

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: June 21, 2009
Beverly ECC, Chicago, IL

“BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT”
Matthew 5:1-3; Luke 18:9-14

**“Wonderful news for the poor in spirit!
The kingdom of heaven is yours.**

**“Wonderful news for the mourners!
You’re going to be comforted.**

**“Wonderful news for the meek!
You’re going to inherit the earth.**

**“Wonderful news for people who hunger
and thirst for God’s justice! You’re going
to be satisfied.**

**“Wonderful news for the merciful!
You’ll receive mercy yourselves.**

**“Wonderful news for the pure in heart!
You will see God.**

**“Wonderful news for the peacemakers!
You’ll be called God’s children.**

**“Wonderful news for people who are
persecuted because of God’s way!
The kingdom of heaven belongs to you.**

□ These are the Beatitudes, the words of Jesus in Matthew 5:3-10. {Trans: NT Wright} How shall we interpret them? What approach should we take to decipher their original meaning and their application in our lives?

◆ Are the Beatitudes Law, one more series of rules that we must obey by our own effort?

If so, Christ Jesus demands the impossible.

◆ Are they Ethical Ideals, moral concepts we will never achieve, yet which inspire us to reach higher? If so, the Lord is a dreamer with hollow ideas that accomplish little.

◆ Are they Motivational Strategy, a self-help course for achieving happiness?

If so, they contradict the rest of Christ’s teachings, which say little about emotional pleasure.

◆ Are they Sociology, a study of the way human society naturally functions?

If so, Jesus is dead wrong. In any merely natural community {NT Wright, Matthew for Everyone}

“Mourners often go un comforted, the meek don’t inherit the earth, those who long for justice frequently take that longing to the grave.”

◆ Are they Prophecy, a depiction of the distant future with no substance in the here-and-now?

If so, they are, for the time being, incomprehensible and immaterial

Each of these has been proposed as *the* correct reading of Matthew 5:3-10. Some may be attractive at first glance, but they do not stand up to close scrutiny. And so we are left with a set of fine-sounding words that confuse and frustrate those who long to be doers of the Word, and not hearers only.

◆ Is there a better take on the Beatitudes than these? Is there a way to read them that is more consistent with the rest of the Gospel and more helpful for discipleship? Are the Beatitudes something *other* than law, ethical ideals, motivational strategies, sociology, or prophecy?

□ Let’s look at the events leading up to Mt 5 for clues.

In Matthew 4:17, shortly before He teaches the Beatitudes, **“Jesus [begins] to preach, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’”**

Next, in vv 18-22, Jesus recruits his first disciples.
“Follow me, and I will send you out to fish for people.”

Then, in vv 23-25, He journeys through Galilee,
“teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.”

✦ This section leading up to the Beatitudes shows that: a) the Lord’s ministry is to bring the kingdom of heaven near (vv 17, 25); b) Christ’s Followers help to grow the kingdom (v 19); and c) the kingdom is unveiled in Gospel teaching, proclamation, and transformed lives (vv 23-25).

□ The Beatitudes themselves open the Sermon on the Mount, recorded in Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7.

✦ This sermon is full of moral teachings, but it *not* just a collection of do’s and don’ts; instead, it is a word picture of an alternate reality, a portrait of a community that is radically different from the dominant secular and religious culture. Here in Matthew 5-7 Jesus is inviting his disciples to live in this new reality.

Let me clarify the link between the sermon’s code of conduct and its deeper meaning.

☑ Beth and I sometimes say certain phrases to our girls, like: “This is what we do in this family” or, “We don’t do that in this family.” These might seem to be all about the rules; in fact, they are statements of identity. They are concerned with what it means to be a Nelson.

So it is with the Sermon on the Mount. It is about identity. It is concerned with what it means to be a follower of Jesus who lives in his realm.

The name of this alternate reality is embedded midway through the Sermon on the Mount, in Mt 6:9-10 {NASB} ~ **“Pray, then, in this way: ‘Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven’”**: it is **the Kingdom**.

✦ So the teaching immediately after following the Beatitudes shows the countercultural identity of Kingdom citizens, expressed in new relationships with God, each other, and the world.

◆ The context of **the** Beatitudes (Mt 4:17-25, and the rest of chapters 5-7) reveals that they are not good advice, they are Good News; they are not a directive, they are a description; they are {NT Wright}, **“a summons to live in the present in the way that will make sense in God’s promised future; because the future has arrived in the present in Jesus of Nazareth.”**

This has been a very long introduction for a single verse, but we cannot decipher the original meaning and current application of each individual Beatitude until we first grasp the gist of the whole set.

■ Matthew 5:3 ~ **“Blessed are the poor in spirit.” “Wonderful news for the poor in spirit!”**

Poverty of spirit is...

⊕ As Max Lucado says, coming to **“God’s soup kitchen”** as a **“beggar.”**

⊕ Humble dependence on God for forgiveness, wholeness, daily bread, health, you name it.

⊕ Realizing that God has everything we need and all that we have is what He has given us.

⊕ Knowing in the marrow of our bones that God owes us nothing, but we owe him everything.

⊕ Living as though we need God – not some of the time, *all* the time; not moderately, *desperately*.

“The poor in spirit” {Amp} **“[rate] themselves insignificant,”** {CEV} **“depend only on [God],”** {NCV} and **“know they have great spiritual needs.”**

□ Let’s review the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Luke 18:9-14. The characters in that story illustrate what the poor in spirit do, and do not do.

(Or, better yet, what poverty of spirit does and does not do within us.)

Luke 18:11-12 ~ **“The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’”**

☹ This Pharisee is not lying. He is an upstanding, religious do-gooder, the kind of person you’d want as a neighbor because you know he will keep his lawn mowed and won’t have loud parties. Yet he has two fatal flaws:

- ◆ 1st, He judges himself against human beings.
- His comparisons are accurate: surely, he does not steal like robbers, break all kinds of laws like the wicked, etc.

They are also irrelevant. In the Final Judgment the Lord Jesus will not set us side by side with other people (good or bad), to see if we measure up to them – He will compare us to himself!

- ◆ 2nd, He seeks God’s approval on the basis of his effort.

He presumes that the connection between our deeds and divine reward is a quid pro quo transaction, in which good people work hard and the Almighty pays up.

The poor in spirit do not judge themselves against other human beings, nor do they seek God’s approval on the basis of their effort.

Luke 18:13 ~ **“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.’”**

☺ Make no mistake: This tax collector is a bad man. He has been a parasite on his community, lining his pockets at the expense of his neighbors. Yet he has two things going for him:

- ⚙ 1st, He judges himself against God.

He neither compares himself favorably to other sinners, nor unfavorably to respectable people. He compares himself to God, and confesses, “I am a sinner.”

- ⚙ 2nd, He pleads for mercy on the basis of God’s extravagant kindness.

He offers no justification, makes no excuses. He simply begs for God’s undeserved forgiveness.

This is what the poor in spirit do!

“Wonderful news for the poor in spirit!”

How so? In what ways are they blessed?

Christ Jesus came to establish God’s Kingdom by releasing those who are in bondage, conquering the forces of evil, and uniting heaven and earth.

His work is not yet complete. It will only be finished when He comes again in glory, as {Rev 19:16} **“KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.”**

And yet {NT Wright} **“The future has arrived in the present in Jesus of Nazareth”** and every individual, family, and community that lives **“in the present in the way that will make sense in God’s promised future”** is in some ways an outpost of the Kingdom, and in other ways a signpost that points to it.

Only **“the poor in spirit”** are blessed to experience the kingdom here and now – not in all of its fullness, but truly, and in substance. And only **“the poor in spirit”** are able to help usher in the kingdom. They are the kind of people who find a home in God’s realm.

Lord, help us to be continually poor in spirit!

“Wonderful news for the poor in spirit! The kingdom of heaven is yours!”