

BUILDING CHARACTER: On Being Poor in Spirit

A Study of Matthew 5:1-3

Characteristic of Completeness: Humility/Submission

Big Idea: When you hold out an empty cup, there's more room for God to pour.

Related Scriptures: Proverbs 18:12; 39:23; Isaiah 57:15; 61:1; 66:2; Philippians 2:5-11; James 4:10; 1 Peter 5:6

Introduction

1. How would you evaluate your personal well-being right now? What rating would you give the quality of your life in this moment? Use a zero-to-ten scale, zero meaning your life couldn't be worse, ten meaning your life couldn't be better. Zero is the lowest possible score; you could not be less fortunate. Ten is the highest possible score; you could not be more fortunate.

Zero to ten, what number would you give your personal well-being right now? What number comes to mind? What is the quality of your life right now, zero to ten?

Got a number in mind? Okay. Now, I want you to think about what's behind the number. For example, if you gave yourself a five, what factors contributed to the score? How did you arrive at the number? What are the considerations that kept you from going higher or lower?

Here are some of the things that come to my mind.

Health: If my loved ones and I are in good physical condition and generally free from illness, I feel blessed.

Financial security: If I've got a pretty good nest egg and my income exceeds my expenses by a comfortable margin and I can deal with emergencies as they arise, I feel blessed.

Respect: If people who know me think I'm a good and competent person, I feel blessed.

Job satisfaction: If I really enjoy my job and feel like I do important work and am appreciated, I feel blessed.

Comfort: If I own some nice things that make life enjoyable, whether it's a nice car or a nice home or nice clothes, I feel blessed.

Companionship: If I'm not lonely and have close friends and maybe even a soul mate, I feel blessed.

In thinking this way, I am perfectly normal. Perfectly ordinary. Perfectly mainstream.

And maybe—just maybe—perfectly wrong. Perfectly confused. Perfectly deceived.

2. You see, we've been studying through the gospel of Matthew. And today we come to a passage in which Jesus is messing with my blessing. Jesus blows my paradigm. He turns my thinking on its head. In ► Matthew 5:3, Jesus says something that makes no sense. He says:

^{NAU} Matthew 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

When I first read this, I thought to myself, I don't really know what “poor in spirit” means, but I'm pretty sure it didn't make my list of factors that contribute to my well-being. I could buy “Blessed are the healthy.” I could buy “Blessed are the financially secure.” But, “blessed are the poor in spirit?” What kind of poverty is that? And how would it bless?

Good questions. In fact, in my sermon this morning, I'm going to try to address these two questions. First, ► what does it mean to be poor in spirit? What kind of poverty is it? What would it look like? And ► second, how are the poor in spirit blessed? How is such poverty a benefit? How are the poor in spirit better off? And what about my health, financial security, respect, job satisfaction, comfort, and companionship? Where does all that fit in?

3. In order to address the two questions, ► I'm going to have to set the stage. I need to put this in some context.

Last Sunday, we learned that Jesus' earthly ministry involves three big things and one of them is teaching. In our text for today, that's exactly what we find Jesus doing: He's teaching. He's teaching His disciples. If you have your Bible, please turn with me to Matthew 5:1-3. That's the text we're going to study: Matthew ► 5:1-3. It says,

^{NAU} Matthew 5:1 When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain [probably to position Himself so that the crowds could hear]; and after He sat down, [Sitting was the customary position of teachers in that day.] His disciples came to Him. 2 He opened His mouth and *began* to teach them, saying, [And now, here comes the funny part.] 3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

- I. Now, let's deal with ► the first of our two questions: What does it mean to be poor in spirit? What kind of poverty is it? What would it look like?

To start, it would be helpful to know that Jesus is alluding to something in the Old Testament. It's Isaiah 61. Matthew doesn't explain the Old Testament connection because he doesn't have

to. His audience is primarily Jewish. Jews familiar with the Old Testament would pick up on it. It's Isaiah 61—a chapter commonly recognized as being descriptive of a coming Messiah.

In fact, as recorded in Luke 4:18-19, Jesus had a little earlier walked into a synagogue, opened the Hebrew Scriptures to Isaiah 61 and began reading to the congregation. It was the first part that speaks of the Messiah preaching to and delivering the poor. The poor are characterized as ones who are somehow in bondage, ones who are somehow blind, ones who are somehow oppressed. Jesus ► reads the text:

^{NAU} Luke 4:18 “THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, 19 TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD.”

Then Jesus stopped, closed the book, and sat down. All eyes were fixed on Him. They were probably thinking: “Nice reading, Jesus. Good choice. Short, but good. Messianic prophecies are always good. Yes, the Messiah will deliver the poor.”

Then Jesus said something shocking. He ► said:

^{NAU} Luke 4:21 . . . “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

This was a direct claim to be the Messiah. Jesus was declaring Himself to be the Deliverer of the poor, the Redeemer of the impoverished.

Now, ► in our text in Matthew 5, it's a little later, and Jesus is on a mountain, this time expanding upon the Messianic deliverance of the poor prophesied in the Old Testament. He ► says:

^{NAU} Matthew 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The little phrase ► “in spirit” gives us a clue that Jesus is not just talking about folks with no money. He's talking about people who are spiritually poor. More specifically, He talking about people who *acknowledge* their own spiritual poverty. People who *acknowledge* their own spiritual bondage. People who *acknowledge* their own spiritual blindness.

In a word, it's humility. In fact, ► humility is our Characteristic of Completeness for the week. The poor in spirit are humble.

To be poor in spirit means to humbly acknowledge our own spiritual bankruptcy before God, and our total dependence on His grace and mercy for our own personal well-being. The poor in spirit recognize that we are all spiritual beggars. To be poor in spirit means to hold out an empty cup to God, recognizing that only He can fill it.

- II. Now to our ► second question: How are the poor in spirit blessed? How is it that the humble are fortunate? How are they better off?

Jesus explains it. He ► says,

^{NAU} Matthew 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for [or because] theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The poor in spirit are blessed or fortunate or favored for this ► reason: Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. What exactly does this mean?

In previous sermons, I’ve tried to explain that “the kingdom of heaven” in Matthew often refers to the reign of God, not a place. The kingdom of heaven describes the rulership of the Lord. It describes God’s economy in which He rules.

If that is true, in what sense does God’s rulership belong to the poor in spirit? I think the idea is that kingdom blessings belong to the poor in spirit. Theirs are the benefits of God’s rulership. In God’s economy, they are the ones who get rewarded. Because, in God’s economy, when you hold out an empty cup, there’s more room for God to pour. In fact, that’s ► the big idea of my message: When you hold out an empty cup, there’s more room for God to pour.

The empty cup is humility. What God pours out is grace.

How could you hold out an empty cup? And how would God pour out His grace? Let me show you how this can work.

- A. I had just finished my freshman year of college. I was a pre-medical student at the University of Arizona. My real major was pride. I wanted to make a name for myself, and I wanted to make a lot of money. So I figured I’d be a doctor. Doctors are respected, and doctors get rich, I thought. I liked telling people that I was a pre-med student. I liked to see the flash of admiration.

I smoked a pipe. But I didn’t inhale. It thought it enhanced my image. Intellectuals smoke pipes. And people like the smell of pipes, I thought.

I grew a beard, too. Partly to show that I could, and partly for intellectual reasons. Stroke the beard and you look deep.

I had been dating a pretty Christian girl who was going to Biola, Christian college in LA. I’d drive over to see her on long weekends in my dad’s pickup truck. It had an eight-track stereo, and I’d listen to Peter Frampton and the Eagles while I pined for this girl.

Cathy proclaimed the gospel to me. More than once. She explained how Jesus Christ died and rose again to be our Savior from sin. I thought the only thing Christians needed to be saved from was their stupidity.

I'd go to Biola and try to be real nice and real moral, in part, to show up those Christians. I wanted to show them that the heathen could outscore the moralists at their own game.

Cathy gave me a Bible, and I began to read, mostly to show her all the contradictions, I thought. But the strangest thing happened. Somehow, as I read this book, my own heart was exposed. I began to realize, for example, that I wanted to be a doctor for all the wrong reasons. Something was not right on the inside.

And so, I did the only reasonable thing: I dabbled in Transcendental Meditation. I got a book and some incense and my own mantra. I'd come out of my room fresh from my meditation—I was still living at home with my parents—and my mom would say, "I don't know what the meditation and incense is supposed to be doing, but you do seem more selfish when you come out of there." Something was not right on the inside.

And then I got my research paper back from Professor Inman. She taught Women's Literature. As a white male, I figured I needed straight A's to get into med school. And I had them. Until Professor Inman dropped the bomb. I had gotten A's on all my papers in that class. Piece of cake. So, on my research paper, I didn't really do much research; I relied mostly on one source. They call it plagiarism. She gave me an "F" on my research paper. Flushed my 4.0. It was just a symptom. Something was not right on the inside.

So, in the summer of '76, I came to realize that I was very busy trying to make the outside of my cup look good. But the inside was empty. I was confronted with the darkness of my own heart. I needed forgiveness. I needed a Savior. So, I held out my empty cup, and God poured. I believed in Jesus for eternal life. God poured out His grace on me.

When you hold out an empty cup, there's more room for God to pour. That's one example.

- B. But there's more. This kingdom principle is not just about receiving eternal salvation. It still applies to everyday Christian life. All my pride didn't go away when I became a Christian. God is still refining me, and I fully expect Him to have to work on me for the rest of my life on earth.

I married the pretty girl from Biola. We had two children. I spent fifteen years in business in which I climbed the corporate ladder. I was used to success. I was used to getting things done. I was used to being the go-to guy. I was one of the CEO's favorite performers.

After one particularly good year, my company took all upper-level managers and their spouses to Jamaica for a week. There were maybe thirty of us there altogether. We had our own private beach. In fact, we each had our own private, two-story beach house with our own servant who ran errands for us and cooked our meals. And there were two beach houses in particular that were the best—spectacular view, closest to the water, the top floor bedroom window opened up to frothy waves lapping up toward the back porch. The CEO had one of those two primo beach houses; I had the other. The other managers rolled their eyes. One of them, Marty Aronov, said sarcastically, “Of course it’s just a coincidence that Kerrey—the golden boy—got that beach house.” I enjoyed being envied.

And then I sensed that God was calling me to become a pastor. In fact, I became convinced of it. But in retrospect, I can see that I was completely unfit for the job. I was prideful. I thought back then that, hey, if I can run a business, I can certainly run a church. In fact, I was secretly thinking that I could make a pretty big splash in the church business.

I had filled my cup with a lot of pride. Remember the list at the outset of my sermon, the contributors to personal well-being? Health, financial security, respect, job satisfaction, comfort, companionship. I had those things. Nothing wrong with those things. But somehow I had got to thinking that maybe I had somehow earned them through my own goodness or hard work or resourcefulness or whatever. I was taking some credit for what God had done.

And so, the emptying began. One after another, the contributors to my well-being were removed. Toward the end of my seminary education, I had no home, no job, no money, no accolades. Just an occasional panic attack, a prostate infection, and brain surgery for my daughter. We entered ministry on fumes, poor in spirit.

I held out an empty cup. God poured.

And now, about thirteen years later, our children throw us this party last Sunday evening. Many of you were there. Cathy and I celebrated fifty years of life and thirty years of marriage.

My daughter and my son and my daughter-in-law and my son-in-law, they honored us. You honored us. One after another recounted good things remembered about our lives and thanked us. Afterward, my father came up to me and, with tears in his eyes, “Bob, I’m so proud of you.”

A dozen years ago, I would have been touched, but not overwhelmed. I would have been thankful, but not floored. I would have been moved, but not awestruck. I’ve never been so blessed. In the car on the way home, I said, “Lord, take us now; it’s not going to get any better.”

Why? Why is it better now? I think it's better, in part, because I understand a little more about how empty my cup really is apart from God. I'm poorer in spirit. I'm not saying I have this pride thing licked. I don't. I'm just saying that I see a little more clearly that all blessings come only from God's grace. I don't deserve any of it. Not really.

In connection with the party, some have said, "Bob, you've worked hard." Maybe. But if I have, it's only by God's grace that I can. I didn't really arrange to have parents with a strong work ethic. I can't take much credit for how God formed me in my mother's womb.

Some have said, "Bob, you and Cathy have sacrificed a lot." Maybe. But, let's face it, we never really give away anything that we haven't received as a gift of God's grace anyway. My cup is empty and so is yours apart from God.

Some of the things on the well-being list have come back around. Everybody is pretty healthy, we can pay the bills, etc. It's okay to enjoy these things on one condition—in fact, we can only enjoy these things to the fullest when we recognize one thing: It's all God's grace.

When you hold out an empty cup, God has more room to pour.