

Happy Are the Humble

Scripture: Matthew 5:3

Code: 2198

INTRODUCTION

Jesus came to earth to bring men happiness. The key to experiencing the happiness (or blessedness) spoken of in the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12) is in following a new standard of living. That standard is set forth in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). Our Lord didn't tell people how to live step by step but about the kinds of attitudes that would bring about proper behavior. He showed that a person's inner life is the key to true happiness.

A. The Applicability of the Sermon on the Mount

Some have said that the Sermon on the Mount sets a standard that is impossible to apply. They point to Matthew 5:48, which says, "Be ye, therefore, perfect, even as your Father, who is in heaven, is perfect." They say that standard obviously can't be applied today and can only be applied to life in the coming millennial kingdom.

But Jesus never said the Sermon on the Mount was intended to apply to the millennial age and He didn't preach to people living in the Millennium. Also, Matthew 5:10-11 says, "Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.... Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake." Believers won't be persecuted in the millennial age because the Lord will rule with a rod of iron (Rev. 19:15). Finally, Matthew 5:44 would be meaningless in the Millennium: "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them who despitefully use you, and persecute you."

Every principle in the Sermon on the Mount is found elsewhere in the New Testament. For that reason as well as the reasons given above, Christ's message must be for us now. He expects His people to apply His standard of living right now. Only that kind of obedience will result in true happiness.

B. The Life-Changing Nature of the Sermon on the Mount

If you apply the principles of the Sermon on the Mount you will be a different person. Many Christians in our day have lost their distinctiveness because they've allowed themselves to be molded by the world's approach to music, sex, marriage, divorce, materialism, food, alcoholic beverages, dance, entertainment, sports, and other things. God wants us to live as a people distinct from the value systems of the world. It grieves God to see corruption among His people.

The manufacturer of a product knows more about it than anyone else. When you buy a car you need to read the owner's manual so you know how to operate and maintain that car properly. God

manufactured everyone who lives in this world, but few people turn to Him to find out how they can know happiness. Jesus tells us how in His sermon.

Although His focus was on our attitudes and thinking patterns, that doesn't mean we neglect our external behavior. When we are right internally, we will also be right externally. Faith without works is dead (James 2:17). Believers are "created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Eph. 2:10). What a person is on the outside depends on what he is on the inside.

C. The Paradox of the Beatitudes

The Beatitudes can seem to be sacred paradoxes. Their value system is in contrast to everything the world values. Note the progression of thought: Matthew 5:3 speaks of "the poor in spirit." A person who is poor in spirit has the right attitude about sin, which leads to mourning (v. 4). When someone recognizes his sinfulness and mourns over it he develops meekness (v. 5). That leads him to hunger and thirst for righteousness (v. 6). Such a hunger manifests itself in mercy (v. 7), purity of heart (v. 8), and a peaceable spirit (v. 9). A person who displays those attitudes can expect to be reviled, persecuted, and falsely accused (vv. 10-11). That's because that kind of life-style is an irritant to worldly people. But in the end believers will be able to "rejoice, and be exceedingly glad; for great is [their] reward in heaven" (v. 12). He who lives in accordance with the Beatitudes will be "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" (vv. 13-14).

LESSON

Matthew 5:3 says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

I. WHY MUST A CHRISTIAN BE POOR IN SPIRIT?

A. Humility Leads to a Right Knowledge of Self

In the Beatitudes Christ spoke of a new standard of living. Being poor in spirit is a fundamental characteristic of a Christian. No one will enter Christ's kingdom on the basis of pride--the doorway into the kingdom is very low and must be crawled through. The sooner we realize we are incapable of attaining the standard Christ calls us to (Matt. 5:48), the closer we are to finding the One who can help us attain that standard. That calls for humility. Jesus was saying, "You can't be filled until you are empty. You can't be worthwhile until you realize you are worthless apart from Christ."

In the church today there is little emphasis on self-emptying. I've seen many books on how to be filled with joy and other things, but I don't think I've ever seen a book on how to empty yourself of self. Too much of contemporary Christianity feeds on pride. But a person without poverty of spirit fails to understand the grace of God and cannot be a Christian since salvation is by grace through faith. Also, the graces of the Christian life can't grow without humility.

B. Humility Leads to a Right Knowledge of Christ

Christ doesn't become precious to us until we are humble. When we preoccupy ourselves with our

own wants and needs we can't see the matchless worth of Christ. Also, until we comprehend how lost we are we can't understand Christ's wondrous and redeeming love. Until we see our poverty we can't see His riches. No man enters the kingdom without understanding his own sinfulness and realizing his need to repent. Proverbs 16:5 says, "Every one who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord."

The only way a right relationship to Christ is established is when we confess our unrighteousness and inability to meet God's standard. Paul thought he was blameless until he became a Christian (Phil. 3:6). Then he realized he had no basis for "confidence in the flesh" (Phil. 3:3). A person enters God's kingdom with a sense of helplessness and desperation. The church at Laodicea thought it was rich, but Christ said it really "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17). There are people in the world today who think they have no spiritual needs, yet in reality are in desperate need of Christ.

II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE POOR IN SPIRIT?

A. Jesus' Meaning

1. It does not refer to physical poverty

Some say Christ was referring to material poverty in Matthew 5:3. They point to Luke 6:20, which says, "Blessed be ye poor; for yours is the kingdom of God." But according to those standards of interpretation Jesus might have been speaking of poverty in education, friends, or many other things. Luke 6:20 is a part of Luke's account of the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew 5:3 and Luke 6:20 should be compared and studied together. Matthew 5:3 defines the kind of poverty Luke was referring to. Also, if we must be without money to receive blessing, then the worst thing a Christian could do would be to give money to those in need. Instead we should be trying to con people out of their money to get them into the kingdom! But that interpretation runs counter to the teaching of the New Testament and would require the closing of orphanages, hospitals, and missions that reach out to the needy. Our Lord wasn't speaking about material poverty in Matthew 5:3.

The Riches of Poverty

Riches often trip up people. Often a poor person's circumstances give him a running start in the spiritual realm. His desperate circumstances will often lead him to seek a source beyond himself. The self-sufficiency of the rich causes them to be complacent about searching for God. That is why "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God" (Matt. 19:24). A rich person is likely to trust in his riches while a poor man may own nothing to put his trust in.

King David said, "I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread" (Ps. 37:25). Paul had times when he was hungry and thirsty but never resorted to begging. The Lord and His disciples were accused of being crazy, ignorant, and turning the world upside down. Thought materially poor they were never accused of being beggars because they relied on what God supplied. They enjoyed the riches of God in the midst of their physical poverty.

2. It does refer to spiritual poverty

The word translated "poor" (Gk., *ptokos*) in Matthew 5:3 speaks of "cowering like a beggar." In classical Greek the word referred to someone reduced to begging in a dark corner for alms. A beggar would cower because he didn't want to be seen—he would be too ashamed to allow his identity to be known. Beggars would wear their clothes in such a way as to be unrecognizable and hold out an

outstretched hand for alms. The word for "poor" in Matthew 5:3 is the same word used to describe Lazarus the beggar in Luke 16:20.

The Greek word *penes* was used when talking about a person who was so poor he could barely maintain a living from his wages. But *Ptotos* refers to a person totally dependent on the gifts of others. Such people were often crippled, blind, or deaf. Because they couldn't function normally in society, they had to plead for grace and mercy from others. They had no personal resources. Christ said that those who are beggars in spirit are happy. He wasn't talking about physical poverty but spiritual poverty. Spiritually man is empty, poor, and helpless. He has no resources that will get him into heaven. He is Spiritually incapable and therefore totally dependent on God's grace. Happy are those with destitute, cowering spirits--only they know their need! That is a sharp contrast to what the world thinks. The world says, "Happy are the rich, famous, self-sufficient, and proud."

B. Jesus' Emphasis

The spirit is the inner part of man and the body the outer part. By using the phrase "happy are the poor in spirit" Christ was teaching that the man who is begging on the inside is the one who is happy.

1. Isaiah 66:2--God said, "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word."
2. Psalm 34:18--"The Lord is near unto those who are of a broken heart, and saveth such as be of a contrite spirit."
3. Psalm 51:17--David said, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."
4. Isaiah 57:15--"Thus saith the high and lofty One who inhabiteth eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him also who is of a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones."

God identifies with people who are spiritual beggars, not with those who are self-sufficient.

Being poor in spirit is not being lazy or indifferent. A person who is poor in spirit has no sense of self-sufficiency and recognizes he is spiritually bankrupt. Christ described the attitude of one who was poor in spirit in Luke 18:10-13: "Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice in the week; I give tithes of all that I possess. And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner" (vv. 9-13). Of the two men Jesus said, "I tell you, [the tax collector] went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted" (v. 14). God receives those who recognize they are spiritually destitute and who cry out to God for mercy. They are the only ones who ever come to know God.

C. Scripture's Confirmation

James said, "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up" (4:10). That kind of poverty represents deep submission to God. In many churches that is an unpopular doctrine because of the current emphasis on celebrities, experts, and rich Christians. Yet all of Scripture affirms the need for humility.

1. In the Old Testament

Judges 6 records the Lord's call of Gideon to deliver Israel. Gideon, aware of his limitations, said, "O my Lord, wherewith shall I save Israel? Behold, my family is poor in Manasseh, and I am the least in my father's house" (v. 15). In effect he told the Lord that He was speaking to the wrong man. God's reply, "The Lord is with thee, thou mighty man of valor" (v. 12). The mightiest man is the one who recognizes that of himself he is nothing. Moses had that kind of attitude. He thought himself incapable of the task God gave him--and by himself he was! The Lord used Moses because he recognized his own insufficiency. David said, "Who am I, O Lord God? And what is my house, that thou hast brought me thus far?" (2 Sam. 7:18).

2. In the New Testament

Peter was an aggressive and confident man. Yet he said to Jesus, "Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8). The apostle Paul knew that in his flesh nothing good dwelled (Rom. 7:18). He named himself a persecutor, a blasphemer, and the chief of sinners (1 Tim. 1:13, 15). He counted everything he had done apart from Christ to be rubbish (Phil. 3:8). Paul saw the things that once he counted as gain were loss in the light of Christ (Phil. 3:7). He realized that God's "strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

Admitting your weaknesses is the beginning of happiness-- but that's the hardest thing you will ever do. To know true happiness you must first be poor in spirit and acknowledge you can do nothing on your own. There must be an emptying of self before you can be filled. And not only is that the attitude you must have to become saved--it's also the way to live.

What Is Impossible with Man Is Possible with God

Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount affirms a life-style that promises eternal happiness. However it can't be followed through one's own resources. That reality is nothing new. It was illustrated when God gave His law on Mount Sinai. He said there was to be no idolatry, adultery, stealing, murdering, bearing false witness, or similar activity among the Israelites (Ex. 20:1-17). Yet even while He was giving the law to Moses the Israelites were engaging in an orgy at the foot of the mountain (Ex. 32:1-6). Right from the beginning Scripture shows that God's standards are not within the realm of human achievement.

Some of the people of Israel knew they couldn't keep God's standards. They offered sacrifices to Him, confessed their sins, and God mercifully forgave them. However, there were others who thought they could keep God's law and they boasted in their self-righteousness. When the rabbis saw the law couldn't be kept they added traditions that were easier to keep. Talmudic law, the system of Jewish interpretation and tradition that developed around God's law, is nothing more than a diluted system of standards devised so that mankind can have some sense of satisfaction regarding God's requirements. While the rabbis said they were trying to protect the law of God, in reality they simply lowered its standards in an attempt to make it attainable. By the time of Christ the Jewish religious leaders were keeping their traditions while God's law itself was being violated daily. Those who penitently acknowledge that they can't keep God's law and confess their sins are the ones the Lord says are justified (see Luke 18:10-14). The Sermon on the Mount defines God's law in such a way that we must recognize we can't keep it. Only through the power of the Holy Spirit and dependence on Christ are we able to obey God.

Jesus clarified God's standard when He said, "Be ye, therefore, perfect, even as your Father, who is in heaven, is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). He also said, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). The Scribes and Pharisees had substituted the commandments of God with the traditions of men (Matt. 15:9). The purpose of the Sermon on the Mount was the same as the giving

of the law at Mount Sinai: the Lord wanted people to see that they had to become poor in spirit and depend totally on Him (cf. Gal. 3:19- 25). God's standards can't be presented to unregenerate men as something to live by--they haven't the power. Obedience to the law requires a new nature that begins with becoming poor in spirit.

III. WHAT IS THE RESULT OF BEING POOR IN SPIRIT?

Those who recognize they are spiritually destitute will go to heaven. "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3) is a factual announcement, not a wish. The word translated "theirs" is emphatic in the Greek text: the kingdom of heaven definitely belongs to those who are poor in spirit. That describes all who are Christians.

In saying "theirs is the kingdom of heaven," Jesus was stating that reality in the present tense. While the kingdom of heaven will be fully realized in the future, the reign of Christ and true blessedness can be experienced now- -you don't have to wait until the Millennium. We are now a kingdom of priests (1 Pet. 2:5; Rev. 1:6). We are now subjects of Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2:6-7 says we have already been seated together in heavenly places and are recipients of God's grace. We have the grace of the kingdom now and will have the glory later (1 John 3:1-2).

IV. WHAT MARKS THOSE WHO ARE POOR IN SPIRIT?

We don't become poor in spirit by trying to keep God's standards in our own power. That is the folly of monasticism. Some people think they will become poor in spirit by selling all their possessions, putting on a robe, and sitting in a monastery. Some have even thought that by cutting off bodily parts they will become less sinful. But those are practices that rely on either you or someone else setting man-made standards for becoming poor in spirit. God has His own way for a person to become poor in spirit.

A. A Focus on God

A person who is poor in spirit focuses on God and reads His Word. As a person dwells on the excellencies of Jesus Christ he will stop focusing on himself.

B. Starvation of the Flesh

Many ministries today seek to feed our pride. But we must seek those things that deny the pride of the flesh. It's easy for us to accept compliments and accolades about what we do as though we had some worth of our own. But those things very often only feed the flesh.

A while ago I was confronted with some things I had done that hurt some people deeply. I was defensive at first because I hadn't meant to be in error. But God began to speak to my heart, reminding me that I am nothing apart from Him and that everything I've ever desired to do for God could be taken away from me in one short breath. God doesn't need me to accomplish His work. By being confronted with what I had done wrong and the self-examination that resulted, I gained a greater measure of comfort than I had ever gained from compliments. I was driven to see who I am in light of who my Savior is. When we understand our dependency on God, we see that our own

resources and accomplishments are worthless and we seek to starve the pride of the flesh.

C. A Prayerful Attitude Towards God

If you want to be poor in spirit, ask for God's help. A beggar always asks for help. The tax collector in Luke 18 said, "God be merciful to me a sinner" (v. 13). That man went home justified (v. 14). Happy is the man who knows he is a spiritual beggar and asks for God's help--he possesses the kingdom of heaven.

V. HOW CAN I KNOW IF I AM POOR IN SPIRIT?

Thomas Watson gives seven principles we may apply in determining whether we are poor in spirit (The Beatitudes [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971], pp. 45-48).

A. You Will Be Weaned from Self

Psalm 131:2 says, "Like a child that is weaned of his mother; my soul is even like a weaned child." A person who is poor in spirit will be weaned from his self-centeredness. All he thinks about is glorifying God and meeting the needs of others.

B. You Will Focus on Christ

When you are poor in spirit, you will focus on the wonder of Christ. Second Corinthians 3:18 implies that believers are focused on Christ, seeing in themselves a reflection of Him. Philip showed that kind of focus when he said, "Lord, show us the Father, and it sufficeth us" (John 14:8). The psalmist said, "I shall be satisfied, when I awake, with thy likeness" (Ps. 17:15).

C. You Will Never Complain

If you are poor in spirit you will never complain about your circumstances because you know you don't deserve anything anyway. You have nothing to offer to God, yet the greater your needs the more abundantly He provides. So when you lack everything you are in the greatest position from which to receive and recognize God's grace.

D. You Will See Good in Others

A person who is poor in spirit will see the excellencies of others and recognize his own weaknesses. A truly humble person looks up to everyone else.

E. You Will Spend Time in Prayer

A beggar is always begging. He knocks at heaven's gate all the time and doesn't stop until he is blessed.

F. You Will Take Christ on His Terms

The proud sinner adds Christ to his pleasures, covetousness, and immorality. One who is poor in

spirit is so desperate that he will give up everything to obtain Christ. Thomas Watson said, "A castle that has long been besieged and is ready to be taken will deliver up on any terms to save their lives. He whose heart has been a garrison for the devil, and has held out long in opposition against Christ, when once God has brought him to poverty of spirit and he sees himself damned without Christ, let God propound what articles he will, he will readily subscribe to them: 'Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?'" (p. 47).

G. You Will Praise and Thank God

When you are poor in spirit, you will praise and thank God for His grace in the knowledge that everything you have is a gift from Him. The apostle Paul displayed that attitude in 1 Timothy 1:14: "The grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant." Those who are poor in spirit are filled with thanks.

Conclusion

If you want to know true happiness you must be poor in spirit. That means you must understand your spiritual helplessness. If you recognize your spiritual poverty you will possess the kingdom of heaven now. Augustus Toplady summed all that up in the hymn "Rock of Ages":

Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling.

Focusing on the Facts

1. What was the emphasis of Christ' teaching in the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount? Explain.
2. What have some said about the standard of conduct given in the Sermon on the Mount? Are they right? Why or why not?
3. Discuss the relationship between our internal attitudes and external behavior.
4. Describe the flow of thought of the Beatitudes.
5. What is a fundamental characteristic of a Christian? Explain.
6. Was Christ talking about the materially impoverished in Matthew 5:3? Explain.
7. Why do poor people often have a running start in the spiritual realm?
8. Explain the meaning of the Greek words ptokos and penes. Why did Jesus use the word ptokos in Matthew 5:3?

9. What does it mean to be poor in spirit?
10. Give some examples from the Bible of people who were poor in spirit.
11. God's standard for living cannot be attained by man's efforts. Give an illustration of that from the book of Exodus.
12. What did the Jewish religious leaders do when they saw they couldn't keep the law? Why did they do it? In reality, what had they done?
13. What do the poor in spirit receive? When does that take place?
14. How can you know if you are poor in spirit?
15. Why does a person who is poor in spirit not complain about his circumstances?
17. What does a proud sinner do with Christ? What are the poor in spirit willing to do to obtain Christ?

Pondering the Principles

1. People often balk at the idea of humility toward God, as if there was something in them worthy of praise from Him. Yet the apostle Paul did not share that estimate of mankind (Rom. 3:10-18). The Puritan pastor John Owen wrote that believers find that sin "fills them with shame, self- abhorrence, and deep abasement of soul. They discern in ... themselves on account of it, an unsuitableness to the holiness of God, and an unfitness for communion with him. Nothing do they more earnestly seek in prayer than a cleansing from it by the blood of Christ; not are any promises more precious to them, than those of purification from it" (The Holy Spirit: His Gifts and Power, [Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1954], p. 255). When a person understands who they are in light of who God is, only humility toward God can result. That's what starts the walk of holiness. Does humility of spirit mark your life?
2. Do you love the Lord Jesus Christ? Love for Christ requires a humility that will serve Him. Thomas Watson wrote, "Love is a humble grace; it does not walk abroad in state; it will creep upon its hands; it will stoop and submit to anything whereby it may be serviceable to Christ" (All Things for Good [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986 reprint], p. 87). By His death on the cross Christ stooped far lower than any human could ever stoop (Phil. 2:6-8). How low has your love for Christ enabled you to stoop for Him?

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