

This morning we start a new series with these words, “Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying....”

(Matt 5:1-2)

This is the start of what we know as ‘The Sermon on the Mount’.

We are going to look at the sermon over the next few months. A preacher whom I highly respect named Dick Lucas used to speak about getting started on preaching a sermon as a bit like the golfer on the tee ready to strike the ball but who “waggles on the tee” in preparation. Bear with me if I waggle for a few minutes as I get ready to start this series off.

To see what is happening here in v1 we need to look back a few verses to 4:23, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people” and perhaps we can see why the crowds were following Jesus. Here he went up a mountain perhaps to get away from them but they followed. There on the mountain he sat down and his disciples sat round him and he taught. The whole thing has echoes of Moses going up MT Sinai to receive there law. Here in a sense Jesus explains the law in its new context of himself.

He taught his disciples but many others were listening in so that at the end of the sermon we read that “when Jesus had finished saying these things the crowds were amazed at his teaching.” (Matt 7:28)

From now until Easter as we seek “in all things to grow up into him who is the head, that is Christ” (Eph 4:15), we will be listening to what Jesus had to say in the first part of this sermon. Some will listen as disciples of Jesus, those who have come to faith in him, others and interested onlookers, part of the crowd if you like but hopefully along the way we will all hear what Jesus had to say and will grow up into him and hopefully at the end we will all be amazed at his teaching.

We will be looking at Matt 5:3-12 and what are known as the Beatitudes, which all begin with “Blessed are..” There are eight of them but we need to see them as a whole. If you just look at v3 you see, ““Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” and then v10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The blessing in both is the same and what Jesus is describing in all these Beatitudes has a unity as he describes those who are part of God’s kingdom that is those whose lives are lived under God’s rule. The beatitudes are a statement of how fortunate people are who are already in the kingdom. But that is not all. The beatitudes also contain an implicit invitation to become this kind of person.

These Beatitudes describe what we should all be like as Christians. They are not just for the special Christians or the better Christians but for all of us, hence the title of the series, “How then should we

live.” Jesus has something to say to all of us here. The first four describe if you like our relationship with God and the second four our relationship with other people.

Alright I think enough waggling let’s strike the first ball and see if we can get it down the fairway.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:3)

1. Who are the ‘poor in spirit’?

Let’s first of all note that Jesus does not say blessed are the poor. There is no great blessing in being poor any more than there is in being rich. He said blessed are the poor in spirit. So what did he mean, who was he talking about?

Let me take us to our second reading Luke 18.9-14. Here is a parable which Jesus spoke “to some who were confident of their own righteousness,” (Luke 18:9) that is to those who thought that God saw them as pretty good people. In the parable we see a contrast between the Pharisee who stood before God and boasted about how good he was and all he had done. Then we see the tax collector, the man whom the listeners would immediately see as a person rejected by God and society. He simply said “God have mercy on me a sinner.” He knew he needed God. He knew that he was out of step with God. He knew he had no bargaining chips with which to come to God. While he may have been rich he knew what in God’s sight he had and was nothing. That is being poor spiritually. It is when we realise that we have nothing with which we can impress God or by which we can gain his favour.

One preacher describes being spiritually poor as

- a sense of powerlessness in ourselves.
- a sense of spiritual bankruptcy and helplessness before God.
- a sense of moral uncleanness before God.
- a sense of personal unworthiness before God.

Recently Hilary Mantel was invested as Dame and was seen in photos to be having quite a chat with Prince Charles apparently about the TV series Wolf Hall which is based on one of her books. She seemed to be talking to him as an equal, which is fine. However, the point here in this Beatitude is that there is no way we humans can come to God like that. The Pharisee got it wrong and it was the tax collector who was poor in spirit. He recognised that he had no standing before God, nothing he could use for leverage with God. That is spiritual poverty.

2. How are they ‘blessed’?

I am aware I haven’t ask the question what does “blessed” mean? I know some will say it means happy but that is a subjective thing. Here Jesus is describing something objective. Jesus is declaring not what they feel like but what God thinks of them, what they are and the privileges or blessings of being his people. A couple of weeks ago as we looked at Gen 12 we saw the promise to Abraham

that “all peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Gen 12:3) and how he was to be the blessing bringer, in the Beatitudes we see some of the blessings that God has for those who are his people. Here the blessing is that “theirs is the Kingdom of heaven”.

To those who are poor in spirit and only to such the kingdom of heaven is given.

We need again to go elsewhere in the Bible to explain this and to Mark 10 where people were bringing little children to Jesus when the disciples stopped them. Jesus response was to say, ““Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” (Mark 10:14-15). Who can receive the kingdom of God, who can become a child of God? The answer is only those who will come to Jesus like little children, that is those who realise they have nothing to offer God, nothing to bargain with but who come in childlike dependence upon the grace of God and in childlike trust accept what God has done for you in Jesus. The blessing is to become children of the king of kings and the way is through poverty of spirit.

Have you ever been round a supermarket and they offer you a small sample of some food or drink and you taste it and think yes that’s nice I’ll get some of that and enjoy it later. In once sense I think that is how we have to understand these blessings, not as coming from Tesco, but as experienced in part now but to be fully experienced in heaven later. They are now but not yet.

If we come to God as those who are poor in spirit we do receive the kingdom of heaven but not in its fullest sense until that day when we enter heaven.

3. How then should we live?

So then in the light of this what would Jesus have us do? As he spoke to these people on that hillside to those who he had called to follow him and to those who were just interested onlookers what did he want them to do?

I think he wanted them and indeed us to do two things to stop and receive.

a. stop

He wanted them to stop trusting in themselves and their own ability to make themselves acceptable to God.

Let me ask bluntly what are you basing your standing with God on? Is your thinking a bit like that of the Pharisee in the parable we read earlier “I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get” (Luke 18:12) In other words look at me God because I have done all these good things all these religious things. Is that how you think, that God must be pretty pleased with me because I have lived a good life? For many listening to Jesus it would have been their thinking because of their Jewish background and time spent listening to Pharisees just like that man. Friend if that is your thinking

then Jesus says STOP. Stop thinking that way. Why did he say that, because it is wrong. God is not impressed with all our religion or all our good deeds.

We need to recognise our spiritual bankruptcy and that nothing we can do can put right the wrong we have done to God through the rebellious and selfish way we have lived our lives. It is like trying to buy the crown jewels with a bent farthing. Our good works cannot in anyway pay God back for the wrong we have done nor can they buy his favour. I think it was William Temple who said "the only thing I bring of my very own to my redemption are the sins from which I need to be redeemed." Or as it is put by Augustus Toplady in his hymn Rock of Ages "Nothing in my hand I bring simply to your cross I cling; naked come to you for dress; helpless look to you for grace; stained by sin to you I cry: wash me saviour or I die."

We need to stop our wrong thinking and hear what Jesus and the rest of the New Testament tells us about how we receive the kingdom of heaven and then

b. receive we need to accept what God offers us.

Many of us here have already done that. In various ways we have accepted God's offer of grace and forgiveness through the death of Jesus Christ and been changed from living our lives our way to living with God as King in our lives, we have come into the kingdom of God. If you have not and if you are here today or listening on download and have not yet received the blessing of being a child of God under his rule and blessing then please don't put it off.

Have you seen the various adverts for Corsodyl mouth wash? Where they warn that bleeding gums are one of the first signs of gum disease and tooth loss. In the adverts comes the encouragement to use Corsodyl mouthwash to treat gum disease, probably other mouth washes are available. The point is when you see the signs don't put off doing something about it.

Now I am not suggesting that becoming a Christian is like going to the dentist but I am suggesting that if you see in your life things are not right. If you know that you are not right with God then don't keep putting it off, do something about it. Talk with a friend or with me or Gordon and come with that spiritual poverty and receive God's grace and forgiveness.

I wonder if you have ever changed banks or switched your energy supplier or mobile phone provider. Today it is made easy to make these changes. God has made it even easier to change from being outside his kingdom to being one of his own people. It is simply by receiving by accepting what he has done for us in Jesus and through his death on the cross in our place.

Stop thinking that you are OK with God and receive his grace in Jesus.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 5:3)

When we do Open the Book in Schools at the end we say this, "Now I'm going to say a prayer and if you want to make it your prayer say "Amen" at the end after me."

Now I am not wanting to be patronising but I am going to say a prayer which draws these thoughts together and please if you want to make it yours do say amen at the end with me.

Dear God I know that I am not worthy to be accepted by you. I don't deserve your gift of eternal life. I am guilty of rebelling against you and ignoring you. I need forgiveness.

Thank you for sending your son to die for me that i may be forgiven. Thank you that he rose from the dead to give me new life. Please forgive me and change me that I may live with Jesus as my ruler.

Amen