

***“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:3)***

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We are considering this morning the opening statement of what we call Christ’s Sermon on the Mount. And what a radical statement it is!

The statement is in two primary parts: Part A, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” and Part B: “For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

I would like us first to give our attention to Part B and particularly to that phrase “the kingdom of heaven.” This is the blessing that comes to those who are poor in spirit.

This particular blessing Christ repeats twice in these beatitudes. So it must be of special importance to Him. Also we find that word “kingdom” no less than fifty-five times in this gospel of Matthew. So the question arises, Why so much focus on a kingdom?

No doubt you are aware that the gospel of Matthew was written for Jewish and the Jews of that day were very much interested in a kingdom. In fact historians tells us that at the time of Christ’s birth there was in Israel an unusual sense of Messianic expectation. They believed the coming of their King was near.

What king?

The King promised by the prophets of old.

The King who would sit on the throne of David whose kingdom would last forever.

The King who would rule the nations with a rod of iron, according to Psalm chapter two.

The King who would deliver Israel from the boot-heel enslavement of Gentiles.

The King whose headquarters would be Jerusalem.

The King who would restore Israel to her former glory, indeed greater-than-ever glory!

Ah, yes. Christ’s use of that word “kingdom” would catch the attention of that Jewish audience gathered around Him that day on that mountain side.

But wait! He said “kingdom of heaven”. What’s that about? It’s a kingdom on earth that we’ve been looking for. Something tangible and material, something here and now. Not something that is somehow spiritual and kind of like pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by!

Revelation 11:15 speaks of another kingdom. It tells us that the kingdom of the world will one day become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ, and He will reign forever.” And to that we say “Hallelujah!” Yes, but that kingdom hasn’t yet come. And at the present time these two kingdoms are at war with each other. And people have to decide which of these kingdoms they want to belong to and live for.

Christ’s opening statement is a watershed statement. Right up front He is saying in effect, “If you’re not interested in the kingdom of heaven, then you won’t be interested in the rest of what I have to say.”

So think how this would sound to people who want a kingdom on earth, not some spiritual kingdom. “And we’ve got to be poor in spirit to get something we really aren’t particularly interested in?” What a let-down! It’s like you telling me that if I do such and such, the reward I’ll get is a big bowl of boiled okra. Wow! Really? You don’t know how I feel about boiled okra! Your offer would have zero attraction for me!

How sad that most of the people listening to Jesus that day were much more interested in a kingdom of the world than in a kingdom of heaven. Too bad they were like that. Aren’t you glad that we aren’t like that? O, how I wish it were so! Truth is, we are not that much unlike the Jews of that day. When we seek the blessing of God we too are inclined to think in terms of the here and now rather than the eternal, the material rather than the spiritual.

Every day I find myself making decisions about which of these two kingdoms I'm going to live for. Always there are strong enticement to live for the here and now. The world, the flesh and the devil are conspired against me, always on the attack, enticing me to live for the kingdom of the world. God is looking for people whose top priority in life is the kingdom of heaven.

What about you? Every day for the rest of your life you, too, will be making decisions about which of these kingdoms you want to live for. It's not so much what you say; it's the decisions you make which reveal your priorities. Those decisions declare which of those two kingdoms you are living for.

I should note that there are true, born again Christians who try to maintain dual citizenship in both kingdoms. They've been declared citizens of the kingdom of heaven because of their faith in Jesus, but the priorities in their lives show that they still embrace kingdom of the world values. The Apostle Paul called these Christians "carnal" and said that in the day of final accounting, they will see all their life's accomplishments go up in smoke. They'll be saved, he says, but will have no treasure to present to the King. Folks, that shakes me to the core! I can't think of anything worse that could ever happen to me than to have nothing to give to this King who died for me – nothing to give Him that will be of any value to Him.

So how can we know whether we are true kingdom of heaven people or kingdom of the world people?

May I tell you what works for me? It's how I hold my hands. It's not what I say. It's how I hold my hands. It's how I hold the things that are dear to me – that tells everything about where my true priorities are. Am I holding those things with an open hand before the Lord, or do I find myself clinging to those things? A clinging hand says there are things in my life that I am not willing to offer to the One I call my King. An open hand says, "You, Lord Jesus, my King, are more precious to me than anything else in my life. All I am and all I have is completely at your disposal." That's how I can tell at any moment whether I am living for the kingdom of heaven or for the kingdom of the world. It's how I hold my precious things. That's the acid test for me. And folks, I have to check my hands often because they tend to close up on me. As you know, I'm sending some people who are very dear to me to a part of the world that we hear about in the news every day. Sobering news. My allegiance to my King compels me to hold these dear people with an open hand!

The blessings of these beatitudes are exclusively for kingdom of heaven people. Christ makes that clear right up front.

Now let's turn our attention to Part A of this text: "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

What does it mean to be poor in spirit? I've consulted a number of authors on that subject and my best understanding is that it means to have a keen awareness of one's spiritual need. I think the New Living Translation captures the essence of the meaning quite well when it renders, "God blesses those who realize their need of Him."

David, the man after God's own heart, repeatedly said "I am poor and needy" – speaking of his sense of spiritual need.

But what a profound contradiction that is to the wisdom of the world! Christ is here exalting what the wisdom of the world utterly rejects and despises. The world's wisdom says people who are poor in spirit are weaklings, afraid to take on the challenges of life. If you are going to make something of your life you need to have a strong self-image, lots of self-esteem, self-trust, self-sufficiency, self-confidence. Weaklings only get trampled on.

The late Alan Redpath said concerning this text: "The way up is down!" What a contradiction of human wisdom that is!

Pride is a monumental spiritual disqualifier. In this text it disqualifies people for the kingdom of heaven. It also disqualifies people for an intimate walk with God. God resists/opposes the proud, says Scripture, and gives grace to the humble. (1 Peter 5:5)

I was a quite new Christian when the Lord first began to teach me what a serious thing pride is to Him. I was age seventeen and one morning as I was reading Scripture I came in my reading to Jeremiah 4:1-2 where the Lord tells Israel that if they will put away their abominations out of His sight, then He will bless the nations through them. I stopped to think about the text to see if there might be in it some message for my personal life. Of course that word “abominations” stood out so I thought about that. Finally I said to the Lord, “I’m not aware of any intentional disobedience to you, so as far as I am aware, there aren’t any abominations in my life.” And I concluded that this text had no particular application for me. So I began to read on. To this day I am quite sure it was the Holy Spirit who stopped me and caused me to think, “Maybe I should give the Lord an opportunity to show me if in fact there is something in my life that is an abomination to Him. O, I know what I’ll do. I turn over to the book of Proverbs and read two or three chapters. That book is full of pithy, to-the-point statements. The Lord can show me if there is anything in my life that is an abomination to Him.”

So I pushed the pages of my Bible sideways until I came to the book of Proverbs. It so happened that Proverbs came open to me at chapter sixteen. And there on that page was a verse which I had previously underlined in red. Because it was underlined in red, my eyes naturally went to it. It was verse five. It reads like this: “Everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord.” I was stunned. Immediately I realized that the Lord had put His finger right on an abomination in my life. I loved the praises of people and would do almost anything to get praised. I was proud, not outwardly, mind you. I didn’t go around with my nose in the air. People may have thought I was humble. But I was proud in my heart. And that’s what this verse is talking about.

Since then I’ve seen a church destroyed by a proud heart and a mission agency almost destroyed. Pride is a deadly cancer. No wonder the Lord opposes people with a proud heart and embraces with His blessing those who are humble, poor in spirit, keenly aware of how spiritually needy they are.

But we also know this about the Lord: He doesn’t want us to go around as spiritual weaklings, lacking in confidence, afraid to attempt the difficult challenges of life. So the question arises, How can we be poor in spirit and at the same time full of confidence and courage?

Joshua provides us with God’s answer to that question. The Lord had commissioned him to go up against Jericho and other strongly fortified cities of Canaan. And I think we can rightly assume that Joshua must have had some trepidation about that. How can we tell? Here’s how:

Twice the Lord said to him:

“Be strong and courageous!” (Deut. 31:6) (Josh. 1:6)

And a third time the Lord intensified that instruction saying:

“Be strong and very courageous!” (Josh. 1:7)

And three times the Lord said to him,

“Do not be afraid or tremble or be dismayed!” (Deut. 31:6, 8; Josh. 1:9)

For the Lord to speak to him six times like this, I think we can assume that Joshua had some concerns about going up against those fortified cities of Canaan.

So how can you be poor in spirit with no great self-confidence – and still be very strong and courageous, unafraid to go up against places like Jericho?

Scripture gives us the answer to that question. The Lord told Joshua why he had every reason to be strong and courageous. Listen to what the Lord said to him:

“The Lord your God is the one who goes with you. He will not fail you or forsake you.” Deut. 31:6

“The Lord is the one who goes ahead of you.” Deut. 31:8

“I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.” Josh. 1:5

“The Lord your God is with you wherever you go.” Josh. 1:9

O, Christian friend, that's how a person who is poor in spirit can be full of joy and confidence and courage, even in the face of huge challenges. It's not self-confidence such as the world recommends. It's God-confidence! It's a matter of taking the promises of God at face value and marching to those Jericho's in our lives with joy and courage and confidence.

May I share with you how the Lord has given Sandy and me such joyful confidence and courage at an unsettled time in our lives? For some months we've been in a quandary about the possible need to make a decision that will have a huge impact on our future. And we have been keenly aware of our lack of wisdom to know how to make a right decision. For one thing we're not able to know everything we need to know and even if we had all the facts in hand there's no way we can know how that decision will impact us five years or ten years from now. So in our great awareness of inadequacy and need, we went to Scripture and decided to take firm hold of a wonderful promise of God. It's Isaiah 42:16. We both have it posted in places where we see it daily and often. It reads:

"I will lead the blind by ways they have not known; along unfamiliar paths I will guide them. I will turn the darkness into light before them, and will make the rough places smooth. These are the things I will do. I will not forsake them."

And even though at this moment we still do not know what decision we will ultimately need to make, yet in our uncertainty we have been able to be full of joy and peace and huge confidence. Not self-confidence but confidence in the God who has given us His word.

That's how people who are poor in spirit can also be full of joy and peace and courage and confidence. People who learn to take the promises of God at face value need not be fearful weaklings, not even in the face of Jericho's.

I believe it is by the Lord's arrangement that we are this morning having a part in sending the Millers back to Central Asia and the Ennis's back to Siberia. Those are difficult places. And these people we are sending are passionate kingdom of heaven people. If it were not so, they wouldn't do what they are doing. O my brothers and sisters in Christ here at Woodland Hills, may we be no less passionate kingdom of heaven people in the various places where God has put us. My prayer is that Woodland Hills Community Church will be full of passionate kingdom of heaven people.

Someone may say, "Well, those people are doing sacred work: Bible translation and evangelism and church planting. Our work is secular: driving trucks, working in a fast food establishment, staying at home changing diapers of small children. Secular work."

O friends, there is no such thing as the secular in the lives of those who are true kingdom of heaven people. May I illustrate that from a recent experience in my own life? For the last two weeks I have been wearing myself out daily doing lawn work. Our front lawn had become really shabby. But as I was in the middle of this huge task I began to wonder if all of this lawn work was a good, legitimate expenditure of so much time and energy. As I searched my heart I realized that what I was doing was in large part motivated by my desire to be a positive witness for Christ in our neighborhood. And our lawn had become such a disgrace that our neighbors were almost certainly wondering if and when we were going to do something about it. They would no doubt be feeling that our lawn was having a negative effect on their property values. Finally I realized that this lawn work had something to do with our witness to our neighbors. Yes! I discovered that lawn work can indeed be kingdom of heaven work. And if lawn work can be kingdom of heaven work, then surely just about anything can be for Christ's kingdom.

O may all the blessings of these beatitudes be ours, because we are true, passionate kingdom of heaven people!