

The Beginning of the Blessings

Last week we started to look at the Sermon on the Mount. Does anyone remember how far we got? We got into the first verse of Matthew 5 where we learned that Jesus took His disciples up on a mountainside and began to teach them. So we had to investigate what disciples are and what the Master was training them, or preparing them, for.

This week we return to Matthew 5 and the beginning of the sermon itself. But not yet! First, what is the context for the Sermon on the Mount? When does it take place? What happens right before Jesus goes up on the mountain with His disciples? This is important, because it will make a significant contribution to our understanding of Jesus' words.

Chapters 1 and 2 describe the genealogy and the birth of Jesus. Chapter 3 describes the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus being baptized. In the next chapter, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness and successfully withstands the temptation and then begins His public ministry with this announcement: "Turn from your sins and turn to God, because the Kingdom of God is near." (3:17) Two more things happen in this chapter: Jesus calls His first disciples - Peter, Andrew, James and John - the four fisher-men. And the final paragraph of Matthew 4 describes Jesus teaching in the synagogues, healing every kind of sickness and disease and being followed by large crowds from the entire region.

What is significant about these details?

1. In the first place, Jesus has been walking around the Galilee, announcing that the Kingdom of Heaven has arrived - and not in some mysterious way, but in Himself, in His presence with them. This first sermon, coming right on the heels of Jesus' proclaiming the Kingdom, is the first insight we are given into the nature of that good news.
2. The second thing to note is that this is the first training session for the disciples that Jesus has called to be with Him. I'm sure it would have included more than the four who are named in chapter 4, but it is Jesus' disciples who are called up on the mountain with Him and it is His disciples to whom these teachings are given. And they are pretty brand new - they have witnessed some amazing healings and deliverances, but this is just the start of their walking with Jesus.
3. The third thing to note is that the crowds have begun to gather in response to Jesus' miracles. There is such a buzz that people are coming from Jerusalem to the south, from the ten towns east of the Sea of Galilee and from Syria in the north. A Man comes announcing news of the Kingdom coming and He does amazing miracles, showing that He has authority over demons and diseases - of course the crowds will gather. But they are coming with an expectation, that maybe this One is the Messiah. He's fulfilling some of the prophecies of Isaiah. He's doing some of the works of the prophets of old. The idea that this could be "the one" is on the minds of many.

And now we come to the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount and it begins with what? The Beatitudes. They provide us with Jesus' first explanation of the inbreaking Kingdom of Heaven. This is the first time, outside of the miracles themselves, that we are given a picture of what the Kingdom is like and what those who participate in the Kingdom are like.

And this is what we read:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit
For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven
Blessed are those who mourn
For they will be comforted
Blessed are the meek
For they will inherit the earth
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness
For they will be filled
Blessed are the merciful
For they will be shown mercy
Blessed are the pure in heart
For they will see God
Blessed are the peacemakers,
For they will be called the children of God
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness
For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven (5:3-10)*

Let's begin by looking at the word "blessed". The Greek word *makarios* is often translated "happy", but that is too weak a word for the translation of these verses. "Happy" describes a feeling, a state of emotion, but this word is describing an objective, "out there", state, not a subjective, "in here", feeling. This word will be describing how God evaluates my spiritual condition, not necessarily how I feel about it.

There are lots of candidates for an English word to translate *makarios*, including "fortunate", "approved" or "right on". But the sense we need to look for is the sense of being "right side up", or "in alignment". In Darrell Johnson's book on the beatitudes, he uses the phrase "in sync" to convey the sense of *makarios*. In sync with the Kingdom of heaven are the poor in spirit ... or, In sync with God's order of things are the pure in heart.

That changes the way we read the beatitudes. Now we don't see them as describing a reward for good behaviour, but as a description of the person who has welcomed the Kingdom into their heart. The rewards come as a consequence of being "in sync" with God's priorities and values. They are descriptive of the person who is a follower of Jesus, right now, not just at some point in the future.

The second thing to notice about the beatitudes is that the first and last act like "brackets" to all eight of them. In the first case, Jesus says of those who are poor in

spirit, “theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven” and in the last case, He says of those who are persecuted because of righteousness, “theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” Because of this repetition at the beginning and end of the Beatitudes, it is fair to say that the whole series of blessings describes Kingdom people, that it can be said of those who mourn and the meek and the merciful, etc., “theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”.

Which leads us right into the next point: what is the meaning of the word “theirs”? Is it that people who are poor in spirit have come to possess the Kingdom that now belongs to them, or is it saying something else? The word “theirs” means, literally, “of them”. The Kingdom of Heaven is something that describes them, as distinct from other people. “Theirs and theirs only, is the Kingdom of heaven,” “they and they only shall inherit the earth,” “they and they only shall see God.” The Beatitudes describe Kingdom people.

And that leads us to the next point, which is that these descriptions by Jesus are not of eight different kinds of people or eight different personality traits - they are describing one person, the person who has entered the Kingdom, who has been transformed by the Spirit of God, who has been purified in heart, who has become meek and hungry for righteousness and has become a peacemaker. Darrell Johnson puts it this way:

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs and only theirs, is the kingdom of heaven
Blessed are the meek, for they and only they, shall inherit the earth.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they and only they shall see God.*

And then a little further on, he writes:

To make the point more boldly, Jesus is saying that those who are not poor in spirit have not yet received the kingdom. Those who are not meek will not inherit the earth. Those who are not peacemakers are not acting as children of God.

So let’s run through all these bits of information again and see where they take us.

1. The Beatitudes are spoken in the context of Jesus announcing the coming of the Kingdom and calling the first disciples. This is His first teaching about the nature of God’s Kingdom
2. What Jesus describes here are the values of the person who has entered in to God’s Kingdom and He chooses to describe them as “in sync” with God’s order .
3. The Beatitudes give us a picture of the new person who is being formed in the image of Jesus.

One of the great challenges of the entire Sermon on the Mount is that it leaves us feeling inadequate, as if the demands of Jesus are beyond any ability we have to carry them out. “I can’t turn the other cheek when someone insults me or hurts me! I have a raging temper and I’d sooner hit them back rather than turn the other cheek. I can’t do this!” Or, “When Jesus tells us not to worry about anything, that my heavenly Father knows everything I need and I should just trust Him, I feel so inadequate and unworthy. I worry all the time. I can’t stop worrying. I don’t seem to have any faith at all when I’m facing the daily challenges of my life.” What’s happening when you’re saying those things - besides that you’re beating yourself up?

You're demonstrating what it's like to be "poor in spirit".

There are two Greek words for "poor" in the New Testament. One is *penes* which describes people who have to work all the time because they don't own any property. This group of poor have only the bare essentials, but they get by. The second word is *ptochoi* and it describes the destitute, the ones who are so desperate that they have to beg from others just to survive. It's this second word that Jesus uses in this first beatitude: "*Blessed are the beggarly poor in spirit; in sync with the Kingdom are those who recognize that their pockets are empty, that they have nothing in themselves that would grant them entry into the Kingdom of Heaven.*"

The opposite is also true: that people who are confident in their own spiritual strength, in their own goodness relative to others, are not in sync with the Kingdom and therefore cannot display the Kingdom in their lives. This is an amazing revelation for us: The King comes announcing His Kingdom and the first thing He tells us about it is that you have to recognize your unworthiness to enter before you can be let in. That recognition is key. The door opens to those who come with empty hands, with the recognition of their own destitute poverty, saying, "I can't control my anger, my worries, my jealousy, my lust, my fear, and I need God's help if I am to change."

We can't move on to the next beatitude until we compare this one with Luke, because they are famously different - at least on the surface. Whereas in Matthew's Gospel Jesus blesses the poor in spirit, in Luke's, He simply says, "Blessed are the poor". Is this a different point made on a different occasion? Matthew describes a sermon on a mountain while Luke describes a sermon made on a level plain. When you take it apart, though, the point in either place must be the same. Jesus never preached a message of salvation through poverty; a message of class struggle similar to the Marxist one. Always Jesus pointed to the heart of the individual and His blessing of the poor in both contexts would have to bring out the same point: poverty that is recognized by the individual can lead to a humble recognition of need, a need which God wants to fill.

While Matthew and Luke wrote their gospels in Greek, Jesus would have spoken Aramaic, the language of the Jewish people in the first century. The word He would most likely have used in this context should be understood in this way:

The poor in Judaism referred to those in desperate need (socio-economic element) whose helplessness drove them to a dependent relationship with God (religious element) for the supplying of their needs and vindication. Both elements are consistently present, although 'nwm does place more stress on the latter.

Robert Guelich, The Sermon on the Mount: A Foundation for Understanding

What he's saying is that the Aramaic word that Jesus would have used on that occasion recorded by Luke and translated by the English word "poor" is a word that would have actually emphasized the spiritual side of the condition of poverty and could justifiably be translated, or at least understood, as "poor in spirit".

Last week Michelle shared about a friend who came to her at a Christmas party and said something like, “I see it now”, or “Now I get it.” This is the vision that comes to the person who begins to believe, to really trust, in the Lord Jesus. It’s not something you gain by climbing a ladder, the way you gain everything else in life. You get a degree by studying hard, by doing your assignments, by passing your examinations. You get a promotion by being cooperative, by working responsibly, by being trustworthy. You gain respect in the community by showing yourself to be a caring and competent person. These are all steps up the ladder, ways in which you grow and, in a sense, ‘prove yourself’. But that’s not the same kind of step that gains you entry into the Kingdom, that allows you to get it, to see it, as if the light has just gone on for you. In the Gospels, we encounter two kinds of people, those who see it and those who don’t. The Pharisee at prayer, who is content to tell God that he’s better than the sinner next to him, just doesn’t get it. The sinner who beats on his chest and cries out to God for mercy, does get it - he is the one who is poor in spirit and who recognizes his need.

John Newton thought of himself as “quite a decent chap”, even though he was a skipper on a slave -trading ship. One day he was reading Thomas a Kempis’ classic, “On the Imitation of Christ” and the light went on for him. He suddenly realized that he wasn’t such a wonderful person. He had compared himself to other people and thought he was okay, but when he saw what he was in comparison to Jesus, he was made brilliantly aware of his shortcomings. Some time later he wrote his own testimony:

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.*

A wretch? Nobody else called him that. He didn’t feel himself to be less than other people. This is how he described himself after he had encountered Jesus. This is how he saw himself when the light went on for him, when he ‘got it’, and saw for the first time the beauty and wonder of Jesus. At that point he began to see the wretchedness of trafficking in slaves captured in Africa and transported in the filthy holds of slave ships across the Atlantic Ocean to America. Even then, it took awhile before he left his profession and studied to become an Anglican clergyman.

Notice the second verse of his famous hymn:

*’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved*

Grace taught his heart to fear? Yes, because grace opens our eyes to see our true condition before God, our desperate poverty of spirit. And then, grace relieves us of all that fear. In God’s order of things, once we recognize our poverty, we become heirs of His riches in grace, and our lives are forever changed. Praise Him.

Brennan Manning, who spent most of his life as a priest who was unaware of this Kingdom principle, discovered the blessedness of spiritual poverty later in life and

compared it to the survivor of a shipwreck finding a plank that would keep him afloat. He writes:

The landlocked have their own security system, a home base, credentials and credit cards, storehouses and barns, their self-interest and investments intact. They never find themselves because they never really feel themselves lost The shipwrecked, on the contrary, reach out for the passing plank with the desperation of the drowning. Adrift on an angry sea, in a state of utter helplessness and vulnerability, the shipwrecked never asked what they could do to merit the plank and inherit the kingdom of dry land. They realized that there was absolutely nothing any of them could do.

(Manning: Lion and Lamb: the Relentless Tenderness of Jesus)

This first beatitude seems like a death - and it is a death to self-sufficiency, self-saviorship, as Darrell Johnson calls it, but it is also the birth of a new life, a vibrant hope, and belonging to God's Kingdom.

Blessed, in sync with God's world, are the poor in spirit, those who recognize their spiritual poverty, for theirs IS the Kingdom of Heaven. It's your inheritance and cannot be taken from you by any power on earth. To God be the glory!