

“Needing God”

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Christ Presbyterian Church
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Up to now, the Gospel of Matthew has been mostly introduction. Jesus has spoken to John the Baptist; to the devil; to the town of Capernaum, and to the fishermen.

Last week we saw how Matthew sums up John’s preaching. In Matthew 3:2, John says,

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 3:2)

Then we saw what Jesus’ message was when he starts his public ministry. Matthew writes,

From that time on Jesus began to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 4:17).

Same message, and that makes sense, because John’s focus was on God coming to meet his people in the person of Jesus. After the announcement of the kingdom, then we have a description of Jesus’ public ministry. Matthew writes,

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. (4:23)

When Jesus does his public ministry, it includes three things: teaching, preaching, and healing. Then you have the sermon on the Mount in chapters five to seven, and Jesus doing miracles of healing in chapter 8, and then you have this line in chapter nine:

“Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness” (9:35)

Did you catch that? It’s almost exactly what Matthew wrote in chapter four. Jesus preached and taught, the ministry of the word, and he healed, and that’s the ministry of works of power. He announces the kingdom (preaching), he explains what that looks like in God’s new order (teaching), and he demonstrates the kingdom by healing diseases and casting out demons. His *word* and his *work* always go together.

So, in the Sermon on the Mount, the greatest speech ever given, we have Jesus’ first major teaching. Let me say something about Jesus’ teaching. His main gifts to us are his death for our sins and his resurrection for our life. But we shouldn’t forget his teaching. We don’t only experience him through his Spirit in our hearts. We also experience him by obeying his teaching. He lives in the power of his words, because they’re not only human words, they’re God’s words, so they bring power through what

they command. That's why whenever you take his words seriously, they cause growth and new life. That's why at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock" (7:24). The Sermon on the Mount *shows* us what it means to follow Jesus, and it gives us *power* to follow Jesus.

I like the way New Testament theologian and Bible teacher Dale Bruner breaks the sermon down. He says you can think of the Sermon along the lines of three different themes, with two sections in each. You might want to jot these down, and it will give a touchstone to whatever part we're studying in the weeks ahead:

Bruner calls Matthew chapter 5 the Call of Love; this includes both blessings and commands.

He calls chapter 6 the Call to Faith; this includes both devotions and goals.

And he calls chapter 7 the Call to Justice; this includes both summaries, and warnings.

Now, Jesus opens with eight beatitudes.) (There are actually nine, total, but I think the ninth is in place to reiterate or interpret the eighth. The first four talk about us when we're in need: poor in Spirit; poor in joy (those who mourn); poor in power (the meek); and poor in righteousness. The three next beatitudes talk about us when we're full, or beatitudes of service: full of mercy; full of purity; full of peace.

Now notice that Jesus doesn't start with *guidelines*, but with *gifts*. This tells us Jesus helps before he commands. The Ten Commandments show the same thing, because of the preamble. They don't start with commandments, but with a promise of God's undeserved kindness; before the first command is a promise: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the Land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). Only then, he says what the people are to do in response: "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). See the tense of the promise? It's present tense: "I *am* the Lord your God." Aren't you glad it doesn't come after the commandments? Not, "I *will* be your God, if only you do these things...if you measure up!" And notice the past tense? "Who *brought* you out of Egypt." Not, "Who *will bring* you out of Egypt." God's work is always first, and he is for us.

Today we focus on the first beatitude, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit," and some of the marks of being "poor in spirit." It comes in two parts, "what we lack," and "God's promise."

What we lack.

Poor in spirit is when you're at the end of your rope.

When you are down, then Jesus says, "Look up! I'm *for* you, and the kingdom of heaven is especially for you.

Poor in spirit is when you know you need God.

In Luke's gospel, Jesus tells a story about two men who went to the temple to pray. One was a respected member of the religious elite, a Pharisee, a man who was serious about scripture. The other was a despised tax collector. Jesus said the religious leader looked into heaven—by the way, that was the normal posture for prayer in the New Testament time, not like we pray with head bowed and hands folded, but to pray with eyes and hands lifted to heaven.

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. (Luke 18:11-14)

Scripture teaches that lesson in a lot of ways. How can God bless us unless we come to him for help? He needs to soften a heart by his Holy Spirit before that heart can receive him. That's the importance of humility. It's why the prophet Isaiah pleads for the people to turn back to God,

Isaiah 66:2: "To this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at my word."

It's the hard lesson David finally learned after his sin with Bathsheba. In his psalm of repentance, he writes,

"The sacrifice God wants is a broken spirit. A broken and repentant heart, O God, you will not despise." (Psalm 51:17)

And again,

Psalm 131: "Lord, my heart is not proud; my eyes are not haughty. I don't concern myself with matters too great or awesome for me." (Psalm 131:1)

That's the hard lesson of the kingdom, that we are our own masters, but God is. Being poor in spirit means we know we need God, and when that happens, it's the beginning place for help.

That's a hard lesson for us sometimes. It is for everybody. It's what Jesus was getting at when he said,

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. (Luke 18:14)

When Jesus taught the crowd some hard things like that, they didn't like it. John tells us, that when they heard some of his hard teaching, that "many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him." And Jesus asked the Twelve, "You don't want to leave too,

do you?” Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life’ (John 6:68) Sometimes Jesus’ teaching is hard, but it’s what we need to receive his life. When we’re empty, then he can fill us. When you know you need God, that’s the starting place for blessing, not smug self-confidence.

In the Jim Carrey movie, “Bruce Almighty,” Bruce is a newscaster in New York who is upset with his life and complaining to God. God presents himself in human form as Morgan Freeman. At first I had a hard time with God being portrayed in film, but I think the movie makes a good point. So God responds by saying, “Fine, I’ll give you my powers for a week, and we’ll see if you can do any better.” Bruce continues to mess his life up, and he ends up losing his job, his girlfriend, and his friends. He realizes that he’s miserable in his selfishness.

Finally, Bruce falls on his knees in the middle of the road at night, and he lifts his arms to heaven and cries out to God:

“You win. I’m done. Please. I don’t want to be God. I want you to decide what is right for me. I surrender to your will.”

The funny thing is, when you feel sad and hurt by your sin and turn to God, that’s when you really are righteous, because righteous is really just being in a right relationship with God. But when you’re sure you’re righteous and don’t need God, that’s when you’re really in trouble.

Second. God’s promise.

God doesn’t leave us in our poverty, he does something with it. That’s why it’s called a beatitude, a blessing. *Blessed* are the poor in spirit, Jesus says, *because theirs is the kingdom of heaven*. He says it another way later in the sermon: “Seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you as well.”

What does he mean by “blessed?” It’s more than happy. Now, you’re thinking, “Hey, I’ve got no problem with happy. I’ll take it.” Okay, but that’s dependent on circumstances—on “happenings.” That’s temporary and insecure. God says, I’ll give you something deeper, more resilient, not geared to whether or not everything’s going great. Wouldn’t we take that? To know, no matter what, all is well when God’s your Father?

That comes out in the word, *makarios*, “blessed.” It means God looks with favor on you. He approves of you. You could say, “God blesses you when you realize your need for him.” That’s when you’re well off. You’ve got it made! There’s a story told, and I haven’t been able to find if it’s true, that the great 20th century theologian Karl Barth said you could translate blessed as “You lucky bums!” How fortunate!

Nothing going your way, nothing to commend you, alone and unprotected in this sad, dark, old world? When God shows up in Jesus and calls you into his marvelous light, you became sons and daughters of the Living God. You’re blessed. Well off. Got it made. You lucky bums! Because of God’s undeserved gift, because of everything he’s done, our lives are different from now on.

We're blessed because God holds us together, body and soul. It's kind of like a star in the sky. A star has two forces at work, the explosion of energy that spreads its light, and the pull of gravity that holds it together. If the energy becomes greater, then it's a supernova, and the star explodes. If the gravity becomes greater, then it implodes into a black hole that sucks in everything, including light. At least, I'm not a scientist, but it's how I think of it. Our lives are like that, too, with God keeping the balance, every day; how blessed we are.

God's way of living is upside-down, but leads to blessing. We start by being empty, by knowing we need God. We are so blessed! Let's let the light of Jesus' blessing shine through us to a world that needs God.