

The Park Road Pulpit

Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church

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Everything I Need

(Blessed are the Poor)

Psalm 23; Matthew 5.1-3

Russ Dean, July 2, 2006



As children, we visited with both sets of my grandparents only several times a year, because we lived in my early years in Virginia, which was an eight-hour drive away from each of their South Carolina homes. The up side of living such a distance “to Grandmother’s house we go...,” before car seats, “Game Boys”, and DVD players, was that when you finally had driven what is today’s rough equivalent in wear-and-tear on parents’ nerves to a round-trip journey on the Yukon Highway – everyone was really glad to be there! The benefit for grandchildren, not seen in perhaps as much as six months (which is long enough for an infant to learn to walk or a teenager to go through three entire personality changes!), is that Grandparents, already genetically predisposed to spending and spoiling, are now further weakened by the sympathy factor, for both their children and their precious Grands. In those days, when we visited Granny and Granddaddy Phillips, a trip to Roses Dime Store was the coolest thing going! We would drive the six miles from Joanna to the big city of Clinton and were given free-reign in a particular section of the store – we could pick any toy we wanted.

On one of these memorable trips after getting a particularly good sympathy pay-off, bedtime came too early. Kind persuasions were running thin when my grandmother stepped up the pressure just a bit. My sister and I were already into the bedtime routine, but my brother Phillip, whom we called Kevin at the time, was a bit more fastidious in his refusals to put down the toy. Grasping at straws, my grandmother warned, “Kevin, if

you don't come to bed now, I'm not going to buy you anything else." Completely nonplussed, a child with a new toy responded instantly, "That's OK with me. I've already got everything I want!"

"Everything I want," sounds like a pretty good advertisement for a consumer society, but it is far from what Jesus had in mind with his instructions for happiness, fulfillment, what he called "blessedness." We might get pretty close, though, if we change one of the words of my brother's declaration of satisfaction, and consider, carefully, what "Everything I Need" might mean to us, today.

Before we look specifically at today's beatitude, I want to reemphasize a word from Amy's introduction last week. What is the intent of Jesus' sermon? What does it mean to be *blessed*? We who live in such comfort and convenience will surely need numerous reminders as we hear Jesus' odd and uncomfortable words, beginning with one of the most difficult lines in all of scripture: *Blessed are the poor...* What kind of "blessedness" could this possibly be? John Bell has insight for us as he says,

Jesus was both more shrewd and more direct than David... and the other psalmists. He did not separate the weals and the woes (that is, the blessings and the curses of life) into two separate categories. In his manifesto for human blessedness, in his people's charter for spiritual fulfillment, it is not only evident that the road to holiness leads through the world of action. It is also clear that those who wish to know the deep joy and consolation of faith will be required to experience other less attractive depths. And this because Christian faith is holistic. It embraces the totality of life in all its robustness and fragility. Those who wish to know the bliss of shouting Hallelujah need also to know the yearning of those who cry 'How long?'"¹

Blessedness isn't a superficial happiness, for no one's life is just "happy." (Nor would it be truly "blessed" if it were.) Jesus' "blessedness" will have to mean more than this. So, again, if we are to understand Jesus we will have to think, carefully and deeply;

¹ John Bell, *States of BLISS & Yearning*, p. 15.

we will have to understand the scriptural use of metaphor, irony, hyperbole and paradox; and we will have to be open to know that Truth is always deeper than its literal words.

“*Blessed*” doesn’t really mean what it sounds like, on the surface – no one is “happy” to be poor, nor is anyone “blessed” because he is poor. If this is as deeply as we’re willing to listen, then we are destined not to understand – and, probably, not to know the fullness of Jesus’ beatitude prayer for us. As James Howell explains it:

...to be blessed isn’t catchy advice on how to go and be happy; rather, “blessed” is being swept up in God’s decisive movement in the world. “It’s about something that’s starting to happen, not about a general truth of life. It is *gospel*: good news, not good advice.”²

There is a strange paradox here, as Amy pointed out last week. The blessedness that Jesus encourages is not something we can seek to attain, to work toward, as if we could create a 12-step plan for achieving “blessedness.” Yet, if we do not find ourselves somewhere in the beatitudes, we can know with much certainty that we are not “doing” something right in life. To be blessed is, as simply as I can state it, to recognize the presence of God among us, within us (see Luke 17.22). We cannot work to attain this, for it is God who is doing all of the “work,” yet, we must move, be willing to move toward those experiences which resonate deeply within our souls, in which we can see and say: “God is here.”

So... *blessed are the poor*. To paraphrase: The spirit of God, the presence of God, is with “the poor.” What *poor*? The spiritually or the financially poor? And how *poor*? Didn’t Jesus say it is impossible for a rich man to get to heaven? (Matthew 19.23) And... *blessed, how*? Like Job, who lost his wealth, but whose fortunes were then restored? *Blessed* with a reward of *the kingdom of heaven* – is

² James Howell, *The Beatitudes for Today*, p.29-30.

Jesus just saying that people who are poor will get to heaven and then, but only then, all of their earthly poverty won't matter?

It is interesting, and we must note, that the shorter, perhaps older, version of the beatitudes says more simply, and more troublingly, "*Blessed are you poor*" (Luke 6.20). It sounds as though Matthew was trying to tidy up Luke's disturbing financial theology by "spiritualizing" his words (and don't we need for him to do so!) – "Oh, Jesus was really just saying, 'you who are poor in spirit!'" (As if this is easier?)

But, I do not believe the issue is money. As one wise pastor once said, in maturity beyond his years(!), "Money is just money. Nothing more, nothing less."³ But, paradoxically, even though Jesus was not laying blessedness at the feet of money – either for those who have or for those who have not – money is almost always part of the problem (for those who have, and for those who have not). Money is just a commodity ("something useful that can be turned to commercial or other advantage"). Money is only a means to some other, much more important end. But as most people treat money, both the "haves" and the "have-nots," money becomes the solution – our solution ("...if I just had more money!").

Used as such, money will always keep us from seeing who we really. How many scoundrels do you know who use their money as a façade for legitimacy? How many selfish people do you know whose money charades as generosity? How many insecure, pitifully weak people do you know, who hide behind their money, so they never have to face the real person, wounded, and weak, within?

³ This is from one of my own stewardship sermons!

Money is almost always part of the problem, because for the rich and the poor, money keeps people from seeing who God created them to be, who God blesses us as, in and of ourselves. And there can be no *poverty in spirit* for those who cannot be honest about whom we really are.

And the second problem with money is that, even more problematically, money obscures the reality of our needfulness. And this is the real issue. “If only I had money,” we think, rich and poor, then I could solve my own problems. Myself. Without you. Without God. And this is the heart of the issue. In keeping with Jesus’ thought, “*blessed are the poor*,” we could say, “and woe to the affluent – for your wealth is idolatry.” Needlessness has become our God.

Jesus did not say, “Blessed are the self-sufficient...” “Blessed are those who take care of themselves...” “Blessed are those who work hard, do well, prepare for the future...” Jesus did not say any of the things that our culture says are so important. These may be true and good – but they will not lead us to a life of blessedness. Jesus said, blessed are those who cannot take care of themselves, because only in such “poverty” will we ever let go, and fall back into the hands of God. To say “I need” is a bad word in an affluent society, but for Jesus, the reality, the recognition, the admission of “need” – for the rich and the poor – is the very beginning of our blessedness.

Blessed are the poor, or the *poor in spirit*, because when we are impoverished, we cannot deny our need. The financially impoverished cannot deny that they cannot provide, with the means at their own disposal, everything

necessary to make their life full and free, happy and blessed. And the spiritually impoverished (whether rich or poor) cannot deny the same thing – that that which is most needed, most necessary, most important to make life full and free, happy and blessed, cannot be bought with any amount of money.

The *Kingdom of Heaven*, is not the same thing as heaven. Jesus is not saying, as some have suggested, that the poor shouldn't worry about their poverty, nor is he saying the rich shouldn't bother helping the poor, because heaven will even everything out and make it all seem worthwhile. What Jesus is suggesting is much more difficult to preach than such “pie in the sky by and by.” Jesus taught his disciples to pray for the kingdom come “*on earth as it is in heaven*” (Matthew 6.10) – and if we are to be bold enough to pray for something, we must be willing to work for it, and we sure as (...heaven!), better believe in it! Blessedness is not just a promise for the next life. It is a reality in this life, for those who are “poor enough” to know they need it.

Jesus knew he needed it. To be blessed. To be in the presence of God. To be so intoxicated with God's life that his own life ceased to matter. So Jesus renounced the things of this world, the material comforts, the emotional protections, the personal securities – and the means for achieving these things. Jesus didn't need things, so he didn't need the money which could provide them... Jesus was confident in who he was, so he didn't need to “win friends and influence people” who could bolster his ego... Jesus didn't worry about the

future, so he didn't waste his life doing today what should be put off until tomorrow. Jesus was occupied with only one thing, and that is, learning to experience and share the *abundant life* (John 10.10) that God desires for us all. And that abundance, ironically, paradoxically, begins not in great wealth, but in great poverty.

Here is my one-sentence summary of the first beatitude: (*Blessed are*) The presence of God will be known (*the poor in spirit:*) to those who can acknowledge that everything they really need is still beyond their own ability to acquire; (*for theirs is the kingdom of God:*) for only such an honest life, leaning on one another and on God, is real life.

We usually pray for the needy. Our prayer today is that we may be so needy as to find God, even in this life.

May it be so!

Teach us O God, contrary to popular opinion,
That strength is not freedom from need
 but freedom to need honestly;
That affluence is not the lack of asking
 but the richness that comes in relationships
 honest and developed enough to *ask... and seek... and knock...* (Matthew 7.7)
That blessedness comes not in independence
But in the fullness of life, which Jesus taught us comes from
 leaning on one another
 and on you.

In the spirit of the Psalmist
Bless us to Need Everything,
 that in such poverty,
 we may want for nothing but you
 even today.

[sing] Lean on me, when you're not strong
I'll be your friend, I'll help you carry on
For, it won't be long, till I'm gonna need
Somebody to lean on.

Amen!