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Matthew 5:3

1st Message

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THE POOR IN SPIRIT

SERIES: LIVING RIGHT-SIDE UP IN AN UPSIDE-DOWN WORLD

We are going to take a break from 1 John where Andy has been over the past month, and for the next two weeks we are going to look at the first two Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. I don't know about you, but I have always loved the Sermon on the Mount. I don't really know why. Maybe because it's the greatest sermon ever given. This fascination led me to take a class on this text even before I became the Junior High pastor here at Peninsula Bible Church. The class was taught by Darrell Johnson, Associate Professor of Pastoral Theology at Regent College, and it was very foundational for me. Over these next two weeks I will be leaning heavily on what Darrell does with this text.¹

The title I like for this, the greatest of Jesus' sermons, is "Living Right-side Up in an Upside-down World." You can use this title for anything that Jesus says or does because when we meet Jesus He rocks our world. What we thought was right is suddenly wrong and what we thought was wrong is suddenly right. Or, in other words – He flips us. He turns us upside-down or, perhaps more accurately, right-side up.

If we look at the timeline of history, you'll understand what I mean. Way back in Genesis 1, God creates the world and humankind. Humanity begins right side up, made in the image of God. Everything about Adam and Eve is right-side up – spiritually, emotionally, attitudinally. Everything. Then came that awful day when Adam and Eve sinned and humankind turned upside-down. From that point on, every human being has been born upside-down: still made in the image of God, but tainted as a result of sin in every part. The Story of Salvation begins as God undertakes his great pursuit of humankind.

As the Story continues through the Old Testament, the prophets looked upon this history and saw a time when God was going to intervene in a dramatic way. They called it the Day of the Lord. It would be a time:

- When things would be made right
- When all kinds of blessings would occur
- When sins would be forgiven
- When relationships would be healed
- When bodies would be healed

All Israel, and indeed all humanity, waited for this great Day of the Lord.

Then, Jesus came, represented by the cross, and all of what was expected happens. That long-awaited Day of the Lord had come in the person of Jesus.

So, men and women — upside-down ever since the fall — meet Jesus and are flipped right-side up.

That's our story. That's what happens when we meet Jesus. We fly upside-down beforehand, and then we meet Jesus and he turns us right-side up, slowly but surely:

- Our attitudes change
- Our actions change
- Our speech changes
- Our motivations and ambitions change
- Our entire life, which began upside down, is slowly turned right-side up.

In no place is this right side up lifestyle stated more emphatically than in Jesus' greatest sermon – the Sermon on the Mount. G.K. Chesterton says this about the Sermon on the Mount, "On first reading, you feel it turns everything upside-down. But, the second time you read it, you discover it turns everything right-side up."²

That's the Sermon on the Mount and that's why I love it.

Context: Gospel & Jesus

Before getting into the text of the sermon, it's important to say a few words about the context of the Sermon. If we don't know context, everything gets out of place. The Sermon is found in Matthew 5-7. Chapter 1 of Matthew is Jesus' genealogy, then His birth narrative, his baptism and his temptation in the wilderness. Next, Jesus begins his ministry in chapter 4 where He is said to have gone into Galilee, teaching and proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom (Matt 4:23). That's the context for the sermon. This is of utmost importance for understanding the Sermon, because if you separate the Sermon on the Mount from the Gospel message, the Sermon becomes impractical idealism or crushing legalism.

This a common mistake for a lot of people; it was for me at least. To the contrary, if you go either the idealistic route or the legalistic route, you have forgotten the context. The context is the Gospel message. What is this Gospel message? Jesus gives the definition of His Gospel in Mark 1:14-15:

"Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Good News."

"The time has come, the kingdom of God is at hand; turn around and trust this good news." The Gospel is that in Jesus' coming into the world, history has reached a climax. The time has come. In Him, the reign of God has come. That amazing time that the prophets spoke about has finally arrived.

One commentator summarizes, "In the coming of Jesus, the kingdom of God ceases to be a merely future reality toward which we are on the way. Rather, it has invaded and permeated our earthly historical existence and is in the process of transforming it."³

The Gospel has invaded this world, permeated this world and is in the process of transforming it right here and right now.

- This Gospel is not just about getting a ticket to heaven.
- This Gospel is not just about the forgiveness of sins.
- This Gospel is not just about eternal life.

It is all those things, but this Gospel is Good News right now because it announces that a new way of life is possible right now! A right-side up way of life. God's new way of life is in the process of transforming every part of our lives as we speak! In the end, we are simply transformers, like those popular movies out now. If you don't know the movies, that's OK. They are not great, but all the Junior Highers love them. The Transformer movies are about robots that turn into cars and cars into robots; their mechanical parts are transformed into something else. In the same way, we can't swap our parts for new ones. We can't go down to Target and buy a new brain or a new heart or new ambitions or new motivations. These are our parts but God takes them and transforms every single one of them – not into cars, but into His image – not right away, but over time (2 Cor 3:18).

This is Good News because His Kingdom has come and is in the process of turning each one of us right-side up right here and right now.

When we come to this great sermon, we must keep in mind that Jesus is simply describing transformed people. He is explaining what happens to people when the Good News gets a hold of them, when an individual turns around and throws their entire weight upon His Gospel.

The key is this: nothing found in this Sermon is a result of our own effort! It is what happens to us when the Gospel invades and transforms our lives. We can't simply pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and become beatitude people. We can't simply try a little harder. We can't simply set New Year's Resolutions to become lovers of our enemies. It won't happen. But, it will happen if we allow the Gospel to take root in our lives.

So, are we supposed to be passive (a common question)? No! As much as I wish I was allowed to be passive — because every time I add something I seem to mess things up – nonetheless there is effort on my part. This is the divine dance we do everyday, what Dallas Willard calls 'Effort, but not earning.'⁴ As the Gospel works in our lives, we are continuously called to turn around and open up more and more of our lives to Him, even those parts of our lives that we don't want to. And when we do, day after day, week after week, year after year, we are slowly turned right-side up. We are slowly transformed into His image.

The sermon begins with these things called "beatitudes:" eight statements that all begin with this funny word 'blessed.' What does this word 'blessed' mean?

To begin with, the word blessed does not refer to how we feel about ourselves. The word blessed describes how God feels about us. It is God's assessment of us. Many bible translators, scholars and commentators have tried to translate this word. I'll give you some examples, then give you what I think is best and you can decide.

Some people translate it 'happy,' and the word in Greek can mean happy in some instances. But, that implies how we feel about our circumstances, so I think we can do better. Some people translate it 'congratulations.' This is a bit better, but it can imply that we have achieved something. So we can probably do better still.

Karl Barth translates it 'you lucky bums.' That is a pretty good translation but I still think we can do better. The two best ways to translate "blessed" are:

'In Sync' – In sync with the Kingdom are you when you are poor in spirit; in sync are you when you are meek; in sync are you when

you are merciful, and so on. Unfortunately, this reminds me too much of that pop group from the 90s, and I just can't get it out of my mind. So I need something better.

'Right-side up' – Right-side up are you when you are poor in spirit, when you are mournful, when you are meek, when you are merciful. 'Right-side up' – the phrase I've been using all morning – is my favorite way to define this word.

Transition to 1st Beatitude

After that long introduction, we finally come to the first Beatitude:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Right-side up are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

1st Beatitude

This first Beatitude is of primary importance. It sets the tone for the rest of the Beatitudes, and for the rest of the Sermon. It is the foundation. In fact, it may be good to simply read this verse before and after every other verse in the sermon.

What does Jesus mean by poor in spirit? If this first sentence sets the tone for the entire sermon, we need to understand what 'poor in spirit' means.

The word used here for "poor" in Greek is used for people who are absolutely destitute and are forced to beg. They have absolutely nothing. They are desperate. So, the poor in spirit are those who have poverty of spirit, who are desperate in their spirit, meaning - those who know they are powerless to get into the kingdom of heaven. They know they are broken. The poor in spirit know that apart from the mercy of Jesus, there is no hope for them. The poor in spirit understand that they are entirely dependent on God – and not on themselves - for their hope and deliverance.

The key word here is dependency. To be poor in spirit is to be entirely dependent on the Lord. It's an emptying of ourselves so that we can be filled with the Lord.

Adam and Eve turned upside-down because they went the independent route. But, Jesus says, blessed are you when you are dependent on me.

And, now you see why this is the first statement in this great sermon. Because as you read through the entire sermon, you see that almost 50% of the verses are commands. Do this, do that, don't do that, don't do this, which is why, as I said earlier, impractical idealism or crushing legalism can easily engulf you if you're not careful.

As I said earlier, part of my fascination with the Sermon on the Mount was probably the fact that I didn't understand it. All these rules! I'd read though it and just end up falling on the floor in a blob, saying, "I can't do this – this is impossible." But, now I understand. Now I hear God say, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible (Matt 19:26)... Right-side up are you when you are completely dependent on me!" Then I pull your blob self up off the floor.

I grew up singing hymns in church, and this first Beatitude reminds me 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 fountain fly;
 wash me, Savior, or I die.

Nothing in my hand I bring. Instead, I depend completely on the Lord and what He has done.

Many of you are familiar with Brennan Manning. He provides an image that I think is helpful here.

Imagine yourself on a boat way out at sea where the water is rough and the boat is struggling to stay afloat. And, one final huge wave hits the boat and causes it to capsize. Suddenly you find yourself in the middle of the ocean all alone. There is no sign of the boat, no sign of any person, no sign of land, oh, and no life preserver. And, just as you are beginning to get tired of treading water, a piece of wood floats up alongside you. You place your entire weight on that piece of wood.

Brennan Manning says, “That is to be poor in spirit.”⁵ The poor in spirit are like survivors of a shipwreck. They have little in common with those on land. The person floating at sea with only a piece of wood to hold onto is thankful because without that wood, all hope is gone. That little piece of wood provides salvation.

But for those on land, especially here in the West, we aren't desperate for anything. We're pretty comfortable. We know we've worked hard to become comfortable. We've worked hard for our money, we've worked hard for our house, we've worked hard for our degrees, and we have worked hard. We deserve what we have. We're entitled to it.

The problem is that this mentality works its way into our faith. I'm doing the right things – going to church, reading my Bible, going to small group, going to prayer meetings, tithing, serving. We begin to think that we deserve heaven. God can't live without me. We so easily forget that we are broken people in desperate need of a Savior.

This is why mission trips and service projects can be so powerful. They get us out of our comfort zones and help teach us how to depend on the Lord. You have no status when you're walking down the streets of King City with our high schoolers. You have no comfort other than the Lord when you're eating a meal with a homeless person at a shelter in San Jose. You have no security other than the Lord when you're building a church in a rain forest on the Yucatan Peninsula with the 20s group. For me, that was the first time I realized how dependent I was on my things. It took stepping out of my comfort zone to see on what I actually depended.

Little Children

Manning finishes his story by comparing the ship-wrecked to little children, drawing from Jesus' words in Matthew 18: Unless you become like little children you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven (Matt 18:3).

I never understood this statement by Jesus. I always wondered if heaven was only going to contain 4-year olds. Or, maybe our goal is to become screamy, whiny kids. I honestly struggled with this verse. But, as it turns out, I think children give us the clearest picture of what it means to be poor in spirit. Why? For three reasons.

1. Children have no status. They are status-less. They can't depend on any status.

2. Children have no claim on heaven. They know they've done nothing to deserve getting into heaven.

3. And, thirdly, children are entirely dependent on another. They cannot make it on their own and they know it.

I have a 5-year old son who has finally recognized how dependent he is on his parents. When we get out of a car in the parking lot now, all I do is put my hand down. And, his little hand desperately grabs my hand, and holds onto it the whole way into the store. Sometimes, I try to get him to let it go but he won't. What if we actually walked thru life holding Jesus hand because we simply know we can't make it on our own? That is what it looks like to be poor in spirit.

The Kingdom of Heaven

To those are given the Kingdom of heaven. To those are given the realm of God. To those are given the privilege of watching God in action, spreading His kingdom among humanity. To those are given an eye into eternal life right here and now.

Blessed are the poor in the spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

This is really good news, amen?

Today, we have the privilege of coming to the Lord's Table. One important way we remember that we are dependent on Him is through the taking of communion. Today we come to His table recognizing that we are powerless, recognizing that He is our only hope and recognizing that we are in desperate need of Him.

Nothing in my hand I bring

Simply to the cross I cling

1. Darrell Johnson, *Living In Sync: Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, (Regent Audio, ISBN/Product ID: 3411).

2. G.K. Chesterton as quoted in E. Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the Mount* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1931), 14.

3. David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 32.

4. Alan Andrews, *The Kingdom Life* (Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2010), 93.

5. Brennan Manning, *Lion and Lamb: The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 2004), 205.

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