



Today we begin a new series of messages, based on the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are a section of Scripture that I was surprised to realize I have not used as a series of messages. Outside of a couple of sermons with the context of the Sermon On the Mount, I have not preached on the Beatitudes.

The Beatitudes serve as the introduction to the Sermon On the Mount, and as the Sermon On the Mount is one of the most important parts of all the Scriptures, the Beatitudes – as the beginning of that passage – are of great importance, as they set the tone for all that follows.

The Sermon On the Mount – and all that it contains – also happens to contain some of the most radical, most challenging words ever spoken. They are the epitome of going *from preachin' to meddlin'*. Consider, for example, the words of Jesus in verses 10 – 12:

10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

12 Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. I'll be honest, when I read those words I want to ask *are you kidding me?* Don't you find those words to be incredibly challenging? Do you want to be persecuted, and then rejoice about it? Do you want to be insulted and have people say things about you that aren't true?

The Beatitudes are beautiful words, but they are very challenging words as well, and let's hear them now.

Matthew 5:1-12 –

1 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His

*disciples came to him,
2 and he began to teach them. He said:
3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.
12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Before speaking about the poor in spirit, I want to speak about one matter related to the Beatitudes in general, and it is this –

The Beatitudes challenge us to open our eyes, our minds, and our hearts to true life.

I have often commented on the fact that Jesus sometimes spoke in what we would call opposites, meaning that Jesus would make a declaration that stated the opposite of what was a generally accepted view about life. He said, for instance, that *the last will be first, and the first will be last* (Matthew 20:16) and *you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many* (Matthew 20:25-28).

The reason he did this, I believe, was to make plain the reality that the world in which we live can condition us to accept a view of life that is not only misleading, but an outright lie. To seek power, to seek to be exalted above others, and to want to get ahead of everyone else, Jesus plainly said, is a false presentation of what life should be. So the Beatitudes are Jesus’ way of revealing that the expectations and aspirations of the world are, in many cases, wrong.

And this really gets to the heart of the Christian faith, I believe. Faith is sometimes portrayed as being primarily about either how good a person is or about what they believe. Don’t misunderstand me; I am not diminishing in any way the importance of living a life that is ethical and moral, and I also affirm that what we believe is important. It is important to remember, however, that here is an element of faith that goes much deeper, and it is this – faith, as presented by Jesus, is the ability to live in a way that sees

through the falsehoods and illusions that are presented to us and to embrace the reality of the life that he presents to us.

Allow me to give an example or two of what I mean. Some years ago I visited an historical community in another part of our state (www.washingtonky.com). It was a very interesting visit, particularly the church in that community that dated back many years, well into the 1800s. There was a balcony in the church but the only way to get into the balcony was through two doors on the front of the building. But there were no steps to the doors. There were no steps because the balcony was for slaves, and the slaves would get into the balcony by climbing ladders, and then the ladders were taken down so that they could not escape during the service. Here's one of the things we can learn from that – when you live in the middle of an historical moment, you might not be able to recognize that what you are doing is completely and absolutely against the will of God. It is hard for us to imagine that it was once perfectly acceptable in our country – and other countries – to own another human being as though they were property. It was perfectly acceptable to buy and sell those human beings as though they were simply another commodity being taken to market. It was so acceptable, in fact, that people could sit in a church, in a worship service, testifying of their belief in the God of this universe who created all people, and yet sit there while their slaves were placed in the balcony essentially as prisoners, and they would listen to sermons that upheld that way of living as not only right, but as the will of God. When the minister spoke of that being the will of God they would nod their heads in agreement that it was what God wanted. Hard to believe, isn't it?

There was a time when African-Americans could not vote, and that was, for many years, widely accepted. There was a time when women were not only forbidden from voting, they were forbidden from running for office and from engaging in many types of work. Just last year our society awakened to the harsh reality of sexual harrassment that has been suffered by women for ages. It was acceptable, in the minds of some men for many years, that it was their right to treat women in such a horrible manner. Once those stories began coming to light, our society had a moment of reckoning and questioned how such actions were ever allowed to take place, with the full knowledge of many. There are many other historical examples I could offer this morning but I hope you see my point – as we live in a particular historical context there are always things that we cannot see as wrong because our context tells us they are right and we are conditioned to think they are right. What might we be missing now? In fifty years, what might people look back to and say, *how did they ever understand that to be acceptable? How could they sit in church and believe that to be God's will?*

What Jesus seeks to do in the Beatitudes is to remove the blinders from our eyes so that we can see what it is that God wants us to understand about life and how we ought to live.

So what does it mean, then, when Jesus says *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven?* What does it mean to be *poor in spirit* and why is the kingdom

of heaven theirs? It's hard to understand what it means to be poor in spirit, I think. For one thing, we don't like that word *poor*. Nobody wants to be poor, do they, even if it is poor in spirit. I have been amused in the past week or so with the lottery fever that is sweeping the nation. I will admit that it is a lot of money that is sitting there, waiting for that one in about a twenty trillion chance of being claimed. I stood in line at a store the other day while someone bought a big stack of tickets. I just wanted to pay for my candy bar and be on my way, but this person was purchasing a serious stack of lottery tickets. I was tempted to say, *you know, as much as you're spending there, you would be a lot better off to keep that money in your pocket*. But I didn't. Who bought a ticket? You don't have to raise your hand and I'm not judging you if you did, because who doesn't want to be wealthy, but I have to say, I find it amusing when people run out and buy a lottery ticket only when the jackpot gets to around half a billion dollars. It's as though they think *\$100 million? Nah, that's not really worth bothering about*, because if you're going to be wealthy, why not be *really* wealthy, right?

In the time of Jesus, to be blessed meant to be wealthy. Everyone knew that. Everyone knew that connection. There was no doubt that when you referred to someone as *blessed* you meant they were wealthy. So when Jesus says that it is the *poor in spirit* who are blessed it would have shocked his audience into attention. It was a moment that left the assembled crowd saying *wait, what? Did I hear that right?*

That means that Jesus was telling people to rethink not only what it meant to be blessed, but to rethink who was blessed. If you were poor, and most people in that day were relatively poor, it was an accepted view that it was because that is what God wanted. God blessed those he loved and God chose to bless them and if you weren't one of them it was for a very simple reason – God chose not to bless you. Think about that for a moment – the far, far majority of people in the day of Jesus would think it impossible for them to be blessed. They couldn't be, because they were not wealthy. And to make matters worse, because they believed that blessing came from God – especially financial blessing – it was God who had condemned them to their poverty and it was God who was withholding any sense of blessing from them. There is still an element around today, and it's called the prosperity gospel. The proponents of the prosperity gospel don't say it that plainly, and I don't believe they understand themselves to be saying that God is condemning anyone to poverty, but the implication is still the same, and that implication is that God chooses to bless some and if you are not blessed, especially financially, well, you can make the connection yourself.

In saying *blessed are the poor in spirit*, Jesus was presenting a way of looking at life that was very different from the accepted view of the time. Jesus was saying, *guess what? The accepted wisdom of the day is wrong. You aren't poor because that's what God chose for you and wanted for you. You aren't unloved by God because you are poor. On the contrary, you are blessed regardless of your financial or social station in life. In fact, you might be blessed because of your lowly station in life.*

Jesus was saying you could be blessed even if you were not wealthy. Even if you had very little, God blessed you. Even if you were poor, you were blessed by God. But not just poor, but *poor in spirit* as well, which meant all the associated ills and struggles that came with poverty, which were many. Even if you were ground down by the struggle of life, even if you were incredibly discouraged by how difficult life could be, even if you felt as though you were living a marginal existence of which no one cared, you could still be blessed.

That was a radical truth for people to hear in that day, but it was the truth. The people who were teaching otherwise were wrong and they were teaching a lie and the people who are still teaching or implying the same today are wrong and are teaching a lie.

I think it would be to our benefit to ask the question, then, have we too narrowly defined who it is that God chooses to bless and who God chooses to love? I have heard ministers confidently proclaim that God does not love certain groups of people, just as I'm sure the religious leaders in the day of Jesus did. And I'm confident that the ministers today who confidently proclaim that God does not love certain groups of people are just as wrong as those in the day of Jesus who confidently proclaimed they also knew who God loved and who God blessed. We are not the ones who get to decide who God will bless or not bless. I have heard too many people over the years say something along the way of *I don't think God cares much about me*. And the primary reason why they would make such a comment, I believe, is because they have been told that God doesn't care about them. The truth is, however, that God does care very much about them.

When our kids were younger our family took a trip to Mammoth Cave. It is a fascinating place to visit, particularly at one point in the tour. If you have been to Mammoth Cave, you will remember the experience I'm about to relate. There is a point, deep in the cave, when you enter a large room, about the size of this sanctuary. While in that part of the cave, the lights are turned out. Most of the time, when we are in the dark, it's not always that dark. Generally speaking, even in the dark, there is a bit of light coming from somewhere. But deep in Mammoth Cave, when the lights go out, it is absolute darkness. At that point, you literally cannot see your hand in front of your face. Even when you move your hand just inches in front of your face it is impossible to sense any movement at all. It only takes a few moments to feel a sense of panic, especially as it becomes very quiet and you wonder if everyone else has somehow slipped away and left you there! At the moment when you feel the panic rising within, the guide strikes a match, and it is absolutely amazing how that little bit of light brings so much illumination to that room. A little bit of light, in such darkness, truly brings a lot of illumination.

As we have just come through the season of Christmas, where we speak often of Jesus as the Light of the World, let us remember that his light brings illumination to us in the form of having our eyes opened to the illusions and the lies of our world. In the Beatitudes, Jesus seeks to open our eyes to the truth of life, and helps us to see beyond the illusions and the lies that our particular moment in time teaches to us.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Indeed. And the good news is, you are blessed!