

'Oh You Fortunate Paupers'

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January 17, 2010
First Baptist Church
Vancouver, BC, Canada

Text: Matthew 5:3-12
Title: 'Oh You Fortunate Paupers'
Series: The Beatitudes: People in Synch

We were leaving the restaurant where we had been talking about Jesus' call to discipleship.

"I am not going to make it' he said, I simply do not have what it takes'. He said it in all seriousness and with a deep sense of sadness. "I see what Jesus calls me and you to be and do: He is calling me and you to a qualitatively different kind of life. Given the condition of the world, given the massive needs all around us how could He do otherwise? Given who He is, He has to call us beyond what we know. I would not want Him to call us to anything less. But I am not going to make it. I just do not have what it takes."

I have good news for my friend and for anyone who feels the way he does. Yes, you are going to make it. The problem is, you have misunderstood what Jesus is doing in His Beatitudes and Sermon on the Mount. Given the original context in which Jesus spoke, and given the performative power of his word; we are going to make it. Indeed, the fact that we feel we are not going to make it says we already are making it.

Will you please now give your attention to Jesus as He speaks His Beatitude in the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 5, verse 3-12. Keymo will read the first clause of each Beatitude the 'blessed are' clause. And we will respond by reading the search clauses. The 'for their/ for they' clause.

As I emphasized last Sunday in our introductory study, separate the Beatitudes from the original context in which He first spoke them, and they become either frustrating idealism or oppressive legalism.

Jesus first spoke His Beatitudes right after announcing His Gospel, His good news. Separate His Beatitudes from His Gospel and they become either frustrating idealism or oppressive legalism.

So the question we ask again is 'what is His Gospel?' 'what is the good news Jesus announces?' Ready? The Gospel according to Jesus is the announcement of a great fact. Because of the sheer magnitude of this great fact, it by necessity impacts all other facts. The Gospel according to Jesus is the announcement that in Him and because of Him, the long awaited Kingdom of Heaven has come near (Matthew 4:17) As we hear Jesus say in

Mark 1:15 “the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God, has come near, repent and believe this good news.” The Gospel according to Jesus is the announcement that History has reached a major crisis point! The future is spilling over into the present. Heaven is invading the earth. God news indeed!

I want to share with you a diagram that helps me begin to grasp Jesus’ Gospel. The diagram was given to me some 40 years ago now in embryonic form by Professor George Ladd, the Biblical scholar to whom I owe the greatest debt. The diagram puts Jesus and His Gospel into historical context. The diagram is a time-line or time –line of the living god’s dealing with humanity. The time line begins with creation and leads to the new creation. It begins with God creating the heaven and the earth and we humans within it, and leads to God re-creating the heaven and the earth and we humans within it.

We begin with God speaking us into being in his good world. We then move to the sad and tragic decision humans made to ‘go it alone’ to no longer trust God to be God, and to take our lives into our own hands. We fell. It is then that we first encounter the God of mercy and grace. For no sooner had we rebelled against God, that God made a promise to one day come and un-do the ruin we caused. In the now fallen world, in the garden that was becoming a cemetery God began what is called ‘salvation history’. And as God unfolded His plan, it became clear that history was being moved toward a ‘day’, a great day ‘ the Day of the Lord’, as the prophets of the Old Testament called it.

- 1) On that day God would radically intervene in history and bring his plan to fulfillment
- 2) On that day sin would be removed, evil would be overcome and banished, death would be no more.
- 3) On that day the kingdom of God would come into the world.

Now here is the Gospel according to Jesus of Nazareth. Ahead of the great Day, God comes into the world. Jesus is, as Mathew tells us in the Christmas story a few chapters before the Beatitudes, Immanuel, God with us, or more literally, with-us-God. Ahead of the great day of the Lord, the Lord Himself comes into the world. And brings with Him His Kingdom. The cross on the diagram stands for all that is involved in Jesus coming: His birth, his life, His ministry, His death, His resurrection, His ascension, His pouring out of the Holy Spirit. The coming of Jesus-the-with-us-God is the coming of the Kingdom of God. In Jesus coming near the Kingdom of God has come near. Ahead of time! Ahead of the great Day of the Lord.

Jesus’ Gospel is the announcement of this great fact, the future is spilling over into the present! And heaven is invading the earth.

Now, It is in this context that Jesus first speaks His Beatitudes. Separate Jesus Beatitudes from Jesus Gospel and they become either frustrating idealism or oppressive legalism.

You see in His Beatitudes Jesus is simply describing what happens to human beings when His Gospel grabs hold. In His Beatitudes Jesus is giving a profile of the new

humanity that happens. The new humanity that emerges when the Reign of God breaks into our brokenness. Jesus is describing people in synch with great fact.

And the first stroke of this portrait is 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven'. Note the position of the pronoun 'theirs'. It stands at the beginning of the Beatitudes for emphasis. 'theirs' is the Kingdom. Literally, 'of them' is the Kingdom. The implication being 'theirs' and 'only theirs'. Of 'them' and only 'of them'. And note the verb 'is'. Not 'will be' but 'is'. Present, now, already, today.

I am so glad Jesus begins on this note! Let us say the words together: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven'.

I want to ask three questions of this first Beatitude.

Number 1 – What does 'poor in spirit' mean?

Number 2 – Why is 'poverty of spirit' a sign that the Gospel is grabbing hold? That we are in synch with his in-breaking Kingdom?

Number 3 – Is there ever a time when we are 'rich in spirit'?

Question 1

What does Jesus mean by 'poor in spirit'? There are two words for poor in the Greek New Testament. One (*penes*) describes people who have to work all the time because they own no property. The other (*ptochoi*) describes people who are so destitute that they are forced to beg from others (F. Hauck and E Bammell Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol VI, pg 886) The first refers to those who at least have the bare essentials. The second refers to those who have nothing ,absolutely nothing and know it. It is the second word (*ptochoi*) that Jesus uses in this first Beatitude. 'Blessed are the destitute in spirit, the beggarly poor in spirit. Beggars come with empty-hands and empty-pockets. They have nothing to offer in return for food. 'Congratulations' says the bringer of the kingdom of God. 'Right-on' says the saviour of the world. 'Right-up' are those who approach the Living God with empty hands. In synch are those who come with empty pockets. What?

The 'poor in spirit' are those who know that they have nothing with which to get 'the Kingdom of God'. The 'poor in spirit' are those who come totally at the mercy for the kingdom Giver. Surprise! 'You lucky bums' yours is the Kingdom of heaven!

Now, you may know that in the Gospel according to Luke we have a slightly different version of the first Beatitude. Or is it that Luke records a different Sermon Jesus preached similar to the one Mathew records? Is it that, like any good teacher, Jesus taught the nation of the in-looking Kingdom on a number of occasions? Mathew records for us the sermon Jesus preached on a mountain side 'The Sermon on the Mount'? Luke records for us a sermon Jesus preaches a little later on a level place "the Sermon on the Plain?

At any rate, in Luke Jesus says 'Blessed are the poor'. Luke 6:20 'Blessed are the poor'. In Mathew Jesus says, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit'. As many scholars ask, has Mathew

‘spiritualized’ Luke by adding ‘in spirit’? Or has Luke ‘socialized’ Matthew by dropping ‘in spirit’.

As I have wrestled with this over the year, I keep concluding that the two versions of the Beatitude are essentially getting at the same thing. Let me try to explain.

Throughout the Bible we meet a God who is, quote, ‘The Champion of the Powerless’ Would you agree? Why is Israel chosen by God as the people through whom He will bless the world? Because as Israel acknowledges, Israel was powerless before those who thought they were powerful. Throughout the Bible there seem to be ‘A Divine preference’ for the powerless, for orphans, widows, prisoners, aliens, and the poor.

Yet, nowhere in the Bible is material poverty held out to us as the ideal human condition. Nowhere in the story is the Living God happy when people are materially poor. It would be wrong to take Jesus words in Luke to mean ‘it is good to be poor’ and that, therefore, only the materially poor inherit the Kingdom of God. Although Luke, more than the other Gospel writers, stresses Jesus’ teaching on the poor, Luke never romanticizes or celebrates material poverty.

Why then are poor ‘blessed’ in Luke’s version of Jesus’ Beatitudes? Why are the poor ‘congratulated?’ Why, blessed are the poor’ period? Because of the resultant attitude: the poor know they need help: the poor know they need God; and, therefore, live depending on God. The poor have only one hope. Their whole existence hangs on God and God alone. Which is why Mother Teresa enjoyed serving the poor. Which is why Jesus promises His ‘in synch’ on the poor.

You see in the Bible, the opposite of ‘poor’ is not ‘rich’. In the Bible the opposite of ‘poor’ is ‘violent’ (TDNT, 885) Those who take their life into their own hands.

In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus pronounces a ‘woe’ upon the rich not because they have much, but because of the attitude of what that produces; the attitude of not needing God; the attitude of living independently of God. The rich and most of us in this sanctuary fall into that category have, or think we have other grounds for hope than the Living God. Until a hurricane wipes out parts of our city or an earthquake shakes houses to rubble or a Recession decimates pension funds. The poor are not shaken by such events for the poor are not deceived into thinking riches are the grounds for security for the future.

The poor do not inherit the Kingdom of God because they are poor. That would be a perversion of the Gospel –a kind of ‘salvation by social class’. The ‘poor’ who inherit the Kingdom of God are the poor in spirit who stand before God and the world in utter helplessness.

Robert Guelich, in his work on the Sermon on the Mount, summarizes the Biblical perspective best. He works with the Aramaic word Jesus might have used, the word ‘anawim’ which by the first century had a particular meaning. Guelich writes: ‘The poor

in Judaism referred to those in desperate need (socio-economic element) whose helplessness drove them to a dependent relationship with God (religious element) for the supply of their needs and vindication. Both elements are consistently present, although 0??? does place more stress on the latter “(69) “for Matthew, the poor in spirit are those who find themselves waiting, empty-handed upon God alone, for their hope and deliverance’ (75).

Surprise, surprise. Jesus switches the price tags. It is the powerless, it is the spiritually bankrupt, and it is those who feel inadequate in the things of God, who experience the coming of the Kingdom.

Thus, my friend, Dale Bruner can say: “the Sermon on the Mount is, spiritually speaking, actually the sermon from the valley. It starts low. It starts with those who feel very unlike mountains! (the Christbook, pg 137)

‘Right –on’ says Jesus, ‘In- Alignment’ for theirs are the glorious benefits of the Rule of God.

Now, as a matter of fact, all human beings are apart from Jesus Christ, spiritually bankrupt. We are all spiritually bankrupt, paupers. No-one has anything with which to buy the Kingdom. However, not everyone acknowledges this universal spiritual poverty. Therefore, the poor in spirit’ whom Jesus blesses are those who recognize and admit their bankruptcy. The beggarly poor have laid aside all pretense, the beggarly poor have stopped playing denial games. The beggarly poor know they are fundamentally helpless. And they admit it. And they have Jesus ‘blessed;’ right-ward-up, In Synch’.

Now, I suggest last week that the qualities which Jesus congratulates in His Beatitudes are not natural human qualities. Rather, they are the result of having been grabbed by His Gospel. Jesus did not come into the world looking for Beatitude people who he could then call into His Kingdom. No. He came into the world fist called people to Himself and as a result of encounter and on-going relationship with Him these qualities begin to emerge within them.

Question 2 – Why is poverty of spirit ‘ a mark of the Gospelized? And why is it the first mark? I am not sure I can adequately express what I want to say. When we encounter Jesus Christ as he really is beyond our inadequate images of Him; when we see Him in his Glory, full of Grace and truth. We see ourselves as we really are. Loved by Him, yes Lord with an extravagant love! But also falling short of who we were made to be. When the light of His in-breaking Kingdom dawns upon us; when the Glory of His New World Order is revealed to us, we become aware , as never before, of how far short we have fallen from the Glory f God (Romans 3:23) Right?

As Jesus said, just before going to the cross, (John 15;22) ‘If I had not come and spoken to the, they would not have sin’ ‘If I had not come and done among them the works no one else did, you would have no sin’.

It is His presence, which makes us aware of just how poor we are in the things of God. We see Him as He is and ourselves as we are. And like the tax-collector in Jesus parable we cry out “God be merciful to me” (Luke 18:13)

The Pharisee in the parable could go on and on about his spiritual achievements because he was only comparing himself to other pagans. And as long as we do that we can always find someone worse off than we. We can always find someone who is prouder than we are: and although we ourselves may still be quite proud we can congratulate ourselves on being humble. Or we can find someone who has strong fits of temper, and although we too have a temper we can congratulate ourselves on being gracious and patient. (James M Borce, the Sermon on the Mount, pg 27)

But then we are confronted by the purity and compassion, the integrity and peace of Jesus of Nazareth. The illusion breaks and like Peter we fall at Jesus feet and cry out ‘Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord’ (Luke 5:8)

Peter is not suffering from a poor self-image. He has simply been arrested by the infinite qualitative difference between who he is and who he was made to be as reflected in Jesus

It was while reading Thomas Kemp’s Imitation of Christ that John Newton; author of ‘Amazing Grace’ came to the blessedness of knowing his spiritual poverty. Before that encounter with Jesus Newton was a skipper on an English slave-trading ship. He thought of himself as ‘quite a decent chap’ thank you. Then the light broke through, and then the Kingdom of heaven invaded his life. And his hymn is his personal testimony. ‘Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me’. ‘A Wretch’. It is his own self – designation. No one else called him that. No one needed to. In the presence of Jesus Christ what else would a slave –trader say in the presence of Jesus? He did not have a self esteem problem. He simply saw how short of the Glory of God he had fallen. “I once was lost but now am found, was blind but now I see’. Now I see that before the Living God I am woefully poor in spirit. That is why he goes on in the second verse to sing “ ‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear’ Grace taught him to fear? Yes, for grace first makes us see ourselves as we are apart from Grace. The Gospel of God’s New Order first caused Newton to see how wretched his part with the old order was. But then he made the greatest discovery of his life. The New Order, the Kingdom of Heaven, is for those who recognize how wretchedly poor they are before God. And so he sang ‘and grace my fear relieved’

I am so glad Jesus began His description of the new humanity on this note! For every time I read the rest of the New Testament I find myself hanging my head and wondering if I can make it. For when I listen to Jesus describe the Kingdom life I have to cry out ‘O Lord, have mercy on me’.

I hear: whoever is angry with his brother (or sister) shall be liable to the court. Whoever says ‘you fool’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell (5:22) I hear: “Whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has committed adultery with her in his heart” (5:28) I

hear: no-one can serve two masters' (6:25) You cannot serve God and mammon. I hear 'do not be anxious about your life, do not be anxious about tomorrow (6:25, 34) I hear: "do not judge lest you be judged, why are you bothered by the speck in your neighbours eye but do not notice the log in your own eye? (7:1,3) And I hang my head.

I hear 'let your yes be yes and your no be no, anything beyond this is of the evil one' (5:37) I hear 'do not resist the one who is evil, but whoever slaps you on the right cheek turn to him the other also' (5:39) I hear 'love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you' (5:44) I hear 'not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of heaven; but the one who does the will of my father who is in heaven' (7:21) And I have to cry out 'O Lord, I do not have what it takes to be and do what You call me to be and do'!

And then I hear 'blessed', 'congratulations!' in synch are those who know they fall short and who know they cannot make it on their own for theirs and only theirs is the Kingdom. It is the 'in synch' who echo the words of the old hymn 'Rock of Ages'

Nothing in my hand I bring
Simply to the cross I cling
Naked, come to thee for dress
Helpless, look to thee for grace,
Foul, I to the foundation fly
Wash me, Saviour, or I die'
(Augustus M Toplady, 'Rock of Ages, Cleft from me)

Brennan Manning spent most of his life as a priest before the light of the Kingdom dawned on him. He suggested that the 'poor in spirit' are like the survivors of a ship wreck. Out at sea, all the things they used to rely on, past achievements, accumulated treasures, titles and degrees simply do not matter all that matters now is the plank to which they cling to life.

Manning writes; "the shipwrecked have stood at the still point of a turning world and discovered that the human heart was made for Jesus Christ and cannot really be content with less. They cannot take seriously the demands that the world makes on them. We were made for Christ and nothing less will ever satisfy us' (the Lion and the Lamb, pf 178)

"The shipwrecked have little in common with the land locked. The landlocked have their own security system, a home base, credentials and barns, their self-interest and investments intact. They never find themselves because they never really feel themselves lost. The shipwrecked, on the contrary, reach out for the passing plank with the desperation of the drowning. Adrift on an angry sea, in a state of utter helplessness and vulnerability, the shipwrecked never asked what they could do to merit the plank and inherit the Kingdom of dry land. They know that there was absolutely nothing any of them could do' Then Manning writes this: Like little children they simply received the plank as a gift. And little children are precisely those who haven't done anything. 'Unless you become like little children you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matthew

18:3) Jesus is not suggesting that heaven is a vast playground for infants. Children are our models because they have no claim on heaven. If they are close to God, Simon Tugwell says, it is not because they are innocent but because they are incompetent (p 182-183)

Blessed are the incompetent in spirit for theirs and only theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven

How do you respond to the first Beatitude? It is a Kind of death, is it not? Kind of? It is death!! Death to self –sufficiency, death to self-savourship

But since self-sufficiency and self-savouring are illusions this death is a birth. As anyone in a 12 step recovery program will tell us it was when we embraced the first step ‘we admitted we were powerless’ that they began to be free. The poor in spirit are those who know they do not have it all together. They are, therefore, ready to receive. They are, therefore, willing to receive.

Question 3 - Will there ever be a time when we are rich in spirit? Yes and No. No because we were created to live dependently. We will never be able to live apart from God. In the new creation we will gladly live dependent lives. As someone has said ‘even in that life there will be the need for supplies from outside ourselves. Even there we shall not be independent of Him (God). Oh, blessed absence of self-sufficiency. We shall never be self-contained. (F.B. Mayer reflecting on Rev 22, ‘I am Alpha and Omega ; I will give to the one who thirsts.)

So ‘no’ we will never in our own be rich in spirit’.

But ‘yes’. Yes, there is a time when we are ‘rich in spirit’. Note how I put it there is a time when we are ‘rich in spirit’ When? Every time we are ‘poor in spirit’.

For every time we are ‘poor in spirit’ Jesus says to us: yours is the Kingdom. Yours. All of it. The Kingdom. Everything Gods’ glorious new world order entails. It is all yours. Forgiveness of Sin, Cleansing: Deep Cleansing, Freedom, Freshness, Wisdom, Power, Truth, Hope, Light, Holiness, Community, Fullness; full of the Spirit. Gifts of the Spirit. Creativity. All yours. You lucky bums. You blessed paupers. Yours is the Kingdom.