on God. Every morning, I loved one hunter who led the Friday morning prayer time that we had on Zoom all through the first half of the year.

We'd introduce everyone and welcome everyone and thank God for a new day and for the health and strength to be alive today in this beautiful day. I never get tired of hearing that.

I never get tired of the recognition within that statement of humble dependence upon God as the life giver. Every new day is a blessing and a gift that He has given us.

Time is short and time is precious. We don't have much time. We won't be here for very long and we're in a battle, a huge battle as the evil one thrashes out in his defeated mentality to do as much damage as he can.

[26 : 14] We must be facing God daily as believers. We must be those who recognize our ongoing need of Him out of His mercy and of His grace and of His strength.

And if we lose sight of that, we descend again into self-reliance, don't we? So that the proud Christian is an ugly oxymoron.

There shouldn't be such a thing in our lives as the proud Christian. Yes, we battle with pride, we struggle with pride, but we should never be content with or seek to characterize our lives as being proud.

There are humble dependents, should be the mark of us all as we live our Christian lives. These are some of the characteristics. As we close, we remember that the great promise is for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And we oughtn't to forget that and we shouldn't forget that. There's a present reality there because we are blessed. Blessed are those who are proud.

[27 : 19] So we have the blessings, the benefits that God bestows on those who come to Him by faith. We become children of God. We become all of the things that He gifts us, including the Holy Spirit and the fruit of the Spirit and the changes that we can know in our lives.

He dwells in us now. We are citizens and belonging to Him now. And the Father's good pleasure is to be with us and to be in us in the person of the Holy Spirit. And we have eternal life now so that even though we die yet we will live.

Even if we don't make it to tomorrow, we have eternal life within us and we are right with God because of what Jesus has done, right before the judge of all the earth.

Isn't that a great thing? If you were to go this evening as a Christian, you're right before the judge of all the earth. That's an amazing truth. But there's also that future hope.

As many of these Beatitudes are framed in future terms, our hope lies in not only what we have now, but what we believe will be much better even in the future.

[28 : 24] And that's a great thing because one of the worst things I think in the reality of the world in which we live in is when people are drained of hope, when they have no more hope.

And there are a lot of people that don't have any hope in this world. It's a terrible thing. And increasingly we're seeing despair and hopelessness because things are out of people's control politically, environmentally, socially, personally, out of control.

Hopelessness, despair. We have the greatest hope of a future because we have it as a reality in the present. And the best, as I've often said from this pulpit, the best is still to come.

So in Christ we have this home, a family, a God and a secure future so that even though we die yet shall we live as Jesus says in John 11. And that's a great hope.

So I hope, I hope that we live that life. That we are poor in spirit, not to earn favour with God, but because we recognize who God is and we just fall at His knees.

[29 : 35] We fall on our knees at His feet because of what He has done for us. And we know His blessing and we know the possession of the kingdom with Him.

Amen. Let's pray. Father God, help us to know and understand You better. Help us to focus on Your truth. It's very easy for us Lord to move our focus away from You, to our troubles, to our battles, to the weight of feeling that we are at the centre of our own universe and we need to do everything to make things good.

But give us drainers of that self-reliance because it's such a heavy weight. It's such a crushing weight to carry. And let us just take off the burdens that we bear and lay them at Your feet and cry out to You about them.

And put on the yoke of Christ which is light and which is easy and which we were created to wear. So help us to see things more clearly Lord, we pray. Forgive us when we're deceived or blinded or when we turn away from You like the prodigal Son and help us always to seek the open arms of the Father who longs for us to have that poverty of spirit which is true riches indeed, real riches.

[31 : 11] So remind us of that. Keep us from chasing other kinds of riches as if happiness will depend on them. And we pray to rely on You daily, especially in prayer.

Make us Lord we pray, a praying people because that is everything. In Jesus' name, amen.