

2022.09.18 - The Blessed Battle - Receiving The Kingdom

So What? Spiritual poverty is the way of receiving God's Kingdom.

Feel What? Thoughtful

Now What? Take time this week to sit with God and allow your insecurities to surface. How can you offer those to him? How might you further embrace spiritual poverty?

VISION CASTING

The purpose of Tallgrass at The Well is to create community together by inviting everyone into the Way of Jesus.

INTRODUCTION

Hello and welcome. If I haven't met you yet, my name is Josh and I'm one of the pastors here. This week, we are beginning a new message series called The Blessed Battle where we'll be studying what are known as the Beatitudes. We thought it would be a good practice to read them together as a church community. My wife, Sarah who is also our outreach pastor, will read them for us this week.

Sarah: From the fifth chapter in the Gospel of Matthew:

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thank you, Sarah.

As we listened to the Beatitudes being read, it's clear how jarring they are when we consider how life is usually lived in this world. Mourning and being insulted means you're blessed? The meek inherit the earth? On what planet, right? This is just not how things are done. Jesus is setting up a collision between common values that are embraced by the vast majority of people, and this new way of living in his kingdom. And it's a collision still happening today, and one that we see happening in media, entertainment, in conversation, and even in our own selves.

We have used this image from Banksy as our graphic for the series because of its jarring nature. Banksy is a street artist, often using guerrilla painting tactics to get his message across. This piece is called "Love is in the Air," also known as "Flower Thrower," and it was created in Bethlehem as a protest to war. You might also recognize "Balloon Girl" or "Consumer Jesus." I don't know where Banksy is at spiritually, but he recognized that Jesus and his teachings are run counter to the values of the world but have also been co-opted, even by the church, for other agendas.

The way of Jesus' kingdom is at odds with so much of what we've embraced as normal, everyday living, which can lead to explaining away the teachings of Scripture or an outright rejection of Jesus himself.

John Stott, *The Cross Of Christ*: "Perhaps the most scornful rejection of the cross has come from the pen of the German philosopher and philologist, Friedrich Nietzsche (died 1900). Near the beginning of *The Anti-Christ* (1895) he defined the good as 'the will to power', the bad as 'all that proceeds from weakness', and happiness as 'the feeling that power increases... ', while 'what is more harmful than any vice' is 'active sympathy for the ill-constituted and weak—Christianity'. Admiring Darwin's emphasis on the survival of the fittest, he despised all forms of weakness, and in their place dreamt of the emergence of a 'superman' and a 'daring ruler race'. To him 'depravity' meant 'decadence', and nothing was more decadent than Christianity which 'has taken the side of everything weak, base, ill-constituted'. Being 'the religion of pity', it 'preserves what is ripe for destruction' and so 'thwarts the law of evolution' (pp.115–118). Nietzsche reserved his bitterest invective for 'the Christian conception of God' as 'God of the sick, God as spider, God as spirit', and for the Christian Messiah whom he dismissed contemptuously as 'God on the Cross'."

So, for Nietzsche, to show compassion for the weak was folly, which led him to rejecting Christianity altogether. We understand that decision as cut-and-dry, but there is also a

more subtle rejection that comes from reframing the requirements of Jesus. Speaking to the online news site Politico in 2018, Tony Perkins was asked to explain the overwhelming support American Evangelicals showed Donald Trump in the 2016 election.

Politico, 2018: “Evangelical Christians, says Perkins, ‘were tired of being kicked around by [the] leftists. And I think they are finally glad that there’s somebody on the playground that is willing to punch the bully.’ What happened to turning the other cheek? I ask. ‘You know, you only have two cheeks,’ Perkins says. ‘Look, Christianity is not all about being a welcome mat which people can just stomp their feet on.’”

This might not be jarring for you until we realize Tony Perkins is President of the Family Research Council, an Evangelical Christian think tank and political activist group. There is a line of thinking in the cultural wars that goes like this: Sure, being a Christian means believing in and following Jesus and that involves forgiveness, love, and being generous to strangers. But to get things done in this world means playing by its rules—which means fighting back and being ruthless when it’s for the greater good of getting our way.

But can you live an a Jesus-shaped life by operating from such divided loyalties? Can you follow Jesus and also operate from the world’s value system? Will Jesus really allow us to maintain a residence in his kingdom while we can act however we want because the ends of course justify the means? And I’m not talking simply about political theatre. What about being a good Christian on Sundays, but living however we want the rest of the week? What’s at stake when our online persona looks perfectly manicured but our lives are full of anger, hatred, and greed? What happens when our curb appeal is immaculate but, on the inside of our homes, our kids only know relational disconnection, raised voices, and a lack of love and nurture?

The good news is that Jesus has come to realign us to his value system. He came for the messy, the distressed, the discomfited. He came to give hope to people like you and me.

Transition: I think it’s helpful to begin with some context on Jesus’ teaching in the Sermon on the Mount.

SOLUTION

It’s interesting to note who was attracted to Jesus’ message, and we find this at the end of chapter 4 in Matthew:

Matthew 4:23-25, NIV: Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.

It wasn't the wealth and powerful who are named as the ones drawn to Jesus. It was the sick. The afflicted. Those in pain. Those cast aside. The marginalized. The forgotten. And they came streaming to him for help. Matthew continues in chapter 5, but remember who makes up the mass:

Matthew 5:1-2, NIV: Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.

Jesus sits as a rabbi, a master teacher, who has the rapt attention of the crowd. He's healed and helped them with extravagant compassion, and now he's going to unpack the motivation behind why he's doing what he's doing. And Matthew does something interesting here. He is summoning the imagery of Moses from the Old Testament. Right after God delivers them from their Egyptian bondage, Moses goes up on a mountain to receive the Law for the new nation of Israel. He delivers this teaching as a covenant between God and Israel. They are to live in the fullness of God's blessing as citizens of the nation by upholding the Law. Now, Jesus ascends to the mountain to give the kingdom directives to this crowd and teach them what living in God's kingdom that transcends borders. He's fulfilling the purpose of the Law that identified a specific people in a specific place by opening wide the invitation for anyone anywhere to enter into the kingdom through him. It's a new constitution for a new people to follow in the Way of Jesus. But more than a list of laws to abide by, it's the law of love that flows from the yielded hearts to the kingdom of God. What we will hear from Jesus over these next nine weeks will be the way in which inhabitants of God's kingdom shall orient themselves to participate as citizens. The kingdom of God should occupy the place of primary allegiance in our hearts, and should be demonstrated by how we follow these teachings of Jesus.

Stanley Hauerwas, *Matthew*: "When he called his society together Jesus gave its members a new way of life to live. He gave them a new way to deal with offenders—by forgiving them. He gave them a new way to deal with violence—by suffering.

He gave them a new way to deal with money—by sharing it. He gave them a new way to deal with problems of leadership—by drawing on the gift of every member, even the most humble. He gave them a new way to deal with a corrupt society—by building a new order, not smashing the old. He gave them a new pattern of relationship between man and woman, between parent and child, between master and slave, in which was made concrete a radical new vision of what it means to be a human person. He gave them a new attitude toward the state and toward the ‘enemy nation.’”

What comes next is how Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount, his most well-known teaching and the most famous Sermon that’s ever been preached. But before we dive in, I think it’s important to understand what Jesus expects from us as we hear his teaching. Those teachers and professors among us are familiar with one of the most-asked questions from students: *Will this be on the test?* In other words, do I need to know this and do anything with it? And, in a way, we ask the same question when we approach the Scripture: *What am I supposed to do with this information.* And Jesus answers that as he closes out the Sermon on the Mount:

Matthew 7:21-27, NIV: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’ Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.”

The teachings of Jesus are not to be just studied and learned. They are to be lived and practiced.

John Stott, *Sermon On The Mount*: “So Jesus confronts us with himself, sets before us the radical choice between obedience and disobedience, and calls us to an unconditional commitment of mind, will and life to his teaching.”

To be Christians—Christ followers—is to embrace who Jesus is and to emulate him as our example. No one will do any of it perfectly—that’s why we needed Jesus to come and make perfect what was broken—but there is an effort that has to be put forth to follow Jesus as he works in our lives. And there must be mid-course corrections and he shows us where we fall short and how we’re resisting the movement of the Spirit in our lives to make us more like Jesus. These corrections are called repentance and it’s where our lives are realigned according the values in the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount.

Mark Scandrette, *The Ninefold Path of Jesus*: “The Beatitudes name the illusions and false beliefs that have kept us chained and imprisoned. We’ve learned to live from a mentality of anxiety and greed, but what if this is a world of abundance? We’ve learned to live as if there is no option but despair, but what if solace and comfort are near? We’ve learned to live by striving, competing, and comparing, but what if we all have equal dignity and worth? The Beatitudes point us toward what is real and true. We are not helpless. We have the power to do good and seek justice. Mercy triumphs over judgment. We can stop hiding and pretending, and be honest. The Beatitudes invite us to a new way of life, into a path of recovery. Instead of dividing the world into us and them, we can learn to embrace each other as family. Instead of resisting pain, we can learn to be resilient and join the cosmic struggle between good and evil. Instead of living in fear, we can choose hope, courage, and radical love.”

With that, let’s look at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount with the first Beatitude:

Matthew 5:3, NIV: He said: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

As I said earlier, this statement is a contrast against what expected, setting up a collision with common experience and the upside-down nature of God’s kingdom. Let’s look at a few of these terms to get a better understanding. First, what is meant by “blessed?” It goes beyond the hashtag you use when your sipping a pumpkin spice latte and its sweater weather outside. “Blessed” is used in Scripture as a designation of someone experiencing supreme favor from God resulting in extravagant flourishing and fulfillment.

But how Jesus is using it is unusual because remember who is in the crowd. He ascribed God’s blessing on people who we would assume lack any blessings at all.

Scot McKnight, *Sermon On The Mount*: “Instead of blessing the one who pursues wisdom and reason and develops a reputation as a sage, and instead of blessing the one who has a good family, who observes the whole Torah, or the one who has all the right friends and develops a reputation as righteous or as a leader, Jesus blesses those whom no one else blessed. The genius of the Beatitudes emerges from this contrastive stance: they are a countercultural revelation of the people of the kingdom. If we add all this together, we get something like this: a ‘blessed’ person is someone who, because of a heart for God, is promised and enjoys God’s favor regardless of that person’s status or countercultural condition.”

Next, what does it mean to be “poor in spirit?” And it’s important that we get this one right because, as the first Beatitude, it forms a sort of foundation for the rest and the entire Sermon Jesus is preaching.

We can think of being poor in spirit as a similar concept to carrying ourselves with humility. But, really, humility is a byproduct of poverty in spirit being first working into our heart. Because being poor in spirit is a basic understanding that we are in lack as we stand before God and we have no ability to produce or maintain any kind of spiritual life and vitality on our own. It’s an acknowledgement that, even on our best day, we really have nothing to offer to God. This is a great slap in the face to our American way of life that prides itself on pulling ourselves up by the bootstraps and making a name for ourselves.

Poverty of spirit is a deep and visceral “no” to all the dreams, visions, and hopes of a good life that we can build for ourselves. For it knows that at the end of the age, when there is an account to be given to God, that we will come up short in every arena that does not have its roots in Jesus.

The opposite of poor in spirit would be the church community in Laodicea that we read about in Revelation 3. They are self-righteous and proud, so Jesus speaks to them and says:

Revelation 3:17-18, NIV: “You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.”

To be poor in spirit is to be convinced of our utter depravity. That with every intention to have the Midas touch, things that we're in contact with that doesn't flow from God will turn to stone.

But! There is a great joy—a great blessedness—in knowing that we don't have to be our own savior. That as deeply flawed as we are that we are extravagantly loved just the way we are. And this is the great tension we live in: **We are all a sad mess on our own, and we are drowning in oceans of God's love at the same time.**

Poverty of spirit should never lead to worm theology—that God barely tolerates us. We are humbled and happy because there is hope for us!

Finally, notice Jesus says, "theirs *is* the kingdom," not *shall be* the kingdom. Those who embrace their poverty of spirit are able to experience the kingdom now, not just in a future eternal state. The kingdom belongs to us right now and can be entered into right now. This means we can experience the blessedness of God's presence, we can have an alive and vibrant spirit, we can surrender our hearts with joy to God, and we can be a vehicle of hope to others.

Putting this all together, Jesus is saying this: **As you continually embrace your weakness and need for salvation, you'll see God's favor and participate in his expanding reign around you.**

Transition: This all hinges, then, on embracing our poverty of spirit. How do we do that?

APPLICATION

As we head toward the end, let me give you a couple practice points for Embracing Poverty of Spirit to experience God's Kingdom:

1. Understand God's purpose for your life

I believe that when we see what God has called us to, there is passion that erupts from within us. Understanding what God will do through a willing and yielded heart becomes fuel that causes us to burn hotter and brighter. Get inspired: read biographies, listen to podcasts, go to a conference, ask people around you how they've experienced God in their lives.

2. Let go of offense

Offense and unforgiveness plug the flow of God's grace. When we look at what others have and become frustrated that God hasn't done the same for us, we grow resentful and mistrusting of God. We must understand that everyone's call is unique and that God owes nothing to no one—that is why it's called grace.

3. Be grateful but never content

Many of us were passionate in our faith when we were younger. But, over time, that wore off. Sometimes, well meaning people told us that we would “grow up” and that “life would happen.” And we settled for dullness of heart, not hungering for God's Word, or listening for his voice as the normal way to practice our faith. Following Jesus is an adventure! And if you're bored with God, it's not because God is boring. Keep pressing into God!

4. Purge your life of sin

John Owen said, “Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you.” Dramatic, but correct. Sin will stifle your spiritual growth and vitality. It will steal your joy. Most importantly, it breaks your connection with God's Spirit. What others may explain away as permissible, your goal is run in the opposite direction, because that's direction of deeper connection with God.

5. Practice awareness

Mark Scandrette, *The Ninefold Path of Jesus*: “Where in your life do you feel like you don't have enough or are not enough? When we become aware of what we lack, our first instinct is to grab and grasp, holding on to whatever we believe will make us feel safe and secure. What makes you feel anxious and closed handed?”

This kind of awareness will reveal your anxiety so you can bring it to Jesus. Spiritual poverty is about surrendering these grasps for comfort and power so they can be transformed by him. Our weaknesses, when surrendered, can be turned into some of our greatest strengths.

“We tend to worry about: (1) money, job, and finances; (2) physical and mental health; (3) relationships and the well-being of those we love; (4) esteem, identity, and significance; and (5) anticipating future difficulties, pain, and uncertainty.”

INSPIRATION

What if our church became the kind of place where we made room for each other's weaknesses? What if we normalized confession to each other about the rough patches of life? And places where we don't feel adequate? What if we had room in our lives for doubters and skeptics? Those requiring extra grace and patience?

Transition: Here's one step you could take as a practice to embrace your own spiritual poverty.

CONCLUSION

This Week's Practice:

- Take time this week to sit with God and allow your insecurities to surface. How can you offer those to him? How might you further embrace spiritual poverty?

Prayer

Invitation