

POOR IN SPIRIT

When I was in the fourth grade, my father asked me one day which of the four Gospels was my favorite. I said, "Matthew." He said, "Why do you like Matthew best?" I said, "Because of the Beatitudes." My father did not say to me, "But Luke has his own version of the Beatitudes. Why do you like Matthew's better?" He just looked at me quizzically for a moment then said, "That is an excellent answer." I do not remember that we had further conversation on the subject. We did not have extensive conversation on any subject in those days, except on the subject of my chores. But I do remember that I read the Bible even more often and more earnestly after that, because my father cared whether or not I read the Bible, and what I thought about it.

Years later I discovered it was partly a fluke. My father confessed that he had been in a discussion with some of the church leaders (he was an Elder) about giving Bibles to the third-grade Sunday School class. Some argued that third-graders were too young and that none of them ever read these Bibles. Others insisted that it was time we at least had a Bible, that we should be encouraged to carry them to church, and that Sunday School teachers should include times in each class session when we would find and read passages in them as part of our class study. My father told them he was pretty sure that I actually did read the Bible they had given me, and that I might even be understanding bits and pieces of what I was reading – but he would find out and report back. Hence, my Pop quiz.

Well, I know that I had very little comprehension of the inner meanings of the Beatitudes when I was in fourth grade. But I also know that they held a special magic for me. I could tell, somehow, that they were beautiful, and powerful, and full of wonderful things that God wanted for me. I do not know how I knew that. The rational mind is only part of our radar system, wonderful though it may be. And that is why I believe the Bible to be "the Word of God" – not because of what is on the page, but because something deeper than the page reaches to something deeper than my outer mind. Sometimes it happens with other books, but usually if I go back over them, it is a diminishing return. With the Bible it happens over and over, and when I go back over it, the experience increases instead of decreases.

How I wish I could preach and teach from that other level, and that our conversations and discussions could include not only the intellectual and rational level, but all the deeper dimensions of our spiritual awareness systems. Alas, though Rodger and the Choir bring us further dimensions, and though you all come with gifts and awareness beyond mere reason, I am stuck putting words together like some child playing with blocks. And you have to take it from there and move it to much better places. A thing, by the way, which many of you do with amazing skill and awareness. At least it keeps me happy enough to go on playing with my blocks.

With mixed feelings of delight, eagerness, and humility, I want to set before you the Beatitudes as the substance of our special theme and journey through Lent this year. Because I have loved them since the fourth grade, I presume that you all know and love them too. Doubtless there are instances where this is not the case, but hopefully it will soon become the case. If nothing else, I hope for the rest of your life that you will know automatically that the Beatitudes are found in the fifth chapter of Matthew, and that they begin the Sermon on the Mount (meaning, you will always know where to find that too). I hope many of you will memorize the Beatitudes this Lent. Only, do it the easy way. Read them so often that they simply start to stick and will not shake loose. Then they will start to work for you in times and ways that otherwise cannot happen.

A very minor illustration: You are driving down the road, hungry and tired at the end of a trying day. Some S.O.B. suddenly cuts in front of you without signal or warning of any kind, narrowly missing your fender, then honks, gives you the finger, hits his brakes right in front of you, then speeds off. But you were on to him from the moment his front tire started to turn. You smile, give him the room he needs, shake your head in sadness at his attitude and discomfort, send a prayer after him, and continue toward home with a growing calmness and confidence. What happened? It is called "Taking the Seventh." It dropped in on you from out of nowhere just when you needed it: *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God."*

It is not my point, but is there any doubt in your mind that if there were enough peacemakers out there, the roads would be safer, we would have fewer accidents, it would be more pleasant to drive, and we would all get where we were going easier and faster?

Anyway, there is nothing in there about blessed are the angry; blessed are the vengeful; blessed are the retaliators; blessed are those who make sure nobody ever gets away with anything. The Beatitudes do not stroke our “natural” side. They reach for something far more beautiful, powerful, and deeper within us. And while we do not live on that plane all the time, more and more we really would like to. It is nice to come home to our loved ones more often in peace than in anger. We do not have to punish the guy who cuts us off in traffic. He is doing a better job of it than we could ever do. Can he be aware of the Kingdom – trying to live for it – while he stays in that mode? The Beatitudes keep taking us back home – if we take them in until they become a working part of us.

Please do not stay with the illustration. Stay with the point. The point is to read the Beatitudes this Lent until they are part of you. The Beatitudes are better, more profound, more powerful than anything my sermons can portray. The sermons are only hints. Let the Beatitudes become your own real theme this Lent, not just a few minutes on Sunday. Read them over and over until you can read them without opening The Book. Try not to decide in any rigid way what impact and effect they are going to have on you. Try not to get on a campaign to change yourself. Just get to know them. Let them in. Let them have their own effect, in their own way, in their own time. In other words, do not go to work on yourself. Let the Spirit do it.

For my part, I will try to show you that the Beatitudes are the spiritual program that Jesus lined out for His followers. There are other places to find it: in the Lord’s Prayer; tucked away in the parables and sayings; we can watch Jesus’ own patterns and responses. But the Sermon on the Mount (or Plain, in Luke) is where it is summarized most clearly. Specifically, the Nine Steps of the Spiritual Life are set forth in the Beatitudes. Though the Beatitudes are a very high WAY, strangely enough they are also steps we can take and choices we can make – when they appeal to us enough for us to truly want them. *Please* prepare yourself to feel surprised and pleased every time you take the step and every time you make the choice according to one of the Beatitudes, rather than feeling ashamed, guilty, or discouraged every time you fail to live up to one of the Beatitudes. The goal is to choose the Way of the Beatitudes more and more often, as fast as we can become aware – as fast as we can truly want this manner of life. Turn it into a perfection game, and you will lose it all.

So here we go: Lent à la the Beatitudes – the blessings. Jesus’ outline of how to live a blessed life, a fulfilled life – how to walk in the Way of the Kingdom of God. I will do anything and everything I can to make it as clear as I can on the mental level. I will relate it to the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) because more and more people are familiar with these steps, and they have been applied to endless additional areas of recovery. “Calvinism” is an unpleasant word, perhaps, in the vocabulary of our culture, but any student of religion knows that Calvinism, properly understood, is the heart and core of nearly all Protestant expressions of Christianity. (John Calvin was no Calvinist any more than Jesus was a Christian, at least not according to the most popular misconceptions of these terms.) It is the base and foundation of American culture, however far we may stray from its precepts. Most certainly it is the foundation of all Puritan concepts and expectations – both theology and ethics. With churches in our time becoming more and more entertainment centers for spectators, and less and less gathering places for bands of disciples who really mean to walk the Christian Way, where has Calvinism gone? A river so mighty cannot simply disappear. It can be absorbed by a bigger river or it can go underground for a while, but it cannot just suddenly cease to flow as if it never existed. If it is hard to start things, it is also hard to stop them. Where has Calvinism gone in our time? It is alive and well – and changing the lives of thousands of people – introducing them into the practices and disciplines it has always proclaimed. Calvinism exists and survives in many places, at various levels of clarity and strength, but its major flow in our time is in the twelve-step programs that dot the landscape, existing in small working groups of serious devotees in every village, hamlet, town, and city across our country. We have five Bible Study groups in this church, with about fifty-seven participants in study every week. Do you know how many AA groups meet in just our area every week? One hundred and nine. And that is not nearly all the twelve-step groups, just AA.

The twelve-step program came straight out of the working side of Christianity, via Calvinism via the Oxford Group Movement. So as we get back in touch with the source – the Beatitudes, and the Sermon on the Mount – some of you will find it interesting and helpful if we connect it to one of its clearest present-day expressions. Sometimes comparison and contrast help us to see more clearly. [At the end of this sermon is a side-by-side comparison you might find useful.]

The first beatitude, the first step of AA, the first step on any authentic spiritual path the world over is always the same – no matter how many different ways we say it, no matter from how many different directions we try to come at it. The first step is always the hardest, though not necessarily the most difficult. This is because heading in any new direction requires us to make a choice, a choice between continuing in the direction we have been going, or heading onto a new path or way. We always have a certain investment, usually a pretty big one, in what direction we have been going and how we have been doing things. Taking the first step in a new direction requires a decision that puts us at risk. That is, what we counted on in the past to keep us alive and give us benefit and progress is now abandoned. What, then, will keep us alive and help us if we go in a new way and on a different basis? If all my life I have depended upon anger to help me get my way and protect me from threats and danger, how will I survive if I turn onto a way that does not depend upon anger, that does not even consider anger to be a proper tool? It makes me furious just to think about it – about having to give up my anger – at least at first.

The first step on any new way is the hardest because it is a *new* way. Can we trust a new way when we have not even had time to test it out? Can we depart from a former way when we have trusted it for so long and depended on it so often? Well, if the new way has enough promise and appeal, and if the old way has enough flaws and detriments – and we have finally noticed this and can admit it – then humans really will risk the change.

So the first step on any authentic spiritual path is to exchange pride for humility. Pride is categorically unteachable. Humility is categorically eager to learn. More specifically, we exchange pride in our own power and ability to govern our lives, for the humility of trusting in a Higher Power, a God, an inner voice that is not generated from our own desires and needs, and that we cannot control: the Holy Spirit.

“I want a drink. I need a drink. A drink would be good. One drink never hurt anybody. Nobody even has to know.” But the other Voice says, “Not today. Tomorrow is a long way off, but we have decided not to drink today.” Listening to my own voice has not worked out as well as I thought it would or could. More and more, the results have not been entirely desirable. I fooled with it for years – adjusting it, correcting it, perfecting it – but the evidence kept mounting. Doing it my way was not good enough – I mean, not even for me. There was a lot of good intention, and some good

things happened, and for a long time I could keep twisting it around to fool myself. But the diminishing returns were more and more devastating. How many hangovers, how many divorces, how many lost relationships, how many lost opportunities, how much loneliness and pain and despair ... before we decide it may be time to try a new way?

So finally I decided to listen to the *other* Voice instead of to my own. The other Voice has always been there. I have always heard it. But I have not always been willing to admit that it was there, or to listen, or to follow its direction.

What confuses a lot of people is that most of us make a decision to follow this other Voice by category – by area of life – rather than once and for all. Sometimes we see illustrations of a massive conversion, like with the Apostle Paul, or Augustine. But most of us do it one segment at a time, because only one segment at a time becomes spiritually conscious to us. We turn will and life over to God at home, but keep running things our own way at work – or vice versa. We let God be our God when it comes to our own choices and disciplines, but reserve the right to raise our children our own way – or vice versa. We let God decide how to use our time, but we stay in charge of how to use our money – or vice versa.

When I was a young pastor, it shocked and dismayed me when I discovered, in my first church, that one of my most devout and dedicated deacons was also one of the worst racial bigots in the territory. How is it possible for a sincere Christian to be a racial bigot? Back then, a lot of people said it simply was not possible – that the guy was a hypocrite and a phony. I'm sorry, but I got to know him too well. He was as sincere and dedicated a Christian as you would ever want to meet. But life had handed him some experiences that marred and scarred him until shields toward black people had grown a mile thick. It was not my doing, but I was lucky enough to be around when the Spirit finally found a way to get into that warded, shielded area of prejudice. I mean, it's easy for me to say it was wonderful, and it certainly was impressive to watch the change, but it damn near put this guy under. A whole lifetime of convictions – of hate and anger – shot to hell with one clear beam of light. The repercussions can be terrifying. Has it ever happened to you? Of course. And you know it will again – unless you really *are* perfect ... or stop having any dealings with the Christ of God.

The first step is to change pride for humility – stop trusting our own way. The first step of AA is: “*We admitted we were powerless*” Lots of people balk right there. They stop at the door when they run into this first step, and go back and drink for a few more years. The first beatitude is: “*Blessed are the poor in spirit*” A lot of people balk at that too, and go back to their sin (alienation from God) for a few more years. To be sure, we have our reasons and excuses. Sometimes we even pretend that it is because we cannot understand – that the wording is too strange and archaic. But you see past it, or into it, don’t you? If I said to you, “That horse is really high-spirited,” or “Be careful not to break that child’s spirit,” you would not have much trouble following me, would you? We often used the word “spirit” to refer to a person’s will, or willfulness, or self-confidence – their inner drive – their determination to shape the world to their own desires and designs. Our problem is not with hearing, but with believing what we are hearing. Jesus says, “Happy – blessed – open to receiving God and God’s guidance and gifts and blessings – blessed are you when you stop trusting your own spirit to direct your life and get you everything you want.” “Blessed are you when you know your own spirit is too small and weak and poor to direct and sustain you in the fullness of true LIFE.” “*Blessed are the poor in spirit*” We hear it; we just prefer to believe that making our own spirits stronger and stronger is the better way to go – more likely to get us what we want.

I believe, and suspect you do too, that the real import of the first beatitude is not only about recognizing the inadequacy (poverty) of our own spirit, but switching to the Holy Spirit – going from trusting our own spirit to trusting God’s Spirit. Interesting that both the first step and the first beatitude do not bother to spell this out. We admitted we were powerless; we recognized that our own spirits were too poor to make it. It is as if both expressions of the first step know that if we change attitude from pride to humility – if we break through the aberration that we can do it on our own – then the shields will crumble. And since God is the Creator and is everywhere – and since God cares for us – if the shields crumble, if the wall comes down, if the blinders fall off ... God is there. We do not have to do anything fancy to get God to come into our lives; we just have to stop warding him off. When the shields go down, God is right there. If we can get past – that is, stop trusting – our pride, our self-confidence, our aggression, our willfulness, our determination, then God can come be our God, guide our lives, use us, and bless us, and many others through us.

By the way, some people use the term “self-confidence” to mean a confidence in the self that God made and is directing. You have to determine by context and attitude whether they really mean *self*-confidence, or if they mean the confidence the self can have in God. In any case, a lot of people balk at the door when they discover what the first step is about. They go back to running their own lives, at least for a while.

“We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.” The humility step. We are powerless over a lot more than alcohol, but first things first – one category at a time. If you are an alcoholic, no improvement, however profound, will make a significant or lasting difference unless you take care of the primary problem first.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Do you hear anything in there about the future? Do you hear anything about the “Second Coming” – that “Jesus is coming soon”? Do you hear anything about a future promise – that if you are good, or if you do it right, after a while you will be rewarded? Do you hear any hint about “pie in the sky, by and by”? You maybe dub it in, but you do not hear it, for it is not there. *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs IS the kingdom of heaven.”* When will you be given the Kingdom of Heaven? When will it start for you? When will you be able to live in it, and for it – feel its truth, and warmth, and beauty? Before your next heartbeat. Before the next breath you take – if you are poor in spirit ... if you turn humbly to God. Blessed are those who know their absolute need of God’s personal presence in their lives ... who take down all traces and pretenses of self-sufficiency ... who know their souls will survive without God just as well as their lungs will survive without air, or their hearts without blood.

They will not “be given” the Kingdom. They *have* the Kingdom. *“Theirs IS the kingdom of heaven.”* A done deal. Signed, sealed, delivered. If you ever have problems at the entryway – problems getting in, getting started, being part of it – never think it is about something you have done wrong. Never think it is about timing, or waiting, or getting better, or passing a test, or getting approved. This is not Disneyland. There is no standing in line. Check pride, grab humility – and you are in!

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

The Beatitudes and The Twelve-Step Program

First Beatitude Poor in spirit; humble (Matthew 5:3)	First Step Christian “humility” and AA “powerlessness” are a close parallel
Second Beatitude Mourn; remember (Matthew 5:4)	Fourth & Fifth Steps To mourn is to remember, take inventory, confession, remorse, penitence, sorrow for the damage we have done
Third Beatitude Meek; obedient; subservient to God (only) (Matthew 5:5)	Third & Eleventh Steps Turn will and life over to God; asking only to carry out the will of God
Fourth Beatitude Hunger for righteousness (Matthew 5:6)	Sixth & Seventh Steps Take action to right our wrongs, repair the damage we have done, make amends
Fifth Beatitude Merciful (Matthew 5:7)	Eighth & Ninth Steps Not an exact parallel; AA does not deal with those who have harmed us – too busy the other way around
Sixth Beatitude Pure in heart is to will one thing (Matthew 5:8)	No corresponding Step However, every AA meeting starts with the comments: “With all the earnestness at our command, we beg you to be fearless and thorough from the very start.... Half measures availed us nothing.”
Seventh Beatitude Peacemakers (Matthew 5:9)	Tenth Step Admit wrongs quickly; keep cleaning it up
Eighth Beatitude Persecuted; rejoice and be glad (Matthew 5:10-12)	Eleventh Step Knowledge of His will for us, spokesmen for God, people of prayer, obedient servants
Ninth Beatitude Salt; light (Matthew 5:13-16)	Twelfth Step Salt practices these principles in all its affairs; light carries the message to others who still suffer