



Matthew 5:3

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Here’s another versions for you, ‘Blessed are the rich, for they have it all, and they have it now – for theirs is the kingdom of the world.’ That’s what our culture is preaching to us, is it not?

And yet Jesus preaches ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heav-

en.’ And so begins this sermon on Christian counter-culture, ‘the Sermon on the Mount’ shocking us by beginning with ‘blessed are the poor.’ This sermon will go on to contain some of Jesus’ most profound teaching – perhaps his most well-known teaching, arguably his least understood teaching, and certainly his least obeyed teaching. Because it is so counter-cultural.

‘Blessed are the rich, for they have it all, and they have it now.’ Its messages like these that the kingdom of this world is preaching to us every day. But the kingdom of God, through its spokesperson Jesus, is preaching to us a radically different message, a radically counter-cultural message. And the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of heaven are on a collision course. This began in chapter four when we saw Jesus do battle with the ruler of

this world, Satan, out in the wilderness of Judea. Satan wielded lies; Jesus wielded truth. And now Jesus takes the battle up to Satan in an even more powerful way. He preaches truth, he speaks God's word not just to Satan, but to huge crowds right-down throughout the ages, crowds that include us this morning.

His sermon starts with the beatitudes – a Latin word that simply means 'blessed.' Now in English the word 'blessed' isn't all that well defined, so think not so much 'happy or fortunate,' it's both those things but something deeper. Think of a blessed state of existence which is utterly and eternally secure even when you don't feel happy or aren't presently experiencing good fortune. So 'blessed' – but a deeper and richer and far more permanent sense of the word.

And at the start of the Sermon on the Mount we have eight, short, profound statements which all begin with ‘blessed are...’ and then a ninth which is more an expansion on the 8th. And so over the next eight days we’re going to look closely at each of these profound statements of truth, which seem to turn the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of our culture completely on its head. And this means that some of them may cut deep for you personally, as many of them have for me.

Today’s passage is this, verse 3,

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

But why this verse to start the eight? Why this verse to begin the whole Sermon on the

Mount? And what does it mean? It's certainly striking, look at the first four words, 'blessed are the poor,' you can't get more counter-cultural than that, can you? But the word poor is qualified with 'in spirit' – so who are the poor in Spirit and if theirs is the kingdom of heaven, the theme of this whole sermon, then how can we be poor in spirit?

Now some people will say categorically that this verse has nothing to do with material wealth. It's about spiritually bankruptcy and not material bankruptcy – and they are right. Jesus has a whole lot to say about the dangers of wealth, but that is not what he is talking about here. This picture of being poor in spirit is to do with the inner person, not the outward circumstances, even if the two are often very interrelated. To be poor in spirit is to know one's deep spiritual poverty before

God. The spiritually poor can be materially poor like many of the society's outcasts who we'll see put their faith in Jesus throughout Matthew's gospel, but they can also be materially rich like Joseph of Arimathea, a wealthy man who ensured that Jesus was buried with the rich, in a new tomb cut out of stone that he owned. We'll meet him in Matthew 27.

You can be spiritually poor and materially poor; you can be spiritually rich, and materially poor; you can be spiritually poor, and materially rich; and you can be spiritually rich and materially rich; but if it's a numbers game in Jesus' day and our own this last category is the rarest – so proceed with caution if you think this might be you. I'll join my warning with Jesus' many warnings about how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven (but all things are possible with God.)

But irrespective of wealth, spiritual poverty is utter dependency on God, it's the realisation that we bring nothing to the table when it comes to salvation, nothing except faith, belief in what Jesus has done for us on the cross – this is the baseline criteria for entrance into the kingdom of God. If you are not poor in spirit then you have no part in the kingdom of heaven. Which is most likely why Jesus starts so strongly with this point, because it is his main point right throughout. Without realising your utter dependency on him you will never be a part of the kingdom of heaven and those who are a part of the kingdom of heaven are characterised by being poor in spirit.

Are you poor in spirit? And if you do realise that you are utterly dependant on God how

is this being expressed in your life? Yours is the kingdom of heaven! Do you feel blessed? Even when life isn't going your way? Or perhaps you've been blessed with material wealth? If so, praise God, but do you catch yourself thinking more about your material blessings than your spiritual ones? Or perhaps you live in a part of the world where almost every member of your church is rich in world terms. Jesus warns a church in Laodicea, in Revelation 3:17, that finds itself in a similar situation:

17 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.

It's a strong warning, Jesus tells them they're lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, they're dis-

tracted by riches, they think they're fine but they are bordering on spiritual poverty, about to turn away from Jesus for good. Is your church neither hot nor cold? In a moment of honesty, a moment of clarity, would you say you're feeling lukewarm right now? If so, pray. This could be the moment that the Holy Spirit turns back on the heat in your spiritual life and moves you on to great joy and service in the kingdom of God.

Poor in spirit. Much to think about, much to pray about. Perhaps much to confess to our Lord, in a culture doesn't like poor anything. Please do so now and I'll see you again tomorrow.