

“Where Real Life Begins: When I Admit My Need”

A while back there was a story that came out about a multi-millionaire (from New Mexico) named Forest Fenn. Forest had this idea to get America to turn off the television, turn off the video games, and go on this adventure. So (what he did is), he took some of his treasure – gold coins, diamonds, emeralds, millions of dollars of valuables – he put them in this chest, and then he hid it. Sending America on this treasure hunt, he provided a poem with nine clues, and thousands of people went off (with these nine clues), looking for this treasure.

He has an autobiography called “The Thrill of The Chase” in which he talks about how the most valuable things, the most beautiful things are not just found. They’re out there, but you need to go looking for them. If you’re going to find them, you have to search for them.

What we’re going to do in this series is to go on a bit of a treasure hunt. What we’re going to find is that what we really want is not just there. It takes some effort. You need to be watching for it. You need to look for it. The Bible says the kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in a field.

We’re going to study (in the next few weeks), a few verses from Matthew chapter five known as the beatitudes. The beatitudes, you might think them as clues gives Jesus gives us to find this treasure of true happiness, to find what it really means to live life to the full.

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Colossians chapter three, verse three. It says “For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.”

Here’s the word I want you to catch. It (sometimes) surprises people. It’s the word “hidden.” Your real life is hidden with Christ in God. There’s a hidden nature to the life God has in mind for you.

Here’s what makes it hidden. It’s the opposite of what many of us intuitively think it is going to be. Where we assume we will find happiness, where we assume we will find real life, it’s the opposite of some of our assumptions. There’s a sense in which our real life in Christ is hidden. These clues Jesus gives us in the beatitudes help reveal the real life, the full life God has for us.

The beatitudes begin (it’s an introduction to) what is thought of as The Sermon on the Mount. It’s the first sermon (we have recorded) that Jesus preached. It’s how he kicks off his public ministry. It’s also the longest sermon on record. The beatitudes are the beginning of it.

Now, it’s important to note (as we look at these verses) that Jesus was thought of (in those days) as a rabbi, and every rabbi had a different interpretation and application of God’s Word. A rabbi would study God’s Word and say “Here’s how I interpret it. Here’s how you should live it out.”

The followers (of these rabbi’s) would decide who they were going to follow, based upon that rabbi’s interpretation and application of God’s Word. A rabbi’s interpretation and application was referred to as a rabbi’s yoke.

Now, a yoke was a circular wooden harness that would be put over the neck of an animal (most often for plowing) and it would give guidance and direction. They’d put their neck into the yoke and it would steer them in the direction they would go.

Now, whether you realize it or not, every one of us has a yoke, a certain set of beliefs and values that guide and direct our lives. A rabbi would say, “Here’s my yoke. Here’s my understanding and application of God’s Word.” The followers would put that on. They would accept it and take it, and it would guide and direct their life.

Jesus comes on the scene. He’s a Rabbi. His Sermon on the Mount lays out his yoke and it’s going to be different from what people had heard before. It’s going to be counterintuitive to them.

Do you remember when you learned to drive in reverse? Some of you are still learning it. You always (the first few feet) go in the opposite direction you thought. It’s difficult to learn to drive in reverse because it’s counterintuitive. It’s the opposite of what you think might work, when you turn around and look over your shoulder.

The word counterintuitive could be defined as “doing something that on the surface doesn’t seem to make sense, but it’s what works.” (On the surface, it doesn’t seem to make sense, but it works.)

This is the hidden nature of the teaching of Jesus Christ. So much of it is counterintuitive. It doesn’t seem to make sense, but it’s what works. You read the teaching of Jesus and it’s so upside-down.

New Testament scholars call this “The Great Reversal.” Dallas Willard calls this “The Law of Inversion” when you study the teachings of Jesus. He turns it upside-down.

He begins his sermon with this section we call the beatitudes. Each of the beatitudes begins with the word “blessed.” He says, “Do you want to be blessed?” (“Yes, I want to be blessed.”) “Ok, here’s how it works.” He says, “Blessed are you who…” And then he gives eight different characteristics of a blessed life.

Some versions translate the word “blessed” as “happy.” Happy is the one who… Now, happy is an OK word. It might be the best stand-alone word, but it’s too small of a word. It doesn’t really capture it. To understand what Jesus is talking about, (the blessed life), we need to think about what he meant when he said (in John’s gospel) “I have come that you might have life and have it in abundance, to the full.” It’s a blessed life. It’s a full life in Christ.

Here’s how we’re going to be defining it (in this series). “A blessed life: living with a God-given joy and satisfaction (and here’s the key) regardless of outward conditions.” This is huge for us, because we are all about a blessed life. It’s one of our rights: the pursuit of happiness.

Now, most of us would say that the pursuit of happiness is all about controlling our outward conditions. If we’re going to be happy, then we need to control our conditions until it happens. It’s what makes it happen. But that’s not the way it works.

Jesus is going to teach us that a blessed life is God-given. It’s given to us by God. It’s not that we pursue it and find it, but it’s something God gives to us. And it’s not dependent upon our circumstances or conditions. It supersedes all of that. Jesus is going to teach us what it means to be blessed, and it’s going to be different from what many of us would assume.

Matthew chapter five, verse three, (Jesus says) “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (This is how he begins his sermon.) “Blessed are the poor in spirit…”

Now, look: these first four words: “Blessed are the poor…” (Some of you are like, “Yes, I win! I’m broke!) Most of the time, we read this verse and we think, what’s that all about? How does that work? And (we think that) because we associate being blessed with being rich. In fact, we even use those words interchangeably. When you go over to a rich person’s house and you tell them they have a nice place, they don’t say, “Thanks. I’m so rich!” They say, “Thanks. I’m so blessed!” We equate being blessed with being rich.

Jesus, the first thing out of his mouth (in this sermon) is blessed are the poor. Blessed are the poor. Now, he’s talking about more than monetary possessions, material stuff. He says, “Blessed are the poor…in spirit.”

The word poor is translated here as “destitute” or “bankrupt.” (He says) “When you’re destitute or bankrupt in spirit, when you’re (poor in spirit) that’s when you are blessed.” (Really?) What does that mean? What does it mean to be poor in spirit?

I was in Denver, this past week, for a 24-hour meeting. Flew in on Wednesday afternoon; came home late Thursday night. I was grabbing something to eat before we started, (went to this McDonald’s) and I ran into this homeless man named Johnny.

He asked me for some money. I didn’t give him any money, but I bought him a hamburger. And I asked him, when I gave it to him, how long he had been on the streets. He said about four years. Then I asked him what the hardest part was about being homeless and I was surprised by what he told me.

I expected him to say something like “A hungry stomach or the cold nights.” (It gets cold in Denver.) What he said (instead) was “The hardest part was asking for help.” He said the hardest part (about being homeless) was asking for help.

I asked him, “If that’s so hard, then what made you ask for help?” He said, “I had no other choice. I had no other choice, and so I asked for help.”

That’s when it struck me. That’s what it means to be poor. That’s what it means to be poor in spirit, when you finally get to the point where you have (no other choice) but to ask for help. At that point (Jesus says), that’s when you’re blessed.

It's not hard to follow. There are a couple of simple lessons in this verse. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." It means you reach a point where you realize you are broke; that spiritually you are bankrupt, that you can't pay your bill.

You can't dig your way out of the hole. You can't take care of yourself. You can't fix your problems. You can't redeem your situation. You can't put the pieces back together. You declare bankruptcy, and (Jesus says) in that moment you are blessed. Blessed are you when you declare spiritual bankruptcy.

Tim Keller offers the following about what Jesus meant when he talked about being poor in spirit. He says, "It means seeing that you are deeply in debt before God, and you have no ability to even begin to redeem yourself. God's free generosity to you, at infinite cost to him, is your only hope."

He says that's hard for us as Americans, to accept the fact that we need God's help. He says, "On the contrary, many of us believe that God owes us some things – he ought to answer your prayers and to bless you for the many things you've done. We can say (in that way) that you are (I love this) middle-class in spirit. You feel that you've earned a certain standing with God through your hard work. You also believe that the success and the resources you have are due primarily to your own industry and energy."

Middle-class in spirit...that we've worked hard and (somehow) God owes us something for our hard work. He says that's exactly what keeps so many of us from experiencing God's blessing in our lives, because we approach him as if we have something to offer, when, in reality, we do not.

Jesus says, "Blessed are those who admit their poverty." And, again, that's hard for us because we're all about maintaining an image. (Maybe more for us guys than you gals. I don't know.) I think for all of us, we'd rather give the impression that we have it together, it's all covered, than to accept the fact (and admit) that we don't and it's not.

It's like the person who drives around in a nice car (even as their creditors are on their backs) because they want to keep up this image that they have it all together. Spiritually, we can be like this. For a long time, we don't acknowledge the mess we're in. We don't want anyone to see inside, look through the windows. We don't want to say that we need any help. Jesus says, "Blessed are you when you realize and accept that you are broke." (That's the first lesson we find.)

There's another lesson in this verse. You reach a point where you ask for help. (You ask for help.) This is one of those things that we're not very good at (either), because it means we can't fix it ourselves. It goes against what so many of us have been taught.

According to some of the latest figures, the (so-called) "self-help" movement has grown into an eleven billion dollar industry. There are more than forty-five thousand self-help books in print.

How come? Because there are no awards at Sports Banquets for those who need help. We don't celebrate that in our culture. It's not something you put on your resume when you're looking for a job. "I don't know how to do that, but if I had some help..." We don't celebrate that.

We celebrate the self-reliant in spirit, those who can help themselves. Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, where you recognize your poverty and say 'God, I need help.'"

We're not good at this. But that's my prayer, that we'd all come to a point where we recognize and acknowledge our need, and admit that I need help, because it's at that point when you are blessed. When you finally say, "I can't do it!"

I can't mend my marriage. I can't fix my kids. I can't keep sober. I can't control my temper. I can't restrain my lust. I can't save myself. I can't put the pieces back together. "God, I can't do it. Help me!" It's at that point that you are blessed.

The Message paraphrase puts it this way. (It says) "You are blessed when you are finally at the end of your rope. With less of you, there's more of God and his rule."

Now, most of us would think that's not a good thing, to find ourselves at the end of our rope. But Jesus says when you reach that point and (you're bankrupt) and you finally ask God for help, that's when your life will be blessed.

I was reading a survey that was listing some of people's favorite verses. One of the most common verses quoted was this one: "God helps those who..." God helps those who help themselves. It's a great verse...that is nowhere in the Bible. It's not there.

The Bible teaches that God helps those who can't help themselves. God helps those who can't help themselves. He helps those who ask for his help.

Go through the stories and that's what you'll find. A woman who can't stop the bleeding; she's tried everything. She's spent all of her money on doctors (who can't help her). She finally comes to Jesus, and that's when she's blessed.

The Centurion whose servant was sick and paralyzed; he knew he didn't deserve to have Jesus come to his house. He reaches out to him and Jesus helps him.

The Canaanite woman, she was an outsider. No one would help her, but she cries out to Jesus and (in that moment) she is blessed.

This is how Jesus begins his sermon, how he starts his ministry. (It's important.) He says blessed are you when you admit that you need help. Blessed are you when you realize you are broke. In that moment (Jesus says), that's when you'll find the treasure.

Let me close with this. This isn't a self-help sermon: three easy steps (do these things) and you'll be OK. It's a reminder to all of us that there's only one who can help us with the things we need the most.

When you go home today and look at all of the things you have, the material treasures, what the world counts as "the blessings of life," think about what really makes you happy. (If you want, you might even make a list.) I'll bet most of things (if not all) that bring you happiness are not things. (Make a list.)

And then, after you've made a list of the things (in your life) that make you happy, make a list of the areas (in your life) where you need help. And be honest. We all need help; more than we care to admit. But until we acknowledge it (and accept it) and ask for Jesus' help, we'll never know what it means to be blessed.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit...for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Amen.