



- Recall from last week:

The Sermon on the Mount is not primarily about ethics; it is a sermon about salvation. In fact, it is probably the most definitive sermon that Jesus preached about identifying who is saved and who is not. Indeed, this masterpiece of divine truth stands for all time as an unconventional litmus test for true salvation and spiritual growth.

-- Read Luke 6:17-20

-- Pray

-- Video – Jesus – Upside Down

I like that video a lot because I think it is a good picture of what is happening in this passage of Scripture from the Sermon on the Mount, which is often called the “Beatitudes.” What I mean is that, in order to understand both the artist’s work in the video and our Lord’s Words in this sermon, we must be willing to slow down and take both of them from a fresh perspective. Indeed, just as the artist did in the video, so Jesus is clearly doing in this masterful sermon. He is taking our conventional perspective and turning it entirely upside down. He is revealing to us a radiant picture of Himself in a way that we would not naturally expect.

Indeed, as we discussed last week, Christ’s message is usually the complete opposite of human thinking, isn’t it, even that of the religious people of His day. Because of this, the people of His time and people still today often have tremendous difficulty hearing and properly understanding His message. In fact, the teaching of Jesus was so entirely incompatible with that of the Jewish leaders, who were regarded as the most theologically astute people of the day, that they declared it to be repulsive and grossly mistaken. They were, in fact, so threatened and offended by the message of our Lord that they accused Him of speaking from Satan.

How, you may ask, could they ever have concluded such a thing? Well, in short, it is because everything He taught was so diametrically opposed to everything these religious leaders assumed. In fact, so great was their opposition to Jesus and His message that they resolved to silence Him by putting Him to death before He had the chance to destroy their entire religious enterprise.

Christ's message, you see, doesn't just add a few ideas to man's conventional religious wisdom, nor does it merely subtract some minor content here and there. Hear this: The truth of Jesus Christ completely supplants and replaces anything else disguised as truth, and His teaching explodes the very foundations of worldly thinking. Moreover, His unconventional wisdom shatters our ungodly motives, whether they be purely secular or dressed up as religion. Our Lord authoritatively takes hold of our world and turns it completely upside-down for His glory.

Thus, the message of Jesus never has been, nor will it ever be politically correct, and it is not going to sound like the conventional wisdom of the world. In fact, the teaching of Jesus is altogether alien to everything we consider to be true in the natural mind. It defies human ideas and proves itself to be the antithesis of human motivation. And nowhere is this more evident than in the Sermon on the Mount, especially the Beatitudes that we will consider today. Just listen to the words of the superlative sermon, beginning in verse 20:

*"Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets."*

Now, it may well be that we have heard these verses so often that our ears have become numb to how incredibly revolutionary they really are. However, as we are blessed to do with any portion of Scripture, let us engage the words of this text in such a way as to hear them as the original hearers did, because this sermon was absolutely unlike anything they were being taught about the kingdom of God. In

fact, to Jesus' original audience, and to us if we will listen, this was not just another sermon; it was more like a devastating series of theological bombshells.

Theologian Adolph Deissmann has described Beatitudes like this: He wrote, "They are spoken in an electric atmosphere. They are not quiet stars but flashes of lightning followed by a thunder of surprise and amazement." Truly, if we will ponder Christ's words here, we will see how thoroughly they violate and confound the standards of this world. I mean, the people whom Jesus declared happy the world would call miserable; and the people Jesus declared miserable the world would call happy. 'Happy are the *poor*?' and, 'Woe to the *rich*?' To talk like that is to put an end to the world's expectations altogether.

Thus, Deissmann's description is right, is it not? The Beatitudes most certainly must have been like startling flashes of lightning, and they were surely greeted by an thunder of surprise and incredulity. Even in our vastly different culture today, these statements of Jesus still sound just as crazy as ever, don't they? Since when are poverty, hunger, sorrow and rejection a blessing? And when did riches, satisfaction, happiness, and popularity a curse? Doesn't the American Dream consist of the reverse—that is, turning poverty into riches, hunger into satisfaction, sorrow into happiness, and rejection into popularity. Isn't that what living the good life is supposed to be all about?

But this is precisely the point that Jesus was making, isn't it? He is pronouncing in no uncertain terms that the world and all its philosophies are usually opposed to the truth. That's why, in 1 Corinthians 1:25, the Apostle Paul writes, "*The foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.*" And in Romans 1:21-22, he says the following about those who advocate for the wisdom of the world: "*For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools.*" Again, we see that Jesus' teaching does not merely come and add something to the existing self-made brilliance of humans. No, He replaces it entirely.

Therefore, what we have in this passage—the Sermon on the Mount—is nothing less than history's greatest preacher preaching history's greatest sermon with absolute authority. And in this oratory masterpiece, Jesus defines who is blessed and who is cursed; He gives us a God-breathed litmus test for our spiritual condition, and His criteria are exactly the opposite of conventional thinking. If you desire to know anything in this life at all, surely you want to know this. Of all the

perspectives we might gain in this life, surely the most valuable by far is the wisdom to see ourselves as God sees us. Surely we are blessed, and greatly at that, to know the status of our relationship with the eternal God and Judge of the universe.

Thus, if you truly desire to know your spiritual condition, and I sincerely pray that you do, then here, in this classic sermon, is the standard by which you can determine it. This is the test. By the time we progress from verse 20 through verse 49, we will, by God's grace, have stretched the plumb line against which our lives can be measured, and we will, by the Spirit's power, be able to determine whether or not we genuinely know God. We shall perceive whether we are growing in Christ or dying with the world... whether we are on the path that leads to heaven or the road that leads to hell... whether we are among the blessed or among the cursed... whether we are saved or lost. And of all the things we could possibly know, this knowledge is clearly paramount. Are you ready? Let us, then, take out our #2 pencils, open up the exam, and engage together the unconventional wisdom of our Savior and Lord.

As we first encounter this passage we can immediately see that two words dominate the opening verses—"blessed" and "woe." Indeed, we see four of each—four blessings and four curses—each of which sounds strangely paradoxical to us, quite the opposite of the way most people think. The first word, which is translated as "blessed" here, is the Greek word "makario." It means "most favored," and it is used to identify those who are in the best possible condition. The second word, which is translated as "woe," is the Greek word "ouai." It means "most unfavored," and it is used to identify those who are in the worst possible condition. Thus, in this passage, the blessed are enjoying the most beneficial possible condition while the cursed are suffering the pain of the worst possible condition.

Note further that Jesus here gives only these two destinations; there is not a third option. Blessing and woe are the only two possible outcomes. Every single one of us, then, dwells in either one or the other of these; there is no middle ground. We are either among the blessed or the cursed. This can, therefore, only refer to salvation. Those saved in Christ are blessed; the lost apart from Christ are cursed. Period. To set forth the parameters of this, the most significant of all possible dichotomies, is the essence of the Sermon on the Mount, and especially these Beatitudes.

With that in mind, please recognize that the blessings and curses voiced by Christ here are not mere wishes. They are not plaintive yearnings or distant hopes.

Moreover, they are not even prayers. Jesus is not here calling out to God and saying, “O God, please bless poor people... please bless the hungry, the weeping, and the persecuted. Nor is He praying, “O God, won’t You please curse rich and satisfied people and bring woe to those who are happy and popular. It’s not a prayer like “God bless America,” which is now displayed upon our new sign as a prayer that God will continue to show favor to our nation. That is a fine prayer, but that is not what Christ’s words are.

No, they are not mere wishes. Rather, the blessings and woes voiced here by our Lord are absolute statements of fact. Jesus is not hoping that the poor will be blessed; He is saying in no uncertain terms that they are. And the same is true with the hungry, the weeping, and the rejected. Jesus is not hoping that the rich, and the full, and the happy, and the popular will be cursed; He is straightforwardly stating the fact that they are. In short, these Beatitudes and woes are clear statements of fact. They are authoritative decrees from the mouth of God incarnate. They are a verdict settled and rendered. // He is revealing the rock-solid truth that some people are monumentally blessed because they have received the eternal salvation of God, and others are cursed because they have rejected it. Both are realities, not just possibilities. Thus, the question resounds: Which group are you in? Are you absolutely sure? // For the desperate, there is blessing, but for the self-sufficient, there is woe.

Now let’s begin by looking at Christ’s first description of people who are blessed—poverty. That’s right...poverty. Look again with me at verse 20, which says, “*Looking at his disciples, he said: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.’*” At this point, you might be tempted to say, “Hold on a minute. I’ve been poor, and I hated it,” or “Aren’t people giving money and serving in impoverished areas all around the world in an effort to alleviate poverty?” Furthermore, we would be right to argue that, even in the Bible, poverty is not always construed as a blessing. For example, in Proverbs 30:7-9 we hear a righteous man calling out to God, saying:

*“Two things I ask of you, O LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.”*

So clearly, and obviously, poverty in and of itself is not necessarily a blessing. But remember, this message is not about primarily ethics anyway; it is about salvation. So what point is Jesus making here?

The point is this: Jesus is not talking about the material poverty of this world. To be sure, God doesn't bless people simply because they are poor in a material sense, although His grace can perfectly reach anyone anywhere. In the same way, not all poor people are going to receive the kingdom of God simply because they are poor. In other words, no one will ever be converted because they are economically deprived. Jesus isn't talking about that kind of poverty.

No, the blessedness of which Christ speaks here is something of infinitely more importance than economics or finance. To see what He is really saying, it is helpful to glance at Matthew's longer account of this same sermon, where, in Matthew 5:3, Jesus says, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" You see, that is what Jesus is talking about here—the poor in spirit.

Jesus is talking about those who are *spiritually* poor. Therefore, people who are blessed are people who understand their own personal spiritual poverty. The blessed are those who recognize the bankrupt condition of their soul. They understand that they completely lack the resources necessary to purchase God's favor. Those who Christ calls blessed realize that salvation simply cannot be the result of our good deeds, kind words, or righteous acts. It will never come through our ceremonies, rituals, or "religious-ness." The blessed are those who comprehend that, at the end of the day, no matter how much human good they may have done, no matter how much religion they can claim, no matter how many ceremonies they may go through, they are totally bankrupt nonetheless. They know, in their heart of hearts, that their own personal righteousness has no power whatsoever to purchase their salvation.

While we don't normally talk about the original Greek language of the text, I think it will be especially helpful to examine the word translated here as "poor," so that we might understand just how poor this poverty of which Christ speaks really is. The word is "ptochos," and the verb form of the same word means to cower and cringe like a beggar. Thus, when Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," He is more specifically saying something like, "Blessed are those whose spiritual poverty reduces them to a cowering, cringing, and humiliating shame." This is definitely not the picture of the con man who pretends to be poor or disabled in an attempt to trick people out of their money or to avoid working, is it? No, this type of poverty represents someone who is at the absolute bottom of the heap. In fact, a

person really cannot get any poorer than those described by the Greek word “ptochos.”

Therefore, Jesus is here saying that the blessed are people who not only have absolutely nothing to boast of, but they are also people who lack the capability to earn what they do not have. These are people who have been reduced to a humiliating life of begging. So humbled are they, in fact, that they do not even look up; they just cover their faces and cringe. And as incredible as it sounds, this is the description of the people whom our Lord says are blessed. Blessed are the spiritual beggars who know they have nothing to offer God and no personal means by which they might earn His favor. Blessed are the poor in spirit who cannot get any lower. Blessed are the bankrupt of soul. Blessed are those like the tax collector in Luke 18:10-14, which happens to be of the most important and central passages to the entire Gospel of Luke:

*“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. **He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’** I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

Both this parable and the Beatitude in question today really proclaim exactly the same message. Notice that, in this parable, Jesus says that the tax collector would not even look up to heaven. Why not? Because he is the very picture of the cowering, cringing, impoverished beggar that Jesus declares blessed. Unlike the Pharisee, this tax-collector has no self-righteous delusions. Rather, he meekly cries out to God, saying, “*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*” In essence, he is saying, “I’m too embarrassed, too ashamed, and too humiliated to even look at up You, O God.” This is same blessed attitude reflected in Isaiah 6:5, when Isaiah, in the very presence of God, says, “*Woe to me...I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.*” This is the poor man who knows he has nothing to offer.

And with this declaration of blessing upon the spiritually poor, Jesus found confusion and conflict, because the Jews absolutely did not see themselves that

way. In their eyes, they were most certainly not the spiritually poor. No, they were the most spiritually elite. They were being taught by their misguided leaders to believe that their good deeds had earned them righteousness. Before most of them ever came out to hear Jesus, they were already certain that their religious rituals and ceremonies had granted them good standing with God. Yet, here Jesus was telling them that they were unimaginably mistaken. With this one short phrase, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit,*” Jesus blasted the foundations of their thinking to rubble by declaring that it is only the spiritually bankrupt beggars who know they are entirely dependent upon God who are blessed. Wow!

“But,” you may ask, “How exactly are the poor in spirit blessed? I mean, this spiritual poverty doesn’t really sound any better than material poverty. In fact, it kind of sounds worse.” Why, then, does Jesus say that they are blessed? Well, look with me again at verse 20, where we read, “*Looking at his disciples, he said: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.’*”

Why are the spiritually poor blessed? We are so very blessed because we get the very kingdom of God. Now that is truly amazing! Hear it again. We don’t simply receive a few assorted things from God’s kingdom or certain privileges within it. No, we get *the* kingdom—the *whole* thing. Romans 8:17 says, “*And since we are his children, we will share his treasures—for everything God gives to his Son, Christ, is ours, too.*” Do you hear that? The spiritually poor will inherit everything in the kingdom of God and all that it has to offer. The spiritually poor are in the best possible position because they are owners of God’s forgiveness and grace and mercy and joy and hope and protection and comfort and peace and love and righteousness.

It’s all ours—that is, if we are truly counted by Christ to be among the spiritually poor. The kingdom is ours, but only if we know that we don’t deserve it and that we cannot in any way earn it. It is only for those who humbly confess that they have nothing to commend ourselves to God. The eternal kingdom of God belongs to those who are not too proud to cower before our God and cringe before His perfect holiness. The kingdom of God belongs to people who approach the throne of grace with a humble heart and put up empty hands, asking God to fill them with the mercy and grace that have been revealed in Jesus Christ.

Hear this, friends: The spiritually poor are blessed because salvation comes not by works; it is the gift of God alone. As Ephesians 2:8-9 so clearly proclaims, “*It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*” And Galatians 2:16 says,

*“A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.”*

You see, you will never be justified before God by good deeds alone, no matter how much good you may do, and if you think that you can earn a place in God’s kingdom, then you are not among the blessed. All of us are far too poor in spirit to make such a priceless purchase. However, if you will, like a beggar, reach out empty hands to God and receive His gift of mercy, grace, and forgiveness, then He promises you that you will receive His perfect kingdom right here and right now. Beyond that, God will lavish you with all of the riches of His eternal home in the new heaven and the new earth yet to come. All of it is promised to us if we will sincerely and humbly count ourselves among the spiritually poor and turn to Christ as our only hope.