

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT & THOSE WHO MOURN

Week #1 of a 4-Week Series on the Beatitudes: "Attitudes of Being"

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So these three old ladies are sitting around playing bridge, bragging about their sons. And the first lady says, "My Freddy: Everybody should be so lucky to have a son like my Freddy. Once a week he brings me a bouquet of flowers. He's constantly taking me out to nice restaurants. And if I even hint that I need or want something, the next day it's on my doorstep. That's how much my Freddy loves me."

And then so the next lady says, "Well, that's very nice about your Freddy. But with all due respect, when I think about my Sammy and how he takes care of me, it just doesn't compare! Every morning when I wake up, he greets me with bacon and eggs and freshly brewed coffee. Every lunch he comes over and cooks me a gourmet lunch. And four nights a week, he brings me to his house for supper and truly treats me like a queen."

And the third lady says, "Well, I don't want to make either of you feel bad or anything, but wait 'til you hear about my Harry. Twice a week, he pays someone \$200 an hour to just lay there on their couch and talk to them. And even at those prices, all he wants to talk about is me!"

[Congregation and Rev. Maraj laugh] Alright.

So this morning, we are going to talk about a passage of Scripture that is well known, but I don't believe is well understood. And it is Jesus' teaching in the Book of Matthew called "The Beatitudes," which are the first eight statements that begin Jesus' famous Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes are really considered to be a summary of Jesus' entire spiritual teachings, but upon reading it the first time, it can feel a little bit confusing and hard to get, just like that lady in the joke. [Congregation laughs]

And they all begin like this:

"Blessed are the poor in the spirit ..."

"Blessed are those who mourn ..."

"Blessed are those who are meek ..."

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst ..."

"Blessed are those who are persecuted ..."

And so, to me -- I don't know about you, but -- "blessed" and any of those things don't seem to connect together. Not one of them seems fun, and not one of them appear on the "Top 100" list of my happy scale. It just doesn't happen. If it is to be blessed to mourn; to be persecuted; to be meek and poor in spirit, I'd rather not be blessed that much, thank you! [Congregation laughs]

So how many would agree that, in some way, when you have read and studied the Beatitudes that it's not always easy and clear to understand? Anybody agree with that? Okay; cool.

And one of the main reasons is that the New Testament was written in Greek, which was considered the learned language. But Jesus' language was Aramaic. So the translation of certain idioms and terminologies just literally got lost in translation. Neal Douglas Klotz -- in his book, *Prayers of the Cosmos* -- says this:

"The tragedy of Bible translation has been that expression meant to resonate on many levels have been whittled down to holy gross in their nature, and restricted ... creating a division and a separation from God, Nature and Humanity."

And one of the reasons that we lose so much wisdom and insight and understanding is that, in both native Middle Eastern and Hebraic mysticism, sacred scriptures were looked at three different levels -- at least three different points of view: the intellectual; the metaphorical; and the mystical.

And so the intellectual would be at face value or literal. But with Aramaic, it was kind of tough, because words had several different meaning. Like, you know how you'd say something like, "I left my keys on the left side of the table." Like, it's the same word, but it means something different. The word "heaven" could mean light/illumination; and it could be mean sound radiating and resonating through all creation. And expansive is another idea and perspective on it. So it isn't clear, but it kind of widens our understanding and perspective of its meaning. So that's the first one: intellectual.

So the example I'll use is the third Beatitude: *"Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the Earth."* And the intellectual one would be: *"Blessed are the gentle"* or *"Blessed are those who soften their inner rigidity."* That they shall inherit the Earth, which means earthiness or, like, the natural abundance that is in nature and life. And so those who are gentle and not rigid will inherit more of the natural abundance in life.

The second one -- metaphorical -- goes a little deeper. And so to go deeper with that, we would ask ourselves a question: Where in my life am I rigid? Where in my life am I being so rigid that it's depriving myself of the natural abundance of life? Where is our society that we are denying ourselves some of the natural abundance of life?

And then the third point -- if you would go even deeper -- and say: How do the words 'rigid' and 'soft' impact how we live? How do 'rigid' and 'soft' impact our relationships? How does the concept of 'rigid' and 'soft' affect our own level of happiness?

One of the things about these different points of view: They don't contradict or exclude any of the other ones. They actually help make it fuller and broader and at a deeper level of understanding.

Another thing that Klotz says is that Aramaic doesn't have just black-and-white, concrete definitions. The inner and outer can sometimes have the same impact. Like the kingdom of God is within you and outside of you. That your neighbor is outside of you and within you. That yourself is in you and outside of you. There's a holistic approach to the mind, soul and spirit that has an integrity and a connection that actually can take us to deeper levels of understanding. But there must be contemplation; there must be reflection; assimilation; and expression.

So today we begin a four-week series on these eight Beatitudes to see what wisdom and insights they have for us. The word "Beatitudes" actually means "the blessedness of life." And they're talking about mental states -- mindsets and attitudes. That when we attain a certain attitude and mindset, there will be a blessedness -- an unexpected blessedness and a deeper blessedness -- of life than we realize.

So the first one is: **BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT.**

You know, there's this Zen master and everybody used to go to him for insights and understanding and wisdom. And one day, this guy -- who was accustomed to having his way; very powerful guy accustomed to commanding and being obeyed -- came to him and said, *"Hey, I want you to teach me about spirituality, and I want you to help me gain enlightenment."*

And the Master smiled and said, *"Let's sit down and have some tea."* And so he started pouring the guy some tea. And he filled the cup, but he kept pouring and it overflowed beyond the saucer to the table. And it got on his shoe.

And the guy got angry and he said, *"Enough! You're spilling it all over the place! Can't you see that it's full?"*

And then the Zen Master said, *"Yes, and you are just like this cup. You are so full that there's nothing I could do to add to you. Come back when your cup is empty. Come back with an empty mind."*

And what this is saying is that, if we want higher levels of wisdom and understanding, and to live life on a higher plane than we're living, we need to actually empty ourselves of the things that we know -- of the things that we're attached to -- to open a space to allow more wisdom and more insights into our lives.

To be poor in spirit means to empty yourself of pride; to empty yourself of the need to be in control; empty yourself of the need to always be right; to empty yourself of resistance; empty yourself of things that we are attached and still holding on to ... so that we can create a space to be filled with Divine intelligence; to be filled with the peace that surpasses all human understanding; to be filled with wisdom and inspiration.

When we are poor in spirit -- when we lessen all the stuff that we hold on to -- the fullness of Spirit can rise above. And we can realize that that energy and Spirit is in us and all around us and available to us, and the Source of every aspect of our life, including every breath that we take.

And so we can live from that place, but we've got to be teachable. We need to be open. We need to be trusting. There's a great story in the Old Testament about the rich, young man. So this guy's rich; he's young. He wants to become a disciple; he wants to live a spiritually-centered life. Jesus says, *"Well, go and sell all your stuff and come with me."* And he was like, *"Sell my stuff?!?"* [Congregation laughs] And so his answer was, *"No,"* and he walked away.

And the fact is: Sometimes there are things we hold on to that aren't exactly material possessions. They could be, if we're possessed by them; if we think that is the thing -- the only thing -- that brings us happiness. But it's any old baggage that we're holding on to, or any limiting ideas or ideas of personal unworthiness. When we hold on to those things, they actually stop us from living as full a life as we want to live.

And the key to this whole idea of being poor in spirit is asking ourselves the question: What am I holding on to that I need to let go? What is it that I believe about myself that I'm just stuck in? What is some old dream or old idea that I still have so much attachment and energy to? And am I willing to let it go? And how much of it am I willing to let go ... to the point where we can get to a place of total surrender?

Surrender sounds scary, but it sounds like we're giving up. Surrender sounds like we're just throwing in the towel, and everything will fall apart. But the truth is: What surrender is on a spiritual level is letting go of all the things that worry and concern and stress us. To open ourselves. To not give up but to give way to some greater wisdom and guidance and intelligence. To lead our lives in a healthier and greater way than we are actually doing.

You know what's a great example of this whole idea to be poor in spirit? It's actually the two first steps in AA, which are: to first admit that I am powerless over alcohol. That's to be poor in spirit: to say, *"I can't do it anymore. I need to let go of all my trying."* And then the second one is to believe that there's a Power greater than myself who can restore me to sanity, which is how to experience the kingdom of heaven.

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

As we let go of all those things, we open ourselves to the fullness of God's presence. But again, we need to be willing to let go.

So I ask you: What are you holding on to in your life that you know it's time to let go? Where in your life is it time for you to be more "poor in spirit"? Not fighting or forcing, but letting it go to allow yourself to be lifted to a higher place?

Jesus said it in these words. He says:

"It is not I, but the Father within, that does the work."

So it's about letting your human self let go so that your spiritual self can come forth.

In the Book of Zachariah, it says:

"Not by might; not by power; but by my Spirit," says the Lord."

I love that song: "When Will I Ever Learn to Live in God?" The point is that, at some point -- as it says in the Bible, "Every knee shall bend" ... At some point, we're going to realize the way we've been playing life -- even though it looks like it's given us some success -- will never be able to give us the depth of fulfillment at a soul level unless we are poor in spirit to open ourselves to be filled with a greater awareness of God's presence. We'll never get to that next level. And that's where we all want: We want a higher level of fulfillment and peace and meaning and connection with God.

And then it says, "For theirs is the kingdom of heaven." For theirs is the potential within to expand: to experience the fullness and the goodness and the allness of God.

And so here's what an Aramaic translation of this Beatitude would be:

"Happy and aligned with the One are those who find their home in breathing. To them belongs the inner kingdom and queendom of heaven."

And so the two lines: "Heaven" could be the light and the fullness of God is what we can achieve. But I love that idea to "find your home in breathing." To find your home in breathing! Everyone just take a deep breath. [Breathes deeply]

The interesting thing about that: Every time I have ever said it or heard people say, "Take a deep breath," I always take a deep breath. [Breathes deeply] And I always feel better! You ever find that? Take another deep breath. [Breathes in and out deeply]

Do you know how powerful breathing is ... other than keeping us alive? [Congregation laughs] Here's the three things it does. The number one thing that breathing can do is: It can help us relax. Everyone take a deep breath [breathes in deeply] and just relax your body. Let it be fully supported by your chair. Take another deep breath [breathes in and out deeply] and just relax. One of the most important things we can do is to learn how to let go and just relax.

Second thing the breath does: It brings us to this present moment. Not the past or the future. So breathe now, but feel the air as it comes in through your nose ... Breathe [breathes in deeply], feeling the air come in. Breathe [breathes out deeply], feeling the air as it exits. Again, just feel the air; concentrate on the air. [Breathes deeply in and out] Concentrate on the air as it leaves. One more time: [breathes in deeply] feel the air as it comes in; [breathes out deeply] feel the air as it leaves.

And I bet every one of us is more present to this moment than we were before. What did we do? We just breathed!

And then the last one is to breathe and realize that breath -- which comes from the word "spiritus" -- that the animating force in us is our breath that is in us and the air that is all round us. And just breathing and realizing that we are filled with the Spirit of God. That helps us become poor in spirit and open ourselves to the kingdom of heaven.

But to be poor in spirit, you have to be willing to surrender. You have to be willing to let go. You have to be willing to stop forcing things in life, and just open yourself to the fullness and the wisdom and the goodness of God.

The second Beatitude is **BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN**, for they shall be comforted.

How many people have ever been hurt or grieving or sad or down or depressed and pretended that you were fine? Anybody ever do that? How many people ever chose to stuff your emotions and not deal with them or face them? Anybody ever do that? How many people have ever been in denial about some problem or situation you had? I think some people are in denial about being in denial ... [Congregation laughs] But that's okay. [Laughs]

Notice Jesus did not say, "*Blessed are those who hide their pain ... Blessed are those who deny their grief ... Blessed are those who resist feeling their own emotions ...*" This is a very, very powerful, powerful Beatitude. Because it is saying don't stuff your feelings, your emotions. Face it; feel it; and process it.

"*Blessed are they that mourn*" means blessed are those who are willing to feel; willing to process; willing to allow themselves to be honest about where they feel hurt or wounded or betrayed or whatever it is. That it is an important thing not to bury it ... for they will be comforted. That it is in the feeling and the willingness to face; to deal; to process that you will be comforted. That there will be healing; there will be better days.

This is a very hopeful and powerful Beatitude! It reminds me of the line when Jesus said:

"In this life there will be trials and tribulations, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world."

There are heartaches and losses and difficulties and mistakes that happen in life all the time. And we have to feel those feelings. Jesus wept! Jesus got angry and disappointed and was grieved!

Somebody once said that we're spiritual beings having a human experience. I heard somebody once say we're spiritual beings trying to avoid a human experience! [Congregation laughs] Especially all the not-so-good stuff!

But a part of the journey is dealing with the loss; dealing with the hurt; dealing with those things. That's how we become healthier. That's how we experience more of the kingdom. That's how we experience more joy and happiness and fulfillment.

Eckhart Tolle says that every one of us has what he calls a "pain body." We all have stuff in life that we just brushed aside -- didn't deal with. We kind of buried it or swept it under the rug, and some of that is still unresolved in ourselves. And that stuff is yearning -- our souls are yearning -- to be liberated from that pain. But we have to be willing to do the work.

When it says that we have to "*walk through the valley of the shadow of death,*" we have to walk through it! Not around it; not run away from it; and not dwell in it. But there's a healthy level of mourning; of grieving; of processing; of healing that we need to engage in.

I love the words in that story with Joseph, when he said ... His brothers threw him in a pit and he said, "*Man means it for evil, but God means it for good.*"

And remember when the disciples said, "*Why has this man been born blind? Is it something he did or his parents?*" And Jesus said, "*No; this is done so the glory of God could be made manifest in his life.*"

And the point I'm trying to make is: Whatever we're mourning from has some good in it that's going to bring us some blessing. Something in it is there to help heal us; to teach us; to expand us to experience greater joy; greater hope; greater faith.

Here are a couple of Aramaic translations of this Beatitude:

"Healed are those who weep for their frustrated desire, for they shall see the face of fulfillment in a new form."

I love that! When you grieve something's that passed, you will find something better in a new form. And another Aramaic thing:

"Tuned into the Source are those who feel deeply confused by life; they shall return from their wandering."

So if you're feeling lost, that's what this is saying: If you keep on the path, you'll find yourself! You'll discover new and greater things. But you've got to walk the walk! You've got to go through the process!

I love this, because it is the Beatitude of hope! A Beatitude of healing! A Beatitude of faith that everything's going to be alright. But you've got to be willing to walk; you've got to be willing to feel; you've got to be willing to process and move through it.

A lot of people didn't know, but there were two other Beatitudes that didn't make the cut. And I found them; I'm going to share them with you. The first one is, *"Blessed are the flexible, for they shall not be bent out of shape."* [Congregation laughs] I'm so surprised that one didn't make it; that's a great one! [Congregation laughs]

Another one that didn't make it: *"Blessed are the cracked, for they shall let in the light."* [Congregation laughs] That's a good one. Should have made it!

So in our culture, we praise success and work and ambition, and there's nothing wrong with it. But what this Beatitude ... And if we did, the Beatitudes would be written like this:

"Blessed are the strong, ambitious and hard working."

"Blessed are the driven and focused and aggressive."

"Blessed are those who take charge."

And that's good; I'm not putting that down. But it can only take you so far. See, what the Beatitudes are doing -- and it scares us! Because it's calling us to a place that's uncomfortable and unfamiliar, because it's asking us to be more vulnerable.

If you really want to have a deeper experience of life and God and fulfillment and love and joy, you have to be willing to be vulnerable. You have to be willing to soften. You have to be willing to be more open. You have to be willing to mourn and to feel and to process. And you've got to be willing to surrender. These are not easy things for us! They're counter-intuitive to what we define as success. And not putting that other stuff down; that's important. But this is important, too. And it is even more profound. But we have to be willing to walk that road of vulnerability: to feel; to be honest; to share; and to process.

The Beatitudes really encourage us to learn. And this is going to be our work this week is: To develop an attitude of being poor in spirit: of letting go; of surrendering; of not forcing so you can be aware that the kingdom of heaven is right here. Connect with your breathing to remind you of that truth. And then: Are you willing to mourn? Are you willing to face what you need to face? Feel what you need to feel? And process so you can be healed and transformed and lifted to a fuller and higher experience of life?

When we do, we will truly experience the blessedness of the Beatitudes.

God bless you all!