

“Blessed are the Poor in Spirit”
Part Two in a Series on the Sermon on the Mount
Matthew 5:3

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
Delivered at Oakland Christian Church, September 10, 2017

Two old friends met each other on the street one day. One looked forlorn, on the verge of tears. His friend asked, “What has the world done to you, my old friend?”

The sad fellow said, “Let me tell you: three weeks ago, my uncle died and left me forty thousand dollars.”

“That’s a lot of money.”

“But you see,” the unhappy fellow continued, “two weeks ago, a cousin I never even knew, died and left me eighty-five thousand dollars.”

“Sounds to me that you’ve been very blessed,” the friend remarked.

“You don’t understand!” the gloomy man interrupted. “Last week my great-aunt passed away. I inherited almost a quarter of a million from her.”

Now the man’s friend was really confused. “Then, why do you look so glum?”

The depressed man responded: “This week . . . *nothing!*”¹

Apparently, some people just can’t be happy. I’ve known a few people like that. Haven’t you? Perhaps these perpetually unhappy people have failed in their quest because they’ve been looking for happiness in all the wrong places. For the next eight weeks, we will be examining the topic of happiness from the perspective of Jesus as found in the Beatitudes.

The Bible contains quite a few “beatitudes.” For example, the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament contains 45 beatitudes, and the Revelation to John contains seven beatitudes (as you might expect due to the significance of the number seven in apocalyptic literature). But when people say, the Beatitudes, they are referring to Matthew 5:3-12, the beautiful poetic passage that opens the Sermon on the Mount. Many scholars consider the Beatitudes “the soul of the Sermon.”

What, exactly, is a beatitude? A beatitude is a phrase declaring that an individual or a group is particularly blessed. Our English word “blessed” is derived from the Latin word, *beatus*. The original Greek word used in Matthew, *makarios*, carries the same basic meaning as *beatus*: supremely happy, blissfully happy, or particularly fortunate. Thus, in the Beatitudes,

Jesus described eight characteristics, eight traits of discipleship, that promote the highest form of happiness and well being.

At first glance there appear to be nine beatitudes, but based on grammatical and structural reasons that I can't go into in a short sermon, it is clear that there are actually eight beatitudes. The apparent ninth is actually an expansion on the eighth. For those of you who are musically inclined, you might think of the Beatitudes as "the octave of kingdom-music." These are the eight "tones" of discipleship that produce a harmonious symphony of blissful happiness.

For those of you not musically inclined, let me offer another analogy. Think of a disciple of Jesus as a diamond. As you know, diamonds have many facets, which is what gives them their brilliance. As Jesus turns this "diamond," the eight facets of discipleship highlighted in the Beatitudes catch the light and flash forth in blissful happiness.

As we begin our study of the Beatitudes, it is imperative that we note two things. First, Jesus does not command us to be or to do these eight things. On the contrary, he says we are blessed because we already are or already do these things. I know what you're thinking; "but I'm not always 'poor in spirit' or 'merciful'; I'm not always a 'peacemaker' or 'pure in heart.'" I know; neither am I. But Jesus says we are "diamonds in the rough." Our facets need more polishing, to be sure, but we would not have awakened to God's redemptive activity in our lives if we were not at least a little bit "poor in spirit" and a little bit "hungry and thirsty for righteousness." The rudimentary forms of these characteristics exist in us because God has already been at work in our lives—even before we were aware of it. Discipleship means first hearing the freeing proclamation that "you are" before endeavoring to respond to the call to "be more of what you are." As I said last week, discipleship is a response to grace, not an effort to gain God's favor.

The second thing we must note about the Beatitudes is that they "completely reverse the values of most societies, including our own."² For example, society teaches that if we want to be happy and successful in life, we must be aggressive, grabbing all we can; we must accumulate wealth; we must focus on seeking pleasure; we must always play it safe and not stand up for our deepest convictions. But the Beatitudes stand society's values on their head. "The Beatitudes, far from being passive or mild, are a gauntlet flung down before the world's accepted standards."³ Jesus' words are a challenge both to the teachings of secular society and to the legalistic approach to spirituality.

These are revolutionary teachings, so—with excitement and anticipation—let's set about the task of examining the first beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." What does it mean to be "poor in spirit"?

First, we need to do away with a possible misinterpretation, a misconception that caused Friedrich Nietzsche to pour scorn on the Beatitudes as promoting "slave mentality." Let me emphatically state that Jesus was not describing his disciples as people who are poor-

spirited or faint-hearted or cowardly. Even a cursory reading of the Beatitudes reveals that the character they describe is the exact opposite of a spineless person who lacks courage.

If we are to arrive at the correct understanding of “poor in spirit,” we should begin by noting that in Luke’s Sermon on the Plain, the parallel beatitude reads, “Blessed are you poor” (6:20), and is accompanied by a corresponding woe, “Woe to you who are rich” (6:24). Luke’s version of the beatitude is even more shocking and confusing. Why would Jesus say that? Obviously, there is nothing blessed about being economically poor. Money may not buy happiness, as the saying goes, but you do need a certain amount of money in order to be happy. We have certain physical needs that must be met in order for us to be happy, to have well being. But that true statement must be tempered by the following: several economic studies have revealed that as people gain money, they reach a point where there is an inverse relationship between money and happiness. That is, beyond a certain point, more money actually decreases happiness and well being. (We’ll return to that thought later in the sermon.)

The main reason we have trouble understanding this beatitude today is that we need to read it in light of its ancient Jewish setting. In the Old Testament, most notably the Prophets and some of the Psalms, “the poor” are often praised as being the true followers of God. You see, in that world—just as today—many people thought that being wealthy was a mark of being blessed by God, a sign of God’s favor. Today’s “prosperity gospel” is nothing new; even in the ancient world, the wealthy were put on pedestals as role models to aspire to.

But the Prophets, God’s spokespersons, denounced this way of thinking. Wealth, they thundered, is an impediment to spirituality, not a mark of spirituality. Wealth has a way of becoming idolatrous, of replacing a sense of one’s need for God. *The root problem with wealth is that it creates a false sense of pride and self-sufficiency, whereas true spirituality arises from a sense of humility and an awareness of our need for God and for others.* To counter this dangerous and all-too-common way of thinking about wealth, the Prophets said that it was actually the poor who had a better chance of reflecting true spirituality, because they recognized their need: they knew they were not self-sufficient; they knew they needed God and others.

We should note that it was not their poverty *itself* that caused the Prophets to praise the poor as true followers of God. No. Poverty *in itself* is neither a blessing nor does it necessarily lead a person to God. Poor people can be just as materialistically minded as wealthy people normally are. But the poor do have an important advantage over the wealthy: they lack a sense of self-sufficiency; in its place, they have a sense of need, which can more easily lead to a longing to be rightly related to God, to one another, and to the earth—that is, to being truly spiritual.

A Hebrew phrase emerged among the Prophets and the Psalms to describe these Israelites: they were the “poor and pious.” Thus, among the ancient Jews, the word “poor” developed a spiritual connotation that it lacks in English.

Jesus voiced his agreement with the Prophets when he said, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!” (Matt. 19:23), so it is likely that he uttered the first beatitude in the form we read in the Gospel of Luke: “Blessed are you poor.” He was, after all, a Jew speaking to Jewish disciples. But by the time the Gospel of Matthew was written—somewhere between 80-90—the Christian movement had spread out into the Greco-Roman world. Apparently, the author of Matthew feared that the original form of this beatitude would be misunderstood by some of his readers. They would hear the word “poor” in purely economic terms—and be confused. To prevent this from happening, he added the words “in spirit.”⁴

Understanding this historical background helps us today. We are to understand the words “poor” in spiritual not merely economic terms. Jesus was referring to those who realize their deep spiritual need: their need for a relationship to God, and to be rightly related to other people, and to the earth. They are not holding on to “things which cannot satisfy,” as our prayer hymn for today put it. Recognizing this spiritual need, the “poor in spirit” are those who have turned to God to satisfy these deepest longings of life, and in turning, have found true happiness.

The Quakers coined a beautiful term to refer to this spiritual mindset: “simplicity.” Let me quote from a Quaker website.

The Quaker testimony of Simplicity invites us to recognize what is central in our lives by listening to inward leadings and learning from others. That listening can give us clarity as we make choices about the responsible use of our time and resources. A life guided by the testimony of simplicity can lead us to recognize what makes us genuinely happy and to be good stewards of personal, community, and global resources. It replaces distraction, stress, and excess with clarity, focus, and a sustainable life.

Simplicity enables us to discern what is really necessary for the well-being of ourselves, others, and the world. Living simply cannot be reduced to lists of what is permitted or proscribed. Simplicity leads to joy, not guilt or judgment, for ourselves and others.⁵

I cannot think about the Quaker concept of simplicity without thinking of Ecuador. As many of you know, Patricia and I experienced an adventure in simplicity in 2011, when we sold all our belongings and went to live among the people of Ecuador for five years. What an eye-opening experience! What we discovered when we got there was an overflowing abundance of happiness among the Ecuadorian people—not the rich Ecuadorians who weren’t much different from very rich North Americans—but those who lived simply. I hate to use the word “poor” because they were so rich in ways that most North Americans cannot understand. They valued relationships above all things—family, faith, and their relation to the earth. They worked hard, but did not aspire to be at the top of the heap—as North Americans tend to do. They were generous and called each other “cousin” even if not actually related. In the village where I lived, I was called Primo Ron—which mean Cousin Ron. That’s how they were. And they radiated happiness. Patricia and I, too, felt happier with less “stuff” and less stress, and more

time to enjoy life, nature, and friends. The Ecuadorians were our teachers in simplicity and happiness, and the two were inextricably bound up together.

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,
 'tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
 and when we find ourselves in the place just right,
 'twill be in the valley of love and delight.
 When true simplicity is gained,
 to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed,
 to turn, turn, will be our delight
 till by turning, turning we come 'round right.⁶

The first beatitude is the root from which all the others grow. Referring back to our earlier musical metaphor, the first beatitude sets the key for “kingdom-music.” And once we know the key—that is, being “poor in spirit”—we can play beautiful kingdom-music with gusto and true happiness.

And that's today's good news. Amen.

¹ Cary Schmidt, “A Funny Reminder to be Thankful!” *Encouraging Words*. November 2009 blog (web).

² Fred Craddock, “Matthew 5:1-12” in *Preaching Through the Christian Year—Year A* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 1992) 101.

³ “Matthew,” in *The Interpreter's Bible, Vol 7* (Abingdon Press, 1959) 279.

⁴ F. C. Grant, *The Economic Background of the Gospels* (New York: Russell & Russell, reprint 1973), 118, n. 1.

⁵ “Simplicity,” Earlham College Mission and Beliefs (web).

⁶ “'Tis the Gift to Be Simple,” 18th century Shaker song, *Chalice Hymnal*, 568.