

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Beatitudes in the Modern World: The Blessing of Poverty

Introduction

Good morning. We start today a new series looking at some of the Beatitudes as found at in Matthew 5:1-12. As we look at these qualities we will consider their setting and their relevance to Christians in the world of today. We know that these things are important as they are the words of the Lord Jesus. Matthew states that Jesus sat on a mountain side with His disciples around Him and He began to teach them (Matthew 5:1-2). All the words of Scripture are important and we should take special note of that which was spoken by the Lord Jesus Himself.

Our title for this morning's radio broadcast is "The blessing of Poverty" but I intend to cover Matthew 5:3-4 which I will now read: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*"

In Matthew 3 and 4 we have the Lord Jesus commencing His public ministry. It is the transition point as the ministry of John the Baptist comes to a close and the focus of attention becomes the Lord Jesus Christ. Matthew 3 ends with the voice of the Father from heaven making this tremendous statement, "*This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*" (Matthew 3:17) The first challenge to the Lord Jesus comes immediately in Matthew 4 from the devil (Matthew 4:1-11). The temptations in the wilderness are attacks upon the person of the Lord Jesus by the devil. With each temptation the Lord Jesus defeats the devil by the use of the word of God (Matthew 4:4, 7, 10). This emphasises the value, power and importance of knowing the Scriptures.

In Matthew 4:12 King Herod puts John in prison which effectively closes his service for God. It is in Matthew 4:12-17 that we find the Lord Jesus commencing His own ministry in the country of Galilee, preaching, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand*" (Matthew 4:17) Also, the Lord Jesus starts gathering specific disciples to Himself (Matthew 4:18-22). These are the twelve who will be closely associated with the Lord Jesus as He moves around the land of Palestine. At the close of Matthew 4, multitudes are being attracted to the Lord Jesus both to hear His teaching and to benefit from His power to heal (Matthew 4:23-25). It is at this point, with a multitude around Him, that the Lord Jesus moves to a mountain with His disciples to teach them (Matthew 5:1-2), and us, the moral and spiritual principles of the kingdom of heaven. These principles will only be truly seen in those who are believers for we know from Matthew 13 that both real and false persons are found in the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, we see that it is only those born of the Spirit who can respond to this teaching of the Lord Jesus. It is the new nature in believers that delights to display these features which were so perfectly seen in the life of the Lord Jesus when He lived in this world.

Such features should be seen in the lives of believers now. In the coming reign of Christ, they will be seen in all their fulness in the subjects of the kingdom. Then the kingdom of heaven will be manifest in all its power, righteousness and glory as Christ rules supreme over this world. Again, referring to Matthew 4:17, the Lord Jesus said, "*Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.*" In His person He was the substance and centre of that kingdom and if there had been a change of heart by the nation of Israel, then the kingdom could have been established there and then. But for now, as the parable states in Luke 19:11-27, the Lord Jesus has gone into a far country to receive for Himself a kingdom and when the Lord returns at His appearing, He will set up His kingdom.

The greatness of the Kingdom of Heaven

Although the kingdom is not manifest at this time, there are guiding principles for the subjects of the kingdom which are binding and must take precedence over the laws of the land where there is a conflict between the two. As Peter in Acts 5:29 said, "*We ought to obey God rather than men*". This does not give license to unlawful behaviour or to blame God for what we do by saying, "Well, God told me to do it". God does not tell anyone to kill or violate any of His own commandments. Believers are expected to be law abiding.

The features to be considered in this series all stem from the inward reality of having been born again of God.

Poor in spirit

This expression, I suggest, is the opposite of the inflated, arrogant, egotistical spirit that characterises so many people in the world today. It started with Cain when he said to God, "*Am I my brother's keeper?*" (Genesis 4:9) Cain implied that he had better things to do than look after his brother whom he had just murdered.

The Lord Jesus demonstrated the right kind of spirit when it was said about Himself, "*Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God...*" (Philippians 2:5). Why was this true? It was true because the Lord Jesus is God. Again and again in the New Testament the Scriptures affirm that the Lord Jesus is God. The Lord Jesus never claimed to be something that was not true of Himself.

Poor in spirit would then speak of those who demonstrated a selfless character, thinking more about others than themselves. It is showing a caring and encouraging attitude towards others. In Acts 11:20-21, a tremendous work of God was going on at Antioch and when the believers at Jerusalem heard about it, they sent Barnabas to be a help to them (Acts 11:22-24). This he did, but it soon became clear to Barnabas that another, and possibly more able, believer would be a better help. As Acts 11:25 states, "*Then Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul.*" Barnabas showed the quality of a man who was poor in spirit; he was not seeking for prominence. Barnabas thought about what was best for the Christians at Antioch. The challenge is, do I want the limelight or am I willing to facilitate the improvement of others and take the back seat!

In Numbers 12 we have this kind of spirit in the man Moses. In Numbers 12:3 it states, "*Now the man Moses was very humble, more than all men who were on the face of the earth.*" This is the chapter where we see Moses being verbally attacked by his own sister and brother (Numbers 12:1-2). Moses does not defend himself. It is the LORD who comes and personally defends and upholds His servant (Numbers 12:4-16). The word "humble" is sometimes translated "meek". It has the same kind of meaning as "poor in spirit". No self justification, Moses leaves that to the LORD. But meekness or humbleness is not weakness as is amply demonstrated in the life of Moses as he leads the nation of Israel through the wilderness for 40 years.

In Isaiah 66:2, the LORD takes account of the person who is similarly described, "*But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.*" Here there is an emphasis upon sadness. Sadness because of the sad state of the world which is blindly running as fast as it can into hell. But, alongside the sadness and the lack of selfishness is the positive consideration that this person "*trembles at MY word*". Why tremble? It is because of the awful judgement that is hanging over this world and the ignoring of God's remedy - salvation through faith in Christ.

When the Lord Jesus spoke about these blessings, He would be very aware of the Roman Empire, its power, rule and brutality. The Caesars were the ruthless dictators who ruled with an iron fist but at the same time were always afraid of the assassin's knife in the back. King Herod, the vassal of Caesar, also ruled with equal brutality. Then there was Pilate, Caesar's representative, also a brutal governor when suppressing uprisings. Finally, there were the High Priests, with their delegated powers who were just as ruthless in seeking to preserve their status and would soon make the Lord Jesus an object of their hatred. With this background, Jesus expected His followers to display a completely different attitude and lifestyle.

This quality runs contrary to the attitude of the world. People naturally want the limelight for themselves. As believers, we are not of the world as the Lord Jesus said in John's Gospel (John 15:19, 17:16). We are to display features that are different and in this way we attract people to Christ. It is the silent witness of a godly life that makes people question as to why we are different, and indeed what or who makes the difference.

It is to this kind of person that the Lord Jesus says "*theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 5:3). The "*poor in spirit*" have as a present possession the "*kingdom of heaven*". This is possessed in a spiritual way. They were enjoying the fulness of the kingdom before its display in this world. They enjoyed the approval of the Son of God, their absent Lord in heaven. Believers are assured of a place in heaven and a role in the kingdom when Christ reigns as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Blessed are those who mourn

We come to the next verse under consideration, "*Blessed are those who mourn*" (Matthew 5:4). The word translated "blessed" can also be translated "happy". Now this seems to be a rather strange statement. In the past two years, my wife and I have attended a number of funerals at two of which I have conducted the service. On all these occasions, I would say there was great sadness not happiness. So why does the Lord Jesus teach the disciples, "*Happy are those who mourn*"?

First, the Lord Jesus is talking about those who are believers. In 1 Thessalonians 4 we have the following words from 1 Thessalonians 4:13, "*But I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning those who have fallen asleep, lest you sorrow as others who have no hope.*" If we take this most encouraging verse, we find that the Apostle Paul is saying we have sorrow but there is an additional dimension. A Christian has a sure and certain hope that eternally all is well. The believer has a home in heaven. Hell and God's judgement is not for them. The blessedness of the Father's house is their eternal dwelling place.

When the Lord Jesus spoke the words of Matthew 5:4, He knew of the eternal comfort and place of blessing that is true of all who believe in God and have the certain knowledge of forgiveness and the hope of heaven. The Lord Jesus goes on to say in Matthew 5:4, "*For they shall be comforted*". Salvation is the foundation stone of comfort in these sorrowing situations. Not all the funerals that my wife and I have attended recently have involved believers. A funeral of an unbeliever is devastating as there is no hope. Some say there is no God and the Scriptures have a word for such, "*The fool has said in his heart, 'There is no God'*" (Psalm 14:1, 53:1). It is a dangerous thing to ignore God.

There are many who think that it does not matter which god they worship, it is all the same in the end. In Isaiah 45:5 we have this statement, "*I am the LORD, and there is no other; there is no God besides Me.*" All other gods are false; there is only one true God and it is this one true God who has been made fully known by the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, there are those who think that they can plead their cause at the gate of heaven. If you die without Christ as your Lord and Saviour, then you do not go to the gate of heaven, you go directly to hell. Read the true story in the Gospel of Luke 16:19-31.

A second consideration on the phrase "*Blessed are they that mourn*" (Matthew 5:4) has to do with a variety of situations which do not necessarily involve someone dying. I am reminded of the time when David fled from King Saul and made the cave of Adullam his place of refuge. 1 Samuel 22 states that David's parents and his brothers went to him there with "*everyone who was in distress, everyone who was in debt, and everyone who was discontented gathered to him*", 1 Samuel 22:2. It would appear that for many people the kingdom under Saul was in a bad state. It was probably similar to what we have today, the world in recession with unemployment, rising debts both personal and as a nation, insecurity, people desperate and not knowing where to turn for help. They saw in David their only hope. These were people who mourned the sad state of affairs into which they and the nation had fallen. Instead of following a hopeless cause, with King Saul, they looked for someone who had a solution. At the same time, they realised the danger of following David. Saul's aim was to kill David whom he saw as a threat to his kingdom. The overriding benefit was the support and comfort that David brought to them.

When we look at the sad state of the world with the vast majority of people without Christ as their Saviour and the downward spiral in every area of life, we as believers should mourn - mourn for the lost and for the sad state of our world. But, we are not expected only to mourn but to go out with the message of hope, salvation in Christ Jesus.

Our comfort comes from the "*God of all comfort*" (see 2 Corinthians 1:3). Additionally, we look for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ to put right all that mankind has made wrong. Our refuge is in Christ; we might say that He is our cave of Adullam. As believers we are eternally secure. Jesus is with us every step through every day. In these recession days our resource is found in prayer, the Scriptures and the indwelling Holy Spirit. In prayer we bring our concerns to the Lord and we ask for His help. As we read the Scriptures, we look for the help to come to us, to strengthen our faith and to see the Scriptural guidelines for living. The Holy Spirit Himself enables us to understand the Scriptures so that we might have the specific guidance for each day and that what we have prayed for may be answered.

There is great value in reading the Scriptures at the start of each day. I remember some years ago talking to a young Christian who said that he always started the day by reading Ephesians 6:10-20 about the armour of God that we need to put on. He concluded his reading every day, with his own personal prayer that, before he put one step out of the front door, he might have put on the whole armour of God in order to face the challenges of the day.

In John 16:7 the Lord Jesus speaks about the Holy Spirit as "the Comforter". He is the One who is able to come alongside every suffering saint of God and provide the greatest of all comfort. It is a similar word which the Lord Jesus uses in Matthew 5:4, "*they shall be comforted*". To comfort and feel the comfort there needs to be a coming along side. So as the Lord Jesus speaks of these features of the King's subjects, He must also have been looking on to the day when the Holy Spirit as the "Comforter" indwells each believer and is able to be alongside to comfort in time of need.

The person who does not believe in Christ as their Lord and Saviour has no hope, no salvation, no security and no comfort. They do not see any blessedness in being "*poor in spirit*" or as a person who mourns. We might say that they are insensitive to reality and eternity, living in a fool's paradise with their eyes blinded by Satan.

As I close this radio talk I would like to leave with you a question and a quotation from a hymn by Helen H. Lemmel (1864-1961).

The question is this, "Where is your comfort in a comfortless world?"

*O soul, are you weary and troubled?
No light in the darkness you see?
There's light for a look at the Saviour
And life more abundant and free!*

*His word shall not fail you - He promised;
Believe Him, and all will be well:
Then go to a world that is dying,
His perfect salvation to tell.*

*Chorus
Turn your eyes upon Jesus,
Look full in His wonderful face;
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim
In the light of His glory and grace.*

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May the Lord bless you today and thank you for listening.

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