

Beatitudes 1: THE POOR IN SPIRIT

Matthew 5:1-12, Revelation 3:17-21 [MW17-21]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 23 July 2017

No comment could be more hurtful to the Christian than the words

- "But you are no different from anybody else" (repeat)

These are the words of John Stott in the introduction to his study on the Beatitudes

- and I think he is right!
to be a Christian is to be different!
to follow Jesus is to go a different way
- this is not to say that you are better than someone else
this is not to say: "I'm in, you're out"
- it is just that there is something different about how followers of Jesus
think, speak, act
and the Beatitudes outline precisely this difference

Over the next eight weeks our Bible study group will be studying 'The Beatitudes'

- and we will be looking at these same Beatitudes on Sunday mornings
based on this, John Stott's Bible Study [show book]

In the introductory remarks, John Stott notes:

... [the Sermon on the Mount, which the Beatitudes introduces] describes what human life and human community look like when they come under the gracious rule of God. And what do they look like? Different!

If Jesus' 'Sermon on the Mount' is a well-known part of his teaching

- it is also arguably the least well understood and certainly least obeyed
it is Jesus' description of what he wanted his followers to be and do
- it is a Christian value system and ethical standard
it outlines the only proper attitude to money, ambition, lifestyle, relationships
all of which are at odds with the way of the world

Now many people reading the whole of the 'Sermon on the Mount' (Matthew 5:1 - 7:29)

- have said what it outlines is impossible for human beings to do
the ideals are noble but impractical
- on the other hand some have said the Sermon on the Mount
expresses ethical standards which are self-evidently true, common to all religions
and easy to follow

John Stott comments:

The standards of the sermon are neither readily attainable by everyone nor totally unattainable by anyone ... the beatitudes set forth the blessings God gives to those in whom he is working such a character – blessings given not as a reward for merit but as a gift of grace. By working toward the standards Christ has given us and coming as close to the mark as humanly possible, we give evidence of what by God's free grace and gift we already are. (repeat last sentence)

The first of these in Matthew 5:3 deals with something

- that does not seem on first glance, much like a blessing at all:
"blessed are the poor in spirit"
- how can being poor be a blessing???
- can you state one blessing, one good thing about being poor?

[responses ???]

There's a story about two men talking, one very rich, the other rather poor. One says, you know being rich doesn't necessarily make you happy. Maybe so so says the other, but being rich and unhappy would sure beat being poor and unhappy!!!

When our son Daniel was 16 he went to Fiji for the Anglican Church's Tikanga Youth Exchange. He spent some time in the capital Suva, and in a village out in the country. It was his time in the village that made a real impression. I remember how when he was describing it he said, "Dad these people have nothing. Nothing! And they are so happy."

Jesus says in Matthew 5:3

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (NIV, NRSV)

*O the bliss of those who realise the destitution of their own lives,
for the blessings of the Kingdom of Heaven are theirs here and now* (Barclay)

God blesses those people who depend only on him. They belong to the kingdom of heaven. (CEV)

You know what I thought of when I read this verse?

- 'The Emperor's New Clothes'
you know the story by Hans Christian Andersen?
- about the Emperor who pays two weavers/tailors to make him some fine new clothes ... and they go through the motions right up to when the Emperor proudly walks through the crowd in his supposed new clothes
- but in reality he is wearing nothing because he has been conned by two very clever shysters
- I remember the first time I heard it thinking: "can't he see???" "doesn't he realise what's happening ..."
- that Emperor thought he had something very grand, when in reality he had ... nothing! Nothing at all!!!

Matthew 5:3 is a very "Jesus" statement

- showing the reality of what our son experienced in Fiji 'these people look like they have nothing, but in reality they have everything'
- conversely, like the Emperor in Hans Christian Andersen's story some people may look like they have everything and actually have nothing

Maybe we could paraphrase Matthew 5:3 like this:

"Blessed are those who look like they have nothing, for they actually have everything"

There is something along these lines in the letters to the churches

- at the beginning of the Book of Revelation the letter to the church in Laodicea says this:

You claim to be rich and successful and to have everything you need.

But you don't know how bad off you are. You are pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. (3:17)

The church in Laodicea was to all intents and purposes going really well

- it was well attended, fully staffed, plentifully resourced yet they are told they were in a bad way
- they were rich, and yet had nothing

Now let me hasten to highlight that poverty, being poor, is not in itself a virtue

- and nor is wealth, being rich, in itself sinful

I am pretty sure there are indeed mean-spirited, selfish, grasping poor just there are mean-spirited, selfish, grasping rich

It just seems that having nothing means there is nothing to 'get in the way'
- in terms of healthy relationships and right attitudes
while more often having something means it is so much more likely
that something gets in the way
- there is something about being poor that means you are less likely
to go off the track, to get distracted or diverted

Jesus is in a sense like the boy in the story who called out: “but the Emperor's got no clothes!”
- Jesus points out that having everything by worldly standards ... is in fact nothing
nothing of eternal worth, nothing ultimately lasting or satisfying
nothing that will bring either happiness or blessing

To the church in Laodicea Jesus says something like
- sure you have great preachers and programmes
you support missions
you have a beautiful building
you have no debt and surplus funds in the bank
- however you are missing something
something as essential as clothes
- in spite of all you think you have, you are naked
and you appear not to notice

In Revelation 3:20, also part of the letter to that church, we find these well-known words:
Listen! I am standing at and knocking at your door.
If you hear my voice and open the door I will come in ...

If you say or believe or live or act as if you have everything
- it is like the door being shut
and no blessing from God can get in
- we are acting like we are already full
there is no room for anything else
and no way for anything at all to get through

We have to recognise that actually we are indeed poor, that of ourselves we are empty
- before something can happen
it seems illogical, against any sort of wisdom, a confusing paradox
that we have to recognise we are indeed 'poor'
before we can become rich

We have to recognise that no matter who we are
- no matter what we have done, no matter how much we have
before God, before the Creator of all that is, was, and ever shall be
we are nothing ... absolutely nothing
- it is a humbling and uncomfortable place to be

To be “poor in spirit” is to acknowledge all of this, to acknowledge
- that we are, to use John Stott's words, “spiritually bankrupt” before God
sinners who deserve only judgement
who have nothing to offer, no case to plead, nothing with which to buy favour
- we are unable to save ourselves
and look to God as our only source of salvation
while at the same time recognising we have no claim at all upon God
- a humbling and uncomfortable place to be

And that is what it is all about – our attitude

- the 'Beatitudes' have sometimes been described as the “be attitudes” being about our attitude before God
- Jesus emphatically states there is no 'middle ground' we are either like those Laodiceans or else we are like the the people Jesus has in mind
- when we admit we are naked, we can be clothed by our Heavenly Father as long as we try to clothe ourselves or refuse even to acknowledge our nakedness we miss out on what our loving, gracious God desires to give us
- it is indeed a humbling and uncomfortable place: yet it is just the place where God is able to bless us

I started by saying no comment could be more hurtful to the Christian than the words: “But you are no different from anybody else”

- do you believe that? do you really believe that??
- do you really believe Christians are to be different???

This is how I see it:

Jesus desired for his followers to live in the here and now by the values, standards, behaviours and relationships of the kingdom, God's kingdom

- saying, believing, living that you are “poor in spirit” is a huge point of difference with the rest of the world
- it is a recognition of how we stand before God which is why it is the first beatitude

This week I invite you to reflect on Christians being different

- upon how you are – or are not – poor in spirit and on how you stand before God

As some 'practical homework' I challenge you to rewrite this first beatitude:

- “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” to rewrite it in your own words for your situation

It could be something like:

“God will be able to get through to me when I forget about myself and remember to involve him in what I am doing ...”

“When I recognise that I have nothing, I am able to receive what God has to give”

“I am going to act and speak and make decisions in a way that shows God is in charge and that everything I have comes from him ...”

So can I encourage you, challenge you, inspire you to rewrite Matthew 5:3

- for yourself, in your words then stick it on the fridge, or your mirror, the current page of your diary put it in your phone, tablet or computer somewhere you will see it every day
- and apply it apply it to yourself and what you do
- and keep the door open

Let me draw all this together in prayer ...