

**“Kingdom Blessings”**  
**Matthew 5:1-11**  
**June 28, 2015**

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**INTRODUCTION:**

We are beginning today a study of the most famous sermon in the history of the world, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Every good sermon has a theme, and this one is no exception. Jesus focuses this sermon on the topic of the kingdom of God. Matthew has already summarized Jesus’ ministry back in the previous chapter. **“And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people”** (4:23). Jesus preached the good news of the kingdom, and this sermon is a summary of that preaching.

The opening section of Jesus’ sermon is what we refer to as the “Beatitudes”? This is not the way we commonly speak today, going around pronouncing blessings upon people. Though it might be a little obscure to us, the pronouncement of blessing was plain as day to Jesus’ original audience. They would have understood it to refer back to the blessings and curses of the Old Testament, blessings upon those who kept God’s covenant and curses upon those who failed to do so. This is a list, then, not of different things we are to make sure we are doing, but basic marks of all God’s people. This is not like extra credit for some elite group of Christians, but the basic minimum for all Christians. While no Christian embodies these qualities perfectly, all Christians possess all of them to some degree. It is an all or nothing kind of list for those who are insiders as opposed to outsiders. When God undertakes to work in your life, this is what it looks like. These blessings are not randomly listed, but follow the order in which God works in our lives, beginning with our growing awareness of our spiritual bankruptcy and continuing through to our learning to love God and love others.

So as we look at this list today, use it as Jesus intended, for some self-assessment. Don’t allow the devil to hijack these good words from Jesus and use it for condemnation. Rather, if you determine that these qualities are not present in your life, seek the remedy that is within the words themselves. They not only describe the marks of the Christian, but also the path one might follow in becoming a Christian. We are going to look at the first four today, and then the balance of them next week, adding in verses 13-16.

**I. Poverty of Spirit**

Eugene Peterson paraphrases this “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule” (*The Message*).

Jesus is using material poverty to describe the attitude required of us toward God. To be poor is to be powerless. I meet monthly with a group of pastors who get together to talk about preaching and pastoring. Four of the eight of us are African Americans who minister in African-American churches. One of these brothers has a poor congregation, and he was telling me that their response to sickness in the congregation is different than in our congregation. Our concern is to pray for healing and to make sure we seek the help of the right medical professionals. He said that the first thought among his people is a financial one since most have no health insurance and little money. Even simple health problems become major challenges because of the powerlessness of their impoverished situation. Wendy lost a filling in her tooth earlier this week, but the dentist was able to see her first thing the next morning and the filling was replaced quickly and proficiently before there was any real pain. But imagine if you didn't have the money or the insurance coverage to take care of this, and you faced the prospect of a significant toothache. You would be in a situation of facing need with no resources to meet that need.

Jesus is saying here that we are blessed when we realize that this is our spiritual condition before God. The reason is that it is only the spiritually bankrupt who possess the kingdom of heaven. It is not the good who get into heaven and the bad who are left out, but the humble who get in and the proud who get left out. You don't get to first base with God if you come to him with anything that you think commends you to him. One stanza of Toplady's famous hymn, "Rock of Ages," expresses this well. "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace; foul, I to the Fountain fly; wash me, Savior, or I die."

Allow me to push you a little on this. Do you know anything of this blessing of spiritual bankruptcy? Maybe you're thinking, "Doesn't our pastor know that we are Presbyterians and that we are champions of the doctrine of total depravity? Of course I know about spiritual bankruptcy." Let me suggest to you, though, that it is one thing to agree in theory with the doctrine of total depravity and quite another to possess this quality of being poor in spirit. The difference lies in the next beatitude, that of sorrow. So let's turn there next.

## **II. Sorrow**

When Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who mourn, he has in mind mourning for sin. He's not saying that sad people in general are blessed and happy people not blessed. To say this differently, confession of sin must go beyond our minds to our emotions. A Christian not only acknowledges in the mind spiritual bankruptcy because of sinfulness, but also grieves the sin in his heart. Paul speaks of this as godly sorrow and contrasts it with worldly sorrow (2 Cor. 7:10). Worldly sorrow is selfish, grieving the consequences of sin in one's life but not grieving the sin itself. If I speak some angry and rash words

against my wife, I might regret the consequences of my words when I see the hurt they brought to her. I might be sad and wish I hadn't said them, but that is not what this beatitude is talking about. It is talking about a sorrow that focuses not on the consequences of my actions or words but upon the hurt they bring to the God who has loved me and died for me. This sorrow doesn't try to minimize our sin by explaining it away, but fully owns it and grieves it.

The result of this mourning of our sin is, **“they shall be comforted.”** They don't comfort themselves, but are comforted by God himself. There is a paradox in this that can be seen if we translate this, “Happy are the unhappy.” It is only those who honestly grieve their sin without trying to excuse it who find deliverance from the grief of this sin. Charles Wesley's great hymn expresses this well. “He speaks, and listening to his voice new life the dead receive, the mournful, broken hearts rejoice, the humble poor believe.”

There is a secondary implication of this that is important. Though this beatitude is speaking primarily of mourning for sin, it is also true that only as we learn to grieve our losses in general that we also learn to experience comfort. To live in denial of the pain in our lives keeps us from being healed and from experiencing comfort. I somehow got the idea growing up that real men don't cry. No one explicitly taught that to me, but I somehow drew that conclusion. And I found that it is possible to keep yourself from crying, but only at a high cost. As you do so, the entire emotional side of your life shrinks, including the more positive emotions such as joy. You can't just quiet the negative emotions and leave the positive ones untouched. Notice how that is taught here. Jesus says that it is those who mourn who will be comforted. To lose mourning is also to lose comfort.

I think the apostle Paul is an example of this. Before his conversion, his emotional life had to have been in turmoil because of his complicity in putting Christians to death. You simply can't take part in that kind of taking of life without something inside of you dying. When Paul was converted, though, we see great evidence of the restoration of the emotional side of his life. He learns to weep for his fellow Jews who don't know Jesus. He experiences regular joy, even when he's in prison. In short, the whole of his emotional life gets restored as he learned to mourn for his sin.

How can we get such mourning for sin? When all is said and done, only God can give this to us. So we must pray and ask him for it. But there is something else, too, and we see it in the next beatitude.

### **III. Meekness**

Jesus says next that the meek are blessed because they will inherit the earth. Meekness is not easy to define. Though it sounds similar to the word

weakness, it is completely unrelated to that word. It is something of a combination of humility and gentleness. Its meaning is best seen in two biblical characters who are noted as excelling in this quality, Moses and Jesus. What we learn from them is that meekness comes as we learn to submit ourselves to God. When Moses first had the sense that he was going to be used of God to deliver the nation of Israel from their Egyptian bondage, he took action by killing the Egyptian master who was cruelly treating the Israelite slave. God had to teach Moses meekness, and it took forty years of tending sheep in the wilderness for him to learn that the deliverance he would bring would come not by his power, but by his submission to God's ways and God's power. To be meek requires submission to God. Meek people have learned to trust God's power instead of their own. Meek people have learned that there are unseen and unintended consequences whenever they assert their own power, so it is better to wait on God and submit to him in all things.

The best test I know for the presence or absence of meekness is found in a command Paul gave. **“Do all things without grumbling or questioning”** (Phil. 2:14). A meek person submits to God in the everyday affairs of life and a grumbler does not. It is possible to have a grumbling heart even if no grumbling word ever comes out of your mouth. One day this past week, I just found myself with a grumbling heart. No one around me had really done anything wrong or improper, but I was just generally irritated at things not going the way I wanted them to go. As I thought about this later, it became evident to me that my grumbling heart was due to a desire to make central my own kingdom instead of the kingdom of God. What I really wanted was for everything to work out in life as I imagined it should for my own comfort and convenience. Those with meekness, on the other hand, gladly submit to God's running of his universe. Meek people trust that he knows best. How do I know that the slow driver in front of me, who causes my anger to begin to rise, is not being used of God to deliver me from an accident I would be in if I didn't slow down?

Notice the reason given for the blessing on the meek. **“They shall inherit the earth”** (v. 5). That's a pretty good outcome, I would say. When you let God run your world and when you submit to his wisdom in doing so, you get everything, inheriting the new earth along with God's people. The best case scenario for my running of my own life is far less than this. If I believe this, I become humble, gentle, patient with setbacks and with people who disrupt my life. In short, I become meek, not insisting on asserting my own power and control, but resting in God's wise leading and directing of his world. As the hymn writer says, “Whate'er my God ordains is right... I take content, what he hath sent; his hand can turn my griefs away, and patiently I wait his day.”

#### **IV. Deep Desire**

You might think that meekness could easily turn into passivity. If we let God be in control, then all that's left for us to do is just to go along for the ride. But that is not the case. It is true that we die to our passion for our kingdom to be realized. But it is also the case that a new desire is borne within, one that hungers and thirsts for righteousness. When Jesus speaks of righteousness here, I understand him to mean the setting right of things as they should be. That means that all things are in accord with God's righteousness, within ourselves and within the world.

Hungering and thirsting speak of strong desire. If you are thirsty, the desire grows deeper until it is satisfied. If the desire goes unmet long enough, you will find it impossible to think about anything other than drinking some water in order to quench your thirst. When we come to God in faith, our desire for personal righteousness grows. Our desire for righteousness in our communities grows. And Jesus promises that these deep desires **“shall be satisfied.”**

### **CONCLUSION:**

Let me close with the accounts of two men who walked different paths, one that embodied these beatitudes and the other that rejected them. Both men were German Lutherans, at least at one time in their lives. Though Friedrich Nietzsche was both son and grandson of Lutheran pastors, he rejected the faith and became a vocal opponent of Christianity. He was the antithesis of these beatitudes. His most vocal attack on Christianity was through his book *The Anti-Christ*, written in 1888, just one year before he went mad. In it, he defines good as “all that heightens the feeling of power, the will to power, power itself in man.” When he read the New Testament, he found only one man worthy of respect, Pontius Pilate. For Jesus, he had only disdain and believed Christianity to be “mankind's greatest misfortune.”

Another German Lutheran, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, embodied the faith and meekness outlined here by Jesus. Interestingly, it was the power philosophy of Nietzsche that became such an influential force in Nazi Germany. And it was this philosophy that Bonhoeffer resisted so courageously, even paying with his life as he was executed in April of 1945, just days before his concentration camp was liberated.

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper today, it is a good time to examine oneself in light of these first four beatitudes. Will you join me in doing so, beginning with that poverty of spirit where Jesus begins.