

The Sermon on the Mount. Blessed are the poor in spirit.
Matthew 5 v 1 – 12

The Sermon on the Mount has been described as Christian ‘counter-culture’. Christians are supposed to be radically different from other people and religions in the world and these teachings of the Lord Jesus describe how.

Many people have admired and quoted Jesus’ words over the years. You may remember President Bill Clinton visiting Belfast after the Good Friday Agreement and saying, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will inherit the earth”. Good day and good sentiment although technically it was a misquote of not one verse but two from tonight’s reading.

People admire these words and aspirations and sometimes say “If we all lived by the Sermon on the Mount the world would be a better place”. Undoubtedly it would but here’s the problem. As we read Matthew ch 5 – 7 carefully we discover the standards set here seem impossibly high. If the super-religious Pharisees and teachers of the law aren’t pleasing God what hope do the rest of us have? And going by the standard here, are not many of us murderers and adulterers before God? How realistic is it to “turn the other cheek” – are we meant to allow people to get away with violence and evil?

And so we might conclude that while Jesus’ Sermon is inspiring in its ideals, it’s just not practical, and perhaps return to the more common creed we often hear – “Just do your best – that’s all we can do!” But before we give up on something so wonderful which God has revealed let’s look at these words again and begin by putting them in their context.

First, let’s realise that this was not Jesus’ teaching for the masses. We have that in ch 4 v 17 where He preaches in the towns around Galilee,

“Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is near”. This evangelistic message was accompanied by dramatic signs and wonders. Many were delivered from demonic influence. Many were healed from various sicknesses, relieved of pain and comforted.

Those early months of Jesus’ ministry upon earth had been a time of proclamation to God’s traditional people, the nation of Israel. It was a message announcing that God’s Kingdom was coming. The long promised Saviour King was in fact here among them, delivering on the Old Testament promises of new life and wellbeing, inviting them to turn from sin and renew their citizenship with fresh devotion.

The Sermon on the Mount was for those who had welcomed and responded to this message and committed to follow Jesus out of the relative comfort and security of the towns and villages to this rough hillside. Crowds followed but the sermon begins with “His disciples came to Him and He began to teach *them*”. This sermon was for those hungry for God’s grace, those ready to be identified as ‘Messiah’s men’ and trained as His disciples. They were to be the loyal subjects of the Kingdom of God and in this ‘manifesto’ of sorts Jesus sets down the kind of people they are to be.

So while the challenges of this sermon remain let us be encouraged that this is not a set of impossibly high standards we have to reach by our own efforts before we can hope to be accepted by God. Rather these are instructions from the God Who has graciously come among us in the flesh to save and bless and release us, given to those who have already tasted his grace and forgiveness and are continuing to depend on His presence and power as we gladly follow in His way. Those who acknowledge we have sinned and could never make God’s grade on our own. Those who gladly and gratefully take refuge in His mercy and redeeming love. Those who, in joy and never-ceasing wonder, are learning to celebrate His generous blessing!

And this is borne out in the very first words of the Sermon on the Mount, the first of 8 “Beatitudes”. Jesus says to His followers: “Blessed are the poor in Spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven”.

God blesses and welcomes into His heavenly Kingdom those who realise their limitation and need and are willing to humbly depend on Him! Let me suggest two applications of this.

1. Fundamentally someone who is 'poor in spirit' is someone who knows they are lost and need to be saved.

Sometimes people who are in physical poverty show a more urgent faith in God, for God is all they have to hold on to. Like when the Israelites were slaves in Egypt. Or like the poor widow cooking her last meal who obeyed the prophet Elijah.

Sometimes a person could be in mortal danger like David, often surrounded by enemies as he cries out in the Psalms. In Ps 34 he celebrates God's saving help, saying, "This poor man called and the Lord heard him, He saved him out of all his troubles".

Someone may be in great need because of sickness, like the leper reduced to begging who cried out to Jesus, "If you are willing, you can make me clean".

Someone "poor in spirit" realises they are out of options, humanly speaking. Their situation is bleak, the cavalry aren't coming, there's nothing more the doctors can do. A bit like Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and Tax-collector who come to pray. No good telling God what a good boy you've been – better to bow your head in penitence and say, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner!" The dying thief on the next cross to Jesus had nothing to offer in his defence. He could only be poor in spirit, ask for grace, and he received it: "Today you will be with me in Paradise"!

Augustus Toplady died at 38 of tuberculosis, but not before he had penned the memorable words:

"Nothing in my hand I bring
Simply to Thy cross I cling

Naked, come to Thee for dress
Helpless, look to Thee for grace
Foul, I to the fountain fly
Wash me Saviour, or I die!”

The “poor in spirit” are those who know they are lost and need saved by Christ, the Saviour King God has sent. Those who are humble and willing to acknowledge their need and ask the Lord for mercy. Have *you* done so? Will you do so today?

2. For notice this secondly before we close. This is not to be just a prayer made once in the past but an ongoing attitude of humble trust.

The “poor in spirit” know they are ignorant of the ways of God and always have more to learn so they take time aside from the busy marketplace to join Jesus on the mountainside and listen to the words of God. “My soul is weary with sorrow” writes the Psalmist, “strengthen me according to Your word”. (119 v 28)

We attend church regularly to be taught in the ways of God from His Word. This Biblical education is ongoing and never ends this side of eternity.

So let us humble ourselves before our Lord and gratefully commit ourselves to study more of this Sermon on the Mount, with the prayer that we might know our Father’s blessing, and by His grace become more worthy subjects in His eternal Kingdom.

Amen