

**Sermon preached by Mr. Michael Bittenbender
at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, June 23, 2019**

THE BEATITUDES

Matthew 5:1-10

This morning's passage can be found in the Gospel of Matthew, Chapter 5, verses 1-10. This may seem like a familiar passage to some. It may be entirely new for others. I hope this morning we can look a little deeper into how Jesus is calling us to live. This passage is referred to as the Beatitudes and kind of kick off Jesus' teaching and preaching.

Let us give our reverent attention to the reading of Gods Holy Word.

“Now when He saw the crowds, He went up on the mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him, and He began to teach 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 be shown mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’”

May God bless the reading of His Holy Word.

This passage is some of the first teaching and preaching we have recorded from Jesus. In chapter 4 we learn that Jesus traveled around and preached in synagogues. The message He was preaching was “the good news about the Kingdom.” In Galilee Jesus proclaimed, “Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is near!” Once a large crowd gathered, He gathered His disciples, sat down and began teaching them. Imagine yourself as one of Jesus' disciples; you give up everything for this man, then He begins preaching and healing. Before you know it, a large crowd has begun to follow and you are one of His closest associates. You have been called by name by this man Jesus. You can imagine that you begin to feel a little important. Being some of Jesus' closest associates gave them not only prestige but opportunity for receiving money and power. This feeling of importance can go straight to the head and cause us to focus on the wrong things.

Some of you may know this story so please bear with me. My very first job was at Barnes and Noble, the one close by in Springfield. While working there, the 7th and last installment of the Harry Potter series was finally hitting the shelves. This store threw a huge party to commemorate the occasion, everyone was in costume, hundreds of people were in the store for this midnight release. As midnight approached, the assistant store manager called me over

and told me to meet her and some other colleagues in the back receiving room where the books were held. Upon arrival I learned I was going to help roll the books out to the cash registers from the back room. I honestly did not think a whole lot of it until the time came to take the books out. We all lined up with our carts of boxes which contained this book. The door opened and I was one of the first ones out. Hundreds of people began screaming, clapping and taking pictures. Store employees blocked out a path for us, people screamed the entire way the boxes were en route to the cash register. Now I knew the people were not screaming and clapping and hooting and hollering for me, they were there for the book. But being close to the books, helping the books get to their destination, being chosen for such a task, that went to my head.

See, Jesus has a crowd and begins to teach His disciples to handle this new-found importance. He is also instructing every believer about hope, God's faithfulness, and what we, as His followers, must embody both with actions and attitude. These beatitudes are the attitudes we must have. The word "beatitude," which isn't actually found in the Greek text, means "supreme blessedness; exalted happiness" or a "state of utmost bliss" according to dictionary.com. The Greek word for blessed is *markarios*. Often happiness and bliss are used to translate this word. There is a deeper sense to this happiness and blissful state. This happiness that comes from the attitudes depicted here seems to be closer to joy than mere happiness. I would also like to point out that these beatitudes, these characteristics of the citizens of the Kingdom of God, are not multiple choice, it is not "pick your top 3 and go." Each one should be embraced by the believer.

Paul David Tripp says "The DNA of joy is thankfulness." When we can switch our attitude to thankfulness, entering into a state of thankfulness, we find joy. This is particularly relevant in light of what Jesus has accomplished on the cross. We can always be eternally grateful for Jesus dying on the cross to save sinners like us.

Rev. Graham Smith, in his first sermon on the beatitudes, says this: "Happiness does not depend upon the atmosphere outside; it depends upon the attitude inside." Now if we are really talking about joy, or this greater blissful state than just mere happiness, which I believe Rev. Smith was getting at, then this joy does not have anything to do with what's happening outside of us. Often we think that happiness or joy can be found in our job, our money, or our car. We tell ourselves that if only this would happen, if only we had a bigger house, then I would be happy. But what I believe Paul Tripp and Rev. Smith, and even Jesus are getting at is something deeper, something joy-filled, some thankfulness we can have always. It starts with our dependence on God.

Jesus also had been preaching that the kingdom of heaven is here. God was, and is, with us. People must have been asking themselves how do they get into the kingdom of heaven, or at least, who are the citizens of such a kingdom. Make no mistake, these beatitudes are not a road map for earning salvation. There is no "if you do this then you will earn salvation." Rather these are postures, characteristics, and attitudes that followers have. Just because we are poor in spirit, are meek, or because we mourn does not guarantee that we will get into heaven. Faith alone, in Jesus, who was raised from the grave, whose atoning sacrifice and blood covers all our transgressions, does that. The grace is offered to sinners like myself.

There is nothing in ourselves that merits salvation, there is no footing we can stand on and demand to be let into heaven.

And that is where the beatitudes start. The first one states, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Poor in spirit. Let’s dive into what poor in spirit means. John Stott in his book study on the beatitudes gives this explanation: “To be poor in spirit is to acknowledge our spiritual bankruptcy before God. For we are sinners, under the holy wrath of God, and deserving of nothing but His judgment. We have nothing to offer, nothing to plead, nothing with which to buy the favor of heaven.” We are and have nothing apart from God. We approach God lowly in spirit, acknowledging who we are in comparison to who God is.

Isaiah, in chapter 6, talks about a vision of the throne room that he saw. He sees the splendor of God’s presence, His holiness. He sees all the creatures around the throne singing praises to God. Isaiah’s response is “Woe is me.” Isaiah realized he was poor in spirit at that moment. He was but a mere human, full of sin, undeserving of God’s favor. In the vision Isaiah is forgiven of his sins, exemplified by the burning of a coal on his lips for he confessed that he had unclean lips. No, we with unclean lips do not get forgiveness from touching a burning coal to our lips. God forgives Isaiah and when God asked who He should send, Isaiah says, “Send me.” Isaiah sees the presence of God, sees the glory of God, sees the holiness of God, sees his own sin that shows him how unworthy he is, has his sins forgiven and says, “Here I am.” He says “Here I am, stripped bare. I am a sinner, but with God with me, here I am.”

Paul approaches his life as a fellow believer by characterizing himself as the worst sinner. 1 Timothy 1:15 says, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst.” Paul, called by Jesus to spread the good news, the chief among sinners, understood that he could not boast in anything he had done.

Being poor in spirit is to acknowledge our sinfulness and deserving of judgment before God’s holiness. This was completely counter to how the religious leaders and many Jews lived. The Pharisees loved for everyone to see their pious deeds and perceived obedience to the law. Jesus was tearing down the structure of society. In society, the rich, powerful, the mighty, the famous, and even the “righteous, like Pharisee righteous” were the important people in society. Here we see that the kingdom of heaven is given to those poor in spirit. The Greek word for poor is *prochos* (*prokos*). The second definition for this word is “destitute of wealth, influence, position, honor.” Again, there is this flipping and even contradicting what was the social and cultural norm.

John Stott also says, “Right at the beginning of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contradicted all human judgment and all nationalistic expectations of the kingdom of heaven.” The Jews were expecting the Messiah to come and overthrow the Romans, to set up a physical kingdom of God here on earth that looked and felt like how kingdoms operated back then. What Jesus taught them, and us, is that the kingdom is different. It is unlike anything we have ever seen.

I read something entitled “A Jewish Story” as I was doing some research into examples of people considered poor in spirit. The story goes this way:

“An old rabbi said, ‘In olden days there were men who saw the face of God.’
 ‘Why don’t they anymore?’ a young student asked.
 ‘Because nowadays no one stoops so low,’ he replied.”

Being poor in spirit also encompasses humility. Humility to acknowledge that we don’t have it all together, that apart from God, there is no health in us. We must humble ourselves before God, lowering ourselves, acknowledging our need and dependence on Him. Rev. Smith says, “Well, He’s not talking about low self-esteem. He’s not talking about putting yourself down all the time. Being ‘poor in spirit’ simply means to depend on God. He’s talking about humility – admitting that I don’t have it all together. I realize that I haven’t arrived. I haven’t learned it all. I’m not perfect.”

Charles Spurgeon in his book *The Beatitudes* says “Poverty of spirit empties a man and so makes him ready to be filled. It lays the guilty sinner at the gate of mercy. Where we end, mercy begins, or rather mercy has begun, and mercy has already done much for us when we are at the end of our own merit, our power, our wisdom and our hope.” Isaiah was emptied of himself when he saw who he was, a sinner, in light of the holiness of God. Isaiah’s sins were forgiven, not because of anything Isaiah said or did, or by his own merit, but because of God. And in light of that mercy Isaiah opens himself up to be filled and says, “Here am I, send me Lord.”

Where are you today? Are you standing on your own merits? Are you standing on some eternal factor for your happiness? Or are you humbling yourself before God? Are you emptying yourself out, saying God there is no health in me apart from you. I am nothing but utterly dependent upon you, God. Are you standing before the throne of God, the mighty, just, merciful, loving Creator, with unclean lips, saying woe is me and yet, here am I, send me Lord? Jesus says blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are they who humble themselves before the Lord, joyful are those who humble themselves before the Lord. Jesus told the disciples this before taking them on a life-changing journey with Him and they witnessed and were at the forefront of everything Jesus said and did. He knew they were going to feel important and Jesus says whoa, now, see humility and utter dependence on God first. Not the riches, not the fame that may come from this.

I’ll close with one final quote from John Stott. He says, “To the poor in spirit and only to the poor in spirit, the kingdom of God is given. For God’s rule which brings salvation is a gift as absolutely free as it is utterly undeserved.”

So, you see, your happiness is determined not by what’s happening around you, but rather by what’s happening within you.