

Blessed are the poor

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[0 : 0 0] of this chapter. Matthew 5, verses 1-4. 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, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Now as we undertake to preach on a sermon, preach a sermon on a sermon, we realise that we are approaching here one of the greatest of all sermons ever preached or recorded. The best known, no doubt, of any sermon in all the world. Even those who make no great Christian pretensions, at least have heard of, and perhaps even have read more than once this Sermon on the Mount. Now I don't know about you, but for myself

I remember since a long time reflecting on just these first two verses of this chapter, the first verse really, or first two, where we read, and he sat down and began to teach them. And I've often thought for myself that I would love to have been part of that group, or even of the crowd who were there gathered round when Jesus sat down in rabbinic fashion in order to teach his followers and those others who heard him in this sermon. Well I wasn't there, and I was aware directly. But we can still listen, at least to what we may reverently call the gist of this sermon. I believe there was a lot more said than is actually recorded by Matthew. But what I want us most of all to ask of God when we look through this sermon on the Mount, is that Jesus will still speak to us. That we will hear it as if Jesus himself was still preaching it to us. And that when we look at it, even though we've looked at it before in different ways, that we may discover new truths, and perhaps also rediscover old truths that we have already realised and gone over. Now the reason I want us to study this particular sermon on the Mount is that it covers virtually the whole range of Christian life. That it is a very practical sermon, not just a theory of a thing that Jesus is interested in. The key message that is in this sermon itself, I think, is this. It is, be different. It is the way that Jesus, in even taking his disciples apart and aside by themselves, away from the rest of the multitude, that he is emphasising that there is a distinction, that there is a differentness between those who truly belong to Jesus and those who do not. And as you go through the sermon, this is something that is emphasised more and more again. It is part of what the teaching of the apostle later lays out, that Christians ought not to be conformed to this world. They ought not to be the same as this world, but transformed. And what Jesus lays out here in a very practical way, is the utter differentness of the Christian lifestyle, as well as the Christian belief, to that of the world amongst whom we live. Now I know that many people who may not particularly call themselves Christians, or perhaps we wouldn't call them Christians, many people will yet admire this sermon. They will admire the ideals that are in the sermon. They will even say for themselves that I live or I want to live according to the principles of the Sermon on the Mount. I remember Jimmy Ridge, who is now perhaps somewhat changed his position in the old days of the upper-clad shipbuilders, making a great protest, more as a socialist or perhaps communist, and yet protesting that this was his creed, the Sermon on the Mount. Now it may well have been, and we would, in a sense, want that to be the case, and yet in another sense it simply is not possible that a person who is not a

Christian, not a born-again person, could live by the Sermon on the Mount. The ideals are beyond what man can achieve by themselves. Here is a way of life that is simply not available to a person who is not a genuine Christian.

It is a differentness of the Christian's calling, the Christian's character, the Christian's conduct that is here emphasized. Now let me ask this question. When we ask God to bless us, and quite frequently in our prayers, we do ask God to bless us.

What are we really asking for? What do we mean? What are we expecting God to do? What do we expect to happen in our own experience?

[6 : 03] Well, it is when he starts this sermon that Jesus is really saying, this is how to be blessed. You want God to bless you? You want your life to be a blessed life? Well, he says there is no other way than this way.

And I will start off my sermon by showing you that necessary blessedness of the Christian. Now there are eight blessings, or beatitudes, as we call them, that are here recorded from the lips of Christ. Each of these blessings, these principles of life, are purposely set down and purposely arranged by Christ to contradict what the world is asking for, what the world is looking for, the standards that the world sets for itself.

And we'll see these, and we'll see these as we go along one by one. But it's this sense in which Jesus sets the principles of the Christian life over and against the standards of this world. It is the utter differentness between them.

First of all, tonight I want us to look at the blessings of spiritual poverty and spiritual mourning. Taking two of these blessings at a time.

First of all, can we think of the recognition of spiritual poverty? When Jesus says, blessed are the poor in spirit, what has he said? What would his hearers have understood, either immediately or on reflection on this?

[7 : 44] He's not suggesting, is he? That people who are poor in this world, who materially speaking, financially speaking, that they are actually, that there is something happy about their state, that they are blessed in any way, particularly?

I don't think we could ever really, honestly imagine that. Some people may take vows of poverty, as if there were some great virtue in doing so, as an end in itself. I do not think so. Nor did Christ think so. He wasn't speaking about material poverty as something that was essentially blessed.

He himself became poor, but that was for other reasons. It was in order that we ultimately may become rich. He is not saying that all those who are poor in the world, the famine people, the starving persons, multitudes of this world, or the people who are unemployed, the people who simply do not have enough to make reasonable ends meet.

We are not saying that there is anything wonderful about that poverty. Christ is not saying it. He is speaking here not about material, but about spiritual poverty. And that is what we must centre on here. The blessings of God begin at the level of our spiritual poverty.

Christ is not saying it. What do we mean? We mean people who have and who recognise their own spiritual emptiness. That is what Jesus is saying.

[9 : 24] That people who realise that they have nothing at all to offer to God of any worth, of any value. People who recognise that, spiritually speaking, they are bankrupt.

They have nothing to their credit. They are in fact in debt. They are in debt. They are owing God. Now, this is a statement that is otherwise taken up by the various writers in the Scripture, under the authorship, the oversight, authorship of the Holy Spirit.

And in various ways, the Scripture writers have explained to us that every person, under the sun, is spiritually bankrupt before God. Everybody is spiritually poor. None of us have anything meaningful to contribute to God.

But, Jesus says, it is a question of recognising our state. That is an important thing. Of actually coming to grips, of coming to terms with the fact that we are empty, that we are poor in spirit.

That we have nothing to offer God, but that we need God. God. Galvan says that the person, the man who is poor in spirit, is he who is reduced to nothing in himself, but who relies wholly on the mercy of God.

[10 : 56] Now, it is a sense of our own nothingness, and of our own emptiness, and of our own nakedness, spiritually, that is the beginning of blessings. It is here that we come into the kingdom.

It is here that God begins, if you like, to make sense to us. You see, what Jesus is doing here, not only in this particular blessing, this particular beatitude, but throughout.

He is putting his blessing on character. Not on your condition. He is not saying, happy are the rich, which is what the world sees.

The rich are happy. Those who have everything going for them, they are the really good ones. They are the ones that are getting on in the world. They are doing well for themselves. They will be happy. Jesus does not say that. He is not laying happiness or blessingness on the condition in which a man is, but rather on the character that a man possesses.

It is what a man is, what a woman is, what a person is before God that matters. It is not what they have.

[12 : 05] It is not even who he is. It is what he is. And if a person is poor in spirit before God and recognises their own poverty, their own emptiness, then that is what matters.

That is what God will bless. You remember the story of the prodigal son, as we so call him.

The younger of the two sons that Jesus tells of that particular parable as Luke records it for us. We remember how he went away to the far country.

The only job he had once his own immediate cash supply ran out was to get a job feeding pigs. And the best food he could get was that he would himself want to eat out of the pigs' trough.

Now it is when this man, after having everything going for him and wanting to carve out his own career in the world, he would not have thought of his father who was left behind, that this man when he came to an end of himself, then he recognised his emptiness.

[13 : 16] Before that it had never dawned on him. But the fact was that the day that that son collected all his cash, his family share of the inheritance from his father, he was just as poor as the day that he woke up to himself.

But the thing, the difference was that he never realised it until he was empty of himself. Until he came to an end of himself. Now this is always the first stage in a person coming to God to be blessed, isn't it?

You know it, those of you who are here as Christians tonight, you know it through your own experience. I am not asking how you came in detail, it doesn't matter. Or how quickly or how gradually you grew into Christ.

But what matters is this, that at some stage in your own experience you realise your emptiness, your nothingness. And it's only then that Christ could become meaningful to you.

It's only then that God could bless you. But I want to ask this question of everyone in this room tonight. Have we come to this stage for ourselves initially, for the first time?

[14 : 26] Have we come here to the place where we recognise that we are spiritually poor? We are coming to that time of the year which is revered in Scotland.

The time when Rabbi Burns is particularly remembered. One of his poems or part of his poems has been taken over in a Christian sense.

Perhaps the purists of Burn supporters wouldn't appreciate it. But it goes like this. So that God the gift would give us to see ourselves as God to see us.

It's not only to see ourselves as we think we are. It's not only to see ourselves as other people evaluate us. It's to see ourselves as the pure eyes of God behold us.

In our emptiness. Our utter nakedness. Our nothingness. You know it's only when we come here. Only when we recognise that we are poor in spirit that the blessings begin.

[15 : 31] It's then that we cry out to God. As you remember that, that man cried in the temple. Not the Pharisee who stood there and boasted about how wonderful he was.

But the other man who stood afar off. Somewhere perhaps in a dark corner where nobody would notice him. And he couldn't even lift up his eyes to look towards heaven. But he cried out of the sheer genuineness and agony of his heart.

God be merciful to me, the sinner. And you know that man went home justified rather than the other.

He went home blessed of God. Because there was a man who was poor in spirit. But a man whom God was ready to bless. We sang the words in Psalm 34.

This poor man cried. God heard. And it is that tremendous truth. That when out of our poverty we realise it and we cry out to God.

[16 : 31] He will see us. And he will hear us. And he will answer us. And he will bless us. Now it is this essential first step. The recognition of our spiritual poverty.

A person who has never come to that stage. Has never and can never come to Christ. Can we put it this way also.

There is in linking these two verses. These two blessings together. Which I think we have some right to do. We can think of the second one under the terms of the companion of spiritual poverty.

What Jesus calls spiritual mourning. Blessed are those who mourn. Now what is described for us here.

Not only in these two verses. But in these eight blessings running together. It is not eight different people. With eight different kinds of lifestyle. Or eight different stages of spiritual progress.

[17 : 35] It is rather the variations of the one character of the one life. And what we are saying here is this. That the person who is spiritually poor. Is the person also who will grieve over the fact.

The person who realises their emptiness. And who realises their sin. Is a person who will mourn their sin before God. Now can I stress the fact that each of these refers to spiritual characteristics.

What I mean is this. I don't know about you and your own experience. But I remember. Thankfully I haven't been to many funerals of late. But I remember when I used to attend them far more frequently.

And one would hear the words sometimes by a minister. To try to vainly comfort the bereaved. Grieving family who were gathered. He would say blessed are those who mourn.

And I have often thought to myself. That many as a family. And many a poor widower. Widower. A bereft. Never felt any blessing then. And perhaps could look with no certainty.

[18 : 44] To any blessing thereafter. There is no essential blessingness. In bereavement as such in this world. It may be yes.

God will certainly comfort his own people. He will certainly give us comfort concerning those. Who belong to Christ. And who have gone to be with Christ. Which is far better. But in and of itself.

There is no universal guarantee. That whenever someone has a broken heart. That God is going to comfort them. And take it away. Jesus is not speaking here about the mourning of bereavement.

Which is perhaps the mourning that we are best acquainted with. He is not speaking about anything that touches on our physical or our material life. He is speaking here about our spiritual character.

And our spiritual state before God. The character of spiritual mourning. If our mourning is as a result of a loss.

[19 : 46] I believe it is the loss of our righteousness. It is not a loss of anything or even a person in this world.

It is rather the fact that we have lost our original righteousness. We have lost our belonging to God. We have lost our place with God. We have lost the entitlement to the blessing of God.

And we grieve over that. That our sins have separated between us and our God. We mourn simply over our own sinfulness.

Over the reality of the fact that we carry with us. And I am saying this to Christian folks. To born again people. We carry within us a body of death.

We carry within us that principle that wars against the principle of life and of the spirit. That where we would do good evil is present with us. So that the things that we want to do we cannot do.

[20 : 50] And it is the things that we don't want to do that we find ourselves doing. Now it is this reality of our own sinfulness that is ever living with us. And Paul could say that quite unashamedly.

As a Christian yes as an advanced and as a mature Christian. Now that is not the end of the story. But it is a necessary beginning of the story. It is the fact that as Christian people.

We face our own sinfulness as a reality. And if that is true for the person who has come to be justified through the blood of Christ.

It is true all the more and more horrifically. More desperately. For the person who has never come near Christ to be justified. What I mean is this. That the person who has never asked Jesus to save them and to forgive them.

Is a person also who carries his sinfulness. And when they waking up to see the emptiness of their own life. Of their own soul. May they weep also over the fact.

[21 : 56] That they are sinners against God. Now this is a sorrow. That Jesus recommends. It is a sorrow that Jesus is asking us to share.

This sorrow of repentance. Not to be repented of. As the apostle put it. You know some people may argue that.

As far as Christians are concerned. We ought not to be. Particularly bemoaning our sins. And certainly we ought not to be confessing. The same old sins.

All the time. And I largely agree with that in one sense. I wouldn't want simply to be going over old ground. And old scores.

That God has settled with us. Long ago. He has settled the old account. And yet it is an ongoing sinfulness of our Christian lives.

[22 : 55] That we have to come to terms with. It is that that we have to mourn over. And not only as individual Christians. But Jesus I would say here is speaking. In essence to the church.

That the church today has to face up to its. Its corporate responsibility towards God. That is our corporate sins. That have separated between us and God. Our corporate sins.

That are withholding the presence and the blessing of God. It is of what we are together. You remember what happened in the camp of Israel. After they had gone across.

Into the place of promise. The land of promise. And they had gone to Jericho. And they had defeated Jericho. They had conquered. They were winners.

But then they moved on to Ai. And they couldn't win. They were defeated themselves in turn. Why? Because one man amongst the group. Had sinned against the Lord God in that situation.

[23 : 51] The man called Ahim. You know the story. Now there it is. How the blessing of God may be withheld. And may be removed from God's people.

From God's church collectively. Simply because of the sin that attaches within his ranks. Not by everybody. But by some. Either way.

Whether we are looking at ourselves individually. Or whether we are looking at ourselves together. Collectively. We have to come to terms with this fact of our own. What we are.

In God's sight. As God sees us. You remember Isaiah. When he went.

Into the temple. Or had that vision. Of within the temple. It was a vision. It was a vision far beyond that. It was a vision into the very presence of God. When he saw the angels.

[24 : 48] The seraphim. Covering themselves. And crying out. Holy. Holy. Holy. Is the Lord God Almighty. God. And it is. This vision of the holiness.

And the glory of God. That Isaiah. Could only respond from himself. I am ruined. The only thing he saw. Alongside God's holiness.

And the purity of angels. And glory. Was his own sin. Now I don't think. That that is a one off experience. And I don't think. That even in Isaiah's case. It was a conversion experience.

As such. I believe he was converted. Before that. And it is rather. This sense. Of our own. Unworthiness. Of the reality. Of what our sin is.

In God's sight. You know. I think there is a problem. Within our Christian life. And it's. One that's perhaps been. Imported. To us. And urged on us. More and more.

[25 : 43] In these days. In that Christians. Ought to be people. Who are characterized. Somehow or other. By laughter. And smiles. That if the Christian life. Is all that it's cracked up to be.

That that we ought to demonstrate. With some. Great. Gospel grin. Forever and a day. But that is not. What Jesus says. It is not how he views.

The blessed people. It is not how he sees. The progress of Christian life. And of Chris. The purpose. Of Christian. Growth. It is rather this. It is blessed.

Are those who mourn. There is a place. A necessary place. A very legitimate place. In our Christian experience.

For breaking our hearts. Before God. A place for grief. A place for tears. And the years. What have we sung. In Psalm 51. That the broken.

[26 : 39] And a contrite heart. Lord. You will not. Despise. Indeed. The psalm says earlier. That it is a special. Sacrifice. With which God. Is well pleased. Sometimes.

Perhaps. We want to offer God. Things that he doesn't really want. But what he does want. What does make God happy. Is when we grieve. Over our own sin. When we come to that end. Of ourselves. When we come to the stage. When we can mourn.

When we come to the stage. When we can mourn. You know. Going back to the case. Of the prodigal son. Was it not like this. In his own experience. It is only when he came to terms. With himself. When he saw. His own spiritual poverty.

That then he mourned. He mourned. He mourned. He mourned. In the sense. That he was unworthy. To come back to his father. He wasn't fit. To be a member. Of his father's family.

He saw. That he had. In a sense. By his own sinfulness. That he had. Forfeited any rights. Towards his father. And so.

[27 : 34] In a sense. A sense. In a sense. By his own sinfulness. That he had. Forfeited any rights. Towards his father. To his father. And so.

his father. And so it is with every person in this world when they come to terms with their own emptiness. They can lay no claim on God as such. The only way that can be brought in is by his grace. But when we see ourselves, when we realise how poor we are, all that we have any right to do is to mourn that fact. But what was his mourning? His mourning was this, that he was sorry for his sins. Not in any superficial way, but in a deep, lasting way. A way in which he turned round immediately from his own situation, from the sight that he had of his own lostness, of his own emptiness, and even of his own grief. And despite the fact that he knew he had no right to go to his father, he turned round from his sin and he went to his father. Now that is what the mourning here that Jesus is describing. It is really this sorrow of repentance. It is the whole theology of repentance. What does it mean to repent? It means to turn our backs on ourselves, on our emptiness, on our sinfulness.

And to turn round and to go to our father. To go to God. You know, what Jesus is describing here is the character of those who are in Christ. Those who see their own poverty spiritually.

Those who are able to mourn over their own poverty before God. To repent. To turn to him. Now these are the beginnings of Christian experience. But these, as I suggested, are also the ongoing characteristic, the reality of our Christian experience. As well. We never become rich in ourselves. We become rich as Christians. But only through the blessings of Christ poured us. In ourselves we are always spiritually bankrupt. In ourselves we are always only to mourn our own sinfulness. And repent of what we see in our lives that is wrong and inconsistent with what God asks. And to turn round and to go to our father. I ask you, tonight, if you see your own sin, it may be quite possible for you to think of somebody else and perhaps to think of their own failings of character and their own sin in your own estimation. But it's not that. Do you see your own poverty of spirit? And are you able to mourn over the fact that you have nothing to offer to God?

Does it grieve you? Now can I look last, and just very briefly, at the actual blessings themselves. The blessings of spiritual poverty, and they are really quite brief. What are they? They are this, that we come to Christ and we receive the kingdom.

[31 : 06] Now that is a blessing that Jesus wants for us. Spiritual poverty, he says, is the only way into the kingdom of God. It's there that we discover true riches.

We discover what real wealth is. For then you belong to Christ. And as Jesus puts it here, not only do you belong to him, but the kingdom belongs to you. And you notice the way he stated, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. It's not simply that you become part of the kingdom, but the kingdom belongs to you.

Christ himself belongs to you. And all that Christ has to offer to you. Now there is a lot in this very phrase itself of the kingdom of heaven, which we are not going to try to unfold right now.

Except to say this, that it is the rule of Christ within our own lives. Where he is king, where he rules, then we are blessed. And that we see unfolded as we go through this sermon on the mount.

But it is as we come and as we see our spiritual poverty, that as we come to Christ, we receive the kingdom. We have a place in the kingdom.

- [32 : 27] You remember the prodigal son. We will go back to yet another stage of his own special experience. And yet it is not special because it is quite universal. That when he saw his poverty, he mourned. But when he mourned, he returned to his father. And when he returned to his father, he received from his father forgiveness.

He received a welcome into the home. We may even say that he was rewarded, not for anything that he could bring back to his father, because he had nothing but the rags that he was standing in.

But he was rewarded nevertheless with a party, with a fatted calf, with great rejoicing. Because his father was so delighted to see the son who had once been lost.

And you know, the blessing of our own spiritual poverty and our spiritual mourning is simply this. That we discover God again. That we discover the blessings of God in our own experience.

It is when we come and we are broken hearted before God, he is never to leave us in such a state. He doesn't expect Christians to be the kind of people who are going through this, a sort of self-imposed agony just for the sake of it.

- [33 : 43] He is wanting to bless us. And it is when we have come to an end of ourselves, when we see our sinfulness, when we break our heart before God, when we come to God again, and then he opens up the blessings to us and we see just how well off we really are.

We come to Christ, we receive the kingdom. There is another blessing. We experience the comfort of God's forgiveness and God's renewal.

This is a blessing that Jesus speaks of in the second instance. This is the comfort that he means. It's not simply a wee pat on the head to say, Now, now, everything will be alright when we know deep within ourselves that everything is not alright.

That is not the kind of comfort he is speaking about. It's this kind of comfort that God actually takes away our past. He covers over our inconsistencies. He delivers us from the very power of our own sinful bias.

He makes us new people. We are remade in his presence. Now, as I say, this happens the very first time that a person comes to Christ. The first time a person repents before God.

- [34 : 56] But it's not a one-off thing alone. Repentance itself is ongoing, as surely as our sin is. And so is the blessing of God. So is this experience of comfort.

Of the comfort of forgiveness and of renewal. You know how David in that well-known shepherd's psalm speaks of the fact that he restores my soul.

Part of the shepherd's activity. That is not a one-off, is it? It is something that happens to us regularly. It is part of our ongoing experience as Christians.

This sense of forgiveness and of renewal. But that forgiveness and renewal can only be ours. When we recognise our sin.

And when we turn from it. Only then. I wonder if as Christian people. We are coming to terms with the fact that we need.

- [35 : 58] Not a sense of status or prestige within the Christian church. But that we need to see our emptiness. That we need to see our poverty. We need to feel it for ourselves.

We need to know it for ourselves. And that when we see it and know it we may mourn. And turn to God. You know for those who are not Christians.

As I said already. This is the only road into Christ. And into his kingdom. Is to come to terms with yourself. Ask that God will make you to see your poverty.

He is not ever going to hold a grudge against you. Jesus isn't interested in simply holding up our sins forever before us. To give us a guilty conscience eternally in the sight of God.

It is not that. Jesus has come to deliver us from that sin. And to deliver us from the guilt of our own conscience. And if you really feel that you are not fit for God.

[36 : 58] And not fit for Christ. All the better. It may not be the happiest experience at the time. But when God makes us see our own poverty spiritually. When he makes us mourn.

And he makes us ask him for forgiveness and renewal. Then he will forgive us. Then he will renew us. Then we are blessed.

May God himself help us. Not only to know the words. But to have the experience. Blessed are those who are poor in spirit.

For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn. For they will be comforted. May God bless his truth to us.

May we bow our heads and our hearts together in prayer. Lord you know.

[37 : 57] Exactly what is in our hearts. Lord you know. What is in our lives. Lord you know. What we think of ourselves.

We pray Lord that you would show us. Not what we imagine. We are. But what we really are. Lord that you would show us the emptiness.

And the poverty. So that we may see it. That we may turn from it. And that we may know then. Your forgiveness.

And your renewal. And your acceptance. And your great blessing. Our God we do pray that you would help us. And may your spirit apply this truth to us.

That we may live it out. And that we may be blessed by it. For Jesus sake. Amen.