



HAPPY TO BE NOBODY

SERIES: THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

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Matthew 5:1-3

First Message

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Last week I spent time gathering old photographs and other memorabilia from my Junior High days in preparation for teaching our Junior High students during the middle hour this morning. As I browsed through my keepsakes, I was struck by two things. First, I see that I'm getting old, and second, the things that used to enthrall me are no longer important to me. Once I thought being successful was a goal worth striving for, but not anymore.

In my search through my childhood mementos I thought of the children's story *The Velveteen Rabbit*, the tale of a toy rabbit who wanted to be more than just a toy sitting on a shelf. I enjoy children's literature. Many of the stories that we read to our children have great messages for adults, too. As this toy rabbit struggled with his uneasy feelings, he had a talk with an old, worn out, much loved stuffed horse. Their conversation is appropriate to the topic we are going to look at this morning:

"What is REAL?" asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?" "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real." "Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit. "Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt." "Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?" "It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

In many ways, discipleship is the process of "becoming real." And that does indeed take a long time.

For the past twelve months I have immersed myself in chapters 5, 6 and 7 of the book of Matthew, a passage commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. During his three years of ministry our Lord gave three major addresses: the Olivet Discourse (Matthew 24-25),

the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17), and the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7).

The Sermon on the Mount is probably the best known of the teachings of Jesus—and probably the least obeyed. These words, which are Jesus' description of what he wanted his followers to be and do, are the nearest thing to a manifesto that he ever uttered. The Sermon on the Mount is the best explanation, and the clearest illustration, of what true Christianity is all about.

Christians desperately need to know the difference between true Christianity and the counterfeits that are so prevalent today. One man writes: "We live in a day when image rates higher than character, when style counts more than real accomplishment. We are impressed with outward appearances. We are easily distracted from unspectacular disciplines that lead to excellence. Life is skimmed from the surface. The depths remain largely unexplored."

If you don't believe that, watch the election campaign in the coming months. We will be bombarded with sound bites and visual images crowing about values and priorities, and the platforms and philosophies of the two major parties.

The Sermon on the Mount, by contrast, is Jesus' philosophy of life, delivered at a time when his popularity was soaring. This was his unveiling of his new platform, not the inauguration of a new political party, but the ushering in of the kingdom of God.

I had intended to take two weeks on the opening verses of the sermon, known as the beatitudes, and then proceed through the rest of chapter 5 on the following six Sundays. But as I have thought and prayed about this series, I have been encouraged to slow down and devote the entire series to the beatitudes alone.

We are so used to hearing these beatitudes that we almost take them for granted. We fail to see how utterly unorthodox they are. The people who first heard Jesus' words were quite ordinary folk, just like you and me. They were hard nosed Jewish businessman, battle-scarred Roman soldiers, common fishermen and laborers. Jesus' words would have seemed just as radical to them as they do to us, for the beatitudes neatly contrast how to succeed in the kingdom of heaven as opposed to the kingdom of this world.

A. W. Tozer in his excellent work *The Pursuit of God*, writes: "A fairly accurate description of the human race might be furnished, when unacquainted with it, by tak-

ing the beatitudes, turning them wrong side out, and saying, 'Here is your human race.'"

I thought I would try that, so here is modern secular man's version of the beatitudes:

Blessed are self-made and the self-sufficient, because they did it all by themselves.

Blessed are those who play it cool, because they avoid being hassled by life.

Blessed are those who demand their rights, because if they don't, someone else will.

Blessed are those who go for all the gusto, because you only go around once.

Blessed are those who show no mercy, because anyone dumb enough to get caught deserves it.

Blessed are those who bend the rules, because after all, everyone is doing it.

Blessed are those who intimidate others, because if you don't, someone else will grab your chips.

Blessed are those who despise the good, because everyone knows that good guys finish last.

Happily, not everyone in modern society would describe their philosophy of life in those terms. But many would. And even many of those who would shy away from admitting it still live that way. Modern society lives by the rules of the survival of the fittest. The bumper sticker says it all: "The one who dies with the most toys wins."

Some time ago, the owner of the Chicago Bulls made this statement when Michael Jordan first retired: "He's living the American Dream. The American Dream is to reach a point in your life where you don't have to do anything you don't want to do and can do anything that you want to do." That may be some people's American Dream, but it is certainly not Jesus' dream as revealed here in the beatitudes. These verses tell us that God sees the world through a very different lens.

In light of that, let us look at Jesus' words in Matthew 5

And when He saw the multitudes, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. And opening His mouth He began to teach them, saying, ... (Matt 5:1-2, NASB)

I will make four general observations about the beatitudes before we look at them in detail.

There are eight beatitudes in all, found in verses 3-10 of chapter 5. Verses 11-12 are not additional beatitudes. They are merely an expansion of the eighth, "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness." Some people seek to equate what they regard as ten beatitudes with the Ten Commandments. Although Matthew is drawing a parallel between Jesus and Moses, and we could make much of that correlation, it was not Jesus' intention to give ten laws. In fact,

these expressions are not laws at all; they are characteristics of citizens of the kingdom of heaven. In other words, this is the lifestyle of those who are subject to the King. We don't do these things to get into the kingdom. Rather, they are a manifestation of the fact that we have already submitted our lives to the lordship of Christ.

The second thing I would say is that these expressions are not platitudes. They are not pious, wishful statements. Jesus is not saying, "I wish this is the way the world really was. I wish this is how people behaved." No, this is reality. This is the way we can be and will be when we are subject to the King.

Third, the people who exhibit these qualities are not an elitist set, a small spiritual aristocracy remote from common Christians. On the contrary, all eight of these qualities are to characterize every believer. They are Christ's specifications for what every Christian ought to be. Just as the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit which Paul lists is to ripen every Christian character, so the eight beatitudes of which Christ speaks describe our Lord's ideal for every citizen of God's kingdom.

Finally, a comment on the promises attached to each beatitude. Each one opens with the word, "Blessed." It is important to understand what that means. The term can and does mean "happy." Many commentators have explained the beatitudes as Jesus' prescription for human happiness. It is true that living like this will ultimately satisfy us. After all, no one knows better than our Creator how to become truly human. He made us, and knows how we work.

However, we need to be careful to not take this word "happy" to mean the subjective feeling of happiness we usually refer to when we use that word. Here, Jesus is not merely declaring how people feel, he is making an objective statement about what God thinks of them. To be blessed is to be approved of God. Blessedness is not simply a nice wish from God. It is a pronouncement of what we actually are, and that is, approved! It is because of God's approval that Christians are blessed. And just as the eight qualities belong to every Christian, the eight blessings do as well. These are the privileges that come with being a citizen of God's kingdom.

The first of the beatitudes is found in verse 3:

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

Eugene Peterson has rendered this beatitude this way: "You're blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and his rule." One translation puts it: "Blessed are the desperate." This beatitude has to do with our attitude toward ourselves. This is where it all begins. A Christian is a person who has declared spiritual bankruptcy, one who understands that spiritually, his need is not partial, but total.

That is why we must recognize that the Christian life

is not just difficult, it is impossible. It is a supernatural life. Christians are people who in their spirit feel needy—and are willing to admit it. The opposite of poor in spirit is self sufficiency—that indispensable characteristic of our society. So when a person becomes a Christian, he comes to the place where he recognizes that he is totally inadequate. As the hymn writer put it, “Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to Thy Cross I cling.”

The word translated “poor” merely means to be dependent. It is used in the same way that we use the word “dependent” when we fill out our income tax forms to refer to those who are supported by us. So the man who is poor in spirit is one who is dependent on someone else. He sees that he needs to rely and believe in someone other than himself. That “someone,” of course, is the King. The one who is poor has submitted himself to the lordship of Jesus Christ and is content to be dependent on God. It is foolish to believe that we are independent men and women. It doesn’t take much, either physically or financially, to bring us down. It is folly for us to say, “I don’t need anybody but myself.” But that’s what we do.

A while back I came across an article entitled the “The Art of Being a Big Shot,” by Howard Butts. This man writes:

It is my pride that makes me independent of God. It is appealing to me to feel that I am the master of my fate, that I run my own life, call my own shots, and go it alone. But that feeling is my basic dishonesty. I can’t go it alone. I have to get help from other people. I can’t ultimately rely on myself. I am dependent on God for my very next breath. It is dishonest of me to pretend that I am anything but a man, small, weak, and limited. So living independent of God is self-delusion. It is not just a matter of pride being an unfortunate little trait and humility being an attractive little virtue. It is my inner psychological integrity that is at stake. When I am conceited, I am lying to myself about what I am. I am pretending to be God and not man. My pride is the idolatrous worship of myself, the national religion of hell.

So the mark of people who are in the kingdom of God is that they are dependent on Another. They have placed their faith in Jesus Christ as Lord instead of believing in themselves or some other resource.

And the result is that they have everything. That is the strange paradox of Christian living. When we give up everything, we have everything. Jesus says that when we are poor in spirit, if we recognize our poverty, then ours is the kingdom of heaven. We don’t have to wait for it. We have all the resources of God’s invisible realm. When we are weak, then we are strong. But as long as we think of ourselves as strong and competent and able, then we are truly weak. We have set aside the mighty resources of God and replaced them with our puny, ineffective humanity.

So that is where Jesus starts. The first step to joy is a plea for help, an acknowledgment of moral destitution, an admission of inward paucity. Those who taste God’s presence have declared spiritual bankruptcy and are aware of their spiritual crisis. Their cupboards are bare. Their pockets are empty. Their options have run out. They have long since stopped demanding justice; they are pleading for mercy.

That is why we see in the Scripture God’s partiality to the poor and the disadvantaged. It is not that God is stuck with the poor; he chooses them.

Why would God single out the poor for special attention over any other group? A writer named Monika Hellwig lists the following advantages to being poor:

1. The poor know they are in urgent need of redemption.
2. The poor know not only their dependence on God and on powerful people but also their interdependence with one another.
3. The poor rest their security not on things but on people.
4. The poor have no exaggerated sense of their importance and no exaggerated need of privacy.
5. The poor expect little from competition and much from cooperation.
6. The poor can distinguish between necessities and luxuries.
7. The poor can wait, because they have acquired a kind of dogged patience born of acknowledged dependence.
8. The fears of the poor are more realistic and less exaggerated, because they already know that one can survive great suffering and want.
9. When the poor have the gospel preached to them, it sounds like good news and not like a threat or a scolding.
10. The poor can respond to the call of the gospel with a certain abandonment and uncomplicated totality because they have so little to lose and are ready for anything.

Convicting stuff, isn’t it? Do we rest our security on things, not on people? Do we have an exaggerated sense of our importance and an exaggerated need for privacy? Can we distinguish between necessities and luxuries? Does the gospel sound like good news to us, not a scolding?

Look at the kind of people who impress Jesus: a widow who places her last two cents in the offering; a dishonest tax collector so riddled with anxiety that he climbs a tree to get a better view of Jesus; a woman with a string of five unhappy marriages; a blind beggar, an adulteress, a man with leprosy. Strength, good looks, connections and a competitive instinct may bring success in our world, but those very qualities may block us from entering the kingdom of heaven.

Most of us are ordinary people. In the eyes of the world we are unimportant, insignificant and unnecessary. Few of us have clout. We're neither superstars nor super saints. But therein lies our strength! Paul put it this way: "When I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Cor 12:10).

The apostle learned that in Damascus. He arrived in that city, thinking he was God's gift to his generation. He felt perfectly suited to evangelize the Jews. He was: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless (Phil 3). Paul was an Israelite indeed. He was the little engine that could!

So he tackled the things that couldn't be done, only to find that he couldn't do them! Instead of a revival, he precipitated a riot. The Christians in Damascus had to put him in a foul and stinking fish basket, lower him over the wall of the city and send him away, pleading with him not to return lest he undo all that God was doing.

What an embarrassment! It was the worst day of Paul's life—and the best! That was the day he learned that he was, as he later put it, "nobody." In time he became somebody. He tells us the process: "But we have this treasure (deity) in earthen vessels (humanity) to show us that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us" (2 Cor 4:7). Deity in humanity. God in a jar. Paul carried about in his body the presence and the essence of God. So can we!

But it comes down to this: Every natural virtue, every endearing quality, every proclivity toward good comes from God. Without him we can do nothing. We must

not only accept our limits, we must love them! They are God's gift to us. It is the way we are. Nothing in us is a source of hope. Nothing in us is worth defending. Nothing in us is special and worth admiring.

I can say that the most profitable spiritual experiences in my life have come out of times of profound spiritual poverty. These were the times when God brought me face to face with my need in my marriage and in my ministry, times when I was left with no doubt that there was nothing in me to commend me to God. But, as we discover here in Jesus' words, times such as these can mark the beginning of life. The moment of our greatest shame can become the moment of our greatest glory. The moment of our deepest spiritual poverty can be the moment when we see clearer than ever before.

At that point we are faced with a choice. We can despair, and end it all, or we can open ourselves up to the wonderful grace of God. He loves you the way you are. He loves the wretch that you are so much that he gave his life for you. He allows us to fall not to shame us, but to assure us that though we are guilty, vile and helpless, we are deeply loved by him. It is his love in the face of our wickedness that awakens us to humility and contrition.

The psalmist says that God never despises a broken and contrite heart. At the moment of our exposure and brokenness we can drive our shame under ground, or we can be touched at our deepest level by God's amazing grace. Let him bring it to the light, and let him touch you and heal you. Today might be the day when you see yourself like others have seen you for a long time. I had to come to that realization myself. I had been fooling myself, but not others. I wouldn't let them tell me. To such, and only such, the kingdom of heaven is given.

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

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