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Matthew 5.3 - 1st Beatitude



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this presentation, Steve Gregg discusses the first Beatitude found in Matthew 5:3. He explains that when Jesus said "Blessed are the poor in spirit," he meant that it is enviable to evaluate oneself in terms of spirituality and righteousness and see oneself as having nothing to congratulate oneself for. Gregg emphasizes the importance of humility, repentance, and surrendering to the Lord for salvation. He also touches on the difference between the terms "kingdom of God" and "kingdom of heaven," both mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount.

Transcript

A few weeks ago we began a study through the Book of Matthew, and we have now come to one of the most intriguing portions of the Book of Matthew, and that is his version of the Sermon on the Mount. I say his version of the Sermon because there is a sermon similar to it in Luke, which is different in some respects, but very similar. Similar enough, indeed, that some have thought it is two different versions of the same sermon.

Others have felt that Jesus taught two very similar sermons on different occasions. It is not necessary for us to decide between these two options in looking at them and seeking to understand what Jesus had to say. However, it is clear that both sermons begin with a series of statements, which are usually called Beatitudes.

A Beatitude is a statement of blessedness, really, a statement of blessing on a certain class of persons or on a certain person. And the Beatitudes in Matthew chapter 5 and verse 3 begin with this statement, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Now, the kingdom of heaven is a very prominent theme in Jesus' teaching.

Throughout the Book of Matthew you will find repeated reference to the kingdom of heaven. And he makes it very clear, Jesus does, that the kingdom is what we should all desire more than all other things. In fact, later in this same sermon, in Matthew chapter 6 and verse 33, he says, But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be added unto you.

So, the kingdom is that which we are to seek first. Now, you may have noticed there was

a difference in wording there, because in Matthew 5, verse 3 it says, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven, whereas Matthew 6, verse 33 says, Seek first the kingdom of God. And therefore, we have in one passage the expression, kingdom of God, and the other, kingdom of heaven.

And there have been a variety of theories among Christians as to what difference may lie between these two expressions, kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven. Suffice it to say, that when you turn to the parallel passage, the parallel beatitude, in Luke chapter 6, verse 20, it says, Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. So, where Matthew has the term, theirs is the kingdom of heaven, the parallel statement in Luke is, yours is the kingdom of God.

So, the kingdom of heaven and kingdom of God are apparently being used interchangeably. And that is the way it is throughout, actually, the Gospels. You'll find that the term, kingdom of heaven, is found only in Matthew's Gospel.

You will not find it in the other Gospels. Kingdom of heaven. However, the other Gospels, when they're recording the same statements of Jesus, as Matthew does when he refers to kingdom of heaven, the other Gospels use the term, kingdom of God, in those same places.

So, it's obvious that Matthew was using the term, kingdom of heaven, in a way that is synonymous with kingdom of God in other passages. So, we will not dicker about fine points of meaning about these two expressions. It would appear that kingdom of heaven, in Scripture, and kingdom of God are simply interchangeable terms, as seen by the various use by the different evangelists in the Gospels.

And we can see that in Matthew also. Not only does Jesus speak of the kingdom as the kingdom of God in Matthew 5, excuse me, kingdom of heaven in Matthew 5, and the kingdom of God in Matthew 6, but we find in Matthew 19 that Jesus uses the two expressions interchangeably in the course of two successive verses. Jesus was approached by a rich man, and he gave the man the terms of discipleship, and he was not prepared to pay them, so he went away sorrowful.

And Jesus made an interesting comment, as the rich man went away unwilling to make the sacrifice necessary. In Matthew 19, and verse 23, Jesus said to his disciples, Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

Now notice twice he mentions how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom. In two successive verses, however, Matthew 19, verses 23 and 24, the term is called kingdom of heaven and then kingdom of God. It's the same kingdom and same statement.

It's simply that the two terms are interchangeable. So when we find in the gospel of Matthew the term kingdom of heaven, and that is of course the only book of the Bible that we will find the expression in, we can substitute, if we wished, the term kingdom of God, because that is equivalent. So Jesus said, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven, or the kingdom of God.

They possess it. It is theirs. What is the kingdom of God? Well, the kingdom of God is the main theme of Jesus' teaching.

Even before Jesus appeared, John the Baptist preached that the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven, was at hand. And then Jesus taught the same thing. And throughout his teaching you will find frequent, central place given to the subject of the kingdom.

Now Jesus taught that he was coming to initiate or inaugurate a kingdom. And this because he was the king. And a kingdom is simply the domain ruled over by a king.

Now, Jesus never did rule over an earthly domain with geographical perimeters that could be measured or mapped. He never has had that kind of a kingdom. Not since the days of Israel, at least, but since the time Jesus came.

The kingdom of God has been a global phenomenon. And his subjects are in many countries. The kingdom of Christ is identified with his people, whoever they may be.

They are his subjects. They are his kingdom. Christ reigns in the hearts of believers, of Christians.

And those who truly take his kingship seriously, or we might substitute the word lordship seriously, are the ones of whom it is said they are his kingdom, and they possess his kingdom. So this is how we are to understand, I believe, the kingdom of God. And there are those who possess it, and there are those who do not.

Now, Jesus said that the poor in spirit possess the kingdom of God. And for that reason, they are blessed. The word blessed means fortunate or happy, to be envied.

These people are enviable because they possess the kingdom of God. Which to possess is to possess all other necessary things too. Since Jesus said if you seek the kingdom of God and find it, you will have all other things added to you as well.

That is, all other necessary things. To be in the kingdom of God is to be in an eternal kingdom. And Paul says in Colossians 1 and verse 13 that Christians have been translated out of the kingdom, or out of the power of darkness, and into the kingdom of God's own dear son.

So we have been translated into the kingdom if we are Christians. And these beatitudes describe the attitudes and dispositions and frame of mind and behavior of those who are

in the kingdom. And the first point that is made in the first beatitude is that these people are poor in spirit.

Now, what does it mean poor in spirit? We know what it means to be poor if we don't modify it with the word in spirit. What does it mean to be poor? Well, it means to possess very little, or going down all the way to nothing. If you own nothing, you are poor.

Now, the word poor that is used here is the word for total indigence, for total poverty. It is the word that would be used to describe a beggar. A person who is a beggar would be called the poor in this particular Greek word that is used in the New Testament.

And we don't know exactly which Aramaic word Jesus used, but his teachings have come down to us in a Greek translation, and we must trust that the Greek words adequately reflect what Jesus said, even though he spoke a different language. So what we could translate this verse to be saying would be, blessed are the beggars in spirit. That is, those who are in terms of their own spiritual condition and spiritual assets, beggars.

Now, why would someone be enviable if that is their case? One might think that the person who had a great deal to commend himself spiritually would be the one that Jesus would commend. We do have, for example, men in Jesus' own day who would have viewed themselves as anything but beggars in terms of spirituality. They considered themselves rich in spirituality.

And those men were the people called the Pharisees. And these people were very religious, very circumspect. They kept a great number of religious laws that other people did not keep.

And they were quite proud of themselves for doing so, as a matter of fact. We have an example given by Jesus over in Luke chapter 18 of the attitude of a Pharisee. And there it is contrasted with the attitude of a man who was not religious at all, a man who is a publican or a tax collector, which, of course, in Jewish society was one of the lowest, most disrespected among the religious because a tax collector was one who had gone to work for the Romans, who were considered to be the enemy of Israel.

The Romans were the oppressors of Israel who collected taxes from Israel. And those Jewish men who had gone to work for the Romans to collect taxes were considered not only to be irreligious men, but traitors to the nation and traitors against God. So a man who is a publican or a tax collector did not pretend to be religious.

He did not think himself to be spiritually rich or to have anything to offer God. The Pharisees, on the other hand, had just the opposite attitude. And Jesus tells this story in Luke 18, verses 10 through 14.

It says, two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank you that I am

not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week.

I give tithes of all that I possess. And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, God, be merciful to me, a sinner. I tell you, Jesus says, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other.

For everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. Now that is a principle that Jesus teaches. Everyone who exalts himself, whoever promotes himself, whoever propels himself forward and brags about himself and seeks glory for himself, that person will be brought low, Jesus said.

But the person who humbles himself and truly takes a low opinion of himself, that person will be exalted. It says in both 1 Peter and also in the book of James, it says that God resists the proud man, but gives grace to the humble. Now notice these two men.

What a contrast there is. Two religious types. One is a religious person, one is an irreligious person.

And the religious person is congratulating himself that he's not like the irreligious people, like this tax collector here. And he reminds God of all the good things that he himself has done for God. He fasts, he gives his tithes, he keeps the law.

God should be pleased. God should be enriched by having this man on his side. The man feels that God is really fortunate to have a man like him, following him.

Now the other man, the tax collector, he can't make any such boast. He didn't pay tithes, he didn't fast twice a week, he didn't keep the law. He was a total sinner, an outcast from religious society.

And yet he was a man who knew he needed the mercy of God. And he simply cried as he beat his breast, God be merciful to me, a sinner. The wonderful thing about this story is that Jesus said it's this latter man who went down to his house justified.

Now the word justified means viewed as righteous. That God viewed this man, the tax collector, as more righteous than the Pharisee. Now how can this be? The tax collector had done not one righteous deed, but he was a beggar.

He was a beggar in spirit. Jesus said, blessed are the beggars in spirit. And the reason for this is simply this, that no matter how much religious work we do, we still need the mercy of God, because God has such high standards of perfection that he demands that none of us can measure up to them.

And if we feverishly go about doing religious actions and good works day in and day out

in order to somehow measure up to some standard that we think God is requiring of us, we will not measure up. It is too far. It is too much.

Perfection is beyond our reach. We are sinners. And because we are sinners, we are earthbound.

We can't ascend into heaven. There's a limit to how high you can jump. And there's a limit to how far you can go toward becoming perfect in your own works.

The Pharisees tried very hard by keeping a lot of religious rules and making quite a few sacrifices. But it was not anywhere near enough. The problem with this religiosity is that those who do these works often think that they are close to the mark or even have reached it.

Now this is the biggest problem. A man who is very religious, a man who does many good works, needs the mercy of God as much as a man who has done no good works. You see, if you and I decided to have a jumping contest, and you were able to jump, let's say I was able to jump two feet off the ground, and you were able to jump two and a half feet off the ground, you might congratulate yourself that you had exceeded me, that you had done much better than I had in jumping.

But if it turns out that the contest was to see which of us could jump over a house, well, neither of us managed that, and neither of us even came close. And for that reason, it's not possible that you could congratulate yourself at jumping two and a half feet instead of two feet, because the distance you did not make is the distance that matters, and you came pitifully short of that. Likewise, what God requires of us in order that we be accepted in his sight is that we be perfect.

And yet, through the best efforts of any of us, we cannot attain perfection. We can become a little more religious or much more religious than we were before. We can do a great number of good deeds, but none of these will make us perfect.

And because of that, we need to call out to God for mercy. No matter how good we are, we are not good enough. Now, the problem with being as religious as a Pharisee is that you sometimes fool yourself into thinking that you have attained to what God wants, and that you are somehow better than others.

Even though you have fallen short just as others have, you congratulate yourself that you are doing well, and you compare yourself with others. You see, the problem with the Pharisee was he compared himself with the publican. Now, it says in 2 Corinthians 10, Paul said, In comparing themselves among themselves they are not wise.

That's 2 Corinthians 10 and 12. To compare yourself with other people in order to arrive at some self-assessment or self-esteem is a foolish thing to do, because on the Day of Judgment, God's not going to compare you with some other person. He's going to

compare you with His standard of perfection, which is seen in Jesus.

And therefore, to compare your righteousness or your behavior, your religiosity, against that of somebody else is a fool's errand. It makes no sense at all. It'll not yield any information of value to you.

You might be able to convince yourself that you're more religious than somebody else, or that you have fewer failures than somebody else, but that's irrelevant to the subject of your salvation. What is relevant to the subject of your salvation is, when God judges you, will He be able to say, You are perfect in my sight. And if not, then you're in as much trouble as is the person that you're favorably comparing yourself against.

Now, for that reason, being rich in spirit, being very religious and exact in religious things, is not an advantage, necessarily, in itself. In so far as it convinces you that you are really okay with God because you do these things, you are being ripped off. The person who is a beggar in spirit, the person who knows that he has nothing to contribute, the person who knows exactly where he stands with God and realizes that he's a pensioner on God's mercy 100%, that no matter what he may do, good or bad, he will always fall short of what God requires for us to be saved, that person is better off because that person will cry out for mercy if he does anything.

At least he will not stand before God and congratulate himself. This publican, this tax collector, just said, God be merciful to me, a sinner. That's exactly what the Pharisee needed to say too, but he didn't see himself as a sinner.

He didn't see himself as one who needs mercy. He was nobody's beggar. And this is the important thing.

When Jesus said, blessed are the beggars in spirit, what he means is that you are an enviable person if when you evaluate yourself in terms of spirituality and righteousness, you see yourself as having nothing to congratulate yourself for, you see yourself as having nothing by which God is enriched by having you in his church or on his side, you just see yourself as a beggar, one who's completely dependent on the generosity of others. And the other one, in this case, is God. If you see yourself as completely dependent on the grace and mercy and generosity of God for your salvation, you, like this tax collector, may go down to your house justified.

Now, the reason this is possible, of course, is because it's not because God just doesn't care anything about sin and he'll overlook it if you cry for mercy. If your cry is sincere, he will forgive your sin. But he will do so because of what Jesus has done.

Jesus died for our sins, and the Bible says this about that. In 2 Corinthians 5, verse 21, it says, He who knew no sin, meaning Jesus, became sin for us that we might become the righteousness of God in him. There's a strange transaction that takes place when we cry

out for mercy to God and when we put our faith in Jesus Christ, and that is that our sins, many as they are, are counted as if they were his.

And when he died, his death for our sins is counted as if we had died for our sins, which is a wonderful thing because the Bible says the wages of sin is death, and where there's sin, there must be death. But you can either die for your own sins, which is you won't be saved if you do that, or you can have Jesus died for your sins. And this, of course, is realized when you turn to Christ, when you repent of your sin, when you put your faith in him and humbly cry out for mercy and acknowledge yourself to be really unworthy and needing him as your Savior and surrendering to him as your Lord.

When you come into this kind of relationship with him, not only is your sin counted as if it was his, and that he died for your sins and you died, as it were, through your representative, him, and you no longer face a death penalty in the future, but also it says in Scripture that his rightness, his justice, his righteousness, his perfection is counted as being yours. When you stand before God on the Day of Judgment, nothing short of perfection on your account will matter at all. And that is why doing religious works won't save anybody, because you can do many good works, but they still fall short of perfection.

The only way you can hope to stand before God and not fall short of perfection is to have the perfection of Jesus counted on your record. The Bible says of Abraham, Abraham believed in the Lord and it was counted to him for righteousness. And the New Testament says if we believe in Jesus Christ, if we put our trust in him, if we make him our Lord and Savior, then his righteousness will be counted to us as if it is ours.

We will stand before God and be treated and viewed by him as if we had in fact measured up, as if we in fact had been perfect, which he requires. Not because of anything we've really done, but because of what Jesus has done for us and his perfection is imputed to us. And so, we're out of time for today's broadcast, but we will talk about the next beatitude next time.

That would be tomorrow. I hope that you'll be able to join us. And we will go through all of these beatitudes rather slowly, and then we'll pick up the speed a little bit as we get to the rest of the Sermon on the Mount.

And, of course, we'll take whatever passages in Matthew at whatever rate they seem to require. And we're going slowly through these because they are deep. We'll talk to you again next time.