

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

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[0 : 00] Now if you will, go with me to Matthew chapter 5. Matthew chapter 5. Roger has introduced to us the paradox of the Christian life.

The paradox of being a citizen in God's kingdom. Really the paradox of God's kingdom itself. From what Paul would refer to as the wisdom of this age, the Christian life, life within the kingdom, is very strange, foolish even, certainly counterintuitive.

And I think nothing illustrates us better than a story we read in Acts chapter 17. Paul and Silas, they are preaching the gospel as usual, and they are having some success.

Some of the Jews were converted. Many of the Greeks were converted. And the response of the Jewish leaders in that area was hostility, frustration.

And the accusation they make against Paul, Silas, and the other Christians is they are turning the world upside down. So in that, obviously we see that they saw a distinction, a clear distinction between the unbelieving world and the believing world.

[1 : 24] Between Satan's kingdom and God's kingdom. It was completely different so much so that as they saw people coming to Christ, entering the kingdom, they felt like the world was being turned upside down.

Now the reality is, they were not turning the world upside down. The Christians were, in fact, by the grace of God, turning the world right side up again. They were being conformed again to what God designed world and for man to be.

But from an outsider's perspective, it looks like they were turning the world upside down, when in fact it was sin that turned the world upside down. And God, through redemption, is turning the world right side up again.

Now as we go to Matthew chapter 5, the Sermon on the Mount, specifically the Beatitudes, we're going to spend a few weeks here because we get a real sense of this paradoxical nature of God's kingdom.

I will read just verse 3. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The series of blessings promised here in Matthew 5, namely verses 3 through 12, is what we generally refer to as the Beatitudes, which is a name derived from Latin and refers to a state of happiness or bliss.

[2 : 50] We could read this, Happy are the poor in spirit. Jesus presents the possibility of people being genuinely happy, and that available happiness is the opening theme of the Sermon on the Mount, which some may find hard to believe.

If you've ever read through the Sermon, if you understand what's said, you may wonder how could such a demanding and seemingly impossible message as the Sermon on the Mount be intended to make people happy.

And yet here we are, the first and great sermon preached by Jesus Christ begins with this resounding theme of happiness right at the start.

Far from being the cosmic killjoy that some want to make God out to be, assuming that He just wants to destroy all of our fun, God desires to save men from their sin, to give them power to obey His will and to make them happy.

He wants us to be happy. That's the goal. In this great sermon, Jesus carefully and clearly sets forth the way of happiness for those who come to Him in faith.

[4 : 04] Blessed or blessed means happy. It means fortunate. It means blissful even. Homer spoke of the Greek gods as being happy, using this exact same word that Jesus uses, because he says they were unaffected by the world of men who were subject to poverty and disease and weakness and misfortune and death and all of the things that hinder us here.

The fullest meaning of the term has to do with an inward contentment. An inward contentment that's not affected by external circumstances. That's the kind of happiness that God desires for His people, a state of joy, a state of well-being that does not depend on physical, temporary circumstances.

The word blessed is often used of God Himself throughout Scripture, such as when David ended Psalm 68 with the declaration, Blessed be God.

Solomon said, Blessed be the Lord God, the God of Israel, who alone works wonders. Paul spoke of the glorious gospel of the blessed God and of Jesus Christ, who is the blessed and only sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

So blessedness is a characteristic of God Himself, and it can be a characteristic of anyone when they share in the nature of God.

[5 : 38] There is no blessedness. There is no perfect contentment. There is no real joy except that which comes from a genuine relationship to Christ when we, as Peter said, become partakers of the divine nature.

When we become a part of God, when we share in God in that way, His blessedness becomes our blessedness. And because blessedness is fundamentally an element of the character of God, when we partake in God, when we partake in Jesus, we partake of His blessedness.

So it becomes clear at the start of the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus is speaking of a reality that is for believers, for believers, not for everyone in general.

Now others, they can see the kingdom standards. They can see the ethics here. They can see what's being said, and they can get a glimpse of those kingdom blessings, specifically in us, but only those who belong to the kingdom have the promise of personally receiving and experiencing those blessings.

This is almost descriptive more than prescriptive. To be blessed is not a superficial feeling of well-being based on your circumstances.

[7 : 11] This is a deep, supernatural experience of contentment based on an objective reality realized in the miracle of transformation to a new and divine nature.

The attitudes clearly seem very paradoxical, don't they? The conditions and their corresponding blessings do not seem to match, at least, again, not from a human perspective, from the wisdom of this age.

By normal human standards, such things as humility and mourning and a desire for righteousness and mercy and persecution, these are not the things happiness are made of.

These are not the things that make us happy. To the natural man or even to the immature Christian, perhaps, such happiness sounds like misery.

It's just misery under another name. But in a way, that's true. In a way, happiness is misery with another name.

[8 : 28] Jesus teaches that misery endured for the right purpose and in the right way is the key to happiness. That basic principle summarizes the Beatitudes.

The world says, happy are the rich, happy are the noble, happy are the successful, happy are the, maybe the macho or the glamorous or the popular, the famous, the aggressive.

But the message from the King of Kings does not fit the world's standards. It's very counterintuitive because His kingdom is not of this world.

His kingdom is of heaven. It's a much different realm. You know, the two kingdoms that we've talked about that you've heard Roger talk about, they're not described in Scripture as shades of gray.

One is light and one is darkness. Diametrically opposed, polar opposites. Jesus' way to happiness, which is the only way to true happiness, it's by a much different road than the world would suggest.

[9 : 44] Seneca, who was that first century, or, yeah, first century Roman philosopher who tried to mentor Emperor Nero, that horrid emperor, he wisely wrote, what is more shameful than to equate the rational soul's good with that which is irrational?

Now, you have to think about that a while before it sinks in what he was trying to say. But in context, his point was, you cannot satisfy a rational, personal need with an irrational, impersonal object.

In other words, to simplify it further, external things cannot satisfy internal needs. It doesn't make a lot of sense. Yet, that is exactly the philosophy of this world.

Things satisfy, we're told. Just take this, do this, buy this, and you'll be happy.

Acquiring things brings happiness. Achieving things brings meaning, they say. Doing things brings satisfaction. That philosophy philosophy is as futile as it is unbiblical.

[11 : 09] Doesn't work. Doesn't really make sense. When, excuse me, King Saul was distressed. His jewels, his army, what help were they to him?

None. None at all. When King Belshazzar was having his great feast and he suddenly sees the handwriting on the wall, quite literally. He was so terrified that his face grew pale and his thoughts alarmed him and his hip joints went slack and his knees began knocking together.

How much help was his military power or his influential allies or his great possessions? What solace did they bring? None.

The great Puritan Thomas Watson wrote, The things of the world will no more keep out trouble of spirit than a paper scone will keep out a bullet.

Worldly delights are winged. They may be compared to a flock of birds in the garden that stay a little while but when you come near to them they take their flight and are gone. So riches make themselves wings.

[12 : 21] They fly away as an eagle toward heaven. That's biblical. Proverbs says, Do not weary yourself to gain wealth. Cease from your consideration of it.

When you set your eyes on it it is gone. It's fleeting. How are you going to solve an eternal problem with a fleeting thing?

How are you going to solve a spiritual problem with a physical thing? You can't. To expect happiness from the things of this world is like seeking the living among the dead.

Just as the women sought Christ in an empty tomb. The angels told the women he's not here. He's risen. He's gone.

You're looking in the wrong place. Paul said, If then you have been raised up with Christ keep seeking the things above. Why? Well that's where Christ is.

[13 : 22] Seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above not on things that are on the earth. John said, Do not love the world nor the things in the world.

Why? The world is passing away with all of its lusts but the one who does the will of God abides forever. true blessedness as Jesus is really talking about here is on a higher level than anything in this world.

And it is to that level that the sermon on the mount takes us. It's not taking us backwards as some might think. It's taking us forward.

It's taking us higher. Here is a completely new way of life based on a completely new way of thinking. It is in fact a new way of being. The standard of righteousness and therefore the standard of happiness is here a standard of selflessness.

A standard that is completely opposite to our fallen impulses. To our unregenerate nature. It does not come natural to the sinner.

[14 : 42] It is impossible to follow Jesus' new way of living without having his new life within us. And I think that's an important point to keep in mind.

As someone has said one might as well try to in our day fulfill Isaiah's prophecy that the wolf and the lamb and the leopard and the kid and the lion they're all going to live together in perfect harmony.

Perfectly peaceable. Try that today. If we were to go to a zoo and we were to maybe lecture a lion on this new peaceable way he's expected to live and then we place the lamb in the cage with him what's going to happen is exactly what we think is going to happen.

When that lion gets hungry enough that lamb is gone. The lion will not lie down peaceably with the lamb until the day the lion's nature is changed.

That's why I say we have to remember the beatitudes are not quite prescriptive in the way that we think they are as though we can go out and preach to somebody on the street do this and you'll be happy.

[15 : 57] Chances are they'll look back at you and say I'm not doing that. I don't see happiness coming from that. It's important to remember that the beatitudes are pronouncements more than probabilities.

Jesus does not say that if men have the qualities of humility and meekness and so on that they're more likely to be happy nor is happiness simply Jesus' wish for his disciples.

The beatitudes are divine pronouncements. The blessed life, the happy life is represented by true inner righteousness of those who are humble, of those who are poor in spirit because they belong to the kingdom and they are partakers in Christ's divine nature.

They're his people. They've been transformed. They've been changed. And because of that they have begun to turn the world upside down or right side up as it should be.

you'll notice the beatitudes are very progressive. As we'll see they're not necessarily in a random or haphazard order.

[17 : 09] Each one kind of leads to the next in a logical succession. Being poor in spirit reflects the right attitude we should have in light of our sinful condition recognizing our sinful condition which should then lead us to mourn and to be meek and to be gentle to hunger and thirst for righteousness to be merciful to be pure in heart to have a peacemaking spirit and a Christian who has all of these qualities will be so far above the level of this world that his life will rebuke the world which will bring persecution from the world.

And you see that's where the beatitudes ends. people will become hostile because you are different and because you are turning their system upside down.

That's how different we're supposed to be from the world. We're so different that not only do people notice they're threatened by it. Let's look at this first beatitude from five perspectives the meaning of poor in spirit what does that mean the location of this virtue in the list the way to achieve this attitude to be poor in spirit how to know if we are poor in spirit and the results promised for having it.

So let's start with the meaning poor is from a verb meaning to shrink to cover to cringe think of a beggar a beggar sitting in the corner begging for anything he can get classical Greek used the word to refer to a person reduced to total destitution you know someone who's just crouched in the corner begging as he held out one hand for alms he would cover his face with the other because he was so ashamed that he might be recognized the term did not simply mean poor as we think of poor but begging poor desperate poor I've got nothing else I can do poor the word commonly used for what we might call ordinary poverty was different it was used for instance of the widow whom Jesus saw giving money in the temple she had very little but she did have two small copper coins that's what we're told so she was poor but she wasn't at the level of begging she actually had money to give one one who is that kind of poor at least has some meager resources one who is poor as

Matthew 5 3 is talking about is completely dependent on others he has absolutely no means of self support he's destitute now because of a similar statement in Luke 6 20 which says blessed are you who are poor comma for yours is the kingdom of God some interpreters have maintained that the beatitude here in Matthew 5 3 teaches material poverty that's what it's talking about being materially poor but I think proper interpretation sound harmonics if you will requires that when two or more passages are similar but not exactly alike the clearer one explains the other not the other way around we go with the clearer one the detailed one the one that gives us more information perhaps so by comparing scripture with scripture we see that the Matthew account is the more explicit account it's got a detail there that is important Jesus is speaking of a spiritual poverty poor in what spirit poor in spirit it corresponds to a material poverty but that's for the sake of metaphor that's for the sake of illustration it's not that we're talking about somebody who is destitute of material things if Jesus were advocating here material poverty he would have contradicted many other parts of the bible including some things he said himself here in the sermon on the mount that teach us to give financially to help the poor well if you're supposed to be destitute yourself what do you have to give if Jesus was teaching the innate blessedness of material poverty then the task of Christians would be to help make everyone including ourselves destitute but Jesus did not teach a material poverty is the path to spiritual prosperity that's not what he says anywhere in scripture that I'm aware now those who are materially poor do have some advantages in spiritual matters they don't have some of the same distractions that others have they don't have some of the same temptations and the material materially rich they have some disadvantages because they do have those distractions they do have those temptations temptations but material possessions have no necessary relationship to spiritual blessings

[23 : 00] Matthew makes it clear that Jesus is talking about the condition of the spirit not the wallet that's not what we're talking about here after he began his public ministry Jesus often had no place to lay his head but we do not read of him and his disciples begging on the street corner for food Paul was beaten Paul was imprisoned he was shipwrecked he was stoned he was often hard pressed do we ever see him begging for food?

no in fact it was a badge of honor for him to continue his tent making so that he could support his own ministry at times the Lord and his apostles were accused of a lot of things they were accused of being ignorant of being troublemakers insurrectionist irreligious even insane at times but they were never charged with being beggars what do we assume from that?

well we assume they didn't beg they had a little something on the other hand we don't see that New Testament believers are condemned for being rich Nicodemus the Roman centurion of Luke 7 Joseph of Arimathea Philemon there's just a handful of examples they were all wealthy and they were all faithful the fact that not many mighty not many noble as Paul says are called is not because they're rejected because they've got too much oh you're rich forget about you no they're rejected because so many of them trust in only those things they have not in Christ to be poor in spirit is to recognize one's spiritual poverty apart from God it is to see yourself as lost as hopeless apart from Christ we're all spiritually destitute doesn't matter what our education is our wealth our social status our accomplishments our religious knowledge none of that matters apart from Christ so the point of this first beatitude is just that the poor in spirit are those who recognize their total spiritual destitution their complete dependence upon God they realize that they cannot save themselves all they can do is beg for his mercy and his grace they know they have no spiritual merit they know they cannot earn spiritual reward their pride is gone their self-assurance is gone and they stand empty-handed before God

Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector as the Pharisee stood praying in the temple he proudly extolled his virtues and he gave thanks that he was not like those who were sinful especially that tax collector who was nearby the tax collector on the other hand was unwilling to even lift up his eyes to heaven but was beating his breast saying God be merciful to me a sinner the tax collector Jesus said went down to his house justified rather than the other for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled but he who humbles himself shall be exalted the Pharisee was proud in spirit while the tax collector was poor in spirit in his confessions

Augustine makes clear that pride was his greatest barrier to receiving the gospel he was proud of his intellect he was proud of his wealth he was proud of his prestige and until he recognized that those things were less than nothing he said Christ could do nothing for him Martin Luther till he realized that all of his sacrifices and all of his rituals and all of his self abuse and all of his religious works counted for nothing before God he could not find a way to come to God he could not find a way to please God even at Sinai when the law was given it's pretty evident that God's own chosen people could not fulfill the demands of that law on their own because as Moses was receiving the law on the top of the mountain Aaron was down at the base of the mountain leading a pagan celebration they couldn't do it on their own now there were

[28 : 09] Israelites who were spiritually sensitive they knew they needed God's power to keep God's law and humility they confessed their helplessness they pleaded for God and his mercy David for instance began Psalm 51 with the plea be gracious to me O God according to your loving kindness according to the greatness of your compassion blot out my transgressions for I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me you know other Israelites though they took a different approach they were so determined to keep the law on their own that they simply watered down the law they made commentaries and developed traditions based on that law but they rewrote it into their own little collection that became known as the Talmud here in the Talmud they had something they could keep not that they were truly keeping God's law but they made it easier to give them in the sense that they were keeping God's law all on their own but we can't not without God's power not without God's grace and if God's

Old Testament standards are impossible for man to meet by himself what chance do we have to meet the standards of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus says you know it has been said don't murder but have you ever been angry with someone that's much harder that's actually what the law was intended to mean they just didn't realize it but Jesus here I mean teaches that not only must people love God but they are to be perfect as their heavenly father is perfect we're told that our righteousness must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees or we will not enter the kingdom of heaven can we do that on our own certainly not well here's why humility needs to be first on this list I think

Jesus puts this beatitude first because humility is the foundation of all these other graces is a basic element in becoming a Christian pride has no place in his kingdom and so until a person surrenders pride he cannot enter the kingdom I've heard it said that the door to the kingdom is low and no one who stands tall is going to be able to get in we cannot be filled until we are empty we cannot be made worthy until we recognize our unworthiness we cannot live until we know we're dead we might as well expect fruit to grow without a tree as to expect these other graces to form without humility we cannot begin the Christian life without humility yet in the wider church today there's little emphasis on humility we spent three weeks recently on this subject there's very little mention of self emptying we can find go to

Barnes and Noble you can find all kinds of Christian books on how to overcome problems and how to be successful how to be happy how many books are you going to find on denying yourself how many books are you going to find on picking up your cross and following Jesus in the way that Jesus actually tells us to follow him you're going to find far fewer of those books and yet this is the way to happiness until a soul is humbled until the inner person is poor in spirit Christ can never become precious to us because he is obscured by self he's obscured by what we are looking at in ourselves until one knows how helpless and how worthless and how sinful he is he cannot see how mighty how how worthy how glorious Christ is until we see how doomed we are we cannot see what a redeemer the Lord is it's only when one admits to his own deadness that Christ can give him life

Proverbs 16 5 everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord so being poor in spirit is first the first beatitude because humility precedes everything else where Christ is exalted where Christ is exalted we are humbled where self is exalted well Christ is not Christ is not where self is king Christ is not until the proud in spirit become poor in spirit they cannot receive the king or inherit his kingdom so how then do we become poor in spirit well by definition it cannot start with us right it cannot start with anything we can do anything we can accomplish with our own power nor does it necessarily involve that we are putting ourselves down I think I made this point when we talked about humility we are already down humility is just the act of recognizing that simply being hopeless and helpless and in need that's no virtue of itself that's not

[34 : 01] God's will for anyone his will is to get us out of that condition and into blessing and the fulfillment of that goal really depends on his sovereign gracious work of humbling humility is not a necessary human work to make us worthy it's a necessary divine work to make us see that we are unworthy that we cannot change our condition without God that's why asceticism that's why physical self-denial mutilation and all of these other efforts are so foolish so futile they feed pride rather than subdue it because they are works of the flesh look what I've done look how I've denied myself look how I've made myself suffer they give a person a reason to boast in themselves in the flesh and I think these kinds of efforts are actually enemies to humility in many respects to be clear though even though genuine humility is produced by the

Lord as an element of the work of salvation it is also a command and we see that throughout scripture there are numerous commands in scripture to humble oneself which the Lord perfectly harmonizes with his sovereign work of humbling sovereign saving work is never without some personal cooperation and because of that it might be helpful to look at some of the steps from the human side of this divine paradox and some of the time we have remaining the first step in experiencing humility is to turn our eyes off ourselves and look to God turn our eyes off ourselves look to God when we study his word when we seek his face in prayer when we sincerely desire to be near him and to please him we move toward being poor in spirit it is the vision of the infinitely holy

God and all his sinless purity and perfection that allows us to see ourselves as sinners in contrast so rather than focusing on ourselves we focus on God which has the result of shrinking us and making us poor in spirit so to seek humility we do not look to ourselves or to our faults but to God and his perfection and what we should see in ourselves becomes quite clear second we must starve the flesh starve the flesh by removing the things on which it feeds the essence of our nature is pride and to starve the flesh is to remove really anything that promotes pride that feeds pride so rather than looking for praise looking for compliments looking for popularity we should be wary of those things we should be wary of those things yet because our human sinfulness has a way of turning even the best of intentions into its own advantages we need to be careful to not make an issue of praise and recognition the evil is not in receiving praise or compliments or any such thing but in seeking it in glorying in it okay be willing to take a compliment you can take a compliment humbly right you go looking for compliments that's another issue the third and balancing principle in coming to humility is asking

God for it ask God for it as David did we should pray create in me a clean heart oh God and renew a steadfast spirit within me humility like every other good gift comes only from God and as with every other good thing he is more willing to give to those who ask for it he stands ready and willing to give it long before we ask for it so ask now how do we know if we're genuinely humble how do we know if we're poor in spirit I'm going to borrow seven principles from Thomas Watson forgive me if I move too quickly but first if we are humble we will be weaned from ourselves we will be weaned from ourselves we will be able to say with David my soul is like a weaned child within me one who is poor in spirit loses his preoccupation with self self is nothing and Christ is everything second humility will lead us to be lost in the wonder of Christ second second

Corinthians three with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord being transformed into the same image from glory to glory so our satisfaction will be in the prospect of one day being fully in the likeness of our Lord he captivates our world third we will not complain about our situation no matter how bad it becomes we will not complain when I saw snow this morning I'll admit I broke this rule because we know we deserve worse than anything we can experience in this life as I've heard one person say children of God are as close to hell in this life as they will ever be because of that we should realize that nothing is really that bad that it has a purpose when tragedy comes we don't say why me

[40 : 28] Lord when our suffering is for Christ's sake we will not only avoid complaining or feeling ashamed but we will glorify God for it knowing that we will also be glorified with him and that realizing that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us fourth we will see more clearly the strengths and virtues of others as well as our own weaknesses and sins Philippians 2 again with humility of mind we will regard one another as more important than ourselves fifth we will spend much time in prayer just as the the physical beggar begs for physical food the spiritual beggar begs for spiritual things we will persistently knock on the door of heaven because we're always in need we always need something we're like

Jacob wrestling with the angel we will not let go until we are blessed sixth we will take Christ on his terms not ours we will not try to have Christ while keeping our pride no we'll not try to have Christ while keeping our pleasures and our covetousness and our immorality we will not modify his standards in order to accommodate our own desires Watson said a castle that has long been besieged and is ready to be taken will deliver up on any terms to save their lives he whose heart has been a garrison for the devil and has held out long in opposition against Christ when once God has brought him to poverty of spirit and he sees himself damned without Christ let God propound what articles he will he will readily subscribe to them

Lord what wilt thou have me to do amen seventh final when we are poor in spirit we will praise and thank God for his grace daily nothing more characterizes the humble believer than the abounding gratitude to his Lord and Savior he knows that he has no blessings he has no happiness but that which the father gives him through his love and his mercy he knows that God's grace is more abundant with the faith and the love that are found in Christ Jesus so real quickly we're already out of time but the result of being poor in spirit those who come to the king with this kind of humility inherit his kingdom for theirs is the kingdom of God God has gladly chosen to give his kingdom to those who humbly come to him and trust in him those who come to the Lord with broken hearts though they do not leave with broken hearts

Isaiah 57 for thus says the high and exalted one who lives forever whose name is holy I dwell in a high and holy place and also with the contrite with the lowly and spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite God wants us to recognize our poverty for what so that he can make us rich true truly rich he wants us to recognize our loneliness so that he can actually raise us up humble yourselves in the presence of the Lord James says and he will exalt you so by giving up our own kingdom by giving up the world's kingdom the devil's kingdom the poor in spirit inherit God's kingdom and all of those blessings and all of that happiness that comes with it we're dismissed of it is