

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday, January 2, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

MATTHEW 5:1-3

¹ Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them, saying: ³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: LIVING AS CITIZENS OF GOD’S KINGDOM #1 THE KING AND THE PAUPERS

I want to begin my sermon today, this first sermon of 2011, by wishing you a Happy New Year, and by reflecting for a moment upon 2010. In 2010, over seventy people here at Woodbury Community Church took *The Challenge*, a challenge to read through the Bible over the course of one year. Many of you who took *The Challenge* completed it two days ago. Many did not, but in taking *The Challenge*, you read more of the Bible in 2010 than you did in 2009 or perhaps in any other year of your life. I want to congratulate you on taking a risk in your spiritual lives. I know, from our conversations that many of you were changed because of your time with God.

In 2011, I want to challenge you once again to attempt to read through the Bible. There is nothing that will change you as much as God’s Word. D. L. Moody once said, “This book will keep you from sin, or sin will keep you from this book.” Many of you know exactly what I’m talking about. You experienced that truth in your life over the course of the past year. When we spend time in God’s Word, we are changed, and we are involved in spiritual battle.

In 1959, D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, the minister of Westminster Chapel in London wrote, “There is nothing more important in the Christian life than the way in which we approach the Bible, and the way in which we read it. It is our textbook, it is our only source, it is our only authority. We know nothing about God and about the Christian life in a true sense apart from the Bible. We can draw various deductions from nature (and possibly from various mystical experiences) by which we can arrive at a belief in a supreme Creator. But I think it is agreed by most Christians, and it has been traditional throughout the long history of the Church, that we have no authority save this Book. We cannot rely solely upon subjective experiences because there are evil spirits as well as good spirits; there are counterfeit experiences. Here, in the Bible, is our soul authority.”¹

¹ D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount: Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 6.

One of the common requests that I received last year was for a reading plan that would allow us to read through the Bible chronologically. So this year we'll use the *Chronological Reading Guide*, which was put together by Back to the Bible Ministries. You can download your copy of the *Chronological Reading Guide* by clicking on our web page. If you are a better listener than you are a reader, there is a spot on the front of our website to go to download the daily readings to your computer or iPod, so that you can listen to the readings. We also have several copies of this year's reading plan on the bulletin board in the lobby. I want to encourage you to sign up once again if you'll take *The Challenge* this year. I believe that it will change you, for unlike any other book, the Bible is alive. It is active. It is sharper than any double edged sword. It will continue to amaze you as you look afresh into the pages of Scripture. 2011 will be a great year as we continue to seek to honor God by making more disciples of Jesus Christ, and as we seek to grow as His disciples.

Would you pray with me as we prepare to look into God's Word today?

Dear Heavenly Father,

We long to be a congregation that experiences Your smile upon our lives. We long to be a people who hunger and thirst for You. May 2011 be a year that draws us closer to You. May we understand You more, may we reflect You more, may we experience more of You and less of us as we walk hand in hand with you!

In Jesus' name,

Amen.

Last month, Monte Abeler and I met with our Creative Worship Planning Team. It's a team that meets about once a quarter to discuss the upcoming sermon series, and to give us their input on what we can do to help make the worship services at Woodbury Community Church a more memorable and effective time.

While meeting I shared with them my hope for 2011. Being a pastor is a huge responsibility. It is not an occupation, but a vocation that demands the full engagement of my soul. When I begin to think and pray about what I will preach about, I seek God's face. I want our times in the Word together to be ordered by God, not me. I want to accurately teach His Word. It is important to me that I not preach from my strength, but from God's strength working through me. As I began to plan for 2011, I had about ten different directions that I wanted to go with our time. There were ideas flying everywhere in my head. But, I had no peace, until I came back to an idea that I had dismissed early on because of the length of time it would take to study the topic.

I believe with all of my heart that God has called us to study Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in 2011.

Martin Lloyd Jones was faced with a similar time of ministry during his tenure as the pastor of Westminster Chapel in London. He wrote, “It is the business of any man who tries to preach and expound the Scriptures to wait upon God for leading and guidance. I suppose fundamentally, therefore, my main reason for preaching on the Sermon on the Mount was that I had felt this persuasion, this compulsion, this leading of the Spirit. I say that deliberately, because if I had been left to my own choice I would not have chosen to preach a series of sermons on the Sermon on the Mount. And as I understand this sense of compulsion, I feel the particular reason for doing so is the peculiar condition of the life of the Christian Church in general at the present time.

I do not think it is a harsh judgment to say that the most obvious feature of the life of the Christian Church today is, alas, its superficiality.”²

Jones wrote those words in 1959. 1959! I wonder what he would say today.

Superficiality in all of its ugliness is something that the Bride of Christ has been accused of throughout the ages. There is something so difficult about divorcing ourselves from the world’s system when we become followers of Jesus Christ. I talk with Christians all the time who profess as the Apostle Paul did in Romans 7:15-25 that they can’t figure out why they do the things that they should no longer want to do. Here is how Paul put it:

¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ¹⁶ And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. ²⁰ Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.

²¹ So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. ²² For in my inner being I delight in God’s law; ²³ but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!

So then, I myself in my mind am a slave to God’s law, but in the sinful nature a slave to the law of sin.

Can you relate to the Apostle Paul? Do you ever find yourself with one foot on God’s side and another foot clearly planted in the world’s side? Jesus knew that living the Christian life would be a struggle. He knew that there would be times that we would be tempted to give up. He knew that there would be days of great discouragement. He knew that there would be days that those who called themselves followers of God would be hypocrites. And, He gave us instruction on how we can live as citizens of the Kingdom of heaven.

² D. Martyn Lloyd Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount: Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 5.

We just celebrated Christmas. All throughout the Advent season we talked about the incarnation – the fact that God became flesh and dwelt among us. If we are Christians, people who believe that Jesus Christ is God and have trusted solely upon Him for salvation, it would be foolish of us not to study what it is that Jesus said. As we go to the Sermon on the Mount, let me give you some background on what others have said about this great sermon.

St. Augustine described the Sermon on the Mount as “a perfect standard of the Christian life.”³ The great seventeenth century preacher, John Donne once said in a sermon preached during Lent in 1629, “All the articles of our religion, all the canons of our church, all the injunctions of our princes, all the homilies of our fathers, all the body of divinity, is in these three chapters, in this one Sermon on the Mount.”⁴ Donne even inferred that all of preacher would ever have to preach on is the Sermon on the Mount, and he would never run out of material. So rich is this sermon!

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s classic work, *The Cost of Discipleship*, was based off of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. It is even said that Ghandi was so enthralled by Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, that he based his views on politics upon his understanding of what he thought the essence of Jesus’ message in the sermon was all about.

There is no denying the fact that this sermon has had a profound influence on this history of not only the church, but on the entire world. There are literally hundreds, if not thousands of commentaries that have been written over the past two thousand years on this sermon. My wife bought me a Kindle for Christmas and I downloaded a fourth century commentary on the Sermon on the Mount this week. Fourth Century! That means the commentary was written in the 300’s! And, it’s rich! It is full of truth that is as relevant today as it was 1700 years ago! There is a ton of information about Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.

John Stott writes, “The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best-known part of the teaching of Jesus, though arguably it is the least understood, and certainly it is the least obeyed. It is the nearest thing to a manifesto that he ever uttered, for it is his own description of what he wanted his followers to be and to do. To my mind no two words sum up its intention better, or indicate more clearly its challenge to the modern world, than the expression ‘Christian counterculture.’”⁵

Now I know that some of you immediately bristle when you hear that term “Christian counterculture.” Over the past 30-40 years in the Christian church we have seen ridiculous things done in the name of being countercultural. Somewhere along the line, “Christians” became a voting block, a niche market, a very wealthy consumer driven group that

³ Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount: The Message of the Kingdom*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway books, 2001), p. 15.

⁴ John Stott, *The Message of The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7)*, (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), p. 9.

⁵ Stott, p. 15.

watched certain movies, bought certain books, listened to certain music, and spent, spent, spent! Marketers even found ways to convince us to purchase things like Testamints – the Christian breath mint, Jesus copper magnetic therapy bracelets, Jesus action figures, and Hello Kitty crucifixes. That’s not at all what it means to be a counterculture.

The Sermon on the Mount is Jesus’ greatest and most exhaustive teaching. It was Augustine who first labeled these three chapters in Matthew, *The Sermon on the Mount*. Professor A. B. Bruce, in his *Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, in 1897 wrote that Jesus sermon wasn’t given over a single hour or day, but probably over a period of many days. He wrote that Jesus may have had his disciples with him on the mountain for a kind of “holiday Summer School,” and called this Jesus’ “Teaching on the Hill.”⁶

Jesus gave this sermon to his disciples early in His ministry. It took place near the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had been travelling all over Galilee, teaching in the Synagogues, healing the sick, performing miracles. The crowds are getting huge, with people coming from as far as Syria to hear Jesus teach, and experience His healing touch. So, Jesus retreats.

Look at Matthew 5:1-2.

¹ Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, ² and he began to teach them, saying . . .

Jesus did what was the tradition in that day for the rabbi. He sat down in the customary teaching position, and gathered all of those who were his closest followers, His disciples, and began to teach. He was about to reveal to them some of the most profound truth that the world had ever heard. God in the flesh, Immanuel, spoke. And He spoke with great authority. And he said, ³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

There have been those over the years who have mistakenly translated the word, “Blessed,” as “Happy.” The J.B. Philips translation of Scripture that was popular in the middle of the past century translated the Greek word for blessed as happy. But to be blessed does not mean that you are happy.

Kent Hughes writes, “Happiness is a subjective state, a feeling. But Jesus is not declaring how people feel; rather he is making an objective statement about what God thinks of them. Blessed is a positive judgment by God on the individual that means ‘to be approved’ or ‘to find approval.’ So when God blesses us, he approves us.”⁷ Hughes goes on to write, “Blessedness indicates the smile of God or, as Max Lucado has so beautifully put it, *The Applause of Heaven*.”⁸ I read Lucado’s book when I was a seminary student and the

⁶ A.B. Bruce, *Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels* in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, edited by W. Robertson Nicholl (Hodder, 1897), p. 95.

⁷ Hughes, p. 17.

⁸ Hughes, p. 18.

subtitle is “what you’ve always dreamed but never expected.” The Sermon on the Mount gives us practical instruction on how we can experience the applause of heaven.

There are eight Beatitudes that begin Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Each of them begins with the word, “Blessed.” The first and the last Beatitude both share the same reward, “theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.” Jesus is employing a common Hebrew teaching tool called bookending, whereby everything in between those bookends is also included in the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven. So, those who live by the Beatitudes are those who will experience the Kingdom.

The first four Beatitudes that Jesus shares are focused on our relationship with God. The next four Beatitudes are focused on our relationship with others. Each of the Beatitudes builds upon the others. It’s not a “pick and choose” thing. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ you will display the character traits described in the Beatitudes. It’s not that some are poor in spirit and some are meek are some are mourners. Christians display all of it. The Beatitudes are the beautiful attitudes that are on display in the life of the follower of Jesus Christ.

If you have been with us over the course of the past year, you have heard us talk about the irreducible core of the Christian life. We have been called to love God, love others and make disciples as we go. True disciples are people who live out the Beatitudes. They are people who have experienced the approval of God. They are people who have been blessed. And, in a sense, I suppose that you can say they are the only people who can experience true happiness, for happiness apart from God’s approval is temporary at best, and artificial in every sense of the word!

Which brings us back to Matthew 5:3. ³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

So, what does it mean to be poor in spirit? Let’s begin by examining what it doesn’t mean to be poor in spirit.

1) To be “poor in spirit” is not to take a vow of poverty. There are those over the years who have confused Jesus’ teaching here with an admonition that we should forsake all worldly wealth and become poor. That’s not what Jesus is saying here. Make no mistake that Jesus has a heart for the poor. He even tells his followers that we should take care of the poor amongst us, but that is not the gist of what Jesus is talking about here.

2) To be “poor in spirit” is not having low self-esteem. The Bible is so very clear that we are people of infinite worth and value. We are loved so much by God that He gave His one and only Son so that we might be redeemed. God loves you. “Poor in Spirit” has nothing to do with your self-worth.

3) To be “poor in spirit” is not to have a false humility. Have you ever met someone who acted like a “Christian Martyr?” They want to tell you all about the things that they give up

for God. “Oh woe is me, because I am so busy serving God.” I knew a guy at a church that I served who had been voted volunteer of the year by our church denomination. He served on camp boards and seminary boards. He was a man who gave hundreds of hours to various Christian causes. But, he didn’t do so with no strings attached. He wanted everyone to know about the great sacrifices that he made. He had this false humility that wasn’t what it meant to be “poor in spirit.”

So, what does it mean to be “poor in spirit?”

The Greek is helpful here. Kent Hughes writes that the Greek word for “poor” is *ptochos*. “It comes from a verbal root that denotes, ‘to cower and cringe like a beggar’ . . . In the New Testament it bears something of this idea because it denotes a poverty so deep that the person must obtain his living by begging. He is fully dependent on the giving of others. He cannot survive without help from the outside. Thus an excellent translation is ‘beggarly poor’. . . The sense is “Blessed are those so desperately poor in their spiritual resources that they realize they must have help from outside sources. Poverty of Spirit, then, is the personal acknowledgement of spiritual bankruptcy.”⁹

So those who are “poor in spirit” acknowledge that they are spiritually bankrupt. There is nothing that they have to bring to God that He needs. There is nothing in them that has any righteousness when compared to a holy God.

This goes against everything that our world teaches. We are told by the world that those who are blessed are those who are rich, or smart, or strong. Blessed are the intelligent, the self-made man or woman. Blessed are those who are popular, good looking, in charge. But, blessed are the poor in spirit? No. That can’t be.

Martyn Lloyd Jones wrote, “The man of the world is very confident as to his own capacity and is prepared to do anything. The Christian is a man, and the only man in the world, who is truly aware of his own limitations.”¹⁰

John Stott writes, “Thus to be ‘poor in spirit’ is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty, indeed our spiritual bankruptcy, before God. For we are sinners, under the holy wrath of God, and deserving nothing but the judgment of God. We have nothing to offer, nothing to plead, nothing which to buy the favor of heaven. . . This is the language of the poor in spirit. We do not belong anywhere except alongside the publican in Jesus’ parable, crying out with downcast eyes, ‘God, be merciful on me a sinner!’ As Calvin wrote: ‘He only who is reduced to nothing in himself, and relies on the mercy of God, is poor in spirit.’”¹¹

There are some great examples of people in the Bible who demonstrated what it means to be “poor in spirit.”

⁹ Hughes, p. 19.

¹⁰ Jones, p. 29.

¹¹ Stott, p. 39.

When David was chosen to be Israel's next King, he responded this way, "18 Who am I, and what is my family or my father's clan in Israel, that I should become the king's son-in-law?" (1 Samuel 18:18) Later on in his life, when reflecting upon all that God had done for him, David said, "Who am I, O Sovereign LORD, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?" (2 Samuel 7:18). David understood that there was nothing in him that deserved God's favor. He was a man of true humility.

Gideon was chosen for the awesome task of leading an army of 300 men into what looked like an impossible battle. God had assured him that these 300 would have victory over a massive army. Gideon's response at God choosing to use him? "15But Lord . . . how can I save Israel? My clan is the weakest in Manasseh, and I am least in my family" Judges 6:15. Again, one who understood his spiritual poverty.

Moses when spoken to in a burning bush in Exodus 3:11 responded this way, "11 But Moses said to God, "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?" What's special about me God? I can offer you so little. I can't even speak. But, God was looking at the heart. He saw in Moses what Moses couldn't see in himself.

The New Testament is full of examples as well. Peter and Paul stand out as champions for Christ who recognized their utter depravity, and because of that God could use them. We cannot experience God's approval in our lives if we have not come to the place of the recognition of our spiritual poverty.

But it goes beyond that. We cannot come to salvation if we have not recognized our spiritual poverty. Do you want to experience the Kingdom of heaven? Then you must first recognize your spiritual poverty. There is no place for self-achieved salvation in the kingdom of heaven. We must come as beggars.

Mark Twain's classic book, "The Prince and the Pauper," could easily be a description of us. In Twain's book, one boy, penniless and in rags, is forced to beg in the street. The other, a king's son, is coddled and given all he could want. The story tells what happens when the two boys change clothes and places, and each one learns how the other half lives. Friends, we're beggars who no more deserve to be children of the king than the beggar in Mark Twain's classic story deserved to live in the castle. But, that's what God does. He takes spiritual beggars, those who truly understand the fact that they deserve nothing, and He turns us into princes and princesses in the Kingdom of Heaven. It is the true story of the King and the Paupers. We are spiritual beggars who need desperately for the King to save us. No one else can do it.

I want to close our time today with a long quote from Martyn Lloyd Jones' book, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*. He makes an incredible point about Jesus' ministry on earth, and what it means to be poor in spirit.

"But, of course, we see (poor in spirit) most of all as we look at the life of our Lord Himself. He became a Man, He took upon Him 'the likeness of sinful flesh.' Though He was equal

with God He did not clutch at the prerogatives of His Godhead. He decided that while He was here on earth He would live as a man, though He was still God. And this was the result. He said, 'I can do nothing of myself.' This is the God-Man speaking. 'I can do nothing of myself.' He said also, 'The words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works' (John 14:10). 'I can do nothing, I am utterly dependent upon Him.' That is it. And look at His prayer life. It is as you watch Him praying, and realize the hours He spent in prayer, that you see His poverty of spirit and His reliance upon God.

That, then, is what is meant by being 'poor in spirit.' It means a complete absence of pride, a complete absence of self-assurance and of self-reliance. It means a consciousness that we are nothing in the presence of God. It is nothing, then, that we can produce; it is nothing that we can do in ourselves. It is just this tremendous awareness of our utter nothingness as we come face-to-face with God. That is to be 'poor in spirit.' Let me put it as strongly as I can, and I do so on the basis of teaching the Bible. It means this, that if we are truly Christian we shall not rely upon our natural birth. We shall not rely upon the fact that we belong to certain families; we shall not boast that we belong to certain nations or nationalities. We shall not build upon our natural temperament. We shall not believe in and rely upon our natural position in life, or any powers that may have been given to us. We shall not rely upon money or any wealth we have received, or the particular school or college to which we have been. No, all that is what Paul came to regard as 'dung,' and a hindrance to this greater thing because it tended to master and control him. We shall not rely upon any gifts like that of natural 'personality', or intelligence or general or special ability. We shall not rely upon our own morality and conduct and good behavior. We shall not bank to the slightest extent on the life we have lived or are trying to live. No; we shall regard all that as Paul regarded it. That is 'poverty of spirit'. There must be a complete deliverance from and absence of all that. I say again, it is to feel that we are nothing, and that we have nothing, and that we look to God in utter submission to Him and in utter dependence upon Him and His grace and mercy. It is, I say, to experience to some extent what Isaiah experienced when, having seen the vision, he said, 'Woe is me! . . . I am a man of unclean lips' – that is 'poverty of spirit.' . . . When a man has some conception of God, he of necessity feels 'as one dead', as did the apostle John on the Isle of Patmos, and we must feel like that in the presence of God. Any natural spirit that is in us goes out, because it is not only exposed in its smallness and weakness, but its sinfulness and foulness become apparent at the same time."¹²

Invitation for people to begin 2011 by inviting Christ to become their Savior and Lord.

Communion

¹² Jones, pp. 40-41.