

“Solid—Living The Blessed Life (It’s not what you think)”

Today we’re continuing this series about building solid lives. It’s really all about hearing and doing. And it’s based on a section in the Bible where Jesus gives some super-concentrated teaching. Jesus sits down on the side of a small mountain and teaches a bunch of people so this section is called the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus teaches a whole lot of different things but he’s is not really concerned with people knowing a whole bunch of stuff, if they don’t actually do anything with it. That’s the problem that we all face over and over again.

We know what we’re supposed to do, and we think that that’s an accomplishment. Think about driving. We’re all issued a book when we’re learning about driving. It’s called “The Rules of the Road.” We have to learn the book, and know the book and we’re tested on the book. But when an officer stops you for going 75 in a 55, do you ever try saying to him, “Officer, I know the book! I love the book! I agree with the book! I scored really well on my test. I was doing 55 in my heart.” Is the officer very impressed with that? They don’t really care if you know the book. What matters is, what are you doing?

A whole lot of people who go to church think spiritual growth is about just learning more and more and more and more information and then being able to spit out the right answers. You need to know that Jesus is utterly uninterested in that. Yes, there are important things to learn, but he taught to change lives, not convey interesting information. For him it was always all about changed lives.

With that in mind let’s look at this part of the Sermon on the Mount. **“Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. He said: ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you”** (Matthew 5:1-11, TNIV).

These are called the Beatitudes. By the way, **beatitude means supreme blessedness, exalted happiness, state of utmost bliss.** It’s kind of ironic when you look at the first three beatitudes, because nothing about being poor in spirit, or mourning, or being meek sounds like a state of utmost bliss. I want to focus on these first three today because Jesus is specifically talking to people who had been beaten down by poverty, or grief, or an inability to stand up for themselves.

Let’s change gears for a second and let me ask you a question. Have you had a time in your life where you just knew you were way out of your league? In a sport, in a profession, in some area of life? I played racquetball in college and seminary and I really thought I was pretty good. In fact, on the Duke intramural team I was ranked number one at one point—it was a brief point—but I was there. And I was pretty proud of that. And then, one day, a guy showed up to play. He was lean and mean and, I don’t really know how to put this, but...he hurt me! He put the ball everywhere I was not. He toyed with me! I’m sweating, I’m bleeding. I’m panting. I later found out he was a regional champ somewhere. I walked off the court with my tail between my aching legs. I was out of my league.

That would have been bad enough but he walked out saying to his girlfriend just loud enough for everybody to hear, “That was fun!” Like he barely put out much effort and thoroughly enjoyed ripping me apart. It was like saying, “In your face boy. Call me when you get out of diapers.” He enjoyed making me feel inferior.

I’ve felt that way about parenting a time or two. I feel like I’m a really good dad, but I remember being around a guy who was like super-dad. Did everything with his kids, and did it all over the top. It was like he didn’t just play baseball with his kids, he made their bats from scratch. And organized the league and churned his own butter. He just gave out this vibe when I was around him that I was out of my league. And he enjoyed making me feel inferior.

Have you ever felt out of your league AND had your nose rubbed in it? It can make you want to just crawl away and give up.

In the first century A.D., there was a small group of men--not men and women, all men-- called Scribes and Pharisees. They were the superstars of spirituality and they loved it. They put the bar of spiritual expectations so

high that the average man or woman on the street would say, "These guys are out of my league. I could never measure up in religion against these guys. I could never begin to memorize all the rules that they've put into effect for me, let alone live them out. If that's what it takes to be made right with God, there's no hope for me. No hope for me at all."

So in that culture there were lots of men and women who had sort of given up on connecting with God because Scribes and Pharisees set the bar so high. And, yup, the Scribes and the Pharisees took a kind of perverse delight in their spiritual elitism. "Face it, we're out of your league."

So that's the cultural backdrop, the religious backdrop and in walks Jesus. He's thirty years old and to look at him he's no different from other guys his age. He comes from a small town, from a blue collar family, and yet strange things are starting to happen around him. A respected prophet points him out in a crowd and says, "Look at this man! He's the Lamb of God, who came to earth to take away the sins of the world. Look, everybody, there's God's son in human flesh!" Now that sent a ripple through the crowd that day.

On another day that same prophet baptizes Jesus. There's a big crowd there too and when Jesus is baptized there's a voice that thunders from heaven, and the voice says, "This is My Son and I'm pleased with him; I love him. I'm announcing that this is My Son." People started to pay attention.

Then not long after that Jesus starts going around doing miracles. Healing people, driving out demons. And that sent huge, tidal waves, of response through the villages and towns. I mean, there was more stir, and curiosity about Jesus of Nazareth than anybody walking the planet at that time. "Who is this guy really? Could he really be God's Son?"

And then Jesus starts talking about establishing a kingdom. A kingdom where people could be under the direct rule of God. He talked about how this kingdom starts now on this earth and goes on into eternity. People begin to wonder what this kingdom is really like. How is it going to differ from the religious system set up by the Scribes and Pharisees?

And then word gets out that Jesus is going to go public and talk about what his kingdom is like. And when word gets out, thousands and thousands of people say "I'm going to show up to hear that talk." And so they show up on a hillside to listen. They show up with blankets, and picnic baskets, and igloo coolers. And they sit down and they want to hear what Jesus is going to say about his kingdom. And like at any public gathering when you're waiting for the main guy to give the main talk, there's little discussions going on.

Author Dallas Willard suggests that the prevailing two concerns in the crowd that day were first, what will the kingdom really be like, and second who would qualify to get in? You see, lots of people in the crowd had already heard enough about Jesus and seen enough of his miracles to say, "I think I want in. I want to be a part of this kingdom." But the bigger question was, "Am I going to be able to get in? I think I want in on the new kingdom that Jesus is talking about, but I'm afraid I won't be able to get in. I'm thinking that Jesus' kingdom requirements can only be more stringent than the Scribes and the Pharisees. His bar can only be higher if he really is the Son of God. I mean, it might be a great kingdom, but what does it matter if I can't get in?"

High school seniors might put it this way: If my grades aren't good enough to get me into Community College, why bother applying for Harvard? So do you feel the tension? And at that moment Jesus arrives; a hush falls over the crowd and everybody's looking and everybody's listening. And the first words out of his mouth are, "Blessed, blessed." He starts his talk--the greatest message in history--he starts with the word "blessed." "Divine favor is coming your way, are you ready?" He's saying, "Divine favor has fallen on this crowd today. Wait 'til you hear what I have to say to you," he says. "Wait 'til you hear it." And that's when he speaks these things we call beatitudes.

In the first beatitude, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Jesus is saying, "I have good news for those who are poor in spirit." What on earth did he mean? There were two groups of people in the crowd that day. There was a group of people who were rich in spirit, and there was a group that was poor in spirit.

Now, the scribes and the Pharisees in the crowd that day would consider themselves rich in spirit. Rich in spiritual knowledge; rich in spiritual piety; affluent in spiritual activity. They were rich in spirit. In other words, they didn't need anything from Jesus. They had manufactured enough righteousness in and of their own human willpower to say, "We don't need whatever he's talking about. We're rich in spirit."

There was another group represented in the crowd that day, and they were poor in spirit. They were people who knew they were not members of the spiritual honors society. They were ones who knew they were not too impressive: spiritually, morally, ethically--in fact, there were people in the crowd that day who sort of hung their heads low because they knew they were out of their league. That's who Jesus was talking to when he said, "Divine blessing is coming today to those of you who are spiritually bankrupt because I'm announcing to you today," Jesus says, "The doors of my kingdom are wide open to you. Those of you who have just about given up on even hoping that you could gain entrance into the kingdom of heaven, I want to tell you I have good news for you. The door to my kingdom is wide open to you. Come on in. Come on in. Walk right in."

Can you imagine the impact of that first beatitude on spiritually poverty-stricken people in the crowd that day? "Excuse me! Did I hear you right, Jesus? The kingdom of God is open to spiritual debtors like me, even if I don't have a penny of personal righteousness to put on the table? The door is open to me?"

Not long ago I had a conversation with a man who had blown it, who had hit bottom relationally, financially, spiritually. He cried as he told me what he'd done to himself and the people around him. He said something like, "I feel so dirty, so stained, and embarrassed, and worthless. I don't think I'm forgivable."

And in so many words I said to him, "You know the kind of forgiveness you really need, first, is the kind that Jesus said you could find in his kingdom. Maybe this failure will help you see who you really are. You're broke! You're spiritually bankrupt. But if you'll be aware of it and admit it there's some great news here, because Jesus meant what he said when he said, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.' The doors are open to you."

What Jesus said to that crowd that day is just as true today and some of you are feeling it because you're worried that you can't make the cut; that you can't meet the expectations, the religious rules and regs. Jesus is saying, "When will you just realize that what you need to do is own the fact that you're spiritually poor. And then you need to believe the fact that the kingdom of heaven is open to you; and you need to walk right in on the merits of what Jesus did for you on the cross, and that alone. That alone!"

Jesus says, "I have good news for those of you who are almost giving up. Blessed are the spiritually poor; blessed are the materially poor; blessed are all of you who don't think you have a shot of getting into my kingdom. The doors are open to you--come on in. Come on in."

Next, Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." What's he saying? He's saying, "I know that some of you in this crowd are so overwhelmed with sorrow of one kind or another; some of you are so grief-stricken and burdened-down by sadness today that you're fighting a losing battle holding back your tears. Some of you in this crowd are bent over with sorrow and you have come to the conclusion that there's no comfort anywhere for you in the universe."

And Jesus says for you who are sorrowing, "I have good news. The good news is: in my kingdom you'll find comfort, and my kingdom doors are open to you, come on in. Come on in. There is comfort available somewhere in this universe; you'll find it in my kingdom. So come on in. It doesn't even matter what's causing your sorrow, really. If you're fighting back tears of sorrow over loss, or physical pain, or emotional distress, or loneliness, or alienation or rejection, or lost innocence, I just want to say again as tenderly as I can, 'I have good news for you today: you're going to find comfort and soul consolation in my kingdom, so mourners, mourners, come on in, the kingdom doors are wide open to you.'" How do you think that beatitude felt to those in the crowd that day whose hearts were breaking?

Oh, and remember, his kingdom is NOW, and the biggest way God comforts people, is through his people. Yes, God sends his Holy Spirit directly into us to bring us comfort. But he also sends his people. Churches like this one are filled with people whose tender hearts will open up to your sorrows.

Last Sunday night I received a call that a woman had just been found dead in her home. She was the daughter of a church member and sister of another church member. She lived with her mom and I got to her home before the funeral home did so we gathered around her. We prayed together and the tears flowed and flowed and flowed and are they're still flowing. She died too young. And she struggled with life, with pain, with finding meaning. And that just caused more tears. Tears from a mother, tears from a sister and brother, tears from two daughters left behind. So Jesus says, "Mourners: come on in. You're not inconsolable; there's comfort available in my kingdom. There's comfort available from my people. Please, please come on in." In that tragic scene I saw the Kingdom of

God. The police chaplain was there, a Catholic priest was there, I was there, another staff member from our church was there. Friends called. That's how God comforts his people. Jesus says, "Come on in, bring your tears, I will bring you comfort. I may seem hard to believe, but I can, and I will."

Let's look at one more today. Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." The meek Jesus was talking to that day were the powerless, the landless. These are the people who have been pushed around. Blessed are the shy, Blessed are the timid. Blessed are those who have no leverage and no connections and who are not assertive. Jesus is not saying, "Be shy, be timid, be unassertive." He's saying, "Hey, congratulations, you meek people, because here's the Kingdom, now. And nobody, not even the powerful and the connected, can keep you out."

Jesus is saying, "You've been pushed aside, you don't have any clout, but I will see to your inheritance in this world and in the next. That's the kind of Savior I'll be to you. I'll secure your inheritance for you. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Can you imagine how that felt to the tender-hearted in the crowd that day? Some of you can, because that's you.

Some of you are saying, "Ahhh...sounds too good to be true." That's the first indication that you're starting to really understand the kingdom of God, when you think to yourself, "it sounds too good to be true." Listen, if you find yourself thinking, "Nobody could love that purely. No one could love that deeply. No one could love that unconditionally," you're close to understanding the nature of the kingdom of God that Jesus was announcing in the greatest message in history. "Blessed are the meek"

Now, what might these first three beatitudes look like in our day? If Jesus were giving them right here? What would they sound like? It would be a good exercise this week as you read through the Sermon on the Mount, as you read through the Beatitudes, if you write out some Beatitudes for our day. I'll give you some. Where we have to start is: who are the people that our culture says are shut out of the good life? Who are the people who get the message in our culture, on our playgrounds, in our classrooms, from our media, in our commercials that says, "Oh, too bad for you; you got the wrong genes."

Start at just the silly level, because we live in a silly culture. Blessed are the geeks. Blessed are the wimps. Blessed are you when you have dandruff, and blemishes, and all manner of bad breath.

Blessed are those who have no fashion sense. Blessed are the uncoordinated. Blessed are the middle-managers. Blessed are the wrinkled. For Jesus says, "You're not a loser." Jesus says, "This party's for you. You'll be righteously celebrated at my table."

And then we go into more serious ones. Blessed are the anxious. Blessed are the unemployed. Blessed are the divorced. Blessed are the homeless. Blessed are the drop-outs, and the burn-outs, and the left-outs.

Blessed are the chronically angry. Blessed are the sexually addicted and the sexually frustrated. Blessed are the mentally ill. Blessed are the HIV positive. Blessed are the parents who failed. Blessed are the children who ran away. Blessed are the barren. Blessed are the pregnant out of wedlock. Blessed are the failures. Blessed, blessed, blessed, blessed.

Is this good news for anybody yet? Blessed are you who felt that because of your bad genes, or bad health, or bad circumstances, or bad looks, or bad choices, you had been cut off forever from your chance of a life worth living. You have not missed your chance. Here's the Kingdom, now, available to you through Jesus to begin now and to know in its fullness one day and enjoy into eternity.

Blessed, blessed, blessed, blessed, blessed are you. And if you receive it, then you get to become a blessing to other people. Blessed! And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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