

King Jesus Defines Righteousness – Pt. 1

Matt. 5:1-12

Intro. Matthew **chaps. 5-7** is commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. It's one of the most loved portions of the NT and the first of five discourses Matthew included in His Gospel account. Like the Bill of Rights, the Beatitudes are the preamble to what some have called "*The King's Manifesto.*" This AM I want to set the stage for understanding the eight Beatitudes in **vs. 3-12**. After we set the stage, I want to consider just the first Beatitude. Then God willing and the snow don't fall, the next two Sunday's we'll consider the remaining seven. Unfortunately, the Beatitudes are among the most misunderstood messages Jesus gave. Before I say anymore, let's read the passage and pray.

5:1-12 - 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. 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 sons 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. PRAY

1. The meaning of the Beatitudes - The word beatitude comes from the Latin, *beatus* which signifies *a declaration of blessing*. There are several views regarding the meaning of the Beatitudes and this is an important question to for us to settle right upfront. Some say the Beatitudes present the plan of salvation...rules to obey if you want to get into the kingdom. Others claim the Beatitudes present a charter for world peace. In other words, if we would all lock arms and march in step with these principles, conflict could be eliminated and peace would reign on earth. Still others claim the Beatitudes are not for today but describe conditions in the coming Millennial Kingdom. Each of these four views are biblically incorrect and I'll give a short answer to explain why. First, salvation is not by works but by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Amen? Second, to claim the Beatitudes are a charter for world peace sound's nice but they would be as meaningless as Rodney King who he said, "*Can't we all get along?*" Third, the audience who first heard the Beatitudes were not in the Millennium nor are we. The Beatitudes echo standards found throughout the OT which are then repeated in the rest of the NT. In seminal form, the entire theology of the NT is contained in these 8 Beatitudes. So if these standards are not for today, when do they apply?...or are they just hypothetical like "Never-never Land?"

The reason some seem passionate to relegate the Beatitudes to some other day and some other time is because they're so challenging. Most people would rather talk about behaviors than attitudes or core issues. Is it safe to say we tend to be rather superficial? We'd rather talk about what was done instead of why? On vacation one summer, I read Larry Crab's book called Inside Out. It's a great book but it almost ruined my vacation! I almost tossed it in the campfire one night. But many dismiss the Sermon on the Mount because it's standard of righteousness seems so high and unreasonable. These chapters strip away self-righteousness and leave us naked, guilty, ashamed and light years from the glory of God. But as the addage goes..."*If the shoe fits, wear it!*" Do you approach God's truth with that kind of resolve? Or do you come to it more like a buffet where we pick and choose what we like and leave the rest? Do you ask God to confront your issues with His truth? Unlike any other book, God's Word has an uncanny ability to cut through the layers, expose secrets, and diagnose the condition of our hearts. **(Heb. 4:12)**

Another reason the Beatitudes are dismissed is because they seem so paradoxical and contrary to upward mobility and the way things work all around us. Jesus said, blessed are the poor in spirit / the mourners / the meek / the hungry and thirsty / the merciful / the pure / the peace-makers / the persecuted. The man on the street looks at the Beatitudes and says, *“What a bunch of losers! If somebody lived that way, he’d be bulldozed, run over and pulverized! The rules of the road in Flint, Michigan are self-assertion and winning by intimidation.”*

One Bible commentator made this comment about the radical nature of the Beatitudes...*“It’s as if Jesus crept into the display window of life and switched all the price tags.”* From the world’s perspective, God’s standards are entirely backwards. The world says, ‘Happy is the go-getter who pushes people around...Happy is the macho man who knows how to get his way and doesn’t take anything from anybody!...Happy are the rich, the famous, the noble, the popular. But Jesus turns all those values upside down. His portrait of Kingdom people is not what the world values or applauds. So what’s the truth in the midst of this controversy? What do the Beatitudes really represent? How should we take them and what bearing should they have on our lives today?...I’m glad you asked.

2. The Key to the Sermon on the Mount - The key to understanding the Sermon on the Mount is **Matt. 5:20 - For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.** The main theme of the Sermon on the Mount is **righteousness**. That’s why I’ve entitled this message and the next two, **Righteousness Defined**. Under the prevailing influence of their religious leaders, the Jews had an artificial form of righteousness based on law-keeping. They believed and taught that righteousness consists of doing right. Just do right. Just keep the Law. Though no one did right all the time, this was their basic formula. The Pharisees and Law teachers were poster boys for this legal righteousness. They piously strutted around town critical of everybody as though they were judge and jury. They elevated themselves as models of purity and perfection. But they were hypocrites...Jesus said so. Later, Jesus called them out. In **Matt. 23:27, 28** He said, **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.** By the way, the word, **woe** is polar opposite to the word, **blessed!** So Jesus spoke blessing to the crowd, but woe to the false teachers.

As we see in these verses, the Pharisees and Law teachers appeared righteous to the people. They looked holy and good. But like a freshly whitewashed tomb, Jesus said they looked beautiful on the outside but inside they smelled like death. Everything they did and said was choreographed to create the impression that they were the holy ones in town...they were the ones in touch with God. And the average person bought into it. They fell for their hypocrisy and were weighed down by their demands. Remember Jim Jones or David Koresh? These men were Pharisees and false teachers of the highest order. They created an “aura of spirituality” that was totally false. Like the followers of Jones and Koresh, some tried to imitate the Pharisees. They tried to be as holy as their teachers appeared to be. But most people (especially in Galilee) threw up their hands in defeat and resignation. They reasoned this way...*“if those guys represent the standards God requires, I can’t make the grade. So I give up. I’m going to Hell because that’s where all my friends are.”* Ever heard somebody say that? They really don’t want to go to Hell...they just don’t think they can make the grade. They need someone to tell them salvation is a gift to be received not a reward to be achieved.

Then Jesus came. Here’s what He said - **For I tell you that unless your righteousness sur-passes that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. (5:20)** For the average person, the strict rule-keeping of the Pharisees was more than they could bear. We expect Jesus to lighten the load and soon, He will.

But first Jesus said, “Listen...the load your teachers have dumped on you is heavy...but even their righteousness isn’t good enough to get them in! ...**unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.** So the average person who heard left totally dismayed. If the Pharisees (who appeared to be the most righteous people in town) can’t enter the kingdom of heaven...what chance do I have?

Are you with me? For a moment, think in terms of Olympic trials. Suppose you were a snow boarder. First you need to chew gum / have a baggy patchwork outfit made of a hi-tech waterproof fabric / have long flowing hair / be too cool for school / and have total disregard for safety. (The only reason I don’t do snowboarding is the hair thing.) But let’s suppose you’re a contestant...to qualify, you need to throw down a qualifying run with a score of not less than 75 out of a possible 100. Every boarder in the competition knows this, so each one is desperate to throw down a 75. But along comes an Olympic official with an announcement. He says, “*The new qualifying score is 99. No one with a score less than 99 will be allowed to compete for the gold.*” This wrecks everything! The highest score you ever heard of was 94 point something. You think you’re pretty good, but you have no chance of scoring a 99! That was the impact of what Jesus said in **Matt. 5:20**. It was defeating because it seemed impossible. You might as well grab your board and head home. Jesus yanked the rug out from under every self-righteous person who trusted their performance to get them into the kingdom.

3. The Purpose of the Sermon on the Mount - So what was the purpose for the Sermon on the Mount? It wasn’t given to exaggerate the kingdom’s entrance requirements. It was given to define God’s actual requirements in a way that disqualifies everybody!...including the Pharisees and Law teachers! Jesus wasn’t adding to the Law or making a new announcement...He was simply defining God’s Law which had been taught and applied incorrectly. Listen to **Heb.1:1, 2 - In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son...** The point made in these verses is this...the same God who spoke in the past has in these last days spoken to us by His Son...Jesus. The Beatitudes are the Word of God spoken by Jesus! Do they present a standard that is humanly impossible? Yes. Are they for today? Absolutely! Will they find fulfillment when Jesus comes to establish His Kingdom? Once again, be sure of it. The trouble is...most Christians haven’t taken them seriously.

So what motive did Jesus have for giving this definition of righteousness? In this amazing summation of God’s standards, Jesus raised the bar to a height no fallen human being can clear. God’s qualifying score isn’t 99...it’s a perfect score. It’s 100%...it’s perfection. It’s a performance without a single failure or flaw. We see that in **v. 48** where Jesus said, **Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.** So Jesus presented this impossible standard to convince us that rule-keeping is not God’s way. What the Pharisees believed and taught the people was all wrong. His purpose was to destroy self-righteousness and any notion that we can somehow be good enough or perform our way into His kingdom. The only way any sinner can get in to Christ’s Kingdom is by the mercy and grace of God.

So the Sermon on the Mount demolishes self-righteousness...but it does more than that. It shows how those in a right relationship with God will conduct their life. When God justifies or declares us righteous on the basis of His Son’s death, our lives will begin to change. Old attitudes / thoughts / habits / and ways must be put off so God can replace them with His righteousness. **I Jn. 2:29** says, **If you know that He is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of Him.** Christ’s salvation will show up in changed attitudes, words and behavior.

Have you seen Bear Grylls or any of those survival shows? They drop a survivalist guy in some remote part of the world and he has to find his way out. When they drop him off they want him to be totally lost.

The shows would have no suspense or appeal if they dropped him on Times Square or on the mall in Washington, DC. So he's deliberately taken to a wilderness spot where he must find his way out. In a similar way, the population of Galilee needed to feel lost before they could be rescued. They had to come to terms their sin before they would reach out for the righteousness Jesus offers as a gift. **5:20** declared Christ's purpose. Not only was the average person lost, but the most religious appearing clerics everybody looked up to were lost too! And no one as lost as we were...survivalist or not...ever makes it out by their own efforts.

So the standards declared in the Sermon on the Mount are high and completely unattainable for fallen people. They leave us helpless and gasping for breath. They present qualities that can be produced only as we surrender to Christ's Lordship and the enablement of His Spirit. In the energy of the flesh, they are impossible. Only the power of God can liberate us to live this way.

Now if you get this...you'll understand the Sermon on the Mount. We don't live this way to be saved... we can only live this way after we are saved. These 8 qualities blended together describe kingdom people who trust God's grace to save them and change them. Rule-keeping and performance is the broad road most people choose in their quest to be right with God. But Jesus said, "**Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.**" - **Matt. 7:13, 14** Later in **Jn. 10:9** He said, **I am the gate; whoever enters through Me will be saved.**

How did these words impact the crowd that first heard them? **7:28, 29** say, **When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.** The crowd was blown away! The truth sent their heads spinning. If Jesus stood among us this AM, the impact of His words would be no different. We'd rise in awe of His holiness. But we'd shrink down in our seats with a sense of our own unworthiness. Jesus would send us home utterly amazed with our apple carts turned over by the biggest dose of truth we'd ever encountered!

4. The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount - The setting is declared in **vs.1, 2. Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down.** The crowds are shown to be gathering in **4:23-25** especially **v. 25 - Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.** Many in the crowd were impressed by Christ's miracles and came out of curiosity. Others may have been drawn by sincere interest...they wanted to learn more about this preacher and performer of miracles. The setting for Christ's teaching was the low hills behind the region of Capernaum and the other fishing villages along the shore. This photo is believed to be the spot where the sermon was given. Unlike the typical amphitheater effect where the speaker is below his audience, Jesus spoke from the top of the hill to those below Him. This Hollywood re-enactment is inaccurate (as many are) because the verse says Jesus **sat down**. Christ's ability to be heard by so many involved an acoustical miracle. I think it was done to remind the people of the Lord who spoke from Mt. Sinai. Situated above the people was consistent with a message from heaven. So Jesus began to speak **to His disciples** in a miraculous way that allowed the whole crowd to hear.

5. The first and foundational Beatitude – v. 3 Notice that Jesus began His sermon with the word **blessed** which He used 9 x's in the Beatitudes. **Blessed** was also among the last words Jesus spoke from heaven. (**Rev. 22:7, 14**). The first and last words of Jesus were blessing...doesn't that tell us something? The word **blessed** is makarios in Greek. Makarios was a very powerful word to those of Jesus' day. Makarios signified divine joy and perfect happiness. And this is interesting...makarios wasn't typically used in association with human beings. It was used more to describe the joy experienced by the gods or the dead. (I guess the Greeks were dying to be happy.)

But unlike the happiness which is based on circumstances or happenings, makarios signifies inner satisfaction and sufficiency...a blessedness that originates within not from without. This is what God desires for us. The Good News is that we live under friendly skies. God loves us and wants to invade our lives with His love, His joy, and His peace. Out of His goodness, God wants to bless us. Looking back on His time with Jesus John wrote, **From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. – Jn. 1:16.** This blessedness can be the experience of every sinner who comes to Christ in faith. **Eph. 1:3** says we are **blessed in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.** Here in the Beatitudes, this state of joy and happiness is linked to a distinct life-style only God can produce. So with that background, we come to the first Beatitude. The first is the foundation for the rest. And notice, like bookends, **v.3** and **v.10** end with the phrase, **for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** So in these verses we have the kingdom's entrance requirement and rule of life.

v. 3 - "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This first Beatitude has to do with the way we view ourselves. Now here's a challenge...I challenge you to find one person you think about more than yourself. That person you see in the mirror is the person you're most devoted to...the person you most love / pamper / and think about. Am I right about that? Since this is true, it's imperative for us to think right about ourselves. **Prov. 23:7** says, **"As a man thinks in his heart, so is he."** Author James Allen expounds on this verse and writes, *"A man is literally what he thinks, his character being the complete sum of all his thoughts."* So as a matter of first importance, kingdom people will think accurately about themselves. Their self-assessment is based on God's truth, not on truth as we imagine or prefer it to be.

Let's consider the terms in **v.3**. We already know what **blessed** means, but notice the word, **poor**. When **poor** appears in the NT, it's derived from one of two Greek words. The first is *penace* which means so poor you have to work for a living. Penace designates a working class person as opposed to a rich man who has others work for him. But the word in **v. 3** isn't *penace*. (see that gorgeous shiny red Corvette over there? It's not mine...mine is the broken down Geo parked next to it. That's what I just did to you.) The Greek word translated **poor** in **v.3** is *ptokas*. To be *ptokas* poor means you have to beg because you have no earning or bargaining power. You're out of chips. To be *ptokas* poor is to be bankrupt, destitute and totally dependent on the mercy of others. Has there ever been a time when you had nothing...no savings...no bank card...no change in the seat of your car...nothing? Sounds like a college student. The experience of being *ptokas* poor can be a good thing because it helps us understand how a sinner must come to Christ. We must come with empty hands and pockets.

But notice carefully, Jesus wasn't talking about financial bankruptcy or material poverty...He said, **Blessed are the poor in spirit.** He was talking about a poverty of spirit. To be spiritually poor is to know you have no righteousness of your own...nothing to contribute to the kingdom of heaven. People who are poor in spirit are humble before God. They don't come to the king as big shots with credits to offer Him. They come as helpless and hopeless sinners. There's no arrogance in those who are poor in spirit / no boasting / no self-righteousness / no self-sufficiency. The poor in spirit are unencumbered by their own pretensions and free for God to save and use them for His own glory. Every person who wants to enter the kingdom must be spiritually poor because salvation is a rescue operation...it's a free gift of God's grace. This is incredibly good news for the poor and oppressed in our world. The poor person isn't excluded because of his poverty; and the rich person isn't accepted because of his wealth. Every sinner must humble themselves to be part of Christ's kingdom. The ground is level at the cross. In many cases it's easier for the poor of the world to humble themselves. Dropping to their knees is a shorter drop for the poor. But true humility and dependence is far more challenging for the rich and famous who have so much and have such a high estimate of themselves. In **Matt. 19:23, 24** Jesus said, **"I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."**

Scholars say there's a legend about a needle gate at Nazareth, the hometown of Jesus. Having removed the pack from its back, a camel had to get down on all four knees and crawl through. This sort of groveling humility is hard for the rich who rely on themselves and their own resources. But know this...being financially poor is no guarantee a person will be poor in spirit. Being materially poor and poor in spirit are separate issues. Financial poverty can lead to its own breed of pride, anger and bitterness. The poor can see themselves as victims who deserve better.

So the foundation for the Beatitudes is humility. Pride was the first sin...the sin which banished Satan from God's presence. Pride leads to independence and an inflated sense of self-worth and self-sufficiency. Pride causes people to disobey God's commands...it prompts us to emphasize personal rights and just deserts. Yet worst of all, pride leaves us incapable of worship...the very purpose for which God created us. What does pride lead to? **Prov. 16:18** says, **Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.**

On the back side of the sermon notes, I've reproduced **The advantages of being poor** according to author, Philip Yancy. We won't take the time to review them, but I encourage you to consider them at a later time. So if poverty of spirit is Christ's entrance requirement and this is how kingdom people think of themselves, how can proud people like us become poor in spirit? Let me suggest three ways:

- The first way to become poor in spirit is to **get a better view of God**. Do you know why Zachaeus climbed the sycamore tree? He wanted to see Jesus better. If you want to see Jesus better, read His Word. This may sound like the Bible church solution for everything...but guess what...it is! The Bible declares the truth about who God is and the truth about who we are. The Lord allowed Job to gain a better view of who He is. In **Job 42:5, 6** the patriarch said, **"My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."** To see the Lord in all of His holy and glorious majesty is to realize how sinful and unworthy we are.
- The second way to become poor in spirit is...starve the flesh. Remove the things it feeds on. Intentionally subtract I / me / my and mine from your thoughts and speech. Be wary of praise and congratulations. Practice turning more of your thoughts to God and others. **Phil. 2:3** says, **Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.** Several times the Bible instructs us to intentionally humble ourselves. John the Baptizer is a great model of humility. In **Jn. 3:20** he said, **He must become greater; I must become less.**
- The third way to become poor in spirit is to ask...ask God. Humility, like every other Christian virtue, is a gift. It's an inward grace we can't produce on our own. The risk is this...God may answer your request in a way you don't want.

Let me finish with a short paragraph by LeRoy Lawson in his book entitled, Blessed Are We. *"This Beatitude is the base on which all the rest stand...If persons lack this fundamental humility, who can teach them?...The 'poor in spirit' don't strut, don't construct their own empires, don't delight in commanding, don't dictate to others' emotions. Having found a worthy master, they are content to follow. They prefer learning to teaching, listening to talking, comforting to being comforted. They would rather see than be seen."*

So are you a kingdom person? Have you faced your sinfulness and realized how spiritually bankrupt you are when standing before a God who is entirely pure and holy? Poverty of spirit isn't a one time event. It's the way a citizen of Christ's kingdom thinks about himself in relation to the King and how we relate to others everyday.