

Sermon Title: "The Poor in Spirit"

Prelude

TFWS #2158 "Just a Closer Walk with Thee"/UMH #364 "Because He Lives"

Congregational Reading: UMH #785-786 Psalm 51:1-17

Opening Prayer/Congregational Prayer

Apostle's Creed UMH #881

Questions from Our Youth: "Why does God put bad people in our life?"

Scripture

Matthew 5:1-12

Luke 18:9-17

Sermon: "The Poor in Spirit"

Lord's Prayer

TFWS #2162 "Grace Alone"/UMH #354 "I Surrender All"

Closing Prayer and Benediction: Number 6:24-26

Postlude

Questions:

When Jesus talks about being "Poor in Spirit" what is He actually referring to? How do you know if you are living into this?

The Beatitudes as a whole speak to us about what a God-fearing life looks like, but it takes a little discernment for us to really understand. Looking ahead to the next several weeks where we will study this, what do the various Beatitudes actually call for us to do?

Humility is a key ingredient in the life of a Christian, and as we read in Luke 18:9-17, it plays a role in us receiving forgiveness. How?

Memory Verse: Matthew 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Monthly Challenge: Your challenge this month is to read through the Gospel of Matthew.

“Blessed are the Poor in Spirit”

Pastor Jacob Hanson

02/21/21

Opening Prayer

Good Morning Beloved, and welcome to worship. Today is the first Sunday during the season of Lent. We began this season on Wednesday with the imposition of ashes, and for the next roughly forty days until Easter we will be in this time of the year where we focus even more heavily upon the life of Christ than we normally do. The season of Lent has a major impetus behind it, namely its purpose is to remind us of the somber nature of our sinful selves, and it results in the joy of our salvation that we celebrate on Easter. The last two years for Lent we went through (mostly) the life of Jesus as portrayed in the Gospel of Luke, and then the Gospel of John. This year we will be spending the bulk of our time in the Gospel of Matthew, using Jesus’s teaching on the Beatitudes as our guide. I would encourage you to spend significant time in the Gospel of Matthew yourself outside of church service; if you do so you will gain much more understanding than just listening to your pastor alone. Today, appropriately, we begin with the first of the Beatitudes, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” However, before we can even scratch the surface here, we first need to understand what the Beatitudes are in the first place.

The Beatitudes, as we most commonly know them, are either eight or nine (depending on how you classify them) blessings given by Jesus at the famous Sermon on the Mount. These blessings describe what a person who is kingdom focused looks like here and not on earth, even though they have not yet been perfected. In contemporary Christian vernacular we might say that these blessings describe those who are “saved,” or those who are “redeemed.” These are qualities that followers of Jesus possess, although they seem confusing in the way they are often portrayed. Using today’s topic of “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” it looks like a contradictory statement. We think of a blessed person as having more, not less. In the case of the phrase “poor in spirit” it looks like Jesus is saying that someone with an immature faith or a weak faith is blessed. Beloved, this is not actually what Jesus is saying. Rather, Jesus is telling (or commanding if you will) those who are listening to be humble in their faith, and this is what He means when He talks about being poor in spirit. Almost all of the Beatitudes can be misunderstood like this. “Blessed are the mournful” can be taken to mean we are to self-loathe and not ever be happy or joyful. “Blessed are the gentle” could be taken to mean we should never take charge or take a stand. “Blessed are those who hunger” could be taken WAY out of context to mean we should starve ourselves. (It really is a calling for us to hunger for righteousness... which is what Jesus says.) You get the idea. Growing up in the Catholic church, this was something we memorized. Perhaps you did too. Hopefully as we study these blessings, which are in fact callings, we will grow in our understanding beyond just being able to recite the eight or nine Beatitudes. Starting with “Blessed are the poor in spirit,”

we can apply this calling to our lives right away, and live in faith as God has called us to. “Poor in spirit” again refers to humility Beloved. Humility in our faith, not being puffed up as Paul would affirm in Ephesians 2:8-9 where he states “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.” Humility in the faith is understanding where you come from and whom you owe any good work you do to. As we are told, “Every good and perfect thing comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no change or shifting of shadow.” (James 1:17) All over scripture this is the calling from the Lord, this is the hallmark of a Godly believer, that they rightly attribute their success in everything (ESPECIALLY in regards to faith) to the One who gives it. This Beatitude sets the stage for all the others, because without being poor in spirit, without being humble, without being contrite, then the other commands are not going to be followed. It should be somewhat obvious why we are called to be humble in our faith, (note that humble does not equal doubtful, although all of us do struggle with doubt at times) because it points the finger back to God, and it is in God that we find our salvation. As it says in Matthew 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

In scripture there are many different places where we see humbly faithful folks at work. In the book of Judges a man named Gideon defeats a much mightier army with only a handful of men. He was very careful to give all glory in the victory to the Lord, and when he was offered kingship by the people he denied it saying in Judges 8:23 “I will not rule over you, nor shall my son rule over you; the Lord shall rule over you.” Gideon was not an extremely mighty man, quite the opposite, and yet because he had the right faith God used him. Another place we see humble faith is in the Apostle Paul, with his thorn in the flesh. Paul rightly acknowledges why this thorn in the flesh was present, saying in 2nd Corinthians 12:7-9 “Because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, for this reason, to keep me from exalting myself, there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me... to keep me from exalting myself! Concerning this I implored the Lord three times that it might leave me. And He said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness.’” We often wonder why God would allow bad things to happen to good people. We think that if we are walking in the Lord’s light that all the time everything would go well. Truthfully, it is often the opposite. The world doesn’t like it when we follow Christ, Satan doesn’t like it when we obey His commands, and truthfully sometimes we need to be put to the test by the world and by Satan to be more useful as Christians. Often weakness and difficulty produces greater faith, and with it comes a more wonderful witness. Your difficulties in this life do not last, but the faith that they produce and the grace that God shows through them and the words that you speak at His command in humility, those things do last for forever. Are your weaknesses and pains a burden? Of course they are. However, they are also an opportunity to show God’s love is at work within you... but only if you are humbly living in the spirit. That is why Jesus says that the poor in spirit will have the kingdom of heaven. This is about salvation Beloved, and it is about recognizing where your strength comes from.

To be clear, God does not desire our suffering, but He does desire to prune you and use you, so what the world and Satan imposes upon you for evil He allows for a greater purpose. Giving heed to Him in those things, acknowledging that even Christ Himself did not go without suffering, and finding the source of your faith not in your own goodness but in the Lord above is what makes you humble/poor in spirit, and this results in a witness to salvation.

There is great danger, by the way, in not being humble in the spirit. To be convinced that we are something great in God's kingdom is a dangerous place to be. It is ok, obviously, to acknowledge God's good works within us, but we are not taking credit for anything great. All glory goes to God. The danger of being puffed up is that we can convince ourselves that we are acting in God's favor, when in reality we are deceiving ourselves into giving in to sin. We can be filled with pride, and lose the heart of our faith by not being humble. An example would be a preacher you may have heard of before, a guy named Ravi Zacharias.

Over the last several decades, right up until his death in May of 2020, he was hailed as a magnificent preacher. His theology on salvation, the Gospel, and even morality was pretty darn good. He was not a name/claim it preacher like Creflo Dollar or Joel Osteen or one of those other tv preachers with horrible theology. He and his church organization reached thousands upon thousands of people with the gospel, both here and abroad. On several continents his organization of faithful witnesses built great ministries and many were saved from an eternity in hell by his work. However, unfortunately, there was a dark side to this man that came to light over the following months. Massive sexual misconduct, allegations of rape, and a misuse of God's name behind closed doors all now taint the name of Ravi who was formerly such and inspiration for many. God of course works even in our absence, and thankfully many call upon Jesus in spite of this man's evil, but in relation to being humble in spirit, poor in spirit, the truth coming to light shows that Ravi was not humble in spirit. In scripture you could find any number of examples of great men brought low, some for a time and others for eternity, by thinking they were great when they were not in the spirit. Moses doing an illicit miracle resulted in him not entering the promised land. David covering up his adultery with Bathsheba by killing Uriah tainted his kingship. Peter found out his faith was not as great as he thought when he denied Christ three times. Those things God gives us to humble us, whatever they may be, are a good reminder to us to not get haughty but to remain poor in spirit so that we will inherit the kingdom of God.

This may be a hard teaching to understand Beloved. You may argue that it is easy to say when life goes right, and you would be correct to think that way. I don't like to use myself as an example for sermons, it feels disingenuous most of the time, but I will this time around. There are many things in all of our lives that are there to keep us humble, let me share two of mine with you. One of the things that humbles me, that reminds me I am no great shakes, is physical. Normally I am healthy and fit, however as a result of three different car accidents up in

cripple me. It is easy to find pride in physical strength, and I am guilty of it. From time to time the Lord reminds me that I will not be strong forever, that my body is not indestructible, and it helps keep me poor in spirit. I pray much more in agony than I do in ease. Perhaps you understand that. The second thing that humbles my spirit is my mind. Migraines of three different varieties often derail me. I am blessed with the gift of gab... but when migraines come I lose that gift. The sharpness of my mind which I will often rely upon (instead of relying upon the Lord) degrades when I suffer with vestibular migraines, and my normally industrious nature takes a hit. Just like when I have back spasms, I am MUCH more reliant upon the Lord to be at work. It is humbling to feel dumb and feel like you are in a fog, and clearly I need that to keep from puffing myself up. Regularly I am reminded of my weakness, and that it is not my smart words or my physicality that bring people into the kingdom, but rather His work. He doesn't need me to be at peak performance to do His will, and often in my weakest of moments is when He shines through the best. Beloved, that humility of spirit is part of why you too have things like this. It is there to keep you poor in spirit... which results in you gaining the kingdom of heaven.

In your life it could be any number of things that God has allowed to exist to humble you and sharpen you, to remind you that you are not in control. Health issues, circumstances beyond your control, family troubles, etc. plague all of us. They are the result of an evil and sinful world. Our response can be one of two things, either to ignore that we are weak and in need of God ever more, or we convince ourselves otherwise and leave ourselves open to pride's temptations. Guess which of those two people God can use more? Perhaps in your life there is a reason why God would allow something to exist that hurts, and while He does not create evil for you, He does use it to strengthen your faith. Our second reading for today highlights exactly what our right response is to be, and how we are to come before the Lord.

The parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (tax-collector) out of Luke 18 highlights for us the difference between a contrite, humble spirit and one that is self-conceited. The Pharisee (a religious teacher... akin to a pastor) comes before the Lord and states his own accomplishments. "God, I thank you that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get." What a pretentious prayer! He may be doing good things in fasting and paying tithes and not engaging in sin, but he has completely missed the point in worship. Hosea 6:6 reminds us "For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." It isn't about what YOU do, it is about what HE does in you and through you. The religious leader is not great, he serves someone great. To get puffed up in our religiosity is to miss the point. On the opposite end look at what the tax collector says: "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" That man goes home justified, even though he is far from perfect. That attitude, that humble spirit, opens the door for God to do great things in his life. That "poor" spirit is one that leads to a greater love of the redemption given, and it keeps his mind raw to the truth that he is not great

To that end, as we begin our Lenten journey by looking at this first Beatitude, we would do well to examine ourselves Beloved. We would do well to remember that we do not earn our way to heaven, that it is not by our own strength that any great thing is accomplished, that we are indebted to the one who took our sin from us. We would do well to be humble in our spirit, poor in spirit, so that we would have the kingdom of heaven. If we think we are perfect, that we are going along perfectly, then we are in danger. If we exalt our accomplishments, if we think in our minds about how holy we are, then we miss the point. Beloved it all comes back to the One who saved you. Beloved, have a humble spirit, be poor in spirit, and inherit the kingdom of heaven. Let us pray, **Closing Prayer**