

Matthew 5.3
St Stephens

March 14, 2009
Sunday Sanctuary

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

We are in a message series in Lent on virtues and vices, on the 7 deadly sins and beatitudes. It is a series on how God forms Christian character in a modern world, in modern lives. **Christlikeness**, is what we are praying for and looking for in this series.

- We talked about **hunger and thirst for righteousness** and contrasted it to **sloth**.
- We talked about **meekness** and contrasted it to **anger**
- We talked about **mercy**, and contrasted it to **greed**
- This week we are looking at **poverty of spirit**, and comparing it to **pride**.

But first I want to say a few things about the **beatitudes** that I said in the other services last week. The beatitudes are **famous and unique**, I think. These short sentences are the **best known** words of Jesus next to the Lord's prayer. They are a shorthand summary of the his **strategy for life and living**.

This is the wording of some of the Beatitudes in the paraphrase of the **Message**; just imagine **putting these up** on the wall of your workplace:

You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you.

You're blessed when you're content with just who you are— no more, no less... That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought.

*You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God.
He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat.*

It is pretty provocative stuff. So provocative, in fact, that over the centuries people have fallen into **different camps on how to interpret them.**

- Some people note Jesus went up on a **mountain** and think they are his version of the 10 commandments, the **new law**
- Others noting they start with '**blessed**' and don't contain a single commandment say they are **all grace!**
- Some people think they are **meant to be lived.** Imaging that!!
- Others think they can never be lived, but are more like **guiding ideals**, stars in the sky by which you can set your course.
- There were some people who used them as a platform for a **revolutionary movement.**
- Others yet see them as Jesus' strategy for **psychological health and happiness!**

I want to give you **my own take** on them.

They come at the **beginning** of the Sermon on the Mount, this three-chapter sermon about the Kingdom of God. The beatitudes are at the **front** for a reason, and I think it is because they are the **gatekeepers of the Kingdom.** They **let people in and keep people out.** They **treat people differently**, I think, depending on who they are.

As you approach,

- they **greet** you, and **announce** the Kingdom to you – '*Blessed...*' - but then
- they **interview** you, and **search** you...
- And depending on who you are, they **welcome you in or turn you away.**

Listen again to the phrasing of the Message on the first beatitude...

You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.

You can feel these words **search you, probe your heart**. He **looks to see who you are and why you have come**.

- If you are one of those people who is at the **end of their rope**, a sufferer, a sinner - they welcome you in, 'blessed!' they say!
- But if you are **full of yourself**, if you think you have it all **under control**, if life is **all about you**, you find yourself **turned away**.

What you are about to find out is that this word is **not only a gatekeeper**, but he is also a **physician**, a doctor, who has the **power to heal**. He puts you under his care, and **here is how it works**.

You get sent away and you don't like it. It makes you **mad**. You start to **think about it**. You think, '*who do they think they are?*' And then you think about it some more. Your thoughts begin to shift. You begin to think, '*Maybe I don't have things so much under control. Maybe I am not such a 'hot-shot'. Maybe I'm not doing such a great job of managing the universe...!*'

And **back you come**, and lo and behold, this time it is a warm welcome... and a word, '**blessed**' – the kingdom of God is yours!!! That is how the physician heals.

As we look again at the first of these beatitudes I want you to notice that it is **not strictly speaking a virtue**. '**Poor in spirit**' does **not mean** the same thing as **humility**. Jesus is not saying, blessed are the humble, for theirs is the kingdom.

Humility is a great thing but a problem comes the moment humility begins to grow **inside our fallen human nature**. Here is what happens: everyone begins to **think about how humble they have become**, and we begin to notice that we really are more humble than the people around us. And just like that humility, even real humility, is **twisted into pride**.

We are like the **Sunday School teacher** who was given an award for being the most humble teacher on the team – and then they had to take it away from him because he put it up on his wall!!

Jesus is **not advocating a human virtue** here at all, 'Be humble and you will get into the kingdom.' **Poverty of spirit** is not the great virtue of humility - it is actually **the lack of a virtue, it is having nothing to offer at all**.

Look with me for a moment at **the context** of the Beatitudes. At the end of chapter 4 in Matthew, Jesus has been in Galilee leading a teaching and healing mission. We are told that

"he healed every kind of disease and illness. News about him spread...and people soon began bringing him all who were sick. And whatever their sickness or disease, or if they were demon possessed or epileptic or paralyzed – he healed them all. Large crowds followed him... as he saw the crowds gathering, Jesus went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples gathered around him and he began to teach them..."

Matthew 4.23-5.2

He is speaking to his disciples **within sight and earshot of these crowds**. And looking out at them, he says to his disciples, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who are at the end of their rope...' He is watching and declaring. It is actually something like we call '**show and tell**'.

Jesus looks out at the crowd - the people that the world again and again says are **crushed and hopeless, broken and bruised, lost and useless**, this crowd that is coming to him out of their desperation, that have called in sick because they are sick, and packed up and left their homes and walked miles and miles **to find this Jesus** – this crowd that has **nothing to offer him but their suffering and sickness and sin** - and he says,

*'I say to you, **blessed...**'*

They had **never had anyone say that** to them before. Certainly not any religious teacher in Israel. But there he was. And so he spoke...

'Yours is the Kingdom. You shall inherit the earth. You shall be filled and comforted and satisfied.'

This is **God's medicine for human pride**. The way the Pharisees scribes had been running it, religion had put **human achievement over the entryway**. So it was the wealthy, the competent, the well born, the righteous, the slim, the trim, the well educated, the popular, the powerful - who were welcomed. The others were kept at a distance. The suffering, the sick, the sinners, the broken, those who had failed – who were left outside the gates.

When Jesus came along with announcements about the Kingdom being open and here and available, when he reached out to this underclass of lost people, they flocked to him. On that day when he went up the Mount of Beatitudes to teach his disciples, the great crowds followed him. When he spoke his blessed within sight of them, the disciples could see **an upside down world being turned rightside up**.

The last went to the front of the line. Human categories of achievement were overwhelmed by freely given grace.

That is **what the beatitudes declare.**

There is hope when you are beyond hope.

There is life in the very jaws of death.

There is healing when there is nothing but loss.

There is a fresh start when all you have known is failure.

There is no human condition that is a barrier to his blessing,
no problem so overwhelming,
no illness so deadly,
no failure so final

that it can exclude the blessedness of God, if we will simply come
as we are to him. Just as we are. That is what Jesus announces.

There he was. And here he still is today, alive and well and loose in
the world. The Lord of the beatitudes, the healer, the physician
himself. **Come to him**, just as you are and you will hear with your
own ears...

*You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of
you there is more of God and his rule.*

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew makes this observation,

When Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Matt 7.28, 29

There is **this crowd** again, and they heard it all, along with the disciples. Matthew says they were **astonished at his authority**. What Matthew notes is the difference between how Jesus taught and how the Scribes taught. They taught by **citing scholars and other teachers**, speaking in their authority - much as I would I teaching the bible.

But not Jesus. He teaches with his own words, citing his own authority announcing that the blessings of the Kingdom are real and here and available to any and all **no matter that they have nothing**

to offer. Having nothing to offer just makes more room for God and his ways. So he says, 'See for yourselves if it is not just exactly as I say. The Kingdom has come, I bring it to you

Prayer: