

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit [Matthew 5 v1-11] - Understanding the Beatitudes

Jesus saw the crowds and went up a hill, where he sat down. His disciples gathered around him, ² and he began to teach them:
⁴Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. ⁵Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. ³Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.
⁴Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
⁵Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the Earth.
⁶Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.
⁷Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.
⁸Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
⁹Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
¹⁰Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.
¹¹Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me
¹²Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you
[Matthew 5v1-12]

Thus says the Lord: Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. What kind of house would you build for Me? And what kind can be My resting-place? ²For all these things My hand has made, and so all these things have come into being [by and for Me], says the Lord. But this is the man to whom I will look *and* have regard: he who is humble and of a broken *or* wounded spirit, and who trembles at My word *and* reveres My commands
[Psalm 66v1-2 Amplified Version]

¹²So then, dear friends, as you always obeyed me when I was with you, it is even more important that you obey me now while I am away from you. Keep on working with fear and trembling to complete your salvation, ¹³because God is always at work in you to make you willing and able to obey his own purpose. ¹⁴Do everything without complaining or arguing, ¹⁵so that you may be innocent and pure as God's perfect children, who live in a world of corrupt and sinful people. You must shine among them like stars lighting up the sky, ¹⁶as you offer them the message of life. If you do so, I shall have reason to be proud of you on the Day of Christ, because it will show that all my effort and work have not been wasted. **[Philippians 2v12-16]**

Beatitudes?

Are you a Zero or a Hero; Do you having nothing, or the whole world? Or perhaps both are true? Welcome to the world of the Beatitudes

Jesus starts the famous sermon on the mount, with what we often quote as him saying 'Happy are the Poor' ? Really? If you're happier poorer than when you are well catered for, then why do we bother to set up food banks and homeless shelters, or help the down-and-out find a job. Why did Jesus tell the Rich young ruler, to sell all he has and give the money to the Poor [Luke 18v22], if they would be happier without it. Good point? So what is Jesus actually saying?

The Poor Jew

First off, being Rich or Poor meant something very different to the first century Jews, who were mostly low income peasant farmers etc. Your status in a community was essential for good living. This depended on you maintaining yours and your families honour. If it was rebuffed in any way, you had to defend it, before you lost it. If your family were shamed, perhaps your daughter was caught in adultery, then the whole family would be shamed, and your honour would be lost. You would then have to **lose** your settled place in the community and the privileges that came with that; who you could trade with; who you could marry etc. You were disconnected. You were now the 'socially unfortunate', known as the poor.

Interestingly, a widow without close male relatives, was **always** considered poor, because she no longer had the necessary connections within her community no matter how much money she had. She was now a disconnected social mis-fit, so was regarded as poor.

So the 'poor' were the unconnected ones, who had lost the status they should have had, but more importantly had lost that settled relationship within their communities.

In contrast, In a culture where everything was seen as being of limited supply, then if you had more than your fair share, some-one else had less. So if you were rich you were seen as greedy, and must have used your power in a shameful way to exploit others, or you inherited it from ancestors who were greedy. It is different today where you can genuinely make money without disadvantaging others.

The Poor in Spirit

Jesus actually uses the term 'Poor **in Spirit**'. So we've said the 'poor' are those who have lost that settled relationship within their communities and are now unconnected. It follows that the poor **in spirit**, are those who are disconnected from God, whether they know it or not. Here the word poor, doesn't mean you are just about making ends meet, it means you are at your wits end in abject poverty, and must beg to survive. The Poor in Spirit can no longer do this on their own, the Holy Spirit has revealed to them, that what their worldly investments add up to is **nothing**. They can see their spiritual account and it is bankrupt, Lost and desperate they cry out to God.

They are 'blessed'

Jesus says that the 'Poor in Spirit' are blessed. This isn't the type of blessing where you receive something. Like 'Oh Lord bless me with a healthy Baby', instead this type of blessing is something you already possess. It is a steady state of happiness or good fortune.

Here's an example. You can see how content Farmer Green's only daughter is. She knows that one day she will inherit her Father's farm, and that knowledge is an important ingredient in her happy life, one in which she feels secure and confident about the future. She knows that her community are aware of it too, and it gives her a level of acceptance and respect. She is happy in her current state of living, but she is also happy about her assured future life.

Quite specifically though, in this context, the word 'blessed' refers to the **condition** of your heart before God. It refers to the joy you have, when you are connected and open to the presence of God in your life, and to the promise of eternal life to come. That is your joy. What ever happens next, good or bad, can **not** rob you off that joy.

It starts with a moment. The moment when you realise for the first time that you are Poor in Spirit, and stand in front of God with your empty pockets turned out, and say 'I have nothing to give you, but I need you'. This is the moment of breakthrough. It starts with a conviction that leads to salvation. But you are not convicting yourself of your weakness, it is the Holy Spirit that seizes the moment and convicts you, perhaps at the point when you have reached the end of the road, and your defences are down, or perhaps a Christian friend has shown you such love, your normal excuses evaporate and leave a way in for God.

That is the moment to grab your salvation. You won't get saved, as long as you **think** you have something to offer God to **earn** eternal life.. "I got these good deeds I've done I've got some good charitable giving under my belt. God will have seen all my good intentions. I have never done wrong by anyone." Etc.

We need to **stop** going easy on ourselves, and denying the truth which is we have nothing to **offer** God, other than ourselves and our obedience.

"I am poor in Spirit, I am a sinner, I am undone. I have nothing to save my spiritual being in my own strength. To get anywhere God, I need to connect with you, embrace you, and be blessed by you."

Jesus said that the Poor in Spirit **are** blessed; Why? Because theirs is the Kingdom of God? What does **that** mean? What is **this** Kingdom.

Everything Jesus said or did was related to the Kingdom of God, but defining it is difficult. There is a present reality of this Kingdom, as you live out your daily Christian lives with Jesus, but there is also a future reality, and we are taught to pray 'Your Kingdom come'. So Kingdom life is living with Jesus, both in this world and the next.

Peters breakthrough

When Peter first met the Rabbi, he is full of bravado, and to humour Jesus, he agrees to take him out in his boat fishing even though he had been fishing all night and had caught nothing, and the fish had gone too deep in the sunlight now to be caught by nets. But he throws out his net anyway when Jesus says to, 100% convinced that this was a waste of time. Then suddenly the net is so full, it almost sinks the boat. As Peter,

looks at the fish, and looks at Jesus, in that very moment, the Spirit breaks through and convicts him, and Peter realises he is spiritually bankrupt. As Luke recalls it: **When Simon Peter saw what had happened, he fell on his knees before Jesus and said 'Go away from me Lord, I am a sinful man!' (Luke 5v8).**

Peter was afraid. The other fishermen were afraid. But this was it, this was **their** time of blessing. They realised they were Poor in Spirit, and now God could make his move, and bring them into the Kingdom, and then use them for Kingdom work.

Jesus said to Simon "Don't be afraid, from now on you will be catching people" (Luke 5v10).

Pauls breakthrough

Similarly, Saul of Tarsas, the chief persecutor of the 'New Way' sect of Jesus followers, was on the road to Damascus, to hunt out these early Christians and give them a good beating. Then in a moment it happened. There was a flash of blinding light that only he saw. Luke recalls in Acts..

He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him "Saul, Saul why do you persecute me?". "Who are you Lord? he asked. "I am Jesus whom you persecute the voice said." (Acts 9v4-5)

This was Sauls moment. He may have seen himself, or been seen as others, as a spiritual giant in the Jewish faith. A learned, and devout Pharisees, devoted to keeping and protecting Gods law, and routing out heresy at any cost. But at this moment he discovers that he is not a spiritual giant, not even a spiritual weakling, he is a spiritual nothing. All that he has done, had been in his own knowledge and with his own strength, and he discovers that in persecuting the Christians, he has actually been persecuting Jesus, and the very God, who he had thought he had been serving. As he kneels in the dust, now blinded, he realises for the first time his spiritual poverty, his tank is empty. This is **his** moment of blessing. Now God can make his move, and bring Saul, who is renamed Paul, into the Kingdom, and can now use Paul for Kingdom work. Paul can now **become** a spiritual giant, the great evangelist and church planter of the early church, taking the gospel message around the known world. The Lord speaks to a believer in Damascas called Annanias and instructs him to go and meet his persecutor and lay hands on him. His understandable reluctance is met by these words

"Go, because I have chosen him to serve me, to make my name known to Gentiles and Kings and to the people of Israel, and I myself will show him all that he must suffer for my sake" (Acts 9v15.)

Paul recognises he is poor in spirit, and is offered the Kingdom of God.

Those that Mourn

Jesus goes on to say, Blessed are those that mourn because they will be comforted. We immediately think about grieving over the loss of a Loved one, and in that moment being blessed by the presence of God, and receiving his peace in that situation. I have seen transformations in people when praying for them and as a powerful peace descends upon the person, that breaks off stress and anxiety, and headaches dissipate. They are filled with a warm sensation of Gods love and his presence. It is a blessing to receive this comfort from God, and also a blessing to see others receive it, and hopefully they will continue to live in that blessing of peace, rather than it be a one-off healing experience

However, the deeper meaning implied by this passage, is grieving over **yourself** and the state **you** are in.. In this awareness of your sin, there is a sadness for who you actually are, your poor spiritual condition, and the part your sin played in taking Jesus to the cross. for what you have done, and the recognition of that poor spiritual condition, that can make you grieve. Jesus is saying here that you are most blessed when you are grieving over your spiritual weakness.

These are challenging verses, but we need to face up that when disconnected from Jesus, we are vile in the sight of God, we are evil not good. We can't cleans ourselves up and be acceptable to Him. Until I see myself as empty, he can not fill me. It is far easier to make excuses for myself and say others are far worse than me, than face up to my own failings, and what I am really like, and then feel a genuine sadness about it. There is much in my life, and in yours, that grieves God, and we need to recognise that, and feel sorry about it. The honest man knows he is wicked, and should be judged by God, but also knows that the tender heart of God

reaches down to him in love, takes the worst of him, and makes the best of him. Even the great apostle Paul mourns over this in his letter to the Romans his own spiritual battle with himself, in his letter to the Romans “ **I do not understand what I do, for I don’t do what I would like to do, but instead I do what I hate**”... “**What an unhappy man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is taking me to death? Thanks be to God who does this through our Lord Jesus Christ.** (Rom 7v 15:24).

Embracing sorrow makes no sense in the world, but as a Christian, it make sense, to be mourn your spiritual condition, because it cleans you up, and releases you back to Jesus more dependant upon Him, in a fitter state for His service. The worse your sins look to you, then the greater Gods mercy will look, and the more blessed you will be. His host Pharisee Simon recoiled at the sight of an ex-Prostitute kissing the feet of Jesus at the meal table. The response was telling. “**I tell you, her sins, and they are many, have been forgiven, so she has shown me much love. But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love.** (Luke 7v47)., Simon wasn’t self-aware of his sins, so was unable to be mourn and be forgiven, feel the gratitude and express his love to God. He was disconnected.

Another by-product of self-mourning is that we become more aware of the sins of others, and where they are headed, and get more determination to see them saved too.

Jesus, was called a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, because he wept over the plight of men and women, like us, knowing that we would not all come through for Him.

The Meek

But does this internal recognition of our poor spiritual state and being sad over it, make us weak people. Jesus goes on to say.

Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. [Matthew 5 v 5]

So who **are** the Meek. The modern definition is to be quiet, gentle, submissive, and easily imposed on. It conjures up some-one nice and kind but weak with little self-confidence. But that is **not** the characteristic Jesus is describing here.

It could be described as ‘**humble**’ as you have a realistically low estimate of your own importance, especially when measured up against the greatness of God.

A better description though is ‘strength under submission’. It is like catching a wild horse, and breaking it in, so it can pull you in a carriage The wild horse is headstrong, the trained horse is meek. It has lost none of its power, but it is now under control and focussed on serving you.

Jesus was meek. He wasn’t weak. He once trashed a temple courtyard, turning over the tables of the crooked money-lenders. This wasn’t bad temper, this was controlled passion for the House of God. Moses was described as the meekest man on earth, not out of any weakness, but because he was fully submitted to doing Gods will.

So you realise you are poor in Spirit, you receive into your life the kingdom of God. You feel sorrow and regret for what you have done, but you receive his comfort and peace over it. You realise how much you have been forgiven. The only thing you can really do now to improve your situation, is to submit your natural strength, talents, and passions fully over to Jesus for him to control. So God gets you, but you get God. There is no better deal on the market than that one. Fully submitted to him, your meekness becomes your strength

It can be hard to do this of course, and it may be a long journey of submission. One problem we have as Christians in making decisions is not wanting to **fully** submit to God, in case he asks you to do something you don’t want to do. You’d sooner ask God to bless what you have already decided to do. That **is** weakness not meekness, because now you are disconnecting from your power source. It is the meek, the fully submitted, who find their real place on this earth, but will inherit the new earth when Jesus comes again.

Poverty Awareness.

A one-off recognition of our spiritual poverty, leading to our salvation, is not enough. This realisation of who we are without Jesus, needs to be an ongoing part of us. A blessing we live in.

When do you last go to the Dentists for a check-up. I got told off my dentist recently for leaving it 2 years. She threatened to knock me off her list, if I did that again. See, I thought I was doing okay. No tooth pains. I brush my teeth a lot. Why bother going? But I hadn't realised the state of my gum decay, until I checked in with her. I just didn't see it. There is a tendency to go easy on ourselves, and make excuses for our own behaviour, or lack of discipline. We don't see it. We can be going in the wrong direction, and doing things in our own strength without realising. Our tank could be full of hot air and not the Holy Spirit. We become useless to God, and he may set us aside from his work, until we once again realise that we are Poor in Spirit, and only then can we be blessed again and reconnect. So we need regular appointments to check on decay. We need to keep connecting with God, spending time alone in His presence, letting the Spirit convict us of our spiritual state. In God presence, he can remind us that without Jesus we are nothing, but with Him and through Him, we are capable of great things.

Do you come to prayer, with your pockets full of your own accomplishments, asking him to add a bit more blessing to what you are doing, or perhaps just to recognise you in front of others as you perhaps pray out loud in house groups. **Or** do you come with your pockets empty, saying I am yours Lord, whatever you want, whatever you say, I depend on you. I am destitute without you. - These are humbling moments; moments of blessing.

The Tax Collector and the Pharisee

This is brilliantly illustrated in one of Jesus' parables. A Pharisee and a Tax Collector are both in the temple for prayer and worship. Luke again recalls..

¹¹ The Pharisee stood apart by himself and prayed,^[a] 'I thank you, God, that I am not greedy, dishonest, or an adulterer, like everybody else. I thank you that I am not like that tax collector over there. ¹² I fast two days a week, and I give you one tenth of all my income.' ¹³ But the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even raise his face to heaven, but beat on his breast and said, 'God, have pity on me, the sinner!' (Luke 18v11-13)

Jesus then points out that it is the Tax Collector not the Pharisee that goes home connected with God. Why because the Tax Collector has discovered that he was poor in Spirit, his tank is empty and he knows it, and **now** he can be blessed, he can be given the kingdom of God. In his sorrow he is comforted, and in meek submission to God, he will inherit the earth, The Pharisee is doing it all in his own strength, self-assured, confident, proud of his achievements, and unknown to him, he is totally separated from God's kingdom

We must never lose sight of all that we have and have done in the Christian faith is thanks to Jesus. It was never about how good we were, but only about how powerful he is acting through us.

In the movie Superman 2, the villainess Ursa holds up a full bus of people with her co-villain, ready to throw it down the street. The actress Sarah Douglas recalls filming the scene, where the bus was hanging from a crane in the studio, and she was pushing her hands high against the bus. Then the bus slipped 6 inches, and she pushed back on it and injured her back. She recalled later, that she had spent so much time dressed up as a villain with super hero powers, in that moment she believed she actually was Ursa, and could prevent the bus falling.

We have to be careful as Christians as the Holy Spirit works through us. We may start hearing prophecies and words of knowledge, or seeing people miraculously healed. Others may 'big us up' with titles and praise; You are a Mighty Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Teacher, Man or Woman of God. We can start thinking that we ourselves are something special, and we are doing something extra-ordinary ourselves. But we need reminding, it's all Jesus, it's **all** his power not ours. Our reward is the joy of being connected into this Kingdom of God and being used in whatever way he chooses to use us.

When we start operating in our own strength, and following our own direction, then we can get disconnected again, and are back to being spiritual homeless beggars. We **always** need to keep connected to Jesus, and listen to him in prayer, and be guided by his Spirit. But how are you getting on with that?

The Counter Culture

So what is all leading to? This awareness of your spiritual poverty, this mourning over it, and then in meekness submitting to God. The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus teaching his disciples and close followers what type of alternative life style he is calling them into, and how they should be living in this ongoing blessing of Kingdom Life.

This group now connected to God, will be seen by many as disconnected from the World, at least from its expectations...

as they keep their hearts pure for Jesus, surrendering all to Him

as they thirst and hunger after God and his righteousness, and just want to be filled with his words, his presence and his power;

as they look out for and serve in love those in distress, the sick, the destitute, the marginalised and the vulnerable.

as they keep the peace, and make the peace, by taking the blame off others if necessary &

as they endure persecution for doing what is right, in the face of what is wrong, when others find insult in their good deeds.

This is the world of the beatitudes. This is kingdom living.

There is a danger that we can read the Beatitudes back to front. To be gifted with the blessings then we need to be grieve more, be pure in heart, to be peace-makers, to show mercy etc. But it is the other way round. If we live in the blessing of Kingdom life, aware of our spiritual state, and progressing our Christian journey in humility and submission then we live in the blessing of our connection to God.

Conclusions

So what we have learnt from the Beatitudes?

We have so many wrong deeds on our account, and these grieve God. We are spiritually bankrupt, But at least we have come to that moment as Christians where we know that. We have confessed it, recognised the cross, and let Jesus save us and forgive us. Not through anything we have done, but just by his pure Grace and mercy, he connects us into Kingdom life. We are adopted into this settled community of the family of God. This is our honour. This is our status. Children of the King of Kings.

But we must progress this path with meekness, with humility. Don't go too easy on yourselves and make excuses, or lay the blame elsewhere. Be honest about your faults in prayer to God. Also allow yourself to be convicted of any pride. If your ministries are doing well, then don't start believing the hype, and think that in anyway it's **you** and not Jesus.

It doesn't matter how much you impress people, you are still poor in spirit if you operate alone. But if you let Jesus captain your life, like Peter and Paul did, then **yours** is the Kingdom of God. His pockets are full of good things for you, and He can do great things in you and through you, by the power of his Spirit. In the worlds darkness, you can shine for Him.

I think Paul captures the spirit of the Beatitudes well in his letter to the Philippians [2v12-16]

Keep on working with fear and trembling to complete your salvation, ¹³ because God is always at work in you to make you willing and able to obey his own purpose. ¹⁴ Do everything without complaining or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may be innocent and pure as God's perfect children, who live in a world of corrupt and sinful people. You must shine among them like stars lighting up the sky, ¹⁶ as you offer them the message of life.

Wow. What a message. The joy of this Kingdom living is the contentment you get from being in a settled relationship with God now, and the knowledge of the greater eternal reward that awaits you. This is a fixed joy

and does not depend on external circumstances. It is not one you can be robbed of by anyone other than yourself.

Purity of Heart, a hunger for righteousness, mercy and peace-making etc will then grow in you as you harness yourself to the love and lead of Jesus Christ.

So, blessed are **you** when you are Poor in Spirit, because yours is the Kingdom of God.

So get connected and stay connected. Be blessed. Amen