

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church
The Beatitudes #1
July 19, 2020

Sermon Summary #1

The Blessed Life of the Spiritually Impoverished Matthew 5:1-12

I don't think it would be an exaggeration to say that you and I wake up every single day of our lives to some new crisis, either in our city or state or country, or somewhere around the globe. It may be an opioid crisis, or a border crisis, or a Covid-19 crisis, or another wildfire crisis in California. It may be a nuclear crisis, an economic crisis, a crisis of racial unrest and hostility, or a crisis brought on by another shooting in a school or a movie theater or a playground.

Without wanting to sound pessimistic, I doubt if we will ever emerge from crisis mode. My sense is that no matter what we do, there will always be a crisis of some sort somewhere in our world. It may not affect us all directly, but we can hardly afford to ignore it. So here is my question, as we launch this brief series in what has come to be known as the Beatitudes.

What kind of people should we aim to be as we face down the countless crises we encounter? How should we respond to the challenges that come our way as Christians? What *priorities* ought to govern our lives? When we see the world seemingly spinning out of control, what does God want to see in us, his people? The bottom-line question is this: *On what kind of person does God look with favor and delight and affirmation?* What are the characteristics or qualities that God wants to see in us? What does Christ-exalting flourishing look like in a Christian?

When I ask that question, I'm not looking for a personality profile. I'm not asking where you land on the Myers-Briggs test or what your number is on the Enneagram. It doesn't matter if you're passive or aggressive or passive-aggressive. It doesn't matter if you're an introvert or extrovert or somewhere in between. It doesn't matter if you're sanguine, choleric, phlegmatic, or melancholy, to use categories from years ago. No particular personality profile is more godly or less sinful than any other.

What I'm wanting all of us to think about is *the kind of person that God wants all of us to be, the kind of person who will experience genuine, Christ-exalting flourishing*. In other words, there may well be 50 different personality types in this room, of varying degrees. But if you are a Christian man or woman, God wants all of you to be poor in spirit. He wants you to be the sort of individual who mourns and is meek and who hungers and thirsts for righteousness. He wants all of his people, regardless of your background, education, and abilities to be pure in heart and a peacemaker and a person who responds to persecution in a way that magnifies Jesus and his all-sufficient grace.

You Can't Pick and Choose Which Jesus You Prefer

Several commentators have noticed something instructive about the structure of Matthew's gospel. There are two texts that describe in summary fashion the nature of Jesus's earthly ministry. One is Matthew 4:23.

“And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people” (Matt. 4:23).

Teaching, preaching, and healing. Then we read virtually the same thing again in Matthew 9:35.

“And Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction” (Matt. 9:35).

These two statements are like bookends, in between which are two sections: Matthew 5-7 and Matthew 8-9. In the former we find our Lord's teaching ministry and in the latter section we find multiple examples and stories of his healing ministry.

What's important for you to see is that ***you can't have one Jesus without the other***. You can't say, "Well, I like the Jesus who teaches good theology and personal ethics and how to live according to the principles of the Sermon on the Mount, but I don't care much for the miracle working Jesus in Matthew 8-9. Give me principles to live by but not the power of the Spirit in supernatural signs."

But neither can you say, "I want the supernatural Jesus, the Jesus who heals the sick and performs signs and wonders. But don't burden me with what Jesus says about sexual purity and humility and selfless serving of others."

Sorry. But you can't do that. ***You can't pick and choose the kind of Jesus you want***. The Jesus who insists on meekness is the same Jesus who expels demons. The Jesus who calls on us to faithfully endure persecution is the same Jesus who heals lepers and opens blind eyes.

We read in Matthew 5:1 that Jesus "went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him." Most likely we are to envision two concentric circles. The inner circle would be comprised of his disciples, his closest friends and most devoted followers, while the outer circle would consist of the crowds that were astonished by his teaching and his miracles but perhaps had not made a firm commitment to him. It is, then, primarily his disciples, true believers, to whom this message is delivered.

The "Already" and the "Not Yet" of the Beatitudes

There are eight beatitudes. Some say nine, as they separate vv. 11-12 from v. 10. But I believe vv. 10-12 are concerned with a single beatitude. More on that when we get there.

Why do we call these declarations "***beatitudes***"? The word "beatitude" comes from the Latin word for happiness or blessedness. But we need to be careful here. Jesus is not primarily describing a psychological state of mind or a feeling, although we can't rule that out entirely. Rather, Jesus is describing those who are in a blessed situation. These so-called beatitudes, therefore, are ***descriptions or commendations of the good life***.

It's also interesting to note that the first beatitude in v. 3 and the eighth and final one in v. 10 contain the identical promise: "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Note also that the promise in all of the middle six beatitudes is future: "they *shall* . . . they *shall* . . . they *shall*." But the promise of the first and eighth are present: "theirs *is* . . . theirs *is*."

I think the most important thing we are to learn from this is that ***the kingdom is both present and future***. You are *already* in the kingdom. It *already* belongs to you, now. Yours *is* the kingdom of heaven. But the consummation of these promised blessings is *not yet*; they are reserved for the future. I spoke to you about this several weeks ago when I talked about the kingdom of God. Many of its blessings and its saving power are *already* here, but the completion or consummation of the kingdom is *not yet*. Much remains for the future.

Two quick examples will illustrate what I mean. Matthew 5:7 says that the merciful "shall receive mercy," but in numerous texts we are told that we have already received mercy from God (see Matt. 18:33; Eph. 2:4; 1 Peter 1:3). Again, in Matthew 5:9, we are assured that peacemakers "shall be called sons of God," but in Matthew 5:16 and Galatians 4:5-7 we are already sons and daughters of God. We will explore this tension between the already and the not yet in more depth when we come to each of the beatitudes.

So, the Beatitudes are a glorious declaration of how blessed and fortunate people are who already have entered into the power of the kingdom and experience its blessings. But they also contain an invitation to become this kind of person, with the promise that if you do you will experience in even greater abundance the blessings that are already yours.

Important Truths about the Beatitudes

(1) The beatitudes are not conditions or qualifications that you must fulfill in order to be forgiven of your sins and inherit eternal life. In other words, **they are not entrance requirements**. So please don't read these or hear me explain them and think that since you are not yet walking in the fullness of what Jesus describes that you must diligently work to get yourself saved. No! These are the qualities and practices of those who already are saved. Do you remember how Paul described this in Ephesians 2?

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:8-10).

You are saved and redeemed and forgiven and inherit eternal life because of God's unmerited grace and mercy. But this salvation expresses itself in those “good works” that God ordained for us, and among those “good works” are the qualities of life and character that are contained in the beatitudes. The beatitudes are the fruit, not the root, of salvation. They are the consequence, not the cause, of being forgiven.

(2) The beatitudes are what Thomas Watson called “the **sacred paradoxes** in our Saviour's sermon” (39). Whereas philosophers contend that one contrary expels another, that is to say, something cannot coexist with its opposite, “here one contrary begets another” (39). Poverty is thought to be the negation of riches: here poverty begets riches. Mourning is thought to expel joy: here mourning is the precondition of joy. Persecution normally yields misery: here it gives birth to happiness.

(3) The beatitudes reveal how contrary the values and perspective of the church and the world really are. In them Jesus “commends those whom the world in general would dismiss as losers and wimps” (France, 159). Conspicuous by their absence from this list are many of those things which the world prizes. Political power, popularity and fame, sexual satisfaction, influence, physical beauty, things which we are led to believe are essential for genuine human fulfillment, are nowhere to be seen in this list. That isn't to say that there is something inherently sinful in all these things. It is to say, however, that they are no measure of spiritual maturity; they have no bearing on one's place or position in the kingdom of God.

Jesus does not say that the blessed and joyful person is the one who is free from annoyance and discomfort. The calamities and crises that we face are not contrary to and do not preclude us from experiencing the true spiritual flourishing that God desires for his children.

(4) The beatitudes teach us about the nature of true spirituality. Upon whom, upon what kind of person, upon what sort of behavior does God look with approval? On whom does God smile? What brings joy and delight to his heart? What sort of person will experience the deepest and most spiritually satisfying intimacy with Jesus? The answer of the beatitudes is strikingly at odds with what most in society think: “Poverty leads the van, and persecution brings up the rear” (Watson, 39).

(5) The beatitudes describe what **every Christian** is to be like, not just an exceptional elite or the twelve apostles or the clergy or perhaps a few additional super-saints. These spiritual traits and practices are God's design for every one of you. They are possible for every one of you. Don't ever say, “Well, we expect Sam and the Elders and those who are prophetically gifted to display these traits.” No. They are to be found in your life no less so than in mine.

(6) The virtues, qualities, and characteristics described here are **supernatural**. That is to say, they are not inherent to human nature. You aren't born with these traits. You don't come out of the womb naturally meek or hungering after righteousness. These are virtues and character traits that are produced and cultivated by the Spirit of God. Natural endowments that resemble them are still only natural and will never find acceptance with God. The really good news is that the beatitudes not only describe what you and I **should** be, they describe what we **can** be. The gospel of grace can take the proudest man and make him deeply aware of his spiritual poverty. It can transform the meanest into the most humble and the self-sufficient into one who hungers and thirsts for righteousness.

(7) Living out the beatitudes (and the entire Sermon) can never be divorced from a right relationship to Jesus himself. Unlike other preachers and their sermons, the latter of which you may like and the former of which you don't (or vice versa), here you cannot embrace one without embracing the other.

(8) Finally, I've already mentioned something of the structure of the beatitudes, but there is even more for us to see. Observe the three-fold structure of each one. Each beatitude has a *congratulation*, a *cause*, and a *consequence*.

a. *the congratulation* (or, the ascription of blessedness) – How are we to understand the word “blessed”? Some suggest this is “Jesus’ prescription for human happiness.” Whereas I do believe that our desire for happiness and joy are good and God-given and that we should neither be ashamed or repent of it, Jesus has in mind here something more *objective* in nature. Blessedness is primarily a declaration of what God thinks about us. To be blessed thus means to be *congratulated* in a deeply religious sense. The emphasis is as much on divine approval as it is on human feeling. Then again, nothing should make us happier than to realize what God approves!

b. *the cause* (or, the foundation of blessedness) – The virtues on account of which blessedness is pronounced are not separate items. Jesus is not saying that some Christians are poor in spirit, others are meek, others are pure in heart, etc. *These are to be qualities of the same person*. All of us are by God’s grace to experience all of these characteristics. They are not spiritual gifts. Every virtue should be found in every believer.

c. *the consequence* (or, the fruit of blessedness) – Three things to note: First, each promise is uniquely fitted to its beatitude (the hungry get filled, the merciful are shown mercy, the poor inherit a kingdom, etc.). Second, the first and last beatitudes promise the same thing (“the kingdom of heaven”). This is a common literary device called *inclusion*. The point simply is that the kingdom of heaven is the central theme of the message. And third, are these blessings present or future or in some sense both? Probably the latter. “We enjoy the first fruits now; the full harvest is yet to come” (Stott, 35).

Should a Christian Strive for Happiness?

Before we look closely at the first of these eight beatitudes, something needs to be said about the subject of happiness. ***Blessedness is far more than happiness, but it isn’t less than happiness.*** This may surprise you, but the simple fact is that ***everyone does everything in order to be happy.*** You should never be ashamed of your desire to be happy. It is as natural as hunger. Many, if not most, believe that to the degree that they seek their own happiness they diminish the virtue or value of an act. They have this distorted idea that the only way an act is virtuous is if we compel ourselves to do it, contrary to our desire not to do it. We tend to measure the worth of an act by the depth of pain and sacrifice we endure to perform it. Doing something because we enjoy doing it seems to empty the deed of its moral worth. In my opinion, nothing could be further from the truth.

I know what you're thinking: “But doesn't someone commit suicide because they are *unhappy*?” Yes, but they choose suicide precisely because they are convinced (wrongly, of course, but no less convinced) that death will bring them more happiness than life ever could. Or perhaps it would be better to say that they believe death will deliver them from the miseries of life. In either case, they hang themselves because they no longer want to be miserable and depressed. Believing that living can no longer bring them the happiness they so desperately desire, they take their own life.

People struggle with what I’ve just said because it strikes them as experientially misguided. “How can you say I want happiness and joy and satisfaction when I’m always making decisions that I know are painful and sacrificial?” The answer is that we always choose what we think will *ultimately* maximize personal happiness and minimize personal misery. If you make a decision that is immediately painful and uncomfortable and unsettling, I assure you it is because you believe that such a choice *in the long term* will generate more pleasure than not. In other words, you gladly forego present pleasures if you believe the long-term benefits outweigh whatever short-term discomfort you might experience or sacrifice you might make. Likewise, you will ignore long-term consequences if you believe the immediate pleasures of a decision are worth the risk.

You may deny yourself the pleasures of a banana split now because you believe the joy of weight loss later is worth it. Your desire for a long-term satisfaction (the joy of a slimmer waistline) is stronger than the appeal of ice cream now. You weigh (pardon the pun) competing pleasures. Your will is energized based on your belief that one pleasure (whether immediate or long-term) is better than others. But in every case, you choose and act with a view to increasing joy and avoiding pain.

Satan isn't responsible for this. God is. All human beings desire optimum joy and unending pleasure . . . and it is good that they do! We must come to grips with the fact that the Bible unashamedly appeals to our desire for pleasure and happiness. And it does so because God built into us an undeniable, unrelenting, inescapable hunger for joy and satisfaction and delight. God built us to be fascinated, to be intrigued, to be exhilarated, to be stunned.

Now, it is true that you can desire happiness for the wrong reason or seek it in unbiblical and sinful ways. But your desire for it will never let up. There are no breaks, no rest, no sabbatical. This is no surface, fleeting diversion, but a basic, foundational, instinctive orientation of the human soul. You can no more escape from your desire for eternal pleasure than you can cease to be human, nor should you try. Let me be even bolder and say that ***your responsibility as a Christian is to be as happy in God as you possibly can***. In fact, it is impossible for you to be too zealous for happiness or inordinately committed to the pursuit of pleasure. As I said, your pursuit may be misdirected, as is the case when you prefer the passing pleasures of sin to the excellencies of God. But it can't be too strong. ***God's creative design was that your ravenous appetite for pleasure find fulfillment in him, for nothing more wonderfully reveals his glory than the joy the creature has in its Creator.***

Therefore, don't hesitate for a split second in your desire to experience the blessedness that Jesus pronounces over those who display these qualities of life. Don't apologize or repent!

The Poor in Spirit (v. 3)

Jesus does not mean that the poor are blessed in spirit, as if to say that material poverty is in and of itself a virtue. Being of a lower socio-economic status is no barrier to living a blessed life. But it is no guarantee of one either. If Jesus meant that being financially impoverished is essential to experiencing a blessed life, then it would be sinful and heartless for us to alleviate the burdens and suffering of the destitute and starving. If Jesus meant that it is blessed to be financially poor, we should immediately do away with our benevolence fund here at Bridgeway!

Having said this, we must not lose sight of the fact that there is, generally speaking, among the economically deprived a deeper and more intense desire for God and humble reliance upon him. Those who suffer from sustained social and financial distress have no one else in whom they might place their confidence.

Furthermore, Jesus does not mean blessed are the poor-spirited, as if to say that those who experience a deficiency of courage and vitality and zeal are more pleasing to God than others. This is not an endorsement of depression or laziness or the lack of enthusiasm. Jesus is not saying that the introverted, passive personality is more spiritual than the extroverted, aggressive sort. Neither is Jesus saying that the person with low self-esteem or a poor self-image is more spiritual than anyone else.

So, what, then, does this beatitude mean?

Is Christianity a Crutch?

You may have heard people criticize Christianity by saying it is a crutch for weak people. But why is that a valid criticism? Why is it considered a detrimental feature of our Christian faith? If you have a broken leg or have just had knee replacement surgery, or worse still, if you are partially paralyzed from the waist down, a couple of crutches or perhaps a wheelchair might well be a wonderful thing. People disregard crutches only if they view themselves as strong and self-sufficient and devoid of weakness.

But for those who humbly acknowledge that they are spiritually sick, that they are moral invalids, that they have no hope other than what Christ provides, the crutch that Christianity provides is a glorious blessing. It is a reason to embrace Christianity, not reject it. Jesus himself said that "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" (Mark 2:17). If you consider yourself spiritually and emotionally healthy and sin free, Christianity isn't for you. But for those who know their condition and despair of eternal life unless the blood of Christ is applied to their souls, the Christian faith is your only hope. Jesus Christ and his saving grace is the most glorious crutch this world has ever known.

There is an alternative religion in our world that often tries to pass itself off as genuine biblical Christianity. We might call it the religion of “self-ianity.” Its primary doctrines are self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-determination. But Jesus came proclaiming the necessity of our utter reliance on him alone.

What, then, is poverty of spirit? It is the *spirit*, not the bank account, that is poor. In other words, ***just as he who is without money is wholly dependent on God for physical sustenance, so also he who is without merit is wholly dependent on God for spiritual sustenance. Jesus is pronouncing blessed the person who says: “I don’t have a dime’s worth of merit; no righteousness with which I might purchase admission into God’s kingdom.”***

Poverty of spirit, then, is the acknowledgment of *spiritual bankruptcy*, the conscious confession of absolute spiritual destitution before God. The poor in spirit is the person who senses deeply in their heart that they are impoverished and approaches God on no other basis than that of need. This is the person who banks solely on the righteousness God provides through grace.

The poor in spirit are those who come to God and sincerely and humbly declare: “Lord, the only thing I have to offer you is my need!” Do you feel utterly powerless in and of yourself and hopeless apart from Christ? Do you feel morally empty, overwhelmed by your failure and sin? If so, you are blessed, for yours is the kingdom of heaven!

Conclusion

Is it significant that Jesus spoke this beatitude first? Yes! Poverty of spirit is the foundation of all other virtues. It is only when we acknowledge that we are empty that God can begin to fill us with righteousness. People who are full of themselves and bulging with self-confidence and self-reliance will rarely mourn. They are rarely meek. They hunger only for man’s praise. They bristle when persecuted and only make peace when it serves their own purposes.

If ever there were a time in our history when the beatitudes were needed, it is now. Look around. What do you see? I see selfishness and fear. I see entitlement. I see anger and pride and calloused disregard for the welfare and feelings of others. I see hatred. I see division. I see Christians fighting and arguing and vilifying each other over masks! For heaven’s sake, folks, where is our sense of spiritual proportion?

Can selfishness thrive in the heart of the spiritually impoverished? No. Can entitlement enslave the soul that is spiritually impoverished? No. Can those who are poor in spirit live in the grip of cynicism? No. What happens to a judgmental mindset when the reality of our spiritual poverty strikes deeply within? It vanishes. What place does racial prejudice have in the heart of the one who knows his/her spiritual bankruptcy? Nowhere. Can hatred long exist in those who have been convicted of their spiritual poverty? Hardly.

May God in his mercy restore in us a biblical sense of proportion and value and awaken us to the priorities of the kingdom of heaven, a kingdom that is ours, a kingdom whose blessings Christ has secured for us in saving grace.