

Foundations: The First Blessing
Matthew 5:3 (AFBC 9/9/18)

In the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5 through 7, we find Jesus' best known sermon—we know it as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus finished this sermon with a parable about two builders. One of them builds his house on the sand. Sadly, it didn't last long.

But the other builder constructed his house on solid ground; so, as Jesus put it, **"The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock."** (Matthew 7:25)

Foundations are important. What we choose to build our lives on matters. So we return this morning to the theme of foundations. And we begin consideration of what is surely one of the bedrock passages of Scripture for followers of Jesus: the Beatitudes.

Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount with eight brief, but powerful teachings. Last year, we considered the rest of this sermon, but I told you then that we would come back to these opening verses in the future—and that time has now come.

These short and seemingly simple statements of Jesus are at the same time amazingly complex and intriguing. We could read and study and pray over for a lifetime, and still not master them or understand everything Jesus wants to teach us through them.

And maybe this is the point! We're looking at the Beatitudes for our Back to School series this year. Perhaps this is Jesus' version of lifetime learning. Getting at the meaning of the Beatitudes is not easy. We'll need to apply our minds and our hearts to this effort to understand their meaning for the rest of our lives.

Keep an open and receptive spirit because the Beatitudes turn much of what we think is true upside down. They challenge us to the core of our beings.

And no doubt the same was true for Jesus' first disciples. They had never heard a teacher say anything like this before! They likely took Jesus' words too lightly, much the same as we do now! Someone envisioned their first hearing of the Beatitudes as going something like this:

“Then Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and gathering them around him, he taught them saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy....”

Then Simon Peter interrupted Jesus and said, “Do we have to write this down?” Andrew asked, “Are we supposed to remember this stuff?”

Phillip complained, “I don’t get it.” James wanted to know, “Will this be on the test?” And “Jesus... wept.”

To all our teachers who are with us today, I feel sure you can relate. No doubt Jesus got frustrated with His students just like you do with yours. And I guess He still does!

As we look again at these verses in the fifth chapter of Matthew, I hope we’ll develop a whole new appreciation for them—along with a new respect for the depth and wisdom contained in them.

One thing about what we do here in church, though. We don’t get to assign grades like school teachers do. But I got to thinking about this. What if we did—maybe something as simple as “pass or fail.”

Let’s say, hypothetically, we get a request for someone’s church letter, but the other church wants to know how that person has done so far. They need to know what they’ve completed, maybe what grade level to put them in.

And we have to reply, “Well, we’re not so sure you want to enroll this person in your church. Fact is, they flunked out over here. They couldn’t even pass Christianity 101.

They only averaged a 47 in church membership. And, as you might imagine, they were a bit of a behavior problem to boot!”

But then I thought some more about this—some of my best thoughts get shot down this way—by me... thinking some more.

Anyway, I realized there’s a major flaw in this whole idea—and here it is: who would assign the grades? Would it be the Pastor,

or one of his associates? Maybe the person's Sunday School Teacher or their Family Deacon--what do you think?

Here's the issue: how could any of us assign grades to someone else if we are followers of the Savior who began His Sermon on the Mount by saying, "**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven**" (today's text)?

"Poor in spirit" people don't waste their time grading the spiritual performance of others! They know better, and they keep their focus much closer to home!

Do you follow what I'm saying? I'm sure that many Christians wouldn't understand this today. We want Bible verses and sermons that speak to specific problems we're facing.

If the message doesn't tell me how to fix my marriage, or get my finances in order, or raise perfect children—then it's really not relevant to MY LIFE.

I'm not sure Jesus would "cut the mustard" as a teacher/preacher today. "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." "Blessed are the meek..." "Blessed are those who mourn..."

Really now, who wants to hear THAT stuff? What does that have to do with my life? Well... perhaps, nothing at all—sad to say. And that's the problem!

It has to be frustrating for Jesus. We want a quick fix for everything—and we'll keep searching until we find someone who claims they can do that for us.

But listen—that's not Jesus' way. Jesus is more interested in fixing our lives—our hearts and minds--because HE knows that fixing our SPIRITS is the only thing that will really fix our problems. Do you follow this?

The problems we want fixed are just the surface issues. They stem from something much deeper. They're the result of the problems we have in our hearts, and this is what Jesus is speaking to. Our Lord knows that a little less pride and self-centeredness would help with a whole host of problems!

So... Jesus begins His Beatitudes with "Blessed... are the poor in spirit." He doesn't ask if this is what we want to hear. He knows this is what we need to hear! It may be what we MOST need to hear—because this is, after all, what He says first.

Now, for each of these beatitudes, we'll take a look at who gets blessed—in other words, for what quality of the spirit are they receiving God's blessing--and we'll also consider the nature and meaning of the blessing.

1. To get started, though, let's examine the first word that Jesus spoke in this sermon, the word, "**Blessed.**" That's a word that gets our attention. We all want to be blessed.

Some translations say "happy." The Philips version, for example, says, "How happy are the humble-minded, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs." Happiness is good--we all want to be happy!

Jesus tells us that God provides these various blessings, and that there are specific reasons behind each one of them. Each beatitude follows a pattern: "Blessed are those *'with this particular characteristic,'* for they either are presently or will be *'blessed... in this particular way.'*"

Now, does the word "blessed" mean "happy?" Yes—just not in the same way we mean "happy." For us, happiness is something that comes and goes. God's blessings are not like that. God bestows His blessings on us, and they... remain.

God's blessings really have everything to do with **relationship**—the special, life-enriching relationship between God and His people. In the Greek language of the New Testament, this kind of blessing or happiness originally had to do with the joy of the gods—for them, the Greek gods, of course.

We don't "buy in" to Greek mythology—but we do know that Jesus is talking about a happiness, a blessedness, that only God can provide. In whatever form they take, God's blessings make us happier, more contented, and better able to handle life. And no matter what happens, God's blessings in our lives remain.

2. So... who is it that gets God's blessing? In Jesus' first Beatitude, it's the person who is "**poor in spirit**" who's blessed. Now, who would that be?

Well, there is more than one word for “poor” in the Greek. One of these would have applied to almost everyone in Jesus’ day. They were not rich--they were the opposite: “poor.”

That’s not the word used here though. Jesus chose a word that refers to someone who has absolutely nothing, who literally has no idea where his next meal will come from—or if there will even be a next meal.

If there is, someone else will have to feed them. Unless provision is made from elsewhere, they will die. That’s what this word means--someone who is desperately poor.

Understand THAT, and you’re well on your way to understanding what it means to be poor *in spirit*. Jesus was truly concerned about people who were poor and homeless and hungry—and said so. But here, He’s speaking of a different kind of poverty.

It’s a poverty that can exist in the person who is well-fed as well as in the one who’s hungry. It’s not a product of financial prosperity--or the lack thereof. This is a poverty of the *spirit*.

Now, *the spirit* has to do with our relationship with God and our attitude toward God. The point is that you and I will never be able to experience the fullness of God’s blessing until we know how much we need it, and how totally dependent we are on it.

As I thought about what this means, a couple of old hymns came to mind. “I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene, and wonder how he could love me, a sinner condemned, unclean.”

That’s a kind of spiritual poverty. So is this: “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.”

Can you believe people in our day and age actually sing this about themselves? Maybe we’ve long forgotten what this means. It speaks of a spiritual poverty, a neediness, a destituteness in our relationship with God.

So does this mean we have to be all down on ourselves and feel we’re “lower than dirt” in order to be close to God? I don’t think so. Jesus told us to ‘love others as we love ourselves,” so this is not some kind of self-hatred. We just have to come to an understanding about who we are in relation to God.

Compared with *His everything*, we're *nothing*. We *have* nothing. We're spiritually bankrupt, and we can't fix it on our own.

When we know how completely we depend on God, how desperately we need God in our lives, and how hopeless we would be without Him—this is when you and I become “poor in spirit.”

3. Jesus begins here because this is the single biggest challenge we face in life. It's our **pride** that stands between us and God's blessing. It's our pride that keeps the Savior who died for us at a distance. It's our pride that ultimately stands in the way of any meaningful, lasting relationships.

Nobody can fix your *marriage* until you let Jesus fix your *spirit*. No one can be set free from their addiction to things until they are freed from their addiction to themselves. Do you follow this? Where else would the Master Teacher possibly begin but here?

C. S. Lewis said, “Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind. Pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.” To which Lloyd Ogilvie adds: “Self-made people always end up worshipping their maker—themselves!” (Ogilvie, pp. 24-25)

Why do children play such a prominent role in the teachings of Jesus? Because they're children. They're not all grown up. They know they don't have it all together.

Children can admit their need and ask for help—they'll “cry out” for it, when necessary! Jesus said we need to be like children in our relationship with God—having a child-like heart with a humble dependency on our Heavenly Father.

Is this easy? No. Humility is incredibly hard for us. Pride is our “default setting.” If we're not careful, we'll become proud of our humility. Someone wrote a book titled, “Humility and How I Attained It.” Many of us could probably write that book!

We're like the children's Sunday School teacher who finished her lesson on the Pharisee and Tax Collector who both went to the Temple to pray. Then she said, “Children, let's all bow our heads and thank God that we're not like the Pharisee.”

So many of the prejudices and put downs and tit-for-tats that get tweeted about in our society are the result of somebody's sad need to feel better or brighter or richer or whiter or holier or whatever... than somebody else.

That's pride. And it's a dead giveaway that we haven't gotten to first base in our relationship with God—first base being a *poverty of spirit* that opens the way for a relationship with God to happen.

4. And it's this humble relationship with God, friends, that brings to our lives **the Kingdom of heaven**. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven." The Kingdom is where God is in control. And it's good—it's all good.

It is the place of God's blessing, the reality of perfect peace in us—and it begins when we will humble ourselves and yield our lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The kingdom is not only God's promise to us regarding the future. It's God's gift to us now in Christ—and it transforms all of life—the fullness of life—forever.

In Revelation chapter 3, the Lord rebukes His church in Laodicea. What He says here serves as a warning to His church in every age: **"You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked."** (Rev. 3:17)

How plain is that?: *our pride* standing in the way of *our need*—a need that the Lord will meet only when we humble ourselves enough to let Him in—and allow His loving grace and mercy to do its work in us, transforming our lives, making of us God's Kingdom people—new creations in Christ Jesus.

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me..." Is this your testimony today? Do you 'stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene, and wonder how he could love you, a sinner condemned, unclean?'

Yes? Then, brother or sister, thank God. In your humility, you're spiritually poor enough to receive the riches of God's grace in Jesus Christ, poor enough to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. *How blessed you are!*