



Westminster
Presbyterian Church
NACOGDOCHES, TEXAS

Kingdom Living: The Poor in Spirit

Matthew 5:1-3

It seems these days when I open a box that contains a new technological wonder it comes with a Quick Start Guide that tells me how to...well, get started. Then it has a book of detailed instruction in print so fine as to need a magnifying glass to read. Well, I want the simple instructions. I want to start using my new technological wonder, so I turn to the Quick Start Guide. Today, I am beginning a series of sermons on the Christian Quick Start Guide or what is traditionally called the Sermon on the Mount, and for the next eight weeks, I will be preaching on the Beatitudes, which are the opening words to our Lord's sermon.

One of my goals in this series of sermons is for us, as a congregation, to memorize the Beatitudes. I don't know - maybe you already have them set to memory, but if you have not, I challenge all of us to memorize them. I know that the older we get the more difficult it is to memorize anything, but we have eight weeks to memorize eight beatitudes and I think we can do it.

So let us begin with Matthew 5:1-3 and hear the words of Jesus found in the text for today: **"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 saying, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'"**

Now take your bulletin home with you today and cut today's text off the front cover, and place it on your refrigerator or your desk or your computer monitor and look at it every day, and memorize this first beatitude. **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."**

We are to be poor in spirit, and maybe a way to begin is to look at someone who was not. If ever there was one who was not poor in spirit, it was the rich young man that Kristi read about earlier this morning. About all we know about him is that he was rich and he was young, but something happened to this young man, for he came to Jesus asking questions about his mortality.

Maybe someone close to him died. Maybe the physician felt a growth somewhere in his body. Maybe even as a rich young man, he felt something was missing in his life. So he approached Jesus and asked, **“Teacher, what good thing must I do to have eternal life?”**

Maybe it is a question we have all asked at one time or another. But it is an inappropriate question. Eternal life is not an insurance benefit that can be purchased. The young man wanted to know the bottom line: “What good thing must I do? What are the requirements? What is the break-even point? No need for chitchat, let’s go straight to the bottom line. How much do I need to invest to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus said to him, **“If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.”**

Now imagine you have an appointment with a financial planner, and you want to make sure you are going to be able to retire. You take your financial records, insurance information, information about your pension and social security. And you ask, what will it take to retire? And the financial planner says, “If you want to retire, keep the commandments. This is the most important part of your planning, for if you are not serious about your relationship with God, then maybe you should never retire.”

Well, that wasn’t helpful. What do the commandments have to do with retirement? You want to know how much, and she starts talking about religion.

The young man asked, “How much do I need to invest to get eternal life?” And Jesus said, **“If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.”**

I think that anyone with a conscience would have given Jesus a blank and desperate stare and said, “Keep the commandments? Do you know how many commandments there are? Have you read the law lately? I’ve tried, honestly I’ve tried, but I always fail? If I have to keep the law, if I have to keep the commandments to obtain eternal life, then I am doomed.”

But what did this young man do? It is why I accuse of not being poor in spirit, for instead of pleading for mercy, he grabs his pencil and takes out his pad and ask for a list. He licks the tip of the pencil and says, “Which ones?”

So Jesus gave him the list, **“Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not bear false witness, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as you love yourself.”** It is a partial list, but it highlights that Jesus was referring to the Ten Commandments and to the great commandments, to love God and your neighbors.

Maybe this young man scratched his chin and thought, “Murder? Not yet. Adultery? Well, nothing more than any red-blooded young man wouldn’t do. Stealing? A little extortion, but justified. False testimony? Hummmmmm. . . .let’s move on. Honor father and mother? Sure, I see them on holidays. Love my neighbors as I love myself? Well the Jones’ live next door and though I don’t know them well, I’ve tried to be a good neighbor.”

“Jesus, I’ve done all these. In fact, I’ve done them since I was a kid.” Then he proudly said, “Do you have any other commandments?”

Jesus asked a question that was intended to demonstrate how far we fall short, but in this case Jesus only convinced the young man of his success. How blind could he be? In his own mind he understood he had kept the law, loosely as it may be, when in reality he was like the neighbor’s dog who sits looking innocent with a mouth full of chicken feathers being asked, “Have you been chasing Steve’s and Sally’s chickens?”

Jesus then made the point that could not be missed, **“If you want to be perfect, go sell your possessions and give the proceeds to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.”** To the rich young man, this statement crystallized the reality of how short he fell as he sadly walked away. And his departure warns us of the cost of discipleship. Jesus’ disciples were standing there bewildered and they asked, “Jesus, who can be saved?” And Jesus comforted them with His words, **“With man this is impossible. But with God all things are possible.”**

In our world where most folks understand we are rewarded according to our performance, the words of Jesus strike us to our core. In school we get grades according to our study habits. We get commendations according to our success. We get money as payment for our good and hard work. And as a result, like the young man, we are to get heaven as just payment for a life well lived. It only makes sense. You work hard, you pay your dues, and your account is credited, “Paid in full, welcome to eternal life.”

But Jesus said, “No way.” What you want costs far more than what you are able to pay. You don’t need a system of keeping laws; you need a savior. You don’t need a resume of good works; you need a redeemer. What you must receive is given only by grace.

As good Presbyterians we understand grace, but still somewhere in the back of our minds we think of salvation as something we earn. If we can simply believe the right things, live with a certain amount of piety, do enough good works, God will take all this into account. But our Lord’s point is crystal clear. It is impossible for a human being to earn entrance into the Kingdom of God; it takes God’s gracious action and God’s action alone.

The rich young man was not so much hindered by his money and possessions as he was by his self-sufficiency and pride. Oh, how hard it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God!

Consider Jesus’ picture of judgment later in the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 7:22, Jesus was talking about Judgement Day and he said, **“Many**

will say to me on that day, 'Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?'"

It is astounding: there is the picture of people standing before the throne of God bragging about themselves. I think it was Max Lucado who wrote, "The great trumpet has sounded, and they are still tooting their own horn. Rather than worship, they read their resumes. When they should be speechless, they speak. In the very presence of God they boast of self." I hope you are you getting an idea of what it means to be poor in spirit.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." Joyful is the one who acknowledges their sin, and admits his or her inadequacy. Those who enter the Kingdom of God have declared their spiritual bankruptcy. They have long stopped demanding justice for themselves and now plead for mercy. They ask God to do what they cannot do. They have recognized the chasm between their sinfulness and God's holiness and know the impossibility of achieving salvation according to their works.

It is with great joy the poor in spirit hear the words of Jesus, **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever trusts in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life."** And **"The proof of God's amazing love is this, for while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."** Jesus did the work of salvation on our account.

Entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven is not based on a point system. The rich young ruler thought that every time he kept a commandment he got points and every time he transgressed he lost points. All you need to get in, is a positive balance at the end, so you came to church today, you get a point, but you cussed the Cowboys or Texans for a disappointing end to their season so you lose a point. You are faithful to your spouse Sunday through Friday, great you earned six points, one for each day. However, on Saturday you were unfaithful and you lose a point. Well, that is a big one so maybe you ought to lose thirty points, but you have not born false witness, you admitted your

indiscretion so you earned back twenty points. At the end of your life all you need is one point, one measly point and you are in – eternal life is yours.

Can you see it? Can you see the rich young man in his conversation with Jesus adding up the points and saying, “Yeh, Jesus, I’ve been good enough, I’ve kept the law. I have enough points.”

And Jesus said, “You’ve missed the point.” So Jesus gave him a command he couldn’t keep. **“Sell all you have and give it to the poor, then come and follow me.”**

If we were in the young man’s place Jesus might ask a different question. Rather than ask me to sell all I have Jesus might ask, “If you want to enter life then forgive that person who has so offended you. As a matter of fact love them as your own family and commit yourself to only do that which demonstrates your love for them.”

Maybe the poor in spirit understand better than anybody the words which I think are attributed to John Newton who wrote *Amazing Grace*, “There but by the grace of God go I.”

What question would Jesus ask you to prove you are not perfect? The rich young man thought he was perfect enough so Jesus brought him back to earth. And the reason for such a question is not to condemn, but to remind us how easily, and if we are honest, how often, we try to justify ourselves thinking we have done enough when we cannot do enough.

Jesus teaches, and we understand, we are only saved by grace, not by our works. If you realize that you are only saved by grace. If you are poor in spirit, your life will by God’s grace be characterized by grace. You are saved by grace, and you respond to others with grace, and then you will know what it is to have eternal life. Is there anyone in your life about whom you do not greet and treat with grace? If you are poor in spirit, you will be treating others with grace.

Salvation is impossible. Self-justification before God is non-existent; it cannot be done. But what is impossible for us has been accomplished by God in Jesus Christ. And we are totally dependent upon Christ. So bless are those who are poor in spirit, those who recognize their total dependence upon God, and offer that grace in their living to others, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.