
Today we begin a six week series of sermons which will focus on the Sermon on the Mount. It could easily be a 60 week series. For the Sermon on the Mount is rich in content and descriptions about the Christian life.

Augustine described the Sermon on the Mount as the perfect standard of the Christian life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer based his book *THE COST OF DISCIPLESHIP* on the Sermon on the Mount. Unbelievers, like Gandhi, were impressed and influenced by its message.

This morning, I want to focus on the Beatitudes section of the Sermon on the Mount. And even here is a wealth of material I'll not be able to cover adequately. You will need to help.

Please take a pew Bible and turn to Matthew 5. First Book of the New Testament. The first Gospel: Matthew, Mark, Luke, John. Page 4 in the Pew Bibles.

The Context: verse 1, Matthew 5: "after he sat down..." a clear signal that teaching as to occur. For the Rabbis would always sit down to teach. Jesus did that and shared the Beatitudes.

There are 9 Beatitudes. Nine times when Jesus declares the Blessings for people. Note particularly verses 3 and 10:

"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of God" (vs. 3)

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs in the Kingdom of Heaven." (verse 10)

The verbs are present tense. The poor in spirit and those persecuted for righteousness have the Kingdom of Heaven NOW...today, presently. No questions asked, it is yours!

However, notice the Beatitudes in verses 4-9: the verbs are all future tense:

"will be comforted"

"will inherit the earth"

"will be filled"

"will receive mercy"

"will see God"

"will be called children of God"

Not yet, but to come. One of the truths here is also a truth in the Christian life: the Christian life is present and also future. We have a foretaste of glory divine in this life. But we also anticipate the great heavenly banquet with the Lord. We have glimpses of what God's world can be, yet not completely and fully.

You experience forgiveness from a friend who had held a grudge and you knew it was a divine moment.

The truth was hard to tell a member of your family about their addiction, but it finally broke the bonds and chains that had enslaved that person for years. The Kingdom of Heaven broke through.

You realized you had to quit the job that made you miserable and the freedom you experienced gave you a new life...a new world.

Helping to care for folks with Caritas took energy and time but was worth it when a guest expressed his profound appreciation of your hospitality.

You see, the Christian life is not an insurance policy to protect us against problems and difficulties. It is not something that kicks in when we kick off and die. It is not just the acceptable thing to do. No, the Christian life is real right now and yet there is more to come and more to see. The Beatitudes remind us of that when it declares the Kingdom of Heaven is ours now when we accept Jesus Christ and yet there is more to be seen. It will not be complete until we are face to face with the Master. We live in that wonderful tension: good, yes, but great still to come!

The initial Beatitude really sets the stage for us and for our Christian life. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

The poor in spirit...who are they? The materially poor, the psychologically poor, the personally poor, the spiritually poor?

I think we can miss the entire point of this Beatitude if not careful. We could simply equate poverty with piety. We could also easily equate richness with lack of piety. Both would be incorrect.

What Jesus is talking about here is spiritual bankruptcy. Knowing that we don't have enough to make it on our own. Knowing we are in default. Knowing that we are inadequate and helpless on our own. It is an acknowledgment that our lives are worthless save for the Grace of God. It is a declaration to us and to the world we are finished on our own and are worthless. It is an admission of defeat that we cannot make it on our own.

You see, we play what I call the spiritual bankruptcy game. We say, "Yes, I'm a sinner." I know I am not perfect. I know I am inadequate. We use all the right verbiage and the correct language.

And yet, we never get to the heart of the matter. The sense is whether we see how depraved we really are. If we can regularly declare our deficiencies and shortcomings. If we can admit we are less than perfect. If it really sinks into the inner core of our being.

We are spiritually bankrupt, and
we openly acknowledge and admit it.

That is what it means to be poor in spirit. And to add to it, we are only aware of our spiritual bankruptcy because of God's grace and God's invitation. It does not work to think we can somehow admit to our bankruptcy and think we have fixed our problem. No, we cannot earn, we cannot deserve, and we cannot obtain God's love no matter how smart we are or how cunning we think we can be. We cannot empty ourselves. We cannot make things right regardless of all that we try to do.

A classic New Testament text that illustrates spiritual poverty is about the Pharisee and the Tax Collector: Luke 18:9.

Two men went up to the Temple to pray, a Pharisee and a Tax Collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself. The Tax Collector stood far off and would not even look up to heaven and beat upon his breast saying, "God be merciful to me, sinner that I am!"

It was the Tax Collector who was justified. I would suggest that the Tax Collector proclaimed his status because God empowered him to do so.

It is abnormal for human beings to acknowledge or admit our depravity, shortcomings, and inadequacies. It is not in us. Even the admission of our sin and guilt is a gift of God. A gift that breaks through our egos and enables us to say what we cannot say naturally: God be merciful to me a sinner.

The first Beatitude is foundational for the Christian life. It is where our Christian life begins...and unfortunately many of us never are able to experience the joy and freedom this Beatitude promises us. For either our ego gets in our way or our denial of how worthless we really are stops us, or our need to be in the spotlight all the time is too great or our requirement to control all of life is paramount. All of these chains bind us: control, pride, ego, denial, self-centeredness. They hold us down and they suck the very life out of us.

But by God's grace, we declare our spiritual bankruptcy and acknowledge it is real, we suddenly have burdens we have carried for years lifted. We suddenly are in a realm of being free. We find ourselves as someone with new life and new energy. We literally become a new creation, the old has passed away.

Can you imagine what it would be like to declare your own spiritual bankruptcy. To give up all that you thought was important? To be open to a new life and a new relationship with Christ?

That is the promise of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount. No longer is it important that you look good. No longer that you always are right. No longer important that you

win. No longer important that you are number one. No longer important that others look up to you.

For you have finally found the One to whom to look. Your eyes are now fixed in the right direction. You are no longer blind but can see. You have all that really matters - - a relationship with Jesus Christ. Who loves you, who accepts you, who forgives you, who even accepts you just as you are - - warts and all. Is there anything more important or better in life?

Upon such a foundation, you can begin to live life...finally...and fully to God's glory.

Because of that relationship with Christ, you know when you mourn, you will receive comfort.

Because of that relationship with Christ, when you hunger for righteousness, you will be filled.

Because of that relationship with Christ, when you are merciful, you will receive mercy.

Because of that relationship with Christ, when you are pure in heart, you will see God.

Because of that relationship with Christ, when you make peace, you will be called the children of God.

It all comes together because of the poverty, the bankruptcy of the spirit...finally realizing that as hard as you try, you and I cannot make it on our own. But we are blessed...blessed by our Lord Jesus Christ, whose favor we cannot earn nor deserve but whose favor is freely given to you and me.

Will you accept the blessing? I hope so. It is yours!