

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT

A couple from Bakersfield, CA purchased a new boat, but they were having serious problems. No matter how hard they tried, they couldn't get the boat going. It was sluggish no matter which way they turned or how much power was applied. After an hour of trying to make it go, they putted to a nearby marina, hoping someone could tell them what was wrong. A thorough check on the topside of the boat revealed everything was in perfect working condition. The engine ran fine, and the propeller was the correct size and pitch. Then, one of the marina guys jumped in the water to check underneath. He came up choking with laughter. Under the boat, still strapped securely in place, was the trailer!

Ridiculous! But not more ridiculous than the many believers are puttering around wondering why their Christian life isn't working – it's simple, they have sin attached beneath the surface of their lives that needs to be removed.

Today we are starting a new series called Blessed. For the next eight weeks we are going to be looking at the beatitudes. In Matthew 5 we have the opening lines of Jesus' famous Sermon the Mount. He starts His sermon with 8 positive statements about how to be blessed by God. Today let's start with the first of these statements;

Matthew 5:1-3 Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, 2 and he began to teach them, saying: 3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Of all the subjects Jesus could have chosen to speak on when he started the Sermon on the Mount, why did He chose the subject of how to be Blessed. Why? Because He knew that this is what everyone is searching for in life but that very few people really find it.

Let me ask you a simple question this morning, are you blessed? People today wrongly equate blessing with happiness. What would it take to make you happy? They asked that question of 52,000 Americans in Psychology Today. These were their answers: close friends or social life; good job; being in love; recognition and success; sex; personal growth; good financial situation; having a house or apartment; being attractive and beautiful; being a parent, marriage; your partner's happiness. The interesting things about this is most of the attempts to find happiness are through external situations instead of internal.

The popular idea of happiness is this: having the right circumstances. It's what I call "when and then" thinking. "When I get out of school, then I'll be happy." "When I get a job, then I'll be happy." "When I get married, then I'll be happy." "When I have kids, then I'll be happy." "When the kids leave home, then I'll be happy;"

Ecclesiastes 2:1 I thought in my heart, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless.

This classic chapter on the search for happiness is from Ecclesiastes chapter two. Solomon is basically saying here "I decided to enjoy myself and find out what happiness is." If you want to save yourself a lot of time, go home and read Ecclesiastes chapter two. Solomon said, I tried it all and I found three dead ends: accumulating possessions, experiencing pleasures, achieving success. You can be a billionaire and the most popular person on the planet. You can have enough sex and drugs to last a lifetime. You can have the best education. These are not things that bring lasting contentment.

Ecclesiastes 2:17 So I hated life, because the work that is done under the sun was grievous to me. All of it is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

The popular idea of happiness is that it is based on having the right circumstances. But God's way to happiness is having the right attitude. To be blessed means to be favoured by God. Jesus says that it is to have an inward contentedness unaffected by surrounding conditions. It's to be graciously approved by God and to receive the applause of heaven.

To be blessed isn't a superficial feeling of well-being based on circumstances, but a deep supernatural experience of contentedness based on the fact that one's life is right with God -- John MacArthur

Jesus starts the beatitudes by saying "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." You may wonder why Jesus is starting there. Being poor in spirit does not sound like much fun.

Being poor in spirit does not mean that you have low self-esteem. He is not talking about people that are always putting themselves down, saying that they are terrible, awful people. God created us with value and purpose. We are special and precious to Him. Being poor in spirit means that you recognize your spiritual need. You recognize that you are not perfect, that you still have a long way to go. You see yourself the way that God sees you.

He is saying here that the first step to being blessed is being humble. As one Bible translation puts it "Great blessings belong to those who are humble." So why does humility bring us blessings?

1. Humility reduces my stress

When I'm humble I don't have to have all the answers, I realize that the world does not depend on me, I can resign as general manager of the universe. When I'm humble I realize that I don't have to solve all the problems in the world. When I'm humble I don't have to fake it. I don't have to pretend that I'm perfect because God doesn't demand that I be perfect in order to be happy. I don't have to play God and assume responsibility that's not mine.

When I'm humble I can live with the tension between the real and the ideal. You recognize that you are not the perfect spouse, or parent. You are not the perfect employee or boss. There's always a tension in life between the ideal and the real.

Romans 7:18-19 I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. 19 For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing.

Humility accepts the fact that you can be blessed even if you are not perfect. The Christian life is based on the fact that we are not relying on self but depending on God.

It reduces stress when I'm humble. I'm convinced that we take ourselves too seriously. We take ourselves too seriously and we don't take God seriously enough. That is at the root of many of our problems. We're out there trying to impress people with who we are and because we know who we really are and who we want to be there's stress. When I become a humble person, when I walk in dependence upon the Lord, it reduces the stress in my life. As the stress goes down, joy and contentment go up.

A chauffeur had driven the chemistry professor to dozens of speaking engagements. He'd heard the same canned speech scores of times. He said on the way to another engagement, "Professor, I believe I could give your speech myself; I've heard it so often." The professor said, "I'll bet you \$50 you can't." "You're on," said the chauffeur. He stopped the car and the two exchanged attire. They came to the banquet and the chauffeur dressed in a tuxedo, sat at the head of the table and was introduced. He stood up and gave the speech exactly as he had heard it so many times before. There was a standing ovation when he was finished. The emcee got up and said, "You know, we are so fortunate to have such a fine resource with us tonight, and since we have a little extra time, let's have some questions and answers." The first question was asked and the chauffeur stood there dumbfounded, clearing his throat in nervousness. Finally with a flash of insight he said, "You know, that's just about the dumbest question I have ever heard. In fact it is so dumb I bet even my chauffeur could answer that question."

Stop pretending to be something you are not. Just be yourself, faults and all. Years ago I was working for the summer at Canada's Wonderland. Because the roller coaster I was working on was very rough there was a strict policy that pregnant woman were not allowed to ride. One day I had to confront a woman with this. They were very unhappy, until we both realized that we were misunderstanding each other – no baby, beer.

2. Humility redeems (improves) my relationships

No one likes being around proud people. One of the ways pride shows itself is in people who are completely self absorbed. Selfish, self centered people are an irritation. Nobody likes to be around them.

On the other hand, how many of you like to be around humble people? People who understand both their strengths and their weaknesses. They aren't always trying to impress you. When you tell a story they don't always have to have a better one. When you are humble you get along better with other people. Humility doesn't mean you think less of yourself, you just think more about others. When you become interested in others you become interesting to others. So you have better relationships when you're a humble person.

You don't have to be right all the time. And it's easier for you to say those two hard words, "I'm sorry" or the three hardest words, "I was wrong" or the other three hardest words, "I need help". When I'm poor in spirit which means I don't have to fake it and pretend I'm perfect it reduces my stress and improves my relationships because I am humble enough to ask forgiveness.

I read this week of St Francis of Assisi, the monk, who had a method of maintaining humility. In his memoirs he said any time someone praised him, in order to stay humble he had a fellow monk set down and tell him all his faults.

He had to ask a fellow monk, because he never married. Most of us don't need to go get a monk! We have our heavenly sand paper at home. We laugh at this but, ladies, it is not your job to keep your husband humble. Men, it is not your job to keep your wives humble. That's God's job. Ruth Graham once said this about her husband Billy Graham, "My job is to love Billy, God's job is to keep him humble. God can do a better job than you." In your marriage you need to be a supporter and encourager. Let God do the humiliating. He can do it easy enough.

Humility improves my relationships. Proud people bruise very easily. They are sensitive to other people's comments. When I'm pumped up, trying to impress people, and someone says something that really shouldn't bother me, it hurts. It's like sticking a pin in a balloon.

On the other hand, I've discovered, when I'm walking humbly before the Lord and just being who I am, being honest and depending upon God, I'm almost immune to insults. Almost nothing can hurt me. I'm walking before the Lord with the attitude they may be right, they may be wrong, but I'm just trying to please the Lord. If you find someone who is very sensitive to criticism it's because they haven't learned this first principle of happiness: Be humble in spirit before the Lord.

Humility not only improves our relationships but it makes us more effective in ministry. When I first went to Kuwait in 1996 it was in the role as youth pastor. There was a group of Southern Baptists who did not like the Charismatic nature of the church so soon after starting the Senior Pastor asked if I would look after that small group. That meant I had to learn to preach. I had not really done this very much.

The church began to grow. There was an African American man from a southern background that always came to church and would sit in the second row. As someone who was unsure of my preaching style, I learned a lot from him, because he would constantly talk through my messages. If I said something profound he would say "well, well..." If I really was doing great he would raise his hand and say "glory..." However, when I was not doing well he would just shake his head, stretch out his hand and say "help him Jesus..." I always knew how I was doing! That really helped me.

3. Humility releases God's power

James 4:6 ...That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."

Humility releases God's power in your life. Would you like to have God's strength in your life? The Bible says that the secret of spiritual power is to walk humbly before the Lord, to realize you have to depend on Him.

Dr. Samuel Brengle (Salvation Army) said of humility "The axe cannot boast of the trees it has cut down. IT could do nothing but for the woodsman. He made it, he sharpened it, he used it. The moment he throws it aside, it becomes only old iron. O that I may never lose sight of this."

I have a ritual I do every time I speak. During the announcements just before the sermon I say a simple prayer. I ask God to forgive me because I know that I have many faults, but then I offer up myself to God asking him to take this bread and these small fish (from the feeding of the 5000) and to bless it and multiply it and feed the multitude with it.

When I take that attitude before the Lord, I feel His anointing. It is not because of who I am but because of Who God is. I think what this principle here is stating is, the secret of strength is admitting weakness. The secret of power is admitting helplessness. The secret of happiness is humility. The secret of victory is total surrender to God. The secret of independence is dependence upon God.

Matthew 5:3 (Phillips) "Happy are those who know their need for God, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs!"

Another way of saying it is this, God cannot fill what is already full. If you are already full of yourself then there is not much that can be done. However, if you walk in humility and recognize that you have not arrived yet, that you are still learning, that you are not perfect, then God can use you.

That means that all that God has to offer is available to the person who walks humbly before the Lord. All that God has to offer is that person's when we live in dependence before the Lord.

It was John Riskin who said, "I believe the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I do not mean by humility, doubt of his own power, or hesitation in speaking his opinion. But really great men have a ... feeling that the greatness is not in them but through them; that they could not do or be anything else than God made them."

All of us need Jesus in our lives. We need God's power to make through to next week. If you think you don't, you are in trouble. God's power is available to all of us. He is waiting to pour out His power on you. But you've got to ask. And you've got to admit that you need His help. When you walk before the Lord and say, I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me, nothing will be impossible for you.

2 Corinthians 12:10 That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.

Apart from God I can do nothing. When we have that attitude then we will walk not in our own strength but in the power of God.

There's the true story of a young married man who was accepted as an African Missionary. It was the great ambition of his young life. He reported to New York harbor with his wife and soon arrived in Africa. It wasn't long, however, that he found his wife could not physically tolerate the climate. It was killing her. Broken-hearted, he returned home. His father was a dentist, but the young man felt no inclination to become a dentist. His father had, however, a small business on the side making an unfermented wine for use in churches for the Lord's Supper. The young man began to dabble in this business until he finally took over its management. What a waste of time he must have thought as he labored at making grape juice. The business, however, prospered, and the man eventually gave millions to missions around the world. His company is known today as Welch's Grape Juice.

Ask yourself a question, where do I need to practice humility this next week? Where do I need to depend on God more this next week?

After the service today is the last of our town hall meetings looking at the proposed building campaign. We do ask that everyone that has not already been to a town hall meeting or attended a small group presentation please stick around for this meeting. This is your opportunity to ask questions. Do not show up to the Special Congregational meeting on June 26 expecting to ask your questions then.

Many have asked if there is any way that there could be an opportunity to vote in advance of this meeting because they are unable to attend. Next week is our annual congregational meeting. At this meeting the leadership will be presenting a motion to allow for voting in advance. So, if you are an active member of this church and are not able to be at the special congregational meeting on June 26 then plan to attend the regular members meeting next week.