

**Blessed are those who see**  
**Matthew 5.1-4**  
**Mark Booker**  
**17 February 2008**

**Introduction**

In his preaching on the Sermon on the Mount in the 1940s Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, who was the respected Welsh preacher of Westminster Chapel and who died in 1981, noted that the great problem of the church in the present day was superficiality. Some 70 years later I would suggest that Lloyd-Jones' analysis hold true. So much that goes on in the church today could be aptly described by Paul as having the appearance of godliness but denying its power (2 Tim 3.5).

Another way of talking about the superficiality of the church is to note the general lack of difference between the Christian and the non-Christian. It's true that those who follow Christ, those who are members of his kingdom, are to look fundamentally differently than the world around them, because we seek different things, we have different admirations, we understand our limitations, we serve a different audience etc. But, on the whole, we look so much the same. We have the same ambitions, we seek the same honors and praise, we grow the same bank accounts, we pursue the same concept of retirement, etc. This is superficiality. There is plenty of evidence that, objectively considered, would indeed call into question our claim that Christ is our greatest treasure.

A close look at Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and his description of the character of kingdom people is undoubtedly the best treatment for the problem of superficiality in the church and in our own lives today. Jesus describes the character of his followers and, as we heard from Matt last week, in so doing he gives a devastating critique of the ways of the world. His beatitudes congratulate those people whom the world despises. Jesus is saying that these people are the ones who are favored, they are the ones who are blessed, they are the ones to be congratulated. They are the ones who, despite all appearances to the contrary, have it right. And they also receive the only rewards that matter, now and in the future: a place in God's kingdom, genuine comfort, an inheritance that surpasses all others, true satisfaction, and so on. On the flip side, and this is implicit in Matthew and explicit in Luke, those whom the world presently congratulates are to be warned. True reality, in short, is not what it appears to be.

What is it about these people that Jesus congratulates and calls blessed? They see. We could sum up the beatitudes with this: "Blessed are those who see." They see not what the world tells them is real but what God and his word tell them is real and as a result their lives are changed, transformed, and turned upside down. Aware of the reality of God, their lives and character no longer look like those whose lives are oriented around a host of things other than God. This changes everything. This turns everything upside down.

Let me illustrate what I mean by seeing. When climbing a mountain you always in one sense see the weather. You are aware of the storm clouds in the distance and you're aware of their power but unless they are near you continue your ascent or descent in a normal way. However, if a storm comes upon you, and I had this happen to me in 2003 while descending Long Peak, you change

everything. Its power and force inspire awe, fear, and action as your hair stands on edge, your heart pounds, and you flee for shelter. You see the storm in a whole new way and you respond.

For so many of us, I fear that we see God in the sense of the storm off in the distance. We claim to know that he is powerful and strong but we treat him as off in the distance and our ascent through life continues as if God were not there at all – this is superficiality. Some of us, in fact, may not see him at all. But the reality, which the blessed see, is that the storm of God is upon us. The lightning bolts of his holiness and power, the thundering booms of his truth and judgment, the showers of his love and mercy, the winds of his Spirit and grace – these are upon us as his creatures and his world. Do we see it?

My prayer is that the fog would be lifted, that the haze would clear, and that we might see, that the veil might be pulled back, that our vision of reality would be restored to what is truly there, and that our lives and our hearts might be shaped accordingly. Blessed are those who see!

Each of these beatitudes describes people who are keenly aware of the truth-filled, grace-filled storm of God that is upon them in the middle of a world that is oblivious to it and is continuing to ascend the mountain as if the storm wasn't upon them. God IS upon us and Jesus gives us insight into the hearts of those who, by God's grace, SEE this reality.

As we approach the beatitudes, we need to say that...

1. These are for Christians.
  - a. It's very clear that Jesus is speaking to the church. He's describing the nature of his disciples to his disciples as we see from v.1.
  - b. At the same time as saying this, we need to say that these are not for some elite class of disciples. These are not for the special forces (the navy seals, the paratroopers, the rangers). These are for all those who are enlisted in the King's army.
2. All of them are for all disciples.
  - a. They go together as a package and we cannot pick and choose from this list, even if some are more of a struggle for us than others.
3. They are not the description of natural attributes or dispositions but rather of spiritual realities in people
  - a. We'll come to this later, but suffice it to say for now that we cannot say, for example, that because we have a strong personality that others sometimes have problems with that we are exempt from being a peacemakers.
  - b. Likewise the melancholy person cannot claim to be one who mourns because of his melancholy. This isn't what these are about.

We'll now turn to the first two beatitudes themselves. These are the people who know that they're living in the midst of the God-storm.

### **Part I: Blessed are the poor in spirit**

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This is foundational. This is where the whole business of discipleship starts and apart from this no progress may be made. Also, from the outset, this beatitude shows the error of any interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount as a way of life that we are to accomplish in our own strength. We must be empty, we must be

conscious of our lack and dependent upon God to live out this sermon, if we are to be kingdom people.

I would describe being poor in spirit as the *fundamental self-understanding of our smallness and sinfulness that we have by virtue of having a clear view of the living God*. We see God – holy, powerful, merciful – and we see ourselves, particularly our smallness and sinfulness, in light of this. I took astronomy as a first year student at Rhodes College. My professor, who was a committed atheist, said to us on the last day of class before we took the final, ““If there’s one thing I’ve done in this class, I hope it’s that I’ve made you feel small.” We do feel small when looking at the cosmos, but how much more should we feel and recognize our smallness when looking at the Creator of the cosmos! When we see God and ourselves in the proper light, we recognize what Paul says, “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1Cor 1.25). True humility is found in the heart of the person who is poor in spirit.

And yet we have such trouble and we encounter such difficulty on this point. The entire world is arranged to encourage and bless self-reliance, self-confidence, and self-promotion. We are always encouraged to believe in ourselves, to trust in ourselves, to depend upon ourselves. The media loves to tell us stories of the triumph of the human spirit, the rich in spirit. Think about one of the most common refrains in interviews with people who have succeeded in sports or business or entertainment, “I just kept believing in myself.”

Instead of cultivating a poverty of spirit, how often do we try to convince people that we are really something special? Some of us do it explicitly, but others of us have more covert ways such as dropping names in conversation or inserting related but unnecessary comments in a conversation to shed some light on your value or holiness or whatever. Or think about our way of going about getting a job. We have an interview and we send a resume and make the best presentation that we can, perhaps even fudging the facts a bit, to convince our interviewers that we really are something special and that we’re really a cut above the rest of the pool. In this arena, I think about Joseph as great example of a man poor in spirit, whose job interview with Pharaoh came at a desperate time for him, having been in prison for two years, and the pressures to distort and self-promote were great. When asked about his ability to interpret dream he answers, “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer” (Gen 41.16).

Think about Paul. It is quite likely that few churches today would call him as their pastor. His rivals in Corinth said of him, “His presence is weak and his speech is of no account.” Paul even describes himself as being with the church, “in weakness and fear and much trembling.” He apparently didn’t have that charismatic personality that attracted people and he didn’t make everyone laugh, but he was poor in spirit. As he says, “For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the grace of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am...” (1 Cor 15.9-10).

Before moving on, let me say a few things about what being poor in spirit is not. It is not a false humility that serves and then loves to tell about it. It is not the suppression of true personality which is a gift of God. Also, one who appears poor in spirit may not be at all and one who is poor in spirit may not appear to be so.

It is a proper understanding of oneself made possible by a clear view of God. This is illustrated in Scripture when we see the responses of those who see God.

- Isaiah 6, “Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!” Isa 6.5.
- Peter, though a bold man, after seeing Jesus’ power, falling down and saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man.” Lk 5.8.
- Look at Peter, James, and John in Mt 17 when they heard the voice of God at Jesus’ transfiguration, “they fell on their faces and were terrified.”
- Or there is John in Revelation 1, seeing a vision of Jesus reigning in heaven and then saying, “When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.” Rev 1.17.

To become and remain poor in spirit, my friends, we do not try our hardest to assess our own strength or weakness but we must simply look to God. The poor in Spirit see God and in so seeing instinctively know our own bankruptcy, our own filthiness, our own need, and we are given the kingdom. Do we see?

## **Part II: Blessed are those who mourn**

In this 2<sup>nd</sup> beatitude, Jesus is not congratulating those who mourn for any reason. It is not the clinically depressed or the bereaved or the downtrodden that Jesus is affirming, rather he is affirming those who mourn over that which God mourns over: the sin in our own hearts, the sin in others, the sin in the world.

Let’s note again the counter-cultural nature of this beatitude. Our world values the happy and the lighthearted. We try to make life as much of a continuous “good time” as we can. The power of positive thinking is an established cultural doctrine and, sadly, this has impacted the church as well. The nationwide Christian radio station KLOVE promotes itself as positive, upbeat and encouraging. The pastor of the largest church in America is known as “the smiling pastor” and has written a book called “Your Best Life Now.” There is something quite amiss in all of this, something that doesn’t fit with Jesus’ teaching here. Even though it kind of sounds nice, the last thing we’re called to be as Christians are people with plastic, smiley faces who are always upbeat.

Because Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn.” This is a way of saying congratulations to those who see and are not insulated from the tragedy, the folly, the pervasiveness, and the effects of sin in their own lives, in the lives of others, and throughout the world. They see the holiness of God and, therefore, the seriousness of sin.

They know just how tragic this state of affairs actually is, and so long as it exists you cannot help but mourn. They see how they sin willfully, sin habitually, sin playfully, and sin expectantly and this rightly grieves their hearts. They are not so consumed with their own relational, occupational, or psychological problems to be numb to the pain of poverty, disease, and injustice throughout the world. They’ve resisted the Novocain of entertainment, affluence, and abundance. They see the pain of death and the ultimate judgment it seems to pronounce upon the goodness of life, so you mourn. This does not mean that they are pessimists, or joyless, or without hope, or a drain on others. There is something life affirming in their mourning because it’s in accordance with truth, with God himself. And they mourn alongside Jesus, who is called “a man of sorrow, and acquainted with grief” (Isa 53.3), who wept over Jerusalem and at Lazarus’ graveside.

The greatest inhibitor to our mourning is an improper view of sin. We fail to see the holiness of God, we fail to see the cost of sin on the cross, we fail to see the purpose for which we were made.

Thus we flirt with sin, we struggle with feeling any remorse or sorrow, and we become callous. What about us? Do we see? Do we mourn over sin? Or do we not really think about it, in our own lives or in the world? Blessed are those who mourn, says Jesus.

But mourning is not the end, because “they will be comforted.” A day is coming when sin will be wiped out and on that day we who mourn now, perplexing as this may be to our world, we will be comforted. And we already have the comfort of Christ our loving Savior whose rescue through the cross is already ours. We mourn that which made the cross a reality but we rejoice in the provision of the cross for our own sin and the sin of the world. There is joy in the life of mourning, but it is not a superficial or precarious joy that rests upon the things of this world which could so easily be taken away: spouse, children, job, riches, security, fame, comfort. Maybe one day God will give us the opportunity to discover in deeper ways, like he did to Job, that our joy rests upon the unchanging God himself and his love for us, on what he has accomplished through the cross of Christ, and on the fact that Jesus will come again and comfort us fully when that day arrives. The joy of those who mourn is real. At the same time, in a very real sense, our comfort is already but not yet.

### **Conclusion**

The poor in spirit and those who mourn – this is the beginning of the description of the character of Jesus’ disciples. These are the ones who recognize that the storm of God is upon us, that the only way to walk through life and find true blessing is to reset all that we are, to undo all the rebellious ways of the world around us, and to orient ourselves by the living, powerful, and present God. May our eyes be opened. May we see this God clearly. With Paul, let us pray that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened to these things, and that the superficiality of the church will be undone as our lives are shaped by the triune God. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who mourn. You are the true disciples of Jesus. Yours in the kingdom. You will be comforted. Amen.