

PROFILES OF DISCIPLESHIP

I. "The Blessing of Recognizing our Need"

March 5, 2006

Mt. 5:1-12

TEXT "Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." – 5:3, NIV
You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope.
With less of you there is more of God and his rule. – 5:3, Msg

INTRODUCTION

In The Declaration of Independence, our forefathers asserted we had certain inalienable rights—among them, *Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*. Certainly everyone craves happiness, and here in America, we even claim it as a right. But there seems to be a lot more pursuing than finding. People are running here and there, buying this and that, and trying to find the right people to make them happy. Yet, it remains strangely elusive. If we took a poll of those here this morning asking what you really want most out of life, I think most of us would respond with some variation of, "I just want to be happy." But then, here's another question, "How high would you put your happiness quotient?"

I've been asked by those going through heart-wrenching circumstances, "All I want is a little bit of happiness. Is that too much to expect?" Sometimes it is edged with anger. Sometimes you detect the slight whine of self-pity. At other times there is an undercurrent of despair. The good news is, it is not too much to expect. Our desire for happiness matches God's will for us. And, Jesus came to make us the happiest people on earth.

Jesus begins his teaching ministry with eight declarations we often refer to as the Beatitudes, telling us of how to live a happy, blessed, and fulfilled life. The people of Jesus' day weren't any different than we are. They too were seeking happiness, joy, and what we refer to as "the good life." So, Jesus begins his teaching with their need and our need, describing how we capture this elusive, fleeting happiness—telling us how our lives can be lived abundantly and joyfully.

I'm going to spend six sermons on these remarkable declarations, for they give a basic, succinct profile of what it means to follow Christ. It seems like an appropriate study for this Lenten season leading up to Easter. It is probably fair to say that these are some of the most meaning-packed sentences ever uttered. Each one carries a truth that reaches to the core of our being and has the power to transform all of life and society.

These stand in the lead-off position in the first extensive teaching Jesus gives, recorded for us in Mtt. 5-7, commonly referred to as "The Sermon on the Mount," since it says that Jesus went up on the mountain and gave this teaching to his disciples. The Sermon on the Mount gives a portrait of what it means to be a Christian. And the eight beatitudes are like an overture at the beginning of an opera., setting the basic theme carried throughout the Sermon.

The word "blessed" that begins each of these statements needs some explanation. Various translations use: "happy," "God bless," "Congratulations." All capture an aspect of the Greek word, *makarios*. The reason there is such a variety of translations is that no one English word seems to quite capture the whole concept. *Makarios* refers to a transcendent happiness beyond all care and labor. It refers to a happiness that reaches beyond circumstances. It includes security and satisfaction— a blessed state.

Here Jesus give us the keys to that life. The first four beatitudes center on our inner life, the beginnings of faith and trust in God. The final four focus on the outward movement of our lives in ministry to others. The beatitudes provide a neatly balanced inward-outward focus. And, each beatitude follows a pattern. There is a promise, "blessed" followed by the key to that "blessed," such as "the poor in spirit," "those who mourn," or "the meek," and then it concludes with a promised reward.

THE POOR IN SPIRIT

This opening statement is almost incomprehensible to our ears. "Poor-spirited" comes quickly to mind with images of people with slump-shouldered low self-esteem, lacking in energy, motivation, and desire. But, that is not what is being talked about here. The Greek is very strong, speaking of abject poverty of resources, conveying a powerlessness to help themselves. It is a feeling of utter vulnerability and inadequacy— knowing what you have is not going to fill the need. By linking it with spirit, Jesus is not speaking of economics or the circumstances of our lives. "Humble-spirited" perhaps conveys the best meaning. These are people who recognize their need and are open to receiving help. My brother expresses this in The Message paraphrase as, *You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope*. That gives the emotional feel. We know what it's like to have our resources exhausted and the desperation we feel at the end of our rope.

The Greek grammar also conveys, that it is only those who recognize their spiritual poverty that belong to the kingdom of heaven. Those who do not recognize it do not belong. Incidentally, the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of heaven are used pretty much interchangeably in the Gospels. Jesus is talking of a here-and-now kingdom to which we belong when we enter into the Christian life through faith in Him.

Why is this "end of our rope humility" a prerequisite to entering into the Christian life? It makes sense when you realize it was the sin of spiritual pride that originally excluded humanity from the kingdom. Adam and Eve's sin in the garden was to take charge of their own moral, spiritual lives. At the core of the temptation, Satan is saying, "Don't depend upon God to know good and evil. Be your own person. You know what's best. You decide. You can live independent of God." That pride cut them off from the tree of life and from living in the kingdom of God. Ever since, the human race has been infected with that virus of spiritual rebellion against God. Now Jesus, the second Adam, comes and says, to be in the kingdom, you have to recognize your inability to take care of your spiritual life. You need to quit doing it your way and enter into the kingdom through being humble-spirited, knowing your need, recognizing your failure, and your need for God. We are utterly helpless to enter the spiritual life. It comes to us from God. It can only come as a miraculous intervention from God, reaching down to rescue us when we are

indeed at the end of our rope.

It is not just those outside the kingdom of God who struggle with this spiritual pride, “doing it my way.” Even after we become a Christian, a disposition stays with us that wants to keep taking over. Isn’t a lack of prayer and serious devotional practice in listening to God through Scripture a way of saying, “I can handle things?” When you feel you are at the end of your rope, you pray a lot and are hungry to find out what God says to your situation through His Word. Within the church there are those whose minds are closed to new spiritual truth. Their minds are made up, they have a simplistic theology they picked up here and there along with a superficial knowledge of some scriptures. Basically they’ve decided they’re okay by their standards, they have their own program and the way they are going to do it. This is the reason so many of the Scribes, Pharisees, and religious leaders of Jesus’ day rejected Him.

Sometimes spiritual pride is an underlying reason for avoiding Christian fellowship in worship or study with others. These people feel they’re okay and they don't want to humble themselves to listen to what the Holy Spirit may say to them through others. Or, if they do come, they pay little attention or listen only to what they want to hear. There is little humble receptivity to what God may say or what instrument He may choose to use.

We have other experiences in life that parallel this. If you take a class in something and enter with the idea that you know it all, how much will you gain? Often it takes a humbling experience to make us receptive to new learning. Have you known the frustration of trying to help a child or teen who is so sure they are doing things right and making right choices when you can see they are headed for failure or even worse, disaster? All true learning involves an element of humility.

I remember eighth grade shop class, required by all boys in our school. We entered with visions of using all those wonderful power tools. Instead we were given a block of wood to square, using only hand tools—saws, planes, sandpaper, rulers, and an unforgiving square. I believe it was to end up exactly two inches by two inches by eight inches. All of us were disappointed at having to do this first, but felt we could knock these blocks out in no time. I remember the teacher as rather harsh. You thought you had all edges square, and he would find some sliver of light under his square as he held it up and put that horrible pencil mark on the offending area for you to work on. This took us weeks. Some blocks were getting seriously undersized, including mine. And, we couldn’t get on to the good stuff until we passed this. I hated shop! I knew if I could just get to the table saw and joiner, this would be a piece of cake. But, I realized later on in life that what this shop teacher was doing was trying to teach us a little humility. No doubt we all needed that.

Jesus told a parable in Lk. 18:9-14 about this kind of pride.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men-robbers, evildoers, adulterers-or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'

"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.'

"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The Pharisees often get bad rap. But they were extremely good at practicing the law, the outward rules and regulations. They were highly disciplined in their practice. The Pharisee in this parable is fasting twice a week and giving 10% (a tithe) of all he gets. The problem of course is that it is only outward practice. We see his heart is filled with pride, masked by pious thanksgiving. In contrast stands the tax collector. In that day, a tax collector was the worst person imaginable—traitors to the nation, usually dishonest, and taking advantage of the poor. But, there is only one person in this story that is “poor in spirit.” Jesus uses it to make the point that unless you come to God with that brokenness and humility, you don’t enter into the life He offers.

This spiritual pride is so serious, and stands first in the beatitudes because it stops all spiritual growth. It puts a lid on, stopping openness to God, and to hearing and receiving His life. We hear it in Peter's boast before his own denial, "Though everyone else falls away, I will never...."

THE NATURE OF TRUE HUMILITY

Humility **is not** an inferiority complex. It is not a negative self-image, hating yourself, being down on yourself, and never asserting yourself. Phillips Brooks says it well:

The true way to be humble is not to stoop until you are smaller than yourself, but to stand at your real height against some higher nature that will show you what the real smallness of your greatness is.

Of course, that higher nature is God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Paul expresses this when he says, "I can do all things **through** Christ who strengthens me."

Those with a truly humble spirit have three priceless qualities. **First**, they have a sense of awe at God's greatness that issues in wonder and praise. They know who God really is. They've studied God's Word and absorbed His nature. The worship of God is woven into their lives. They hear God speaking to them in the beauty of nature. As they fellowship with other Christians and listen to what God is doing in their lives, it results in a new, deeper understanding of Him.

Secondly, they have an honest realization of their own needs. It is easy to live in denial of our own inadequacy. We put up fronts, thinking we have to look good, be strong. We are schooled in being independent, doing it ourselves. And, sometimes we end up believing our own snow job. But, if you just read the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, none of us can come out feeling adequate, like I can do this. What Jesus lays out in the sermon is clearly impossible from a human perspective. And, that's the point. We need the life of Jesus within us to live as God wants us to live. Dr. Frederick Dale Brunner in an incisive commentary on this says, "I believe it is the purpose of every command in the Sermon on the Mount to drive us back to this first Beatitude."

Third, the truly humble have a receptivity to what God wants to give us. He wants to give us

more than we can ask or imagine. He wants to make us into the kind of people described in this Sermon on the Mount— living with open hearts, continually inviting Him into our lives.

This “poor in spirit” humility results in living right now in the kingdom Jesus came to bring. Down the corridors of our need, His kingdom comes to us when we realize:

- who God is and His love and greatness;
- and who we are and the poverty of our so-called adequacy.

After our Ash Wednesday service this past week, Lance and I were closing up. Lance had his two children with him, Alex and Braeden, and they were eager to turn out the lights. They’d gotten all the main lights off in that array of switches in the sound room. But, there was still the light for the choir loft, which is on a separate switch up behind the choir loft pews. I was walking up there to turn those off— and five-year-old Braeden came running up to complete the job. He climbed up on the pew to find the switch and turned out the lights. But, now it was *very* dark, and I was standing by the pew wondering if he would be frightened. He was in a confusing place, on the pew, and with the sudden darkness, you couldn’t really see the floor or the steps. But, no problem. He immediately turned to me and said, “Help down.”

That has stayed in my mind this week as an image of the kind of humility we’re talking about. Braeden knew his limitations and without hesitation asked for and received what he needed. He had no false ideas of having to do it himself. He is fully alive, energetically enjoying the wonders of life— yet, when he gets in a confusing place, he immediately reaches out for help. That is an illustration of what Jesus wants us to understand about the spiritual life. It is not a self-reform, do-it-yourself program. He is the One and only One who answers the deepest longing of our hearts. This does not diminish our lives any more than Braeden’s asking for help diminished his. We come to Jesus and we are lifted into life in His kingdom.

CONCLUSION

I’m stating the obvious when I say these beatitudes lead us in the opposite direction of this world’s prescription for happiness. Giving God control of your life is the opposite of this world’s message of taking control and doing what you want to do and you’ll be happy. This is only the beginning. The other beatitudes contain other aspects of this. But this first one is foundational— all the rest hang on it, for it deals with how we get into the kingdom. Who’s in control, who’s Lord— you or Jesus?

In the spirit of this beatitude, let me say in closing: congratulations to you when you realize the poverty of your own resources, when you’re at the end of your rope. Because, when you’re no longer in control you can reach out to God. With less of you there’s more room for Him. And, you discover you’ve crossed the threshold into kingdom living— a life blessed by God, enjoying the sufficiency of His resources!