



THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT
Matthew 5:3
“Less of You - More of God.”

**“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope.
With less of you - there is more of God and his rule.”¹**

Today we look at a marvelous portion of God’s word known as the Sermon on the Mount. Today we look at one verse of the Sermon on the Mount and the first beatitude.

As we open **verses 1 & 2** we see that Jesus has taken his disciples to a more intimate setting for teaching and learning on the side of a mountain. While his audience is primarily for the disciples - he allows and even encourages the crowds to overhear the conversation.

One of the reasons that the Sermon on the Mount has endured for centuries is that the man and the message were one - a seamless robe so to speak. The evangelical scholar Carl F. Henry is absolutely right when he wrote **“Jesus clothes the beatitudes with his own life.”** This is why it is important for us to become more Christ-like and Christ-centered.

We learn from **Chapter 4:23** of Matthew’s gospel - that “Jesus came preaching the kingdom of God.” A kingdom has a king - one who is royal and rules over the territory. As Dr. William Barclay reminds us: **“No person can be a citizen of any country - unless they are willing to accept the laws of that country. Citizenship and compliance with the established laws of that country go hand-in-hand. In the same way no believers can be citizens of the kingdom of God until they yield and surrender to the laws of God.”²**

We have learned from the Bible that Jesus was most upset with the Pharisees and Scribes because faith became a mere external exhibition of their own righteousness - rather than the righteousness of God. The law became more of a focus - than the lawgiver.

They had clean hands - but crusty hearts. Jesus wanted faith to begin on the inside and then work its way out. Jesus wanted to build character first - then conduct - not the other way around.

It is no surprise that Jesus begins this ordination sermon of the disciples with what I like to call **“the Beautiful Attitudes.”** These eight characteristics of a mature disciple are necessary if Christ is to be ruler of who they were as a disciple of Jesus Christ - and a citizen of his kingdom. These traits are to be so deep inside of us - that they hold in all circumstances of life. They come from God’s presence living inside of us. Laws and rules can’t produce this kind of commitment - they can only be a reflection of it. The Beatitudes

come from a greater source and richer soil than human beings can design. The Beatitudes have the power to actually form us into the likeness of Christ - not just inform us about it.

However, the change and transformation Jesus was talking about was not an easy thing to do. Change is rarely welcomed. As Mark Twain once said **“The only people who like change are babies in diapers.”**

I like the story of a Jewish rabbi and a Roman Catholic cardinal who were sitting at the same table for an interfaith prayer breakfast. When the meal was served someone had mistakenly placed three slices of bacon on the Rabbi's plate. The Rabbi did not cause a stir - but simply ate those items his faith and religious tradition permitted him so to do. His friend - the Roman Catholic cardinal leaned over to the Rabbi and said “Rabbi - you need to lighten up a little bit! In the Old Testament your people were right not to eat pork - because there were no refrigerators or high-powered ovens. However - those days are gone - and there is no reason for you not to enjoy the taste of pork. Get rid of those antiquated traditions. Please Rabbi - **eat your first bite of bacon!**” The Rabbi smiled and said: “I will eat bacon and even a slice of ham - **when I am invited to your wedding reception.**”

It is no secret why Jesus begins with this first beatitude. The NIV translation declares: **Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God.** Jesus knew that until a person acknowledged their need of God he could not even begin the journey of faith he wanted the disciples and us to take. We take the important first step when we acknowledge our personal emptiness - our failure - our spiritual poverty - our brokenness - our bankruptcy - our dependence on and need of God. We must empty our lives - in order for God's rule to come into our lives. As St. Augustine said 1,600 years ago **“Our hearts are restless till they find their rest in Thee.”**

My favorite translation of verse three is found in Eugene H. Peterson's translation of the Bible, **THE MESSAGE** when he writes: **You are blessed - when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you - there is more of God and his rule.**³

Every year before the Super Bowl is played - many of the athletes and coaches in the sport of football gather for a prayer breakfast. A minister who was invited to this breakfast said “The breakfast was more inspiring and exciting than the game itself.” The speaker that year was Chris Carter, the All-American from Ohio State and the now retired All-Pro wide receiver of the Minnesota Vikings. Chris Carter came to the podium and said: “Every stage of my life, I've always been the ‘best’ football player. I've always been the ‘best’ wherever I went, whether it was in elementary school, junior high, high school, college, and even in the pros. But do you know what the turning point in my life was? It was when I was cut by the Philadelphia Eagles football team and Coach Buddy Ryan. Coach Ryan said ‘All you do is catch touchdowns.’”

“When Carter said the word ‘cut,’ his voice cracked and he got a little misty-eyed.

Suddenly, the breakfast ceased to be just a wonderful ‘media’ event where people went to get autographs of famous football stars. This became a ‘real’ event because every one in that room could relate to Chris Carter.”

“He went on to say: ‘For the first time in my life, I looked around and realized there was a team who didn’t want me. And I had to come face-to-face with an inventory of my life. I had to look around and ask the question, ‘What resources do I have to draw on?’ In that moment, for the first time in my life I **said, ‘God, I need help!’**”

“There was nothing magical. No bright lights. But in a very calm and real way, God reached out to me in the weeks and months after I’d prayed that prayer, and God found me at my point of despair. God found me when I was at the end of my rope. God found me when I was spiritually bankrupt. God found me, and restored my soul.”⁴

When Chris Carter allowed more of God into his life he learned that God’s rule liberates - man’s rule suffocates. He was born again as a child of God. The opposite of being poor in spirit is to be full of self. When you are only full of self - someday that check will bounce in the economy of life.

Now you can begin to sense the reversal of values Jesus was teaching and ushering into every day life. Everywhere they looked they saw the power and might of the Roman Empire and some Caesar. They saw the pedestal - and altar of power. What they had to learn like Chris Carter - is that a pedestal is a very slippery place. Self-made people and self-sufficiency is nothing but a fantasy world that will someday explode in your face - and you will be injured - not God.

Recently Bill Gates said: “In the economy of resources - religion is a poor use of time.” He said, “**I could be doing a lot more things on Sunday morning.**” Someday those words will come to haunt our billionaire friend.

Jesus said, “What profit is it to gain the whole world and lose one’s soul?” Remember the Bible also teaches “**Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.**”⁵

Let us remember in the church house to resist the pedestals of the world - and remember to kneel at the cross where the ground is level for us all. This is where our journey begins.

Since Bill Gates is good with numbers, let me remind of him this number: “**All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.**”⁶ All means exactly that. I hope his computer someday can be reprogrammed from Microsoft Word - to God’s marvelous strong word. This is the only program that will survive in the new millennium. The Beatitudes are the **software** needed to make the hard drive operate and fulfill its program and place us right in the midst of the greatest Internet ever!

I close with this story. A few years ago in a certain church a pastor noticed an ex-convict kneeling at the front of the church, and kneeling beside him was the very judge who, years before, had sentenced the criminal to prison.

Later, the judge and pastor were walking home together, and the judge asked, “Did you see who was kneeling beside me?”

“Yes,” replied the pastor, “but I didn’t know you noticed.”

The two men walked on in silence for a few moments; then the judge said, “What a miracle of grace!”

The pastor agreed, “Yes, what a marvelous miracle of grace!”

Then the judge said, “But to whom do you refer?”

The pastor replied, “Why, to the conversion of the convict.” He thought it was amazing that a criminal would repent and come to Jesus and change his ways.

But the judge said, “I was not referring to him. I was thinking of myself.”

“What do you mean?” the pastor asked.

The judge replied, “That criminal knew how much he needed Christ to save him from his sins. But look at me. I was taught from childhood to be a gentleman, to keep my word, to say my prayers, to go to church. I went through university and eventually became a judge. Pastor, nothing but the grace of God could have caused me to admit that I was a sinner on a level with that criminal. It took much more grace to forgive me for my pride and self-righteousness, to get me to admit that I was no better in the eyes of God than the convict whom I sent to prison.”⁷

Jesus was absolutely correct to begin the Beatitudes by saying **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**

Amen and amen.

Reverend Eric S. Ritz
November 11, 2007 Garden Spot Village Chapel – 10:15 a.m.
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ENDNOTES

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1. Eugene H. Peterson, **THE MESSAGE**, NavPress, 1993, page 15.
 2. William Barclay, **THE BEATITUDES AND THE LORD’S PRAYER FOR EVERYMAN**, Harper and Row Publications, 1968, page 28.
 3. Op.cit., No. 1. My slight variation of this verse.
 4. From an article in **“Guidepost Magazine.”**
 5. NIV., Proverbs 16:18.
 6. NIV., Romans 3:23.

7. Thanks to Rev. David Feddes, **BACK TO GOD HOUR**, sermon pamphlet, page
14. He credits an article by Steve Cole, in **WORLD MAGAZINE**.