



247 Broad Street | Red Bank NJ 0770
(732) 747-0446 | www.umcredbank.org

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The Beatitudes – “Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit”

Intro to Worship

Throughout his life, Jesus taught all who would listen about the Kingdom of God, what our lives and our world could look like if we all tuned our hearts with God’s heart, and let our lives follow. He did this even when it turned the expected order and power dynamics of society on its head, challenging the status quo. This morning we begin a new worship series, on the Beatitudes recorded in Matthew’s gospel. We’ll be focusing on these 8 declarations of blessing one at a time, but for now, I invite you to hear them all together...

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying:

“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 receive mercy. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven.”

Psalm 34

I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth.
My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.

O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt his name together.
I sought the Lord, and he answered me, and delivered me from all my fears.
Look to him, and be radiant; so your faces shall never be ashamed.
This poor soul cried, and was heard by the Lord, and was saved from every
trouble.
The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them.
O taste and see that the Lord is good; happy are those who take refuge in him.

Matthew 5: 1-3

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Early on in Jesus' ministry, Matthew records for us one of Jesus' most profound sermons – one that does what most of Jesus' teachings do... turns the world on its head and challenges us to look at faith and life with new eyes. This Sermon on the Mount begins with these “blessed are the... statements” called the beatitudes... ones we've heard so many times that they've lost their punch in the repetition. We're going to be spending the next 8 weeks working through these Beatitudes, learning from Jesus and looking around at the surprising blessings that abound in our lives, and in our communities.

The word beatitude literally translates in Latin to “blessed”, so let's talk for a moment about “blessedness.” What does it mean to be blessed? In Greek, the language of the New Testament, the word blessed is “makarios” which is an Old Greek word that was reserved exclusively for the gods – Zeus, Hermies, Aphrodites... The gods were seen as blessed because they didn't have to be human. They didn't have to worry about things like work, or disease, or death. They were immune to all that, because they're immortal... Ancient Greeks though, “How great would it be to be one of the gods... wow, the gods are so blessed.” The gods were immune to all the worries and troubles of life... what a blessing!

But there's another group of people that the Greeks realized didn't have to worry about the troubles of life – the wealthy, the powerful, the healthy. The healthy don't have to worry about sickness. The wealthy don't need to worry about getting up and going to work. The powerful don't have to worry about a whole lot of things in life... because they're in control. There's the Greeks thinking again, “Wow, they are so blessed! “

Then you have Alexander the Great, who begins to conquer all over the Mediterranean, and he unites the people who have been speaking all different languages, and he brings Hellenism, Greek culture, language, and thought all over the Mediterranean, to Egypt and Israel and Turkey. He brings with him into Israel this word *makarios*, blessed, and who is blessed? The Gods of course, but also, those who are powerful, healthy, and wealthy. And the Jews hear this word, *makarios*, and they think, you know, this word BLESSED is good, but those Greeks, they've got it all wrong. The people who are blessed are those who DO WHAT IS RIGHT. When you do what's right, then God is on your side, God protects you, so you don't have to worry about sickness when you're doing what's right, because God is going to keep sickness far from you. You see this

thought reflected in various Old Testament scriptures, such as, “blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers”. So who is blessed? Blessed is the pious, upstanding man who does what is right. You are righteous whenever you do the right the things, say the right things, do the right rituals in the right ways for the right reasons. As long as you’ve done everything right, you get to be a part of God’s kingdom of heaven – a term that held great meaning for the Jewish people of Jesus’ day, who suffered under the occupation of the Roman Empire – for it was the kingdom of God that really mattered, not whatever nation they had to pay taxes to.

Then, out of this culture comes Jesus, who turns this concept of righteousness on its head, when he says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” What does it mean to be “poor in spirit?” The term Jesus uses for poor refers to the destitute, the beggars who are without resources and totally dependent on others for their very lives. The spirit refers to our inward attitude of the heart, pointing to our spiritual disposition.

There is one passage in Luke which Jesus gives us a perfect example of this concept of Poor in Spirit, both from a positive and negative standpoint. In Luke, chapter 18, we hear a story of a Pharisee and a Tax Collector.

Jesus told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: “Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.’ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The Pharisee demonstrates the opposite of being poor in spirit. He was self-righteous, self-reliant, and proud. You get the sense that he thought God was lucky to have him on the team. He rehearsed all the wonderful spiritual achievements he had on his resume. The Pharisee was one of those “holier-than-thou” types. He thought that God really loved him because of how

righteous and holy he was. The tax collector demonstrates what it means to be poor in spirit. He wouldn't look up. Remember that the root idea of the word poor is to bow down timidly like a beggar. Here was a man who came to God as a spiritual beggar. He simply cried out for mercy like a beggar would cry out for bread.

While the Jewish thought of the day was, Blessed are the righteous who live just the right way, Jesus says, no... that's not it! When you begin raising yourself up because of your righteousness, that's when you have it all wrong! For being a part of the kingdom of heaven is not about you. It's not about what you've done. You're inclusion into the kingdom is not based on your performance, or whether you believed the right thing on every issue, or whether you jumped through the right hoops in the right order. It's not based on that. It's based on God giving grace. It's based on God saying, "I accept you!"

A man named Powell once observed: "Pride is so subtle that if we aren't careful we'll be proud of our humility. When this happens our goodness becomes badness. Our virtues become vices. We can easily become like the Sunday School teacher who, having told the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector, said, 'Children, let's bow our heads and thank God we are not like the Pharisee!'"

Blessed are the poor in spirit , for they are dependent on God. In The Message interpretation, by Eugene Peterson, he translates this Beatitude as, "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and God's rule." One of the most important lessons for us to learn is to stop relying on ourselves, and to depend more on God. Poverty of spirit has to do with humbling ourselves before God, coming on our knees in prayer, heart wide open to what God has in store for us. It when we open our heart to receive God, recognizing that we are not complete or capable of fully loving on our own that we can truly accept God help. We cannot be filled until we are empty, or at least until we make enough space to let God in.

As we go into our week, may we find the courage to admit our brokenness, and all that we lack, recognizing the places where we need God to shine light and love, hope and peace. As we open our hands to receive the

blessings of God, may our hands remain open, extending blessings to others as well. Amen.