

**Matt. 5:1-12**  
**Luke 18:9-14**

**August 19, 2018**

**Beatitudes 1:**  
**Blessed Are The Poor in Spirit**

**“God wants me to be happy, right?” Have you heard that phrase or spoken it yourself? Is true that God’s purpose with your life or mine is to make us happy? And if it is true, what can make you or me or anyone else happy?**

**Remember that 2006 blockbuster movie “Pursuit of Happiness,” starring Will Smith? It was based on the real life story of Chris Gardner, depicting his epic journey from homelessness, unemployment, and poverty to financial success as a stock trader. It’s a classic rags to riches story, which we can all cheer. With that movie as backdrop, many Americans unconsciously equate the “pursuit of happiness” with the pursuit of wealth and security. In fact, there has developed among some American Christians (and others around the globe) a theology that is centered on the insistence that God’s top priority is to shower blessings on Christians in this lifetime. The most well-known proponent of this message is mega-church pastor Joel Osteen at Lakewood Church in Houston. The message is what some call a “prosperity gospel” that starts with the premise that God wants to make you happy and material wealth is the way it happens. Therefore “believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth.”**

**Now, I’m not here to tell you that wealth and security are all bad, I mean there is nothing wrong with working hard to ensure your family is provided for, and someone who doesn’t is either irresponsible or in need of significant help. But here’s a caution ... Sometimes that phrase – “God wants me to be happy” - is just an excuse to indulge in some selfish behavior that we know is probably wrong, or at the very least self-serving. Once asked about money and wealth, famed pastor Rick Warren replied, “One should not measure their self-worth, by their net worth.”**

**What Is Happiness?**

**The word “happy” comes from “happen” and “happenstance” referring to an event or experience that often comes to us by chance. Sometimes things happen to us, with no connection to our choices or character, and when it’s something good it makes us happy and when it’s bad, it makes us sad. Or we may engage in some behavior because it gives us temporary pleasure. We create the happenstance because it makes us “happy” for the moment. Yet we must make sure that in seeking our happiness we do not bring shame to the name of the Lord. We can never say, “I know God wants me to be happy, so this departure from His will which I am contemplating or have already done, is alright with Him, because I think it would make me happy.” Believers are not free to do**

whatever they please to make themselves happy. **God does not want his children to be happy if it requires sinning.** He does however extend forgiveness to those who in repentance and brokenness come to him in confession. ... more on that in a minute.

Many times we will find ourselves in circumstances we would rather not be in. Most of us will pray “O God please change my circumstances so I can be happy.” And the Bible’s message is more like, “Get close to God and your circumstances will matter less.” Sometimes we are in those circumstances for weeks or months or years or even for a lifetime. There’s no button to push, no simple prayer to say, that will make the difficulty go away. In those cases, we have to decide whether or not we will follow Jesus anyway.

**The Bible’s message isn’t that God wants you to be unhappy, rather it says God wants you to be blessed.** Blessing is found in an enduring relationship with God, which carries us through all sorts of circumstances. Blessing is not dependent on our circumstances or the happenstance of our lives. Whether rich or poor we can still find happiness in life because of our relationship with God our Savior. Sometimes it’s hard to realize, but the people and things you cherish most in this life cannot provide eternal meaning. The church Reformer Martin Luther wrote that truth into his great hymn: “Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also, The body they may kill, God’s truth abideth still, His kingdom is forever.” (from “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God”).

### **Prescription for Happiness**

This morning I am beginning a series of messages on The Beatitudes – those sayings of Jesus found in the gospel of Matthew, chapter 5. If you are somewhat familiar with the life of Christ and the Bible you’ll know that his most famous sermon is called “The Sermon on the Mount.” It’s found in Matthew chapters 5-7. The first paragraph of that sermon contains eight statements that begin with “blessed are....” These statements are called the Beatitudes, from the Latin word for “Blessed.” (The Greek is μακαριοι meaning blessed, fortunate, happy.)

In introducing the Beatitudes John Wesley’s said: “... all men desire, yet few attain, happiness, because they seek it where it is not to be found.” The eight statements of Christ that make up what we call “The Beatitudes” offer a way to true happiness, and perhaps the best definition in the New Testament of what a disciple of Jesus should be. [Again, John Wesley: “Our Lord therefore begins his Divine institution, which is the complete art of happiness, by laying down before all that have ears to hear, the true and only true method of acquiring it.”<sup>1</sup>]

#### **1. They describe inner qualities of a true and happy disciple.**

Most of us would say that a Christian is a person who has trusted Jesus Christ

as Lord and Savior, and that is a good start. But we all know that life continues to throw challenges at us even after we've made such a confession. Here Jesus is saying those who really want to follow me are *poor in spirit, mourn their sins, they are meek, they hunger and thirst for righteousness, they are merciful, they are pure in heart, they are peacemakers, and they are persecuted.*

## **2. They challenge us to inquire as to the state of our soul.**

There's a lot of information available about losing weight, getting in shape, and maintaining your health. But it's even more important to inquire as to the health of your soul. Although some translators used the word "Happy," the Greek word here, μακαριοι, refers to how God views people who live a certain way. The root idea of blessed is "approved by God." Blessing is found in "the applause of heaven." The Christian seeks to live in a manner that God can truthfully say of him what He said of Jesus: "...*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased,*" Matthew 3:17.

Now, just to show the contrast with the world's way of living, here's how The Beatitudes would sound if they reflected our natural inclinations:

**Blessed are the strong, for they shall rule the earth.**

**Blessed are the mighty and arrogant, for they shall rise to power.**

**Blessed are the rich, for they shall inherit the earth.**

**Blessed are the influential, for they shall be favored.**

**Blessed are the popular, for they shall be widely liked.**

**Blessed are the gifted, for they shall be followed.**

**Blessed are the beautiful, for they shall be admired.**

So the Christian is seeking after a very different life and happiness. It's a counter-cultural pattern for living, and **by grace, the Holy Spirit creates within us the ability to reach for holy possibilities.** For the next several weeks we will look at and reflect on these eight statements, called Beatitudes, in hope that we'll be inspired to seek true happiness in Jesus-styled living.

## **Poverty of the Soul**

The first of the Beatitudes is "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." What does it mean to be "poor in spirit"? **Jesus certainly does not mean material poverty.** Few poor people would call their poverty a blessing from God. Consider how hard people work or what they will do to stay out of material poverty.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit," means something else entirely. Yet neither does being "poor in spirit" refer to shyness, false humility, an inferiority complex, or the suppression of your natural personality. There is such a thing as false humility, which is really just a form of self-pity that uses feigned humility

as a way to draw attention to itself. Most of us instinctively recoil from people like that because they aren't what they seem to be.

Now, there are some people whom we may call "poor in spirit" in that they live in a manner that is the opposite of the Beatitudes. Their souls are so crippled by hurt and unforgiven sin that their treasury of grace, and therefore compassion and mercy, is bankrupt.

Well, then, what does "poor in spirit" mean? A little background here: there are two primary Greek words for "poor." One means you have just enough to get by and the other means you have nothing at all. It's the difference between being down to your last dollar and being flat broke. It describes a person who is utterly helpless and completely dependent on others (πτωχοι – cring, beg). That's the Greek word used here. Blessed are those who have nothing to present to God.

### **Your True Condition**

When Jesus said the "poor in spirit" he meant those who recognize their true condition before God. You might say that it means to recognize your spiritual bankruptcy in the eyes of God. It is the exact opposite of being rich in pride. Proud people will never understand this principle and will therefore never receive the promised blessing. Jesus illustrated what he meant with this story of two men praying in the Temple. *The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'*

*But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner, Luke 18:11-13.*

"Blessed are they who feel their spiritual need" (Goodspeed's translation); those who know they are sinners and are incapable of cleansing themselves from sin. Many people think that being a Christian means you've "decided for Christ." No, it's a matter of surrendering to Christ. It is all about yielding yourself to the Holy Spirit and allowing Him to do a work in your heart. *And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God, Romans 6:13.*

As long as we have a self-righteous, conceited notion that we can carry out our Lord's teaching, God will allow us to go on breaking ourselves to do the impossible, until we are willing to come to Him as beggars to receive from Him. We will never find true and lasting happiness, we will never know what it is to be "blessed," until we give up on our own efforts and allow the Holy Spirit's transforming power into our lives.

The bedrock in our Savior's kingdom is poverty, not possession; not decisions for Jesus Christ, but a sense of absolute futility at one's own attempt to do it. In the Beatitudes Jesus teaches us that which we cannot do. We must come to Him as more than a teacher. We must bow before Him as Savior. **The realization of our own spiritual poverty brings us to the frontier where Jesus Christ works.**<sup>2</sup> (Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*). And it all begins with the greatest blessing, the blessing of being forgiven of your sins! The Psalmist says, ***Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the Lord does not impute iniquity... Psalm 32:1-2.***

### **Kingdom Entrance**

Heaven belongs to the poor in spirit. Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." "You will notice the first Beatitude and the last Beatitude promise the same reward, 'for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. Our Lord starts and ends with it because it is His way of saying that the first thing you have to realize about yourself is that you belong to a different kingdom."<sup>3</sup>

So does God want you to be happy? Yes. **He longs for you and me to have the happiness of heaven.** But happiness should never be our goal. Rather, being conformed to the image that God has intended for each of us is the way to blessedness!

It is no mistake that "poor in spirit" is the first of the Beatitudes. This is the first and fundamental quality of the spiritual life: truly recognizing your own sinfulness and need of Jesus' saving grace. This is the key that unlocks the gate of heaven.

It was Jesus who said to us: **"Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away," Luke 21:33.** That's worth remembering and repeating. Let's say it together.

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley's *Explanatory Notes on the New Testament*

<sup>2</sup> Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*

<sup>3</sup> D. Martin Lloyd Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984 39.