

## “Words of Jesus ... Beatitudes I”

Prayer: *Spirit of the living God, you are the caretaker of our souls. We have been waiting and searching, experiencing a desert in our souls. Clear away the dead growth of the past; break up the hard clods of custom and routine; cultivate and water and tend our hearts. Fill us with the seeds of your word until new life buds and flowers within us. Amen.*

Back fifty years ago a Psychiatrist, James Tucker Fisher, closed his book *Few Buttons Missing* with this “revealing” discovery. He wrote: “I dreamed of writing a handbook that would be simple, practical, easy to understand and easy to follow. It would tell people how to live - what thoughts and attitudes and philosophies to cultivate and what pitfalls to avoid, in seeking mental health. I attended every symposium possible and took notes on the wise words of teachers and my colleagues who were leaders in the field. ... And then quite by accident, I discovered that such a work had already been completed. ... If you were to take the sum total of all the authoritative articles ever written by the most qualified of psychologists and psychiatrists on the subject of mental hygiene - if you were to combine them and refine them and cleave out the excess verbiage ... you would have an awkward and incomplete summation of the Sermon on the Mount. And it would suffer immeasurably through a comparison.” (See *A Few Buttons Missing: The Case Book of a Psychiatrist*, Page 273)

Today, we begin a five-part sermon series on the Beatitudes which are the opening and prelude to the Sermon on the Mount.

Let’s begin with understanding the setting for these historic words. The gospel writer Matthew presents this sermon sequence at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus. There is significance to the physical setting of the sermon.

Jesus is sitting and the disciples are approaching him, as a king sits listening to the needs of his subjects. With Jesus on “a mount,” Matthew has indicated that this is an important scene and “These are the **Words of Jesus** ... the Messiah from God.” Jesus of Nazareth is not just another prophet and he is like a king on a throne with his subjects hearing his inaugural address.

So, what are the Beatitudes? Some would suggest these few verses are awe inspiring grace while others suggest they are meant to be unspoken commands. There is also genuine confusion over the Greek work that gets translated as beatitude or what we read today as “blessed”. The most common translation has each saying beginning with the word “Blessed”, although we all know some version begin with the word “Happy.”

Another factor that we will explore in future weeks is that the Gospel of Luke (chapter 6) has another version and what is called the “Sermon on the Plain.” Jesus taught many different times and in many different settings. His proclamation themes were repetitive and consistent depending on the audience at hand.

James Howell has written: “How intriguing is it to consider that Jesus uttered Beatitudes in many villages, in several synagogues, and probably one on one with some Gentile on the road, with Peter, with John, with his mother?” (See *The Beatitudes Today*, page 14)

We need to ask, what was Jesus trying to say? These eight beatitudes are not some packaged deal to make the demands of the Good News easy. These phrases are poetic and yet pithy and concise. Every word is not explained, leaving room for the listener to struggle and find that inner logic and meaning. So, we in our own way need to thrash out the significance and purpose of these **Words of Jesus** for our lives.

Frederick Buechner has written the following that I find to be a helpful introduction to these teachings of Jesus. “Whom did Jesus single out for special commendation? Not the spiritual giants but ‘the poor in spirit’ as he called them, the ones who spiritually speaking have absolutely nothing to give and absolutely everything to receive ... like the Prodigal telling his father ‘I am not worthy to be called thy son’ only to discover for the first time all he had in having a father.” (See *Whistling in the Dark, An ABC Theologized*, page 18)

This morning we look at the first Beatitude: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” (Mat. 5:3) Who are “the poor in spirit” here in our world?

I find my thoughts drifting quickly to the three stories I heard from members this week about children who are going through serious health concerns. Loved ones offer prayers on their behalf ... and in so many ways reach out and try to provide supportive strength. I think also about a number of our members who have shared the deeply pained stories of losing a child to death ... or to the interminable separation of war. Today, at this very hour 365 days ago the tragedy in Tucson had just happened and we are remembering six people who died and the others who were wounded.

There are feelings of guilt, feelings of deep doubt, feelings of being alone ... all expressions of being “poor in spirit.” And to these the **Word of Jesus** comes to bring peace and comfort. There is an acknowledgement that the person passing through the pains of life is never alone, never outside the comforting presence of God.

This is Jesus, at the beginning of his ministry, saying there is a new image of God .... a God who comes to the poor in spirit and the meek. That is a near-revolutionary image for God and so very different from that of the generations before Jesus. God had been a God of the wealthy and successful and humans who were rewarded for their faithful devotion to the law.

These **Words of Jesus**, are saying the poor in spirit, who are not ashamed to admit that without God they can do nothing, are already living in the presence of God. They already tried pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, they failed at being masters of their fate. With all their resources dried up and nothing left to keep themselves going, they have nowhere else to go but God. These **Words of Jesus** are telling that God is already waiting to bless and empower them as never before. “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*”

The Beatitudes are not rules to be kept, but attitudes to be nurtured and lived out as God gives us the grace to go and do likewise. Take time this week to re-read on these blessings coming down from God that give us grace to be faithful and Christ-like. The beatitudes are not goals to be met or laws to be kept. No, instead the beatitudes empower the poor in spirit, the hungry and thirsty, and the meek, to come near and turn the darkness into the light and sorrow into joy.

The Beatitudes ... these **Words of Jesus** ... are the Gospel, the Good News of God’s grace changing everything, turning the world upside down so it will finally be right side up.

May God bless us with this grace so we can see God's Kingdom come and His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Pastors have learned that on Sunday mornings we will meet people who are doing great and have had an awesome week enjoying retirement. We also know there are some whose life has been falling apart. Desperate to find support, peace, and a listening ear, these persons find their way to church. Sometimes the tears begin to flow and I hear a story about all that has happened ... a daughter with cancer, a best friend who had just died, an 18 year old pet who has been that lap friend every night, or finally a new diagnosis from the doctor.

In those moments there is a person who is poor in spirit.

Dear friends in the Faith Church family, these ***Words of Jesus*** are suggesting that pain and suffering are entry points to blessings. That seems to be the message in the ***Words of Jesus: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."***

These are the ***Words*** for our lives ... today and every day.

Psalm 15; Matthew 5:1-12