

Happiness Through Poverty

Matthew 5:3

Pastor John Miller

Look at Matthew 5:3. Jesus is speaking, so it will be in red letters in your Bible.

“Blessed...”—or “oh, how happy”—“...are the poor in spirit, for theirs...”—and theirs only—“...is the kingdom of heaven.”

Someone said, “Happiness is like a butterfly; the more you chase it, the more it eludes you.” I remember when I was a young boy, I used to love catching butterflies. I guess it was kind of mean. Lord, forgive me for catching little butterflies. We used to chase them. But the more you chase them, the more they run from you. Many times if you just stood still, they would actually come and land on you. Then you could snatch them up or catch them. It's kind of like happiness; the more you chase happiness, the more it eludes you. But when you get your eyes fixed on Jesus Christ and you have a right relationship with Him, happiness will land on your shoulder or come to your heart.

I believe Jesus wants us to be happy. Jesus wants us to experience the blessings of heaven. So Jesus opens His great Sermon on the Mount with this great Beatitude: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

A lot of people aren't happy because they're trying to find happiness in all the wrong places. They think they're going to be happy if they make more money; just the first million, then it's the second million, then you're working on your third million dollars. “If I just made another million bucks, I would be happy.” We all know money can't buy happiness. Maybe it's possessions; maybe you make money to buy things. “He who has the most toys wins,” when he dies. Just buy all the toys, and they will bring happiness. We know that's not true. Or maybe it's the pursuit of power or position. We think, If I can just get elected into this political office—if I could be the President, or if I could be the governor, or if I could be the mayor of the city, or if I could be in charge of the company, maybe then I would be happy. But it continues to elude us. Maybe it's the pursuit of pleasure. That's a common pursuit today. Sensual gratification. People think that if you just feed your flesh, it will bring satisfaction. Maybe it's fame and fortune. Maybe you want to be famous. Maybe you want everyone to know who you are. But, again, the happiness eludes you. None of these things can or will bring real, lasting happiness or blessedness.

We all know that King Solomon in the Old Testament was the richest man who ever lived. Everything he had turned to gold. He was a man of wealth and power. He had music and all the food he wanted. He had all the women he wanted; he had 700 wives. Think about that. No wonder he wanted to commit suicide. He actually said, “I want to kill myself.” Well, dude, what do you expect? It's insane.

But Solomon actually made this statement, which is in the book of Ecclesiastes, “Looking at life

apart from God as under the sun is all emptiness, vanity and vexation of spirit.” When you take God out of the equation of your life, when you aren’t “seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness,” happiness will elude you. Solomon said that it’s all emptiness and all vanity. It’s the word used for an air bubble or a soap bubble. When you grab a soap bubble, it just bursts and it’s gone. That’s what happiness is like apart from God. But when God comes into our lives, all life has purpose and meaning.

Now if anyone knew how to be happy, it was Jesus Christ. And He tells us how to be happy in these Beatitudes. We’re going to spend eight weeks learning how to be blessed or happy, eight weeks on the attitudes of our heart that will bring a true happiness. They’re known as the Beatitudes.

Let’s read them, starting in verse 3.

“Blessed...”—or “oh, how happy”—“...are the poor in spirit,

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn,

For they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,

For they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,

For they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,

For they shall obtain mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart,

For they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,

For they shall be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake,

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

These are what is known as the Beatitudes. There are eight of them. They run from verses 3-10. They all start with the word “blessed.” The word “blessed,” which appears eight times in the text, could be translated—and is by some modern English translations—as “happy.” “Happy are the poor in spirit.” “Happy are those who mourn.” “Happy are the meek.” “Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” and so on.

I want to set the Beatitudes in context before we unpack them. They’re set in the context of the Sermon on the Mount. These Beatitudes are the gateway or the opening up of the greatest sermon that Jesus ever preached, the Sermon on the Mount, which runs from Matthew 5 through Matthew 7. Let’s look at Matthew 5:1-2 to get the setting for the preaching of the Sermon on the Mount.

“And seeing the multitudes....”—these are masses of people who are following Jesus, the crowd —“...He...”—that is, “Jesus”—“...went up on a mountain...”—it doesn’t tell us what mountain, but it was in Galilee, so it’s believed to be a mountain around the Sea of Galilee—“...and when He was seated, His disciples came to Him. Then He opened His mouth and taught them...”—His disciples—“...saying....”

The posture for a rabbi when he would teach or give a discourse was sitting. When they would preach or proclaim, they would be standing. So Jesus was instructing or teaching. And He’s teaching not the multitudes but His disciples. But by the end of His sermon, you find out that the multitudes have gathered around Him, and everyone is listening. So it started with His disciples. It may have been more than the 12, because they hadn’t been fully brought in yet. It might be that there was just a small group following Him. By the end of His sermon, multitudes had gathered around, and they were astonished, because the Bible says He was speaking “as one who had authority and not as the scribes.”

The gateway to the Sermon on the Mount is the Beatitudes. The Sermon basically describes what a Christian looks like. By that, it means that he is different. A Christian looks different from the religious world, and he’s different from the irreligious world. Let me give you a couple of verses to show you what I’m talking about.

In Matthew 5:20, Jesus said, “For I say unto you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.” In other words, you’ve got to be different than the scribes and Pharisees. The scribes and Pharisees were religious, but they were lost. Their religion was all external. But the religion a Christian has needs to be internal, a religion of the heart. A Christian has a right relationship with God. God is not that interested in the outward; He’s interested in the heart.

The most important part of you is the part that only God can see. A lot of you are really looking good today, and I’m glad you took the time to take a shower and put your makeup on and comb your hair and put on a nice dress. But do you take that much time for your heart? As much time as you spend in front of the mirror prepping yourself to go out, do you spend that much time in the mirror of God’s Word, letting the Spirit of God speak to your heart and change you?

The most important part of you is the part that only God can see, and that is the heart.

Christians are also to be different than the irreligious. Christians aren't religious. Years ago there was a great book written called *How to Be a Christian Without Being Religious*. You can probably find it if you do a search of used books. So we're different than the religious world in that our righteousness is internal, and it's imputed righteousness that comes by faith in Jesus Christ. So we're to be different than the non-Christian world, the irreligious world.

Look at Matthew 6:8. He says, "Do not be like them." Who's the "them"? The "them" there refers to the heathen, the pagans. They think they're going to be heard by their much speaking, their vain repetition. It goes on in chapter 6 to say that they worry about what they're going to eat, what they're going to drink and what they're going to wear. We have entire magazines on food, on clothes and restaurants. A whole magazine on wine; different kinds of wine. We have a magazine called *Self*. We're pursuing what we want in life.

So Jesus is saying, "Therefore do not be like them. For your Father knows the things you have need of before you ask Him." Matthew 6:34 says, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things." Verse 33 says, "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

So the Sermon on the Mount is introducing us to kingdom living now. It shows us in what ways a child of God looks different from the religious world.

Now the Sermon opens with the Beatitudes. What are the Beatitudes? We read them in verses 3-10. We will look at one Beatitude each week. The Beatitudes describe the inner character and attitudes of those who are true Christians living in the kingdom. I emphasize the word "true." There are a lot of people who call themselves Christians, but saying you're a Christian and being a Christian can be two different things. You can say that you're born again, but if you're not really born again, then you're not really a Christian. We use the term "born-again Christian," but it's unnecessary. It's redundant. If you're born again, you're a Christian, and if you're a Christian, you're born again. If you're not born again, you're not a Christian, and if you're not a Christian, you're not born again. Both mean the same thing. The only kind of Christians that exist are the born-again Christians. That's how you become a Christian: by being born again.

We're going to read about living in the kingdom as God's people in these beautiful attitudes. I like to think of the Beatitudes as beautiful attitudes that bring the blessings of God's approval and happiness to our lives.

Let me make some introductory remarks about the Beatitudes. First of all, none of the Beatitudes describe what may be called "natural tendencies." When you read "poor in spirit... those who mourn...the meek...the merciful...the pure in heart," these are not attitudes that you can make happen. God has to grant you these attitudes by changing your heart. You can't kind of sit in a lotus position and say, "I'm going to be pure. I'm going to be pure. I'm going to be

pure. I'm going to be meek. I'm going to be meek. I'm going to be poor in spirit." You can't syke yourself up. These are produced in the heart of a person by the work of the Holy Spirit. And if God shows you today your poverty of spirit, thank God for that, because that's the beginning of salvation and blessings in your life.

Secondly, I would say that these Beatitudes are in stark contrast to the world's views. When Jesus said, in verse 3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," that's not what the world believes. The world says, "Blessed are the rich," "Blessed are the proud," "Blessed are the self-assertive," those who get what they want in life. The world doesn't say, "Blessed are those who mourn." They don't say, "Blessed are the meek." They say, "Blessed are the strong and the self-assertive." So these Beatitudes are counter-cultural. The Sermon on the Mount is the Christian counter-culture. God's kingdom is the flip-flop or the reverse of man's kingdom.

In God's kingdom, the way up is first down. In God's kingdom, the way to be full is to first be emptied. In God's kingdom, the way to joy is dying to yourself. That's in God's kingdom. So all these beautiful attitudes are contrary to the world.

Thirdly, all Christians are to have all of the Beatitudes in their lives all the time. This is not a smorgasbord. After these next eight weeks of studying the Beatitudes you may say, "Well, I liked the series, but I think I'll just take 'pure in heart.' I don't really like that merciful bit; I've got somebody I'm really, really mad at. I want to smash the windows in on their car. Then I'll put a Christian sticker on it." No! The Bible says, "Vengeance is mine and I will repay, says the Lord." You need to be merciful. "I don't want to take this 'poor in spirit' stuff!" You can't pick and choose. All the Beatitudes belong in all God's children. All God's children have these beautiful attitudes in their lives.

Fourthly, the Beatitudes have an obvious formula and structure and pattern. This is kind of rabbinic teaching in a classic form; they open with "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven," and they close in verse 10 with "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." They are the bookends. That's how you know the beginning Beatitude and the last Beatitude.

Let me mention three things about the formula, structure and pattern of these Beatitudes. They all open with the word "blessed," but not just "blessed" but "blessed are." These are pronouncements. He's not telling us to be blessed. He's not telling us to seek blessing. He's actually pronouncing that these are the individuals who are blessed; it's a declaration.

Then Jesus is describing eight character qualities of those who are blessed. They are "poor in spirit," they "mourn," they are "meek," they "thirst for righteousness," they are "merciful," "pure in heart," "peacemakers" and they are "persecuted for righteousness' sake." So these are character qualities of children of God.

Then thirdly, the Beatitudes give the reasons for the blessings. Notice that every one of the Beatitudes ends with "for theirs" or "for they." "For theirs is the kingdom of heaven," verse 3. Verse 4, "For they shall be comforted." Verse 5, "For..."—here's the rationale or the reason or

the reward—“...they shall inherit the earth.” Verse 6, “For they shall be filled.” Verse 7, “For they shall obtain mercy.” Verse 8, “For they shall see God.” Verse 9, “For they shall be called the children of God.” Verse 10, “For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Every time we read that word “for” there, it’s the rationale or the reason they are blessed, and because they’re blessed, they’re happy. So there is a definite structure to these Beatitudes. They present the present blessing and even the future promised blessing of the true child of God.

Let’s look at the first Beatitude in verse 3. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” First, we see there is a declaration of blessedness; “Blessed are.” You need to understand this word “blessed.” We’re going to live with it for eight weeks, so you need to acquaint yourself with what it means. I did some research on the etymology of the English word “blessed.” It fascinated me. It starts with the word “blood.” The word “blessed” comes from the word “blood.” The reason is that the sacrifices were blood sacrifices. They were dedicated and consecrated to God, or they were “blessed” to give to God. So it started with the concept of a sacrifice or a consecration to God.

Then the word “blessed” in the old, Anglo-Saxon English was tied very closely to another English word, “bliss,” which meant “happy” or “joyful.” So they took the two words and they joined them together—blessed and bliss—so they became the word “blessed,” which means “happy” or “joyful.” Sometimes the translation is “O, how happy.” Psalm 1 is known as “the happy psalm.” That’s because it starts out, “O, how happy.” Our English Bible starts out, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly.” But it could actually be translated, “O, how happy.” The word also means “to be envied.” So this is a person who has true happiness, and he could be envied for the true joy and happiness he had.

Jesus used the word “happy” here not in a subjective, emotional feeling kind of way. He used it in an objective sense; the fact of how God thinks of them—God blesses them. It means that God approves of them. Yes, this word “blessed” means happy. It means joy. It conveys the idea that we have the peace of God, the blessings of God. But I like to think of it as the approval of God.

Max Lucado wrote a book on the Beatitudes. He titled it *The Applause of Heaven*. What a great title. So when these character traits are found in us, God claps for us. What a cool thought; God claps for me! For too long we live for the approval and applause of men. The Beatitudes bring us to a commitment that we want to live for the approval and the applause of God.

Who are you living for? Whose approval are you seeking? Do you seek the approval of people? Your peers? Or do you want the approval of God? As you’re reading this message, ask yourself these honest questions: “Whose approval am I seeking? Whose favor do I want? Whose applause do I want?” The world’s? Or God’s? The Christian wants the applause of heaven. They want to bless the heart of God. That means they want the approval of God.

Do you desire God’s applause? I do. I want God to work that out in my heart. I want nothing

more than the approval of God. When I die, there is one thing I want: I want to hear God say to me, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Enter thou into the joy of the Lord." That's all I want. I don't want to build up a great treasure on earth. I don't want to be famous on earth. I just want God to say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant." I want to be faithful to what God has called me to do, and I want His approval.

Now we move from the pronouncement or declaration of blessedness to ask, in verse 3, "Who are the blessed?" Jesus makes it very clear. And it's interesting that the first Beatitude says that the blessed are happy. If you want to be happy, what do you have to be? "Poor in spirit." "Happy are the poor in spirit."

Now what does Jesus mean by "poor in spirit?" First let me tell you what He does not mean. It doesn't mean monetarily or materially poor. You're not blessed if you're homeless. You're not blessed if you're a beggar. You're not blessed if you're destitute. Nowhere in the Bible does it teach that poverty is blessing from God. If that were true, then it would be wrong for us as Christians to take social action or to help feed the hungry or clothe people, because God would say they're blessed. No.

Riches are relative. If you live in Menifee in the United States, compared to some parts of China or India or the Philippines or even Mexico, you're rich. If you have shoes, a car and a house and you have a bed to sleep in, you're rich. But if you leave Menifee and go to Rodeo Drive, you just became poor.

I grew up in San Bernardino. I had friends come visit me from out of state and they said, "Let's go to Rodeo Drive! I want to see Rodeo Drive."

"Are you sure? We're going from San Bernardino to Rodeo Drive?" So you go to Rodeo Drive, but when you go back to San Bernardino, you're rich again.

So money isn't the issue here. I know that when Luke recorded the same sermon, he had Jesus say, "Blessed are ye poor." And the Bible does have the idea that poor people find it easier to trust God and believe in God and hope in God and to rely on God, because they don't have money. But the Bible doesn't condemn the possession of riches. It doesn't say that it's sinful and evil to have money. But the Bible does say how hard it is for the rich to enter into the kingdom of heaven. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." However, God does save rich people. So it's not about your bank account; it's about your heart. That's what Jesus is talking about. Notice it's "poor in spirit"; not "poor in bank account or possessions."

Secondly, "poor in spirit" isn't talking about a natural shyness. Some people are naturally shy. No; they're not blessed because of their shyness. They're just naturally shy; they're not aggressive. So being "poor in spirit" is not a natural shyness.

Thirdly, it's not a showy, phony humility. There are some people who try to feign or put on humility. Nothing could be worse. It's a reverse of pride. They put themselves down. I've heard

people say, “Oh, I’m just nothing. I’m really not very good. I’m not that talented. I’m really ugly and I’m really stupid. I’m really dumb. I’m just not gifted. I’m just nothing. If I’m in the body of Christ, I’m just the dirt under the toenails.” That’s my illustration.

And what people say is, “Oh, no you’re not!” People purposely put themselves down, so other people will stroke them and bring them up. “No; you’re wonderful!”

“Oh, I am!” They like that. The best way to keep them from doing that is to agree with them when they put themselves down.

“You are messed up!”

Then they get mad at you and say, “What! Why’d you say that?”

“Well, you’re the one who said that. I’m just agreeing with you.”

When a person is truly poor in spirit and truly humble, they just forget about themselves. They don’t pull themselves up, and they don’t put themselves down. They just forget about themselves. They think about God and others being more important than themselves. So it’s not a showy, phony humility.

What is it then? I want you to note that it is “poor in spirit.” It’s spiritual poverty. It is to be poor in the inward man; it’s not the outward circumstances. My definition of “poor in spirit” is “seeing yourself spiritually poor and bankrupt before God.” That may seem simplistic, but it is simply profound. The way to salvation, blessing and the kingdom of God is to humble yourself, to see yourself as spiritually poor before God. It’s seeing yourself as utterly sinful and without the moral virtues to commend yourself to God.

The Greek word that is translated “poor” in verse 3 means “absolute, abject poverty.” It literally means in its root “to crouch or to cower.” It means beggarly poor. It’s used in Luke 16 about Lazarus, who was a poor beggar at the rich man’s gate, begging for crumbs which fell from his table. It means the person is so destitute that he literally has nothing, and he has no way or means to do anything. So he has to beg on the streets. He covers his face in shame and reaches out asking for mercy.

It doesn’t mean you’re hard working but living paycheck to paycheck. It doesn’t mean that you’re living hand-to-mouth because you’re lower income. It means that you’re completely, utterly, totally destitute. This would be a homeless person who doesn’t even have cardboard or a tent to sleep under.

Spiritually speaking, you are an absolute beggar when it comes to your relationship to God. I realize that is contrary to our culture today. Yes, the Bible teaches that God loves us. Yes, the Bible teaches that we are created in the image and likeness of God. We have intrinsic value. God has come to redeem us. But everything God does for us—understand this—God does it for His glory and not because we’re worthy. You’re not blessed, you’re not saved, you’re not a

Christian because of who you are. It's because of what God is: God is good, and it's because of God's grace. As Christians, we need to come to Him with that beggarly heart.

In Psalm 34:6, David is the psalmist. He couldn't be called financially or physically poor, but he said, "This poor man cried out, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles." Isn't that great? Rich King David said, "This poor man cried out, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles."

Perhaps you have that same testimony: you cried out to God in a time of desperation, in a time of difficulty or when going through darkness. And the Lord heard your cry. Maybe you're going through some trauma, some horrible thing, and you cried out to God. And God heard your cry and came to you and He reached down and lifted you up. That's what it means to be poor in spirit.

It is the opposite of pride. When John wrote to the seven churches of Asia in the book of Revelation, he wrote a letter to the church of Laodicea. The church at Laodicea I call "the rich poor church." There are a lot of rich poor churches in our world today. They said, "I am rich. I am increased in goods. I have need of nothing." That's sad. There's a difference between what we think and what God thinks. God said, "No; you're poor." That's the same word used in this Beatitude. "You are naked, wretched and blind. I counsel you to buy of Me eye salve, that your eyes would be anointed that you may see. I counsel you to buy garments that you may be clothed. I counsel you to buy gold that you may be rich."

I would much rather be a "poor rich church" than a rich poor church. I would rather be poor in the things of this world but rich in blessings from God. What an awesome thought!

So when Jesus starts this Beatitude, He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," or "destitute."

How do we become the "poor in spirit"? In Isaiah 6, there is an understanding when Isaiah said that he was called by God. He said, "I saw the Lord...high and lifted up." You know the story. He said that His glory "filled the temple." How did Isaiah respond when he saw God? He responded by saying, "Woe is me."

You know what the opposite word of "blessed" is in the New Testament? It's the word "woe." You're either blessed or woe. I want to be blessed; I don't want to be a woe. You either have the blessing approval of God, or you have the judgment or wrath of God. Woe unto you.

Isaiah said, "Woe is me, for I am undone!" Why? "Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." God had to touch his lips and cleanse his heart.

Here's the principle: seeing God, we see ourselves. You want to be "poor in spirit"? Then get your eyes on God. Don't look at other Christians. You can always find someone else who you are better than. You want to be "poor in spirit"? Get your eyes on Jesus Christ. Fix your eyes on Him. I love that old song:

“Turn your eyes upon Jesus,

Look full in His wonderful face.

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim,

In the light of His glory and grace.”

Fix your eyes on Jesus Christ.

Peter was out on the boat, and after a night of toiling and fishing, Jesus came to him. Peter had caught nothing, and unbeknownst to him, it was Jesus he saw on the shore, Who said to Peter, “Have you caught any fish?”

“No.” Now when a guy has been fishing all night and hasn’t caught anything, that’s the last question he wants to be asked. What great fishermen they were.

Then Jesus said, “Cast your nets on the other side of the boat.” Now tell me how that’s going to work. The boat’s about four feet wide. No fish on this side of the boat, but if I throw a net on the other side of the boat, I’m going to catch some fish? The difference was that they were doing what Jesus told them to do. When you do what Jesus tells you to do, your nets are going to be full.

So they threw their nets on the other side, and then they pulled them in and they were full of fish. John the apostle very perceptively said, “It’s Jesus! This is the Lord!” So Peter put on his coat—he had been fishing without his coat—and jumped into the Sea of Galilee and swam to shore. Knowing it was Jesus Christ, Peter fell down on his face and said, “Depart from me, a sinner.”

When you see Jesus in all His majesty, in all His beauty and in all His loveliness—when you experience God’s grace, you actually say, as Peter did, “Depart from me, a sinner.” “Poor in spirit” is knowing that you have nothing to offer to God, so you are begging for God’s mercy.

Again, the world rejects this poverty of spirit. They say, “Happy are the proud,” “Happy are the rich,” “Happy are the assertive.” But Jesus says, “Happy are the poor in spirit.”

Why does Jesus start with “Happy are the poor in spirit”? Let me give you three reasons. First of all, poverty of spirit is essential for salvation. This is clear in our text: no one enters the kingdom of heaven without being poor in spirit.

Secondly, poverty of spirit is essential for God’s blessings. Do you want God to bless you? Do you want God’s approval? Do you want the smile of God in your life? Well, it starts with poverty of spirit.

Thirdly and lastly, poverty of spirit is essential for spiritual growth. Do you want to grow in grace

and in the knowledge of your Lord and Savior? Then be filled with poverty of spirit. And the only way to be filled is to be emptied. When we want to be filled, we first have to be emptied of self. We will never grow apart from poverty of spirit. It's the posture of grace.

Notice the reward for poverty of spirit, in verse 3: "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The "kingdom of heaven" and the "kingdom of God" are synonymous. People rack their brains trying to figure out what the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God are. There are entire books written on what they are. It's quite simple: they're both the same thing. A Christian lives in the kingdom of heaven. A Christian lives in the kingdom of God.

The Bible says that "It's not food and drink but righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." That's why if a Christian is not joyful or doesn't have happiness, it's a contradiction in terms. You see some Christians who look like they've been baptized in lemon juice. They say with a downcast spirit, "Yes, I'm a Christian. Isn't the Christian life wonderful." Wow! I don't know. With no excitement they say, "You too can have the joy of the Lord." God, have mercy.

A lot of Christians are like a man with a headache. You don't want to lose your head; you want to keep your Christianity. But you want to get rid of your headache. There's no happiness. Only God can give you true happiness. It comes from having a right relationship to God. The beginning or the foundation of a right relationship with God or of entering the kingdom of heaven or of salvation is poverty of spirit.

I want you to notice in the text the words "for theirs." Every time those words appear in these Beatitudes, they are emphatic in the Greek. It basically means "theirs and theirs only." It's emphatic. "For theirs, and theirs only, is the kingdom of heaven." So the minute you are born again, you are taken out of the kingdom of darkness and you are translated into the kingdom of light. From the kingdom of hate to the kingdom of love. From the kingdom of self-righteousness to the kingdom of God's righteousness that is imputed to you by faith.

That was something the Pharisees missed and the publicans found. It's funny how the wine bibbers, the prostitutes and the publicans were found living in the kingdom of God, but the religious community was shut out.

In Luke 18 we see the parable of the Pharisee and the publican or tax collector. This story describes what it means to be "poor in spirit" and to be entering into the kingdom of heaven. Starting in Luke 18:9, it says that Jesus "spoke this parable..."—a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning—"...to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: 'Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.'"

Now the Pharisee was religious; he was a righteous Pharisee. He kept all the Law and all the precepts. That meant that he was separated unto God. The other was a publican or tax collector. Tax collectors were synonymous with crooks. The word "publican" today would be like saying "a Mafia boss." They were mobsters and crooks. They stole money from people.

Continuing, “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’”

What was God doing when the Pharisee said this? He wasn’t applauding. When you go to church and brag about who you are and what you’ve done, God doesn’t clap. It doesn’t impress God. “God, I thank you I’m not like other men, especially like that guy over there. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of everything I possess. I’m righteous.” God’s not clapping.

But then we see this other man, the tax collector. Verse 13 says, “And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’” Remember I said that the word “poor” means “cowering poor” or “abject poverty”? That you cover your face your face in shame? That you’re so poor you have to beg for mercy? So the tax collector would not even look up. He beat his breast and said, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!” In the Greek it actually says, “God, be propitiated. God, pardon my sins.”

Then Jesus makes the application in verse 14. Jesus said, “I tell you, this man...”—that is, “this wicked, worldly tax collector”—“...went down to his house justified...”—notice this word—“...rather than the other.” So the religious man wasn’t forgiven or saved or justified, but the irreligious, wicked tax collector was saved. The principle is, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” That’s poor in spirit. If you exalt yourself, you’ll be abased, but if you humble yourself, you will be exalted. So theirs, and theirs only, is the kingdom of heaven.

Notice it’s in the present tense. The moment you are born again, the moment you trust Jesus Christ as your Savior, God washes away all of your sins. He gives you a brand-new heart. He takes you out of the kingdom of darkness, the kingdom of Satan, and He translates you into the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven.

You get into the kingdom with poverty of spirit. To live in the kingdom is to live in an attitude of poverty of spirit. We sing the song:

“Nothing in my hand I bring.

Simply to Thy Cross I cling.”

We sing:

“Just as I am—poor, wretched, blind;

Sight, riches, healing of the mind;

Yes, all I need, in Thee to find,

O Lamb of God, I come, I come!"

The Christian life starts with poverty of spirit. If you are proud and self-righteous, and you haven't been born again, you haven't trusted Jesus Christ, then you're not a Christian, and you're not living in the kingdom of God. The Bible says, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." It says, "There is no one righteous; no, not one." So all of us have sinned, and no one is good enough to get to heaven. But "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish but have everlasting life." You'll be able to enter into the kingdom.

So if you don't know for sure that you're a child of God, if you haven't entered in through poverty of spirit, you haven't come to God and cried out for mercy or if you've boasted that "I go to church. I'm a good person. I don't do bad things," you're like that Pharisee in the temple who boasted of his goodness. The Bible says that our goodness is like "filthy rags" before a holy God. We must come broken, contrite and humble before Him. Remember that Jesus said if we're to enter the kingdom, we must come "like a little child." Not become a child, but become like a child in humble, broken dependency.