

Session Three

The Foundational Beatitude: Poverty in Spirit (Matthew 5:3)

A. Introduction

1. Poverty in the spirit is the first and foundational Beatitude (Matt. 5:3). All the following seven Beatitudes build on this. Our journey in the Christian faith starts with this virtue / value.
2. Having this foundational fruit will determine how far we go in our walk with and our pursuit of God. We will keep returning to this foundational Beatitude because we will never “graduate” from realising our need for God and from asking for more of Him (John 10:10; 17:3).
3. There is an order, sequence and progression to the eight fruits of the Beatitudes as laid out in Matt. 5-7.
 - a. The eight Beatitudes start with poverty in the spirit, with the other fruits following and building upon it.
 - b. Without the foundational fruit of the Beatitude, we will not be able to cultivate the rest of the fruits – mourning, meekness, hunger and thirst for righteousness, mercy, purity in heart, peacemaking, enduring persecution.
4. *The Sermon on the Mount in Matt. 5-7* describes the process that allows the eight Beatitudes to come into fullness and maturity.
 - a. It is the most comprehensive statement on HOW we can cooperate with God’s grace to grow the Beatitudes. We need to understand God’s grace rightly in order to cooperate with Him, as it is all about His grace, how we respond, and how we appropriate it. There are six hindrances that will close the door (Matt. 5:21-48) and five disciplines that will open the door (Matt. 6:1-18) to growing the Beatitudes.
 - b. It is Jesus’ most excellent teaching on the grace of God.
 - i. The grace of God is now freely and instantly given to us because Jesus has accomplished everything for us on the cross. We are no longer sinners and stand perfectly righteous before God because of what Jesus alone has done, and there is nothing we can do to earn this grace. All the spiritual promises and blessings of God have also been given to us freely (Eph. 1:3). This is our legal position in Christ and is called “justification”.
 - ii. Jesus is now working progressively in us as we take up our cross in response to His grace. We have yet to experience the fullness of His grace and abundant life that He speaks of in John 10:10. This is our living

condition and the process of walking into this fullness in cooperation with God, by the power of His grace is called “sanctification” (Phil. 2:12).

- iii. The Sermon on the Mount teaches us how to increasingly align our living condition with our legal position in Christ, by responding to God’s grace in cooperation with Him. By cultivating the eight fruits of the Beatitudes, we live and walk in the grace of God towards fullness and maturity in Him.
- iv. We will begin to live in the reality of God’s grace and manifest the eight fruits of the Beatitudes as we respond by “doing” the five kingdom activities laid out in Matt. 5-7 (loving your enemies, doing good / charitable works, praying, fasting and giving financially).
- v. Doing the five Kingdom activities do not earn us the grace of God; rather, we posture ourselves to receive what God desires and has already decided to give us through carrying out these activities.
- vi. Poverty in the spirit is so vital as a realization of where we are and a recognition of our need for God will cause us to respond by posturing our heart and lives in accordance with His word, and by pressing in to receive from Him (Matt. 5-7; Prov, 2:1-5; 2 Chron. 7:14).
- vii. This is also why some believers experience more of God in their lives – they keep appropriating the work of the cross and cooperating with God’s grace.

B. Defining Poverty in the Spirit

- 1. The Beatitudes are eight virtues / core values of the Kingdom of God that come with blessings and promises.
 - a. They give us the biblical perspective of what makes us happy (or blessed). Happiness (or blessed-ness) is defined as being connected with God and having a spirit and heart that is alive and vibrant in God.
 - b. We are promised blessedness as we pursue and grow in the eight fruits of the Beatitudes.
- 2. Poverty in spirit is a virtue, and we are blessed when we possess this virtue. The promise that God has for cultivating this virtue is that we will inherit the Kingdom of God! (Matt. 5:3)
- 3. Being “poor in the spirit” means that we acknowledge our spiritual poverty before God (as we stand before Him) and apart from God (without God). It is an awareness of our spiritual lack, our great need for God and our present deficiency in God (ie. what we now have is so little compared to the fullness of what He has for us). This is different from being poor in the material sense. The natural progression as we pursue poverty in the spirit is:

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- a. Realization – we see our condition before God, that we have fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23) and that we need Him.
 - b. Recognition – we recognise our lack / deficiency in light of what God desires to give us. There is so much more that God has for us in our hearts, lives and ministries, yet we are experiencing so little.
 - c. Response – our response in light of realization and recognition can be found in the second Beatitude: spiritual mourning. The combination of these two Beatitudes – poverty in spirit and spiritual mourning – will empower us to progressively experience the rest of the Beatitudes.
4. We have NOT understood or acquired poverty in the spirit if the realization of our need for God and our lack doesn't give rise to a response or action.
 5. A true realization of our state - the huge gap between where we are and what we can have - will lead us to an intense and weighty response. It will not simply be a casual observation, but will lead us to spiritual mourning and a resolve to press into God for more. We will take needful action (e.g. fast, pray etc.) and posture ourselves to receive more of what has been made available to us.

C. Two Great Enemies of Poverty in the Spirit

1. The two great enemies of poverty in the spirit that will hinder us are spiritual pride and spiritual passivity.
 - a. Spiritual Pride
 - i. We do not recognize our lack in God spiritually or think that we are doing fine when we are in reality so far from the fullness of what God has in store for us.
 - ii. The cause of spiritual pride is often the measurement of our spiritual condition based on the wrong benchmark. Instead of using the Word of God to define the "richness" in our faith, we look at outward appearances and / or use what the world defines as "rich".
 - iii. This includes the size of our ministry, amount of money we have, how enthusiastic we are outwardly etc. It is this spiritual pride that caused Jesus to rebuke the Church of Sardis in Rev. 3:1-6, "... you have a name that is alive but you are dead."
 - b. Spiritual Passivity
 - i. We realize our lack in God spiritually - how low or superficial our spiritual experience is, but we are not taking any action in response to it.
2. Both spiritual pride and passivity will eventually lead us to lukewarmness. The primary issue with the Laodicean Church in Rev. 3:14-22 is not that they were rich, famous or influential, but that they believed they had enough of Jesus and were rich in the spirit due to their outward achievements.

3. We must be gripped by the reality that there is a huge gap between what we can know and experience in Christ, and where we are now. We will never have enough of Jesus and there is so much more we can experience in the grace of God!

D. How to Cultivate Poverty in the Spirit

1. We become poor in the spirit by understanding God's highest purpose for us in accordance with His Word.
2. There are three primary ways to cultivate poverty in the spirit:
 - a. See what Scripture says about how much God desires to do in us (in our lives) and through us (in our ministries), and compare that to where we are now. These promises include:
 - i. Fullness and abundant life (John 10:10)
 - ii. Victory over sin (Gal. 5:16)
 - iii. Moving in signs and wonders (John 14:12; Mark 16:17)
 - iv. Loving God with all our heart (Matt. 22:37-38)
 - v. Knowing God (1Cor. 2:9-10)
 - b. Read biographies of what God has done through others such as John G. Lake, John Wesley, Smith Wigglesworth, Brother Lawrence, as well as testimonies of transformation.
 - c. Receive teaching that strengthens our vision to live for the fullness of the Spirit and God (Jude 3).
3. As our understanding increases, we will be able to discern the gap between what God desires to give us and what we are currently experiencing. This reality needs to grip our hearts and awaken us so that we will mourn for more of God.
4. As we pursue this foundational fruit of the Beatitudes, we need to guard against lowering our expectations or settling for anything less than the fullness of God because of what others say. We need to guard against unbelief, skepticism, or false comfort, which threaten to rob us of this gift from God.

E. How to Sustain Poverty in the Spirit

1. Here are some keys to sustaining the cry in our hearts for more of God:
 - a. Don't be comforted by the externals in our quest for spiritual breakthroughs – do not let big crowds, growing popularity and influence, human enthusiasm and money give us a false sense of comfort and the impression that we are not in the need for more of God.
 - b. Don't be content with growth, answered prayers and breakthroughs – while we are to thank God for every breakthrough, we must not be content with where we are at, but keep pressing in for more and greater breakthroughs.
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There is so much more of God to lay hold of in our hearts and ministry experiences!

- c. Don't settle down – the greatest challenge for any church and ministry is to sustain a sense of poverty in the spirit. We often lose the sense of urgency to keep reaching out and pressing in for more after awhile and thus, most “settle down” after a few years.

F. Common Mistakes in Applying This Truth

1. Comparing the achievements, gifts and dedication of others with ours

God has given each one different gifts and ordained different journeys for us in our faith. Comparing ourselves with others will lead to us either feeling inferior, (which is different from poverty in the spirit), or becoming jealous of others. Instead of comparing, we should be zealous and press in for what God has for each of us as individuals.

2. Despising the smallness of our spiritual breakthroughs and impact in ministry (Zec. 4:10)

While we must not be contented with where we are, we should not despise our little breakthroughs and impact in ministry. We can enjoy and be thankful for them.

3. Equating the requirement to press in with earning the grace of God

When we press in for more of God, we must recognise that we are not earning God's grace or blessings through our dedication. There is no amount of dedication that is good enough to earn His grace, for it is freely given to us. Our pressing in for more of Him is about posturing our hearts to receive His grace. This confusion often leads to legalism, pride or condemnation:

- a. Legalism – when we think it is our dedication that earns God's grace and blessings
- b. Pride – when we think we are more dedicated than others
- c. Condemnation – when we begin to relate to God based on how dedicated we are in reading the Bible, praying, etc., we feel condemned and not good enough when we fall short in our dedication, as we believe that God will not accept us anymore. However, God doesn't accept us or love us more because we are more dedicated to Him. He accepts us and love us because of His grace and the finished work on the cross.

4. Relating with God based on our dedication and how much we reach for breakthrough

We must realize that all our dedication is weak and fragile. However, we must be confident that God knows, still enjoys us, and values our weak devotion and dedication. Also, we must not be content or settle with where we are but respond to God's love by growing to love Him more.

5. Measuring based on superficial outward appearances

Poverty in the spirit does not equate having to stay in small house, giving up travel and / or driving a car etc.. These are outward measurements that will lead us to legalism if we abide by them.

G. The Promise that Accompanies the Foundational Beatitude

1. *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.” (Matt. 5:3)* - The promise of this foundational Beatitude is in the present tense, in contrast to the subsequent six Beatitudes, which bear the promise of “they shall...” This means that we can receive the Kingdom of heaven now, while the other six promises are future-oriented. How much of the Kingdom of heaven we receive now is dependent on the depth of our poverty in the spirit.
2. While the focus and fullness of the subsequent six Beatitudes are in the future, we may also receive partial fulfilment now.

H. Conclusion

1. We respond in and express poverty of spirit as we pray, intercede and contend for the promises of God (Jude 3) individually and corporately.
2. We are often contented with the things of God and but not contented with worldly / material possessions. This should not be the case for us as children of God as we have been blessed with so much more, including eternal life (1Tim 6:6-12). God desires that we respond with intensity and urgency, contending and mourning for more of Him.