

## Matthew 4:23-5:12

<sup>23</sup> Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. <sup>24</sup> News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. <sup>25</sup> Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis,<sup>[a]</sup> Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

**5** Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, <sup>2</sup> and he began to teach them.

He said:

<sup>3</sup> “Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup> Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.

<sup>8</sup> Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup> Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup> Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup> “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

### ***The Blessed Poor in Spirit***

Trinity CRC, August 1, 2021 AM

Beatitudes Series #1

**Matthew 4:23-5:12 (5:3)**

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Friends in Christ,

For the past few months that I've been studying, I've been thinking a lot about my walk with Christ. I've been reflecting on the life of a Christian in our world today, wondering specifically about what discipleship means for us in the wealthy western world and particularly for me. Is the Lord calling me to live differently, preach differently? I've been walking with the Lord my whole life. I've been a pastor for

almost 28 years. But I'm asking myself and invite you to ask yourself, "Am I walking with Christ as I should?" This picks up on what Pastor Hilary preached about last Sunday—the cost of discipleship.

I started my study leave reading Genesis. I think about how Abraham gave up everything—left his family and home country—to follow the call of God and to trust God's promise to make him the father of all believers. That was not easy. That was the cost of discipleship. I've been reading through Matthew and studying it as well as watching *The Chosen* on Netflix. I marvel at the disciples in the prime of life who left their fishing boats, tax collectors booth, and other job security and family to follow Jesus and learn from him. They slowly but surely began to understand the cost of discipleship. And it is believed from historical records that nearly everyone of those 12 disciples died a martyr. They paid the ultimate price for discipleship. Reflecting on the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, I consider the vision of the elderly Apostle John on the Island of Patmos. He's banished from people—on a first century Alcatraz—only because he loves Jesus and preaches the gospel. He sends words from Jesus to the seven churches of Asia Minor, warning them about the dangers of immorality and compromise. John writes about the cost of following Jesus—what discipleship can look like at times.

Author Lee Camp wrote a book entitled *Mere Discipleship* which opens with his experience of living in Rwanda. Many of us, I think, will recall what has been called the Rwandan Genocide of the 1990s. The civil war there killed 800,000 men, women and children in 100 days. What we might not know is that prior to that war, Rwanda was considered the most Christian country in Africa. About 90% of the country claimed to be affiliated with a Christian church. But when ethnic tensions arose, people identified as either Hutu or Tutsi. Their faith in Jesus didn't seem to inform their thinking about how to treat their neighbours and enemies.

That Rwandan war highlights a problem that is all too common among Christians of all places and nations. Russian author Leo Tolstoy over a hundred years ago put it like this: "Today, as in the past, there is no way to tell from a person's life, from his deeds, whether or not he is a believer." Ouch! If that's true of Christians, we have a serious problem with discipleship.

So we turn to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to hear afresh from our Lord as he teaches us about discipleship. What does it mean to follow Jesus? Is there a cost? What is it? We'll start that today and work through each of the beatitudes, those "blessed are you..." statements of our Lord.

## **Kingdom Life is About Jesus**

For starters, congregation, we need to hear in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus is calling us to life in the kingdom of God or the kingdom of heaven. Most of us are citizens of Canada on the physical plain, but **we are**—first of all—citizens of heaven. Jesus says in the first beatitude, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" That identity must shape our life, but that can be tough!

It's easy to point to the example of Rwanda. But how are we guilty of missing the mark of kingdom citizenship? Is our life always shaped by the desire voiced in the Lord's Prayer which asks God to bring his kingdom to bear on earth as it is in heaven? I wonder how good I am at living that way. What about you? How hard is it to live a distinctively Jesus-centered, kingdom of God focused life?

Lee Camp tells about his hometown and the hometown of country music, Nashville. He mentions how the Nashville area has over 1000 places of Christian worship, plus it is home to denominational boards and institutions, including Christian book publishers and the contemporary Christian music industry. By those measurements, you would expect that Nashville might be a very Christian city. However, he laments, "Beer drinking, wife cheating, flag waving and 'Amazing Grace' appear almost as one; so subtly are the country-and-western culture and Jesus woven into the same fabric..." (21). In giving that example, Camp is saying that Christians in our part of the world all too easily mix worldly practices with a good Christian hymn and call it all good and pleasing to God. We just sprinkle some faith talk or a song like *Amazing Grace* on top of our self-approved lifestyle that comes more from following our culture than from following Jesus.

Do we do that in Edmonton too? I suspect we do it more than we realize. It's tough being counter-cultural, living in what some call the upside down kingdom of God.

Look at our Lord. Jesus didn't go with the safe life of the Pharisees where you keep anything unclean far away. He didn't take the road of least resistance that the dominate culture suggested. Instead, he embraced unclean folks and called his followers to do the same. He opposed injustice and sought to do the will of God in every detail of his life.

Remember, then, we have been given the power of the resurrected Lord Jesus. We have the Holy Spirit of God living in us. The point of the counter-cultural kingdom of God is that our life should revolve around Jesus. Yes, we believe in him. That's where it starts. He has saved us from our sins, fully and freely. Then we are invited live for him in gratitude for all he's done for us. We seek to do his will and seek first **his** kingdom and not our own. This is not a **main course** of our world with **a side** of Jesus. Not an icecream cone of worldliness with some Jesus sprinkles on top. As John the Baptist put it, *Jesus must increase and we must decrease. He must become greater and I must become less.* The life of the kingdom of heaven is blessed because it revolved around Jesus, doing his will in our world, which is often unpopular.

So as we turn our attention to the Beatitudes—these "Blessed are you" statements of Jesus—I hope you'll see Jesus more and the counter-cultural life he's calling us to as his kingdom disciples today.

Now, in our first beatitude, Jesus teaches us that the kingdom-focused life starts with recognizing ourselves for who we are. In turn, that includes recognizing Jesus for who he is.

## Poor in spirit

Jesus says we are blessed if we are poor in spirit. Now, if that's not counter-cultural, I don't know what is. Poor in spirit sounds so weak. Our culture is all about being strong. Being independent. Being at the top of your game. We're about aiming for the gold medal, to use some imagery from the Olympics which are happening in Tokyo right now. We don't usually exalt anything to do with being poor. In our 21<sup>st</sup> century western world ears, being poor just doesn't sound like the pathway to anything good. Silver and bronze is okay but we strive for the gold.

If you think about the Pharisees and religious teachers of Jesus' day, they were also about aiming for the gold medal. While the gold standard of the Pharisees sounds good, it's not. They assumed that people can reach God's gold standard of behaviour in our own strength. We are able to live up to the standards of God's law. Even surpass them. Hence these people made up 613 laws that they had built as a fence beyond the law of God, as if to doubly ensure that they would not break any of God's commandments. This, they believed, would make them more worthy in the eyes of God than regular folks, more of a gold-standard people. But in the process, these religious leaders built up pride and arrogance in themselves. They looked down on people who—in the Pharisees' minds—were obviously sinners. Meanwhile they failed to see their own inner sin of pride.

They remind me of Mary Ellen. There's this hilarious scene in the 2015 movie "A Walk in the Woods" with Robert Redford and Nick Nolte. These two 70-something men, Bryson and Katz, are not at all physically fit. But they decide to walk the approximately 3000 km Appalachian Trail, starting in Georgia and heading toward Maine.

A few days into it, a young single hiker comes up on them and starts to tell them all the things they are doing wrong. I couldn't find a usable clip but here's a picture and I'll try to relay the story.



Mary Ellen is so full of herself it's funny. She greets the two old guys while they are sitting by the fire for supper. She asks, "What are you guys eating? Then looks at their plates and says, "Noodles! Big mistake. Noodles have got, like, no energy in them. I mean, like, zero." Then she goes on to criticize everything else: "Is that your tent?" she asks. When Bryson says, "Ya", she responds, "Wow! Big mistake. They must have seen you coming at the camping store. How much did you pay for it?" He says, "I don't remember." And her response is, "Too much! That's how much! Beside you should have gotten a three-season tent, my friend. Pardon me for saying so but it's seriously doomed to come out (here) in March without a three-season tent." The two guys try to tell her it is three-season tent but she's not believing them.

By the next scene, Bryson and Katz are so sick of her self-talk that they start plotting a way to ditch her. She blabbers on and on with them, "Usually I just walk alone because everyone else I know is boring. I'm the only person I know who doesn't bore myself to death. Also, if I walk with someone else, I have to watch them make mistake after mistake after mistake after mistake and I'd go crazy and then I'd not be sane on the trail. So I'm like, 'Mary Ellen! Who's the only person you know that doesn't mess up?' And I'm like 'Me!'"

This girl is so full of herself which makes her critical of everyone else. It's funny to watch. But the arrogance and pride just ooze out. This is the opposite of what Jesus calls the poor in spirit.

A poor in spirit person is not full of themselves. A poor in spirit person knows we are not good enough on our own. We are not able to meet God's gold medal standard. From the moment we get up to the end of the day, we need God's grace. We need him to help us face the day with the right spirit. We need him to help us overcome our pride. And we also need him to overcome our self-hatred and sorrow for our failures. In short, we need him to give us the right view of ourselves. Not too haughty because we think we're better than everyone else, like the Pharisees and Mary Ellen did. But also not so self-loathing that we fail to recognize and live into the power of Jesus to overcome our weaknesses or to let them shine with his grace.

The word used for poor in spirit borrows from the word for people who are in poverty. It's a beggar on the street who begs for just enough to survive each day.

I've never seen beggars here like I saw in Bangkok when we lived there for a few months. The most desperate person I remember seeing was a man laying on the dirty sidewalk, half naked and with no limbs. He was literally helpless. Someone put him there and would have to pick him up. There was also a sweet elderly couple we often gave money to. They sat on the pedestrian bridge by our condo. They were both blind and could play musical instruments. They would play and have a can for money by their feet. They appeared desperate.

In terms of spiritual poverty, we need to recognize in this beatitude that Jesus is the one and the only one who delivers us from the bondage and blindness of sin. We are spiritually bankrupt and we know it. We know it and are willing to admit it. Those who are poor in spirit realize we need God's grace every single day. We live in dependence on Jesus each day. The poor in spirit understand that we can't love God and our neighbour without God's grace.

My friends, the best thing that can happen to you is that you realize you're poor. If you've never felt weak and helpless, if you've never recognized your failures, then you don't realize how much you need God's grace. Knowing our weaknesses and failures keeps us humble. It keeps us on our knees. It helps us remember that we need Jesus every single day. I think it was author and Bible teacher Steve Brown who said, "Our need is the best gift God ever gave us. Our need is the best gift God ever gave us." Our self-righteousness like that of the

proud and arrogant Pharisees listening to Jesus preach the Sermon on the Mount is dangerous.

Therefore, those who are poor in spirit are marked by the kingdom characteristics of repentance and prayer. Telling God we're not strong in ourselves and asking him to help us.

### **True Happiness—Blessedness**

Church, Jesus wants us to understand in this first beatitude that true happiness is truly found only in dependence on him. Reliance on him. And that's not some kind of sick desire for us to rely on him so that he can feel good about himself. Of course not. No, Jesus offers his grace to us because our sin makes us unable to fully enjoy life as God intends. Through Jesus alone we are restored to God and have his recipe for true happiness.

In other words, dear friends, we won't find happiness without God. We won't find happiness in feeling superior to others. We won't find happiness in pursuing more things or more friends. Even 1000 friends on Facebook or 10,000 followers on Instagram won't satisfy our longing for happiness. More money and better vacations won't do it.

That's not to say that a good vacation, a healthy bank account, a loving family and good friends don't provide some sort of happiness. But it's not the happiness that Jesus is pointing us to in these beatitudes. Some Bible translations use the word happy in place of blessed. And that's okay and good, provided we understand that this is not the happiness we might think of first of all. It's not, "I'm so happy because I just got the new toy or phone or car that I've wanted for so long." It's not even the happiness of seeing your family doing well. In relation to family, it might better be characterized as seeing your family trusting the Lord and walking with him. That gets closer to what it means.

The blessing or happiness of this beatitude springs from humility. We recognize that we can't find happiness on our own. But it's ours through Jesus. So we depend on him.

Therefore, we don't look down on others because we're all the same. We all need grace from the Lord. And his grace makes us truly happy—blessed—because we realize that only in him are all of our needs fully met. We cannot find God's favour and his best life for us without Jesus. Without his help. And that help is given freely. That's grace.

Friends, being poor in spirit is not about self-loathing. It's simply about recognizing our great spiritual need. None of us can please God, attain heaven or the kingdom of God in our own strength. But when we humble ourselves and turn to God for all we need, we are poor in spirit and we inherit the kingdom of heaven, says Jesus.

Thanks be to God. Amen.