Week 2

THE BEATITUDES

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

This week, we begin looking at the Beatitudes. The word "Beatitude" is actually a rough translation of the Latin word "beatus", which means "blessed". The Beatitudes are a series of blessings given by Jesus. They are not instructions or commands, but rather declarations of truth. He speaks to some of the least desirable positions and calls them blessed. To the hearers of the day, it must have seemed to be a litany of enigmas. He begins the Sermon on the Mount by saying something to the effect of "If this undesirable position is where you find yourself, congratulations." It must have been baffling to the original audience. If we think about it and are honest, we might find ourselves just as confused by the declarations as we read them today.

As we attempt to grasp these mysteries, we see our need for kingdom eyes. The Lord spoke from a Kingdom perspective. The ways of the Kingdom are beyond our understanding, our nature, and our inclinations. Without the help of the Holy Spirit, we could never grasp the concepts much less desire the position required for each blessing. But, with the help of the Holy Spirit, we can engage with these declarations and see what riches the Lord holds for us within them.

As we enter into the process of unpacking the beatitudes, let us assume a posture of humility. May this not be a study for the mind, but a study for the heart… a searching and encouraging course… an honest evaluation of where we are and where God intends us to go. May we not just be well-studied, but deeply marked and changed by the teachings of Christ. May we respond by living a life that more intricately displays the mystery and wonder of the Kingdom of God.
This week, we will begin to look at the blessings. We will begin with the poor in spirit. Poverty of spirit is where it all begins. We realize that we come with nothing, have nothing to offer, nothing to give… and so we bow down and look up.

Day 1: To Be Blessed

PERSONAL INVENTORY

Describe what you think it means to be blessed.

CONSIDER

Last week, we spent time looking at the context. Studying the context hopefully prepared our hearts to begin looking at the actual Beatitudes. We prepared our dispositions as we looked at Christ and his authority. We prepared our ears as we prayed to be an audience that is ready to hear and do the will of God. We prepared our minds as we attempted to understand the setting as a picture of Divine revelation. We prepared our hearts as we recognized the grander story... a story of a set-apart people that is desperate for a savior. Finally, we prepared our anticipation as we took a first glance at the kingdom... what it is, what we can hope for, what we can long for...

Today, we will look at what it means to be "blessed." Before we start though, *look at Matthew 5 and read verses 1 & 2. Circle words that stand out and make notes in your margins* as a means of reviewing what the Lord showed you in last week's study.

Now Read Matthew 5:3. Circle the word "blessed."

The word "blessed" probably has good connotations for many of us... blessing seems to be very desirable, a sign of favor, pleasant circumstances, prosperity, happiness... all things wonderful. And in fact, a good portion of that description proves to be true of blessing, but perhaps not always in the ways that we would expect.

Most commentators and translators would say that the word "blessed" means "happy." In fact, many bible translations actually use the word "happy" instead of "blessed." This comes out of the truth that when one is blessed, they will be deeply happy. However, the reverse is not necessarily true.

Commentator D.A. Carson challenges that these words can be used interchangeably. Look at what he has to say about happy versus blessed, "some translate it as 'happy' but it is a poor exchange. Those who are blessed will generally be profoundly happy; but blessedness cannot be reduced to happiness" (16). He continues by explaining that to be blessed goes greatly beyond being happy. He says that, "To be 'blessed' means, fundamentally, to be approved, to find approval... there can be no higher 'blessing' than to be approved by God" (Carson 16). This type of blessing, however, can come at great cost to the one being blessed. This is where happiness and blessing deviate from one another.

Mere happiness can be conditional, fleeting, circumstantial, but true blessing is deep, unwavering, and eternal. Happiness will be a result of blessing, but cannot be expected to be the originator of it nor the precursor to it.

To see the drastic contrast of the concepts, **look at Ecclesiastes 7:1-5**.

List 3 phrases that might represent happiness

List 3 phrases that might represent blessing (Keep in mind that blessing doesn't always look the way you might expect.)

The Contradiction

As we further consider the concept of being blessed, we must recognize the faulty construct in which modern, Western Christians tend to operate with regard to their understanding of blessing. We tend to label pleasurable things as "blessings" and unpleasurable things as being void of blessing. The primary issue within this construct is that it misses the purpose and intended end result of anything unpleasurable.

Look at some of the other places in Scripture where the concept of being "blessed" is used. Make a note for each of what it looks like to be blessed.

Jeremiah 17:7

Psalm 40:4

Psalm 146:5

These verses are probably familiar in concept. They may also easily coexist, in our understanding, with an incomplete appreciation for the fullness of blessing. Though the concept is familiar, what might be overlooked, is the process by which these individuals arrived at being "blessed"...

The process by which the individual no longer places his "confidence" elsewhere, or has been let down by "the proud," or has been in a place of desperate need for "help" or "hope." What might be overlooked in these verses is the suffering that brings forth blessing.

The truth is that anything that drives us to Jesus is a blessing. The simple recognition of our need for him is a blessing.

These blessings, these Beatitudes, are for the broken. They are for those who know that their only hope is in Christ. They are for the sick, the weak, the despairing, the sinful, the lowly. Blessed are we if this is us. As we come to better understand these Beatitudes, we come to see that part of the blessing is whatever got us there.

The truth is that anything that drives us to Jesus is a blessing. The simple recognition of our need for him is a blessing.

Look at what R.T. Kendall says about the value of being broken, "in one stroke, strange as it might seem, Jesus invites all who are feeling helpless, hopeless, in despair, unworthy and totally empty to feel good about it. But why? That they may see the true value of their condition. They are blessed but may not know it" (24).

In our brokenness, we are offered hope, purpose, redemption, and abundant life. In our brokenness, we have the opportunity to experience blessing and the profound, unwavering happiness that comes from that place.

The nature of the blessings are worth noting. They are specific to each listed characteristic and offer different elements of blessing. Carson explains, "the kind of blessing is not arbitrary in any of these eight beatitudes. The thing promised in each case grows naturally (or rather, supernaturally) out of the character described" (17). There is relationship not only between the characteristic and the blessing, but also between each of the Beatitudes.

Most commentators agree that the Beatitudes can be viewed as a ladder of progression...that each naturally leads into the next...one blessing will beget another. The primary theme in each, and thereby all, is the position of dependence and brokenness. Kendall describes this essential point in the following way, "Brokenness is both the foundation and the superstructure. It is where you begin and it is where you end. The immediate consequence of brokenness is the Kingdom of heaven" (Kendall 27).

PERSONAL APPLICATION

What does the concept of blessing mean to you?

Which of your current circumstances might you have overlooked as blessings? Try to list at least 3.

1.

2.

3.

PRAYER

Prompt — James 1:12

Day 2: The Riches of the Poor

PERSONAL INVENTORY

What does it mean to be poor?

CONSIDER

On Day 1, we looked at what it means to be blessed. Today, we will look at the position of poverty through the lens of a biblical understanding of blessing.

Read Matthew 5:3

Blessed are the poor in spirit...

The phrase "poor in spirit" has two realms of interpretation. The first is in the very physical sense. To be lacking basic needs. D.A. Carson explains that this phrase would have been familiar to the Jewish audience as it was an expression used regularly in the Old Testament. He says that it "seems to have developed in the Old Testament times. God's people were often referred to as 'the poor' or 'the poor of the Lord', owing to their extreme economic distress. This distress often came about because of oppression" (17). Look at how Robert Guelich expands on that information and explains the result of that poverty and oppression.

"The 'poor' in Judaism referred to those in desperate need (socio-economic element) whose helplessness drove them to a dependent relationship with God (religious element) for the supplying of their need and vindication" (69). He describes the Israelites relationship with God as "Powerless and dependent" (Guelich 68).

Though clearly this beatitude is describing something much deeper than physical poverty, there is a very poignant illustration in the physical realm. Being physically poor, dependent, and oppressed positioned the Israelites to be in a consistent state of seeking God's help. Though it seems contradictory to say, there seems to be a certain blessing that the Israelites had in being a nation that was aware of its dependence on the Lord for every provision.

With that in mind, what might be some blessings of physical poverty?

Later in the book of Matthew Jesus will address physical wealth. Read Matthew 19:23. What does this verse teach?

This verse does not condemn physical wealth, but rather gives a warning. What might be the dangers of physical wealth?

This beatitude is not really addressing physical poverty, though. Jesus takes a familiar concept and elevates it to a spiritual realm. He took a phrase with which the people could relate, broadened their understanding and flipped their expectations. John Stott explains it in the following way, "Thus right at the beginning of His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contradicted all of the human judgments and all nationalistic expectations of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is given to the poor, not the rich; the feeble, not the mighty; to little children humble enough to accept it, not to soldiers who boast that they can obtain it by their own prowess. In our Lord's own day it was not the Pharisees who entered the kingdom, who thought they were rich, so rich in merit that they thanked God for their attainments; nor the Zealots who dreamed of establishing the kingdom by blood and sword; but publicans and prostitutes, the rejects of human society, who knew they were so poor they could offer nothing and achieve nothing. All they could do was to cry to God for mercy; and he heard their cry" (Stott 40).

This is true spiritual poverty. Open hands, dependent hearts, and desperate souls. It is a position of waiting, with humble hearts for the undeserved mercy and kindness of God.

Here we see the first blessing of brokenness. Kendall describes it in the following way, "brokenness is evident when you realize you have no bargaining power with God. You can do only one thing: ask for mercy. You can ask for mercy when you have nothing to give in exchange, you have nothing to offer... That is when you know your real need—mercy" (27).

It is coming to a place where you can, where you must, acknowledge that you cannot save yourself... that there is nothing that you can offer God in exchange for his mercy and compassion. Carson says it this way, "Poverty of spirit is the personal acknowledgment of spiritual bankruptcy. It is the conscious confession of unworth before God. As such, it is the deepest form of repentance" (18). Spiritual poverty must be our starting point in our relationship with God, yet arriving and staying in that position can be exceedingly difficult. As human beings, we battle the lie that tells us in one form or another that we don't truly need Jesus. We are deceived to think that either we are doing just fine on our own or that we can and should do something to contribute to our salvation. Often times, we can waffle between both. Pride is quiet, deceptive, and stands firmly in the way of living faithfully. It infiltrates and blinds us to our desperate need for grace through Jesus Christ. Pride plagues us before we are saved and continues to afflict us after we are saved.

D.A. Carson says, "I suspect that there is no pride more deadly than that which finds its roots in great learning, great external piety, or a showy defense of orthodoxy... pride based on genuine virtues has the greatest potential for self-deception; but our Lord will allow none of it" (Carson 18).

The road to the blessing that comes from spiritual poverty is the shattering of pride. It must be shattered before a person can be saved and it must be shattered everyday beyond that. Pride is the illusion of being spiritually rich... as if we have anything to offer. Pride suggests that we might actually bring something to the table that can aid in our salvation. Pride dismisses grace and devalues the cross. It cannot coexist with an awareness of spiritual poverty. If we are desiring the blessing of spiritual poverty, we must plead with the Lord to remove our pretenses and pride.

Read James 4:6. What does God say about the proud?

God desires relationship with his children. He doesn't want our deception blinding us towards his provision and goodness. The process of shattering our pride is not a process of self-loathing or demeaning, but of—with greater clarity—being able to see who we are and what God has done for us.

Look at Romans 3:10-20

Who is righteous enough on their own?

Who can be justified by their own works?

Now continue reading the next passage—Romans 3:21-26

Because we are unable to offer anything for salvation, how can we be justified?

PERSONAL APPLICATION

We all have a default pride-mode. For some, it might be the pride of thinking that our sin is too great for Christ to save us. For others, it might be that we think we are actually good enough on our own. The Apostle Paul had plenty of reason to believe his efforts were capable of saving him.

Read Philippians 3:4-7. What are Paul's possible merits? Why do they count for nothing?

What are your merits that you subconsciously count?

Read Philippians 3:8-14. How does Romans 3:10-26 help a person get to that type of position?

PRAYER

Prompt — Romans 3:23-24

Day 3: Pleading for Poverty

PERSONAL INVENTORY

What does spiritual poverty look like?

CONSIDER

Today the study will be brief and the majority of the day's concentration will be spent in the personal application section. We must recognize that the real awareness of our impoverished spirits, and thereby desperation for the Lord, must come from the work of the Holy Spirit. Because we must depend on the Lord himself working in our hearts, we will spend the majority of the time today prayerfully working through an Old Testament example of an awareness of poverty of spirit.

Before we do that, we must look at who God is so that we might see ourselves more accurately.

Read Exodus 34:6-7
What attributes of God are listed here?

Read Isaiah 6:1-7
How is God described here?

Look back at Matthew 5:48 from Day 4 of Week 1.
What is the character that you are called to have?

PERSONAL APPLICATION

It is imperative that we begin today's application in light of God's perfection. We remember that he is holy, righteous, compassionate, good, just, and faithful. And he has set us apart and called us to be the same way... to bear his image, to reflect his goodness.

When we are aware of God's perfection, we can more accurately see where we fail to live up to his perfect standards and where we fail to look to him and depend on him.

Psalm 51 is one of the most beautiful pictures of an awareness of spiritual poverty and brokenness. It is David's confession of sin and repentance after he committed adultery and had an innocent man killed. Here, he pleads for the Lord's mercy and forgiveness.

We will spend the rest of today working through a good portion of the chapter prayerfully—asking the Lord to be gracious in giving us a heart that mirrors the heart of the fallen King David. A heart fully aware of its depravity... a heart that begs for the mercy of God. A heart that is aware of our true reality and need for him.

1). Read Psalm 51:1—What does David ask for in the first line of the verse?

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2). What characteristic of the Lord is David depending on in the second half of the verse?

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3). What is he asking to be blotted out, or removed?

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4). Spend a few minutes asking the Lord to reveal a few of the places that you have recently fallen short of his perfect standard. Make a vague note of those places here:

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5). Read verse 2. What does David ask the Lord to do?

6). Read verse 3. Why do you think it's important to know your transgressions?

7). Ask the Lord to make you aware or mindful of anything that you might have dismissed or overlooked. Write down whatever he shows you.

8). Read verse 4. In light of this verse, what would perfect justice look like in your life?

9). Read verse 5. What is your natural state—even without the transgressions that come to mind?

10). Read verse 6. Where do you need God to deposit truth?

11). Read verse 7. What do you need God to do?

12). Read verse 8. What is the hope on the other side repentance?

13). Read verse 9. In your own words, what is David asking the Lord to do?

14). Read verse 10. What are the two things requested here?

15). What do you think a "right spirit" looks like in your own life?

16). Read verse 11. Though by grace he doesn't do it, why would God have the right to remove his Spirit from a sinner?

17). What puts a person in a frame of mind to ask for God's presence to stay even though it seems at the very least inappropriate and at the most, impossible?

18). Read verse 12. Why can you hope for joy and a changed heart?

19). Skip down to verse 16. What might we be inclined to do to make up for our sin?

20). Read verse 17. What, in fact, is what God receives? Describe the condition of the heart.

Now go back through the chapter in your own Bible. Circle words that get your attention and make notes in your margins. Ask God to do the impossible... to soften your heart, make you aware... make you desperate for him.

As you go back through the text, keep in mind the graciousness of the Lord. Not only did he "blot out" or cancel our iniquities, but he went so far beyond that in giving us Christ's perfect record of righteousness. His grace and mercy far surpass what we even know to ask for. Trust that the Lord can do the miraculous work of breaking your heart and richly restoring it.

PRAYER

Prompt — Psalm 51:1

Day 4: Then and Now

PERSONAL INVENTORY

How do you think it might be possible to experience the kingdom of heaven before actually going to heaven?

CONSIDER

As we approach the second half of the week, we are still left with the question of how we can be happy or blessed if we are spiritually poor?

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven…

The answer lies in our citizenship—the place where our hearts, souls, and minds begin to dwell upon the moment of salvation. If we truly know the poverty of our spirit and have come to a place of complete faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ and total dependence on him for our daily walk, then we are citizens of another kingdom. A spiritual kingdom. We have seen, felt, and known our spiritual poverty and we rejoice as we see how God has so richly provided not only salvation but also eternal glory in the kingdom of heaven.

As citizens of this heavenly kingdom, we are empowered to see the kingdom breaking through into the physical sphere. Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we have been granted an ability to have spiritual eyes, or eyes that can see the sovereign purposes and activity of God. Robert Guelich explains the phrase "kingdom of heaven" as a reference to the sovereign activity of God. He says the following, "It stands in continuity with the Old Testament concept of *heaven* as being God's realm where, enthroned, he rules over all the world. Therefore, *heaven* is another symbol for God in his sovereign activity" (Guelich 77).

We see this sovereign activity specifically in three realms. The first is in the person of Jesus Christ and in his very presence. The second realm is in the church, made up of true believers. The third realm is in the kingdom that is yet to come (Lloyd-Jones). Look at how Guelich explains the three realms, "On one hand, God's sovereign rule has arrived in this age in the person of his Son and is recognized by the community of 'understanding believers.' On the other hand, it has not yet arrived in all its visible power and glory as anticipated when the Son of Man appears at the end of this age" (78).

Today we will look at the first two realms—then and now. We will save the future realm for Day 5.

Then

Christ was and is the answer to spiritual poverty. When God took on flesh and came to earth, he offered the only hope for every spiritually impoverished soul. For those who followed Christ, not only were their deepest spiritual needs met, but they were able to see first-hand the presence of the kingdom. Those who followed had the opportunity to view the authority of the kingdom breaking through as Christ taught, healed, and interacted with the people. While Christ the Lord walked on earth, the power and dominion of God existed wherever he was physically present. Martin Lloyd-Jones explains it the following way, "Many times when he was here in the days of His flesh our Lord said that the kingdom of heaven was already present. Wherever He was present and exercising authority, the kingdom of heaven was there" (30).

Look at the following verses and explain how they demonstrate that the kingdom of heaven is present in the person of Jesus Christ (Guelich 78).

As God's sovereign rule from heaven in his Son, Jesus Messiah
Matthew 1:23

Matthew 11:27

In Jesus' ministry of healing the sick
Matthew 8:1-17

Matthew 11:2-5

In sharing the table with sinners
Matthew 9:10

Luke 5:30

In defeating Satan and the forces of evil

Matthew 8:28-34

Matthew 12:28

In Jesus' preaching/teaching

Matthew 7:28-29

Mark 6:2

In setting forth God's will as a righteousness that exceeds the demand of the Law

Matthew 5:21-22

Matthew 23:27-28

These are just a few examples of the many ways the Christ brought forth the kingdom in his person, with his presence.

NOW

Not only can we see the kingdom of heaven present in the person of Jesus Christ, we also can see the kingdom present today in the church of true believers. The people of God, together, seeking the Lord, glorifying the Lord, serving him and one another, loving each other, fighting for the good of one another, caring for the poor and vulnerable, being faithful in their homes... the people of God, the church, display the power and the presence of the kingdom of God.

Martin Lloyd-Jones explains this truth in the following way, "the kingdom of God is present at this moment in all who are true believers." He goes on to say that it "is only present in the Church in the hearts of true believers, in the hearts of those who have submitted to Christ and in whom and among whom He reigns" (31).

Look at the following two passages and explain how they display a picture of the kingdom through the church:

Ephesians 2:19-22

Ephesians 3:10-11

PERSONAL APPLICATION

Looking back through the examples of kingdom presence in the person of Christ, which seems most meaningful to you in this particular season? Which aspect of the kingdom are you particularly grateful he displayed? Why?

Where in the life of the church today can you personally see kingdom breakthrough?

What kingdom breakthrough do you pray to see more of in the church? (Keeping in mind that the church is the people of God—not an institution.) Pray for the church here:

PRAYER

Prompt — Matthew 6:10

Day 5: The Coming Kingdom

PERSONAL INVENTORY

What do you imagine heaven is like?

CONSIDER

The poor in spirit are not only blessed in the kingdom that is revealed in Christ and in the church. They will also be blessed in the coming kingdom. There is much to look forward to, much to hope in, much to long for. There is a day coming where we will see the fullness of God. It will be a day of rejoicing, rest, peace, gladness, justice, and righteousness.

A culmination and a beginning—all at once. Though we have seen the initiation of the kingdom as Christ came to earth and we have seen the continuation of the kingdom as the Church loves and serves God, there will be a day when see everything clearly, as it actually is, perfect and holy in the kingdom of heaven. Robert Guelich describes the process of this initiation, continuation, and consummation of the kingdom of heaven in the following way, "Therefore, present and future are not two separate realities but rather are continuous aspects of God's sovereign rule in history. The relationship between the present and the future are not two separate realities but rather are continuous aspects of God's sovereign rule in history. The relationship between the present and the future is the 'mystery of the Kingdom'" (Guelich 79).

Though there is a great deal that we do not know about this future kingdom, we have been given pictures in Scripture of what we can expect.

Look up the following passages and make a note of what you can deduce about the coming kingdom of heaven:

Revelation 11:15-16

Revelation 12:7-11

Revelation 19:6-8

Revelation 19:11-16

Revelation 20:11-12

Revelation 21:1-2

Revelation 21:22-27

Martin Lloyd-Jones describes the coming kingdom this way, “It will then have come, completely and entirely, and everything will be under His dominion and sway. Evil and Satan will be entirely removed; there will be ‘new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness’ (2 Pet. 3:13), and then the kingdom of heaven will have come in a material way. The spiritual and the material will become one in a sense, and all things will be subject to His sway, that ‘at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things in earth, and things under the earth; and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father’ (Phil. 2:10,11)” (32).

PERSONAL APPLICATION

What aspects of the coming kingdom do you most long for now? Why?

PRAYER

Prompt — Isaiah 45:23

WRAP UP THE WEEK

Re-write the first beatitude in your own words:

PREPARE TO DISCUSS

1) How does kingdom-mindedness affect the way you view blessing?

2) What does poverty of spirit look like for you personally—specifically in this season of your life?

3) Where do you currently see glimpses of the kingdom of heaven in the church?

4) What do you look forward to in the coming kingdom?

5) Share your re-written beatitude/create one together at the table