

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit
Revelation 3:14-22 and Matthew 5:3
February 14, 2016
M. Michelle Fincher
Calvary Presbyterian Church

Last summer I ordered an armful of books by a wide array of theologians who had written on the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. As soon as they started arriving, I dove in and almost immediately realized that we were never going to be able to understand Jesus' teaching in Matthew 5-7 if we didn't first study the Ten Commandments, and thus, our fall sermon series was born. You'll recall that the Old Testament commandments build one upon another, with the first one, "You shall have no other gods before me" being the foundation upon which all the other nine laws are laid. Like the commandments, the Beatitudes also have a logical, sequential beauty, and this first one, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" is the cornerstone of all that is to follow, not only in the Beatitudes but in all of the Sermon on the Mount.

It must, of necessity, be this way, because there is no entry into the kingdom of God apart from being poor in spirit. It is the fundamental characteristic of the Christian, and you'll never get to all the other characteristics described in the Beatitudes without it. Being poor in Spirit means, at its most basic, being emptied. It is a theme that is consistently sounded throughout scripture: You must lose your life to find it. The last shall be first. The fall comes before the rising again. We must start at the very beginning, and the beginning is to acknowledge our utter spiritual poverty.

This is one of the gifts of the law: it lays bare and convinces us of our spiritual impoverishment. It tears away from us our elevated sense of self-righteousness, shows us our overwhelming indebtedness to God, and brings us down to earth in self-despair. It strips us naked of our pretenses of self-reliance, self-confidence and self-expression. Needless to say, you will never find a greater antithesis to the world's values than what you find in these six brief words.

Poverty of spirit addresses a person's attitude towards himself. It has nothing to do with how we regard others. It is supremely concerned with how we see ourselves when we're standing face-to-face with God. And, if

your starting place in the presence of God is anything other than that you are a spiritual beggar, it ultimately means that you have never faced God as Lord of life and universe. That is the meaning of this Beatitude.

This first blessing is given in the absence rather than in the presence of praiseworthy qualities. It is a blessing conferred not upon the person who is distinguished for a particular virtue or who is remarkable for excellence in a specific accomplishment or talent, but upon the one whose chief characteristic is that of confessing her own sad deficiencies. What God wants from us is our need because then, and only then, can God fill us out of his abundant treasure trove of goodness.

We don't find it odd to say that a surgeon seeks out the sick or a generous giver seeks out the poor and needy. Yet, we have almost a visceral reaction to the notion that God is not interested in what we can bring to him or do for him. Charles Spurgeon says, "The pious may offer their ceremonies, but [God] takes no delight in all their rituals. The wise may present their inventions, but [God] counts their wisdom to be folly. But when the poor in spirit come...with their utter destitution and distress, [God] accepts them at once, and more so, He bows the heavens to bless them and opens the storehouses of the covenant to satisfy them. [We have a] Savior who seeks out those who need Him." (p. 21)

It is critical to note that this first blessing is identified with a characteristic not of the outer, but of the inner person; to a state of the soul, not to a posture of the body; to the poor in spirit, not to the exact in ritual. We've said it over and over: God looks at the heart and what he's looking for is hearts that are broken and spirits that are humbled before him. Jesus always begins at the center. He insisted that we could not live at the circumference unless we are alive at the center which is precisely the opposite of what we see happening all around us in our culture.

The modern attempt is to have quantity of life regardless of quality of life at the center. Jesus knew that pursuit of such a life would end in futility, cynicism and shallowness. It's no wonder, then, that as he comes to inaugurate his kingdom and make all things new, he starts first of all by laying his hand upon the human heart. In the beatitudes he speaks of what we are to *be* before he goes on in the rest of the Sermon on the Mount to describe what we are to do and not do.

That is, precisely, what the first of the Ten Commandments does as well. Do you remember it? “You shall have no other gods before me.” Idolatry exposes the true state of our hearts. It lays bare that our desires are really for ourselves, to have our own way, to be in control and self-sufficient, to pursue our own aims. Reformed theology has a term for this condition: it’s called the depravity of humankind. We are, at our core, in our heart of hearts, rebellious and self-centered. Of all our self-delusions, which are legion, perhaps the greatest one of all is that we are “good,” that we don’t need the mercy of Christ because we are “good people.” Clinging to our goodness is absolutely opposed to the self-humiliation it takes to admit that in and of ourselves we have nothing, we can do nothing, we are nothing, and that we have need of all things.

This was exactly the problem in the church at Laodicea. This was a community of faith who arrogantly assumed that their material wealth was a sign of God’s blessing and favor. Externally, they didn’t need a thing. Their building was in pristine condition—no leaky boilers or loud air conditioners there. The mission budget was impressively generous. Church programs were humming along decently and in good order. They could puff out their chests and say, “Look at us! *This* is how church ought to be done.”

But John says, “not so fast.” God’s reprimand is swift and cuts to the quick. “You think you’re blessed. What you don’t realize is that in actuality you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.” What a stunning rebuke. If ever there was a picture of the stark difference in how God sees reality, and how we see it, this is it. Laodicea measured themselves by the world’s standards, which is very different from measuring ourselves by God’s. In the Laodicean church God was looking at the heart to see if there was anyone to be found who was poor in spirit. God is looking for the same in our church.

In order to avoid confusion I need to say just a word about what this first Beatitude is not saying. To be poor in spirit is not a matter of suppressing our personalities. It doesn’t mean that we should be retiring or weak or lacking in courage. All of the beatitudes, including this one, have nothing to do with our natural dispositions or personality traits. They describe a spiritual work done in us by the Holy Spirit. A consistent theme in the Kingdom of God series we did three years ago was that the transformation of our desires and our inner selves is not something we can do on our own. Yes, there are ways we can either cooperate or hinder the

work of the Spirit in our lives, but Jesus denounces the whole idea that life in God's kingdom is something we can carry out on our own.

I think Martin Lloyd-Jones captured it well when he said, "The Sermon on the Mount comes to us and says, 'There is the mountain that you have to scale, the heights you have to climb; and the first thing you must do is realize...that you cannot do it, that you are utterly incapable in and of yourself, and that any attempt to do it in your own strength is proof positive that you have not understood it.' It condemns at the very outset the view which regards it as a program for people to put into operation immediately, just as they are." (p. 34)

Do you begin to see why it is not hyperbole to call this teaching of Jesus seditious? The world says, "Blessed are the rich, for theirs is the kingdom of the world." Christ proclaims as ultimate reality and truth the exact opposite: "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The culture rewards those who are successful, who make something of themselves. Jesus says, "Wrong again. It's the spiritual zeros that God rewards." We are pressured every day to assert ourselves and build up our self-esteem. The truth is that when we honestly face our spiritual destitution, it can never do anything but lower our self-esteem.

But, that's a good thing. The recognition that all our righteousness is as filthy rags is already a sign that God's grace is active and alive in us. Our actual sin is no problem for God. Our weakness is no stumbling block. It is our imaginary goodness that comes between us and receiving what God desires to give us. As Charles Spurgeon puts it, "Above all other evils, we have the most cause to dread our own fullness." When we are full of ourselves, God can give us nothing. But when we come to the end of ourselves, mercy begins.

This emptying of self, dying to self, as the Apostle Paul puts it, is hard. And, it's not a "one and done." I need to die to self not only daily, but multiple times throughout each day. As deeply as I desire to be a disciple of Christ and as many years as I've spent trying to practice being a child of the Kingdom, someone cuts me off in traffic, or hurts me, or something doesn't go the way I thought it should, and as quick as that, my ego is rearing its ugly head and making a power grab for control of my life.

And yet, that is precisely how God wants me to come. Not once I've got it all figured out or cleaned up, but right now, just as I am, with all the thousands of ways I fall short and blow it and just plain don't get it. And, when I do that, when we all do that, when we approach God humbly, acknowledging the truth about ourselves, God throws open his arms of love and mercy and also throws open the Kingdom of heaven to us. Can you believe it?

We're going to end the sermon this morning a little differently. In just a moment we will pray together the prayer of confession that is in your bulletin. Then, the musicians will begin to play "Just As I Am", #442 in your hymnal. You are invited to spend some time quietly in repentance and prayer, emptying yourself before the Lord. You may do that in your seat or you may come forward and knee here on the steps. There will be a point at which we will be invited to sing which you may join anytime your time of prayer is finished. We will remain seated as we sing. Then, we'll conclude with our assurance of forgiveness.

If Jesus were to speak the first Beatitude to us today, he might say it like this:

Blessed are the doubters, those who aren't sure, who can still be surprised.

Blessed are they who are spiritually impoverished and therefore not so certain about everything that they can no longer learn something new.

Blessed are the preschoolers who cut in line at communion or make a grab for the cookies at coffee hour.

Blessed are those who have nothing to offer.

Blessed are the poor in spirit.

You are of God's kingdom and Jesus blesses you.

Acknowledging our spiritual poverty, let us pray together the prayer of confession....