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## Truths to Live By: Blessed Bankruptcy

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TEXT: Matthew 5:1-3 (ESV)

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven."

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There was a book published a number of years ago that became quite popular. It was entitled *Life's Little Instruction Book*. It was written by a man named H. Jackson Browne, who originally wrote it as a gift for his son, who was leaving home and beginning a new life in college. The little book contains all kinds of observations and suggestions and truthful reminders on how to live a good life. A happy life.

I suppose you could say that we have something like that before us today as we begin to look at this portion of scripture called the Sermon on the Mount. It's short, like Brown's book, yet its implications are far more profound and eternal. It's Christ's little instruction book for disciples living the new life in Christ. It contains vital truths and instructions for living out one's life as a citizen of God's kingdom. It's actually been referred to by some as the Christian Manifesto of the Kingdom. Jesus began his ministry, you see, announcing the Kingdom of Heaven. He declared, the kingdom of Heaven is at hand. The Kingdom of God. God is up to something big. It's a new day. And for those living in darkness, a new light has dawned. And while he's saying this, Jesus is pointing to himself as he announces this and calling people to repent and believe in him. He displayed powerful signs of this kingdom of Heaven in his miracles, healing the sick, casting out demons. And so, he gained quite a following with this message.

According to Matthew's gospel, his first major teaching about the Kingdom that he's announced is this Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5-7. It provides followers of Christ with a pattern of life and an ethic, so to speak, for living in this world as citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven while we wait for Christ's return. And the opening section of this little instruction book contains eight truths for Christ's followers to know and trust and apply. It's actually referred to as the Beatitudes. The title is derived from the Latin word *beatus*, which means blessed. Because each saying here begins with that word: blessed. And each one of these beatitudes is stating a very important spiritual truth for the Christian disciple to trust and to build his or her life upon. And that's where we're going to be focusing on over the next few Sundays. We're going to carefully examine each one of these beatitudes, these truths and allow them to examine us as well.

But before we approach our first beatitude today, there are some basic things we need to have in mind. First, each of these beatitudes are for those who are disciples of Jesus. Those who have discovered the great treasure Jesus described are the pearl of great price. In Christ, there's Kingdom citizens who have tasted his saving grace and now following him. You see, we're told at the beginning of chapter 5, Jesus was addressing his disciples, which means learners who had come to him. Like us, they had much to learn from Jesus about kingdom living.

A second thing to keep in mind is that all disciples of Jesus are to have all these character qualities working in their lives and manifest all of them. Third, it's important to note that none of these descriptions is referring to what we may call a natural tendency, which is already within ourselves. Each one of them is a disposition which is produced by grace alone and the working of the Holy Spirit in one's life. Their spiritual qualities, the glory of the Gospel, is that it can make us like these characteristics Jesus is describing, this is what God wants to make us into. People who resemble Jesus, who exhibit these kind of qualities in their lives.

And fourth, these descriptions are counterintuitive to worldly wisdom. They clearly display essential differences between Christians and non-Christians, differences in what each admires and seeks and differences and what they do and the differences in their beliefs and what they can do. That would be because the Christian and the non-Christian belong to two entirely different realms. As Jesus points out, there's the

kingdom of this world with all its wisdom and philosophies and values. And then there's the kingdom of Heaven, the spiritual realm where God rules and things are to be done his way. Trusting in Christ, the believer has entered into that kingdom while still living in the world. Jesus taught about this kingdom that the Kingdom of Heaven, God's rule has arrived in Jesus Christ. He also taught that it dwells now in each believer who trusts and follows him.

And finally, he teaches that the kingdom will come in all its fullness at the end of history when Christ returns in glory and majesty. And the final thing we need to bring with us as we study these passages is, and maybe the most important thing, is that these statements are authoritative truths to be believed. For they come from the lips of Jesus, the Son of God, who said, "My teaching is not mine, but His who sent me." And "I am the way, the truth and the life, he hath seen me hath seen the father." This is Jesus speaking, whom God has vindicated and affirmed everything he said or did by his resurrection on Easter. So of course we listen to him. So as Jesus told the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, listen to him. He knows he's speaking the truth. He really does know what he's talking about.

So now we're ready. Let's look at the top of Jesus's list of kingdom truths. First, Jesus said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. That word, "blessed" is a word that describes a state of well-being in relationship with God. It's standing approved by God, enjoying the fullness of life that flows from having a personal relationship with God. So who are these people who have this blessedness? Jesus says the poor in spirit. Now, what does it mean to be poor in spirit? He's not talking about the sad, the depressed, the melancholy, the weak, the nervous, those lacking in courage, the pity parties. No, he didn't say blessed are the poor-spirited but poor of spirit. And he's not talking about material poverty either. He's talking about an important spiritual matter that we need to know about. Being poor in spirit has to do with our relationship with God. It's an understanding about oneself and where he or she stands in relationship to the Almighty, Holy God. The poor in spirit are those who recognize that they stand in need of God. They are dependent upon him. They're like empty-handed beggars, newborn babies needing care. They might even describe themselves as desperate for him. They really need his help.

My friends in Alcoholics Anonymous know about this being poor in spirit from having taken the first step of 12 for sobriety. "We admitted that we were powerless over

alcohol, that our lives have become unmanageable, and we need a power beyond ourselves." They're realizing their desperate need for God. And so, the next step is for that alcoholic to turn one's life over to the care of God. Now, I know from personal experience as a Christian, this poor in spirit mindset does not come naturally to us as human beings. And we wrestle with it because it's not how the world sees things, a world of which we are a part. We don't like to admit that we need anybody. Our mantra, even in childhood, as we're getting as little kids: "I can, let me do it myself." I can do it myself the same "You just need to believe in yourself" is something we're told by others and we encourage ourselves with. Columnist David Brooks points out in a *New York Times* article that we are an overconfident species. The natural side of us and the world around us believes in and applauds self-confidence, self-assurance, and self-reliance in all matters of life.

And also, we like to think of ourselves as being better than we really are. Don't we? We see our faults in faint, black and white instead of in vivid colors, and we assume the worst in others, while assuming the best in ourselves. We see this attitude coming out in a variety of ways. For instance, there was an amusing article I came across in *World Magazine* entitled "Road Test." It begins, "Who's a good driver? Everyone is, if you ask them. That's the finding of an American Automobile Association survey published a few years ago that found that 83% of American drivers consider them somewhat or more careful compared to other drivers they encounter." Everybody is a good driver, huh? Well, that's us. Basically, we like to think we're okay and probably a lot better than others. But Jesus seems to be saying to do life with that kind of mindset is to miss out on the blessedness God wants you to have. Because the real truth is, as human beings, we need God. We need to see and believe this naked truth about ourselves and our sinfulness and live, live humbly and dependently upon him with, Lord, I need you in our minds and on our lips.

So poor in spirit, is not just coming to the end of one's rope, but the end of one's self and their pride. It's understanding and believing that, spiritually speaking, I got nothing to offer God except my sorry, needy, sinful self. And giving myself over to his care. It's acknowledging that I can't save myself. I can't change myself. I can't sustain myself. I need God. And calling upon him and saying, "God, I need your all sufficient grace working in my life." Pastor and author Tim Keller offers a helpful definition for us on being poor in spirit, he writes, "It means seeing that you're deeply in debt before God and you have no ability to even begin to redeem yourself. God's free generosity to you

at infinite cost to him is the only thing that saved you.” And then he goes on to describe those who resist this need for spiritual bankruptcy who have rejected. He says,

On the contrary, you believe God owes you some things. He ought to answer your prayers and to bless you for the many good things you've done. Even though the Bible doesn't use the term by inference, we can say that you're not poor in spirit, but middle class in spirit. You feel you've earned a certain standing with God through your hard work. You also may believe that the success and the resources you have are primarily to do with your own industry and energy. You're proud of yourself.

I've seen this kind of mentality operating both inside and outside the church, and it's missing the truth that Jesus is offering us.

Jesus actually told a parable one time to those who were trusting in their own righteousness and abilities and treating others with contempt. He said

A Pharisee and a tax collector went to a temple and the Pharisee prayed, “Thank you, Lord, that I'm not like other people extortioners unjust adulterers or even like that tax collector standing over there. I do a lot of good things. I fast and I tithe.” But the tax collector who of course was a liar and a cheat and a traitor to his people through his tax collecting work, couldn't even lift his eyes to Heaven. Instead, he beat his breast, saying, “God be merciful to me, a sinner.”

And Jesus finished the story saying, “I tell you, this man went back to his house, justified rather than the other.”

It's been said about this beatitude is that there's no more perfect statement of the doctrine of justification by faith alone than this one, because the truth is we're all spiritually bankrupt before God and in need of his mercy. Two people may each owe \$10 million to someone for repayment. The first may have \$1,000 and another \$1. Well, one is a thousand times better off than the other. But if they owe \$10 million, they're still both bankrupt. And Jesus here appears to be promoting declaring bankruptcy. Ah, this is blessed bankruptcy. Living under the declaration of dependence instead of independence. Because the truth is the sooner you realize and declare your need for God's grace and help, the better off you'll be. If we think we don't need God, we won't come to Him. And if we don't come to God for mercy, we won't be in the kingdom. Jesus says Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs and theirs alone is the kingdom.

And what is this kingdom of Heaven that Jesus is describing for us? It's more than a future promise. Yes, I know I'm going to Heaven someday, trusting in Jesus. But Jesus here is talking about it in the present tense. How's Heaven described in the Book of Revelation as we look to the future? It's described as simply as wonderful because you're living in the presence of God. Where Heaven is, is where God is. So, what does it mean to possess the kingdom, live in the kingdom here and now. It means living with God in a close personal relationship with them. In His presence, He blesses us with his presence and his help. The prophet Isaiah spoke a remarkable word from God in his 57th chapter in the Old Testament. He says, "For thus says God, who was high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy. I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit. Poor in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lonely and to revive the heart of the contrite. The Kingdom of Heaven is about God being with us and for us. To depend on Jesus, also called Emmanuel in Matthew, promised his kingdom people, "Lo, I am with you always to the end of the age." And his spirit is present to revive and refresh and strengthen and grow believers in Jesus, into people who learn more and more that they can't live, that they can live gratefully and dependently. With him today, tomorrow, and forever.

So how do we apply this truth? Three things can be done with this truth today. First, repent. Shed our pride and self-reliance once again and admit we cannot change, save, or sustain ourselves, try as we may. And surrender ourselves to God's grace and care. And that's where the blessedness is to be found. Second thing is worship to thank and praise God for his grace, because we'd be lost without him. And finally, to renew our commitment to being a people of prayer dependently trustingly, turning to God in prayer with our Thanksgivings and our needs and our struggles, for He's available to us, ready to lift us up and lead us and strengthen us and make us able to testify to this truth from the bottom of our hearts: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. Thanks and praise to you, O Lord, for you are faithful and good. Amen.