

The Beatitudes Series, 1
The Amazing Benefits of Humility
Matthew 5:3
Vineyard West Side
Feb. 25, 2006

SLIDE ONE

Building Update

SLIDE TWO

I have just finished reading a very moving book called *The Day I Died* by a guy called Steve Sjogren. Steve was a very dynamic head pastor at a very fast growing Vineyard church in Ohio. He went into hospital for a pretty routine gall bladder operation and the doctors made some horrible mistakes that led to his aorta being severed -- which if you know anything about the human body is very serious. In fact, Steve's contention in his book is that he did in fact die -- or he had a near-death experience -- but then somehow came back to life. I saw Billy Graham describing something similar on Larry King the other night.

Anyway, Sjogren's reason for writing the book is to explain to his readers how differently he lived his life after this near-death experience. His whole relationship with God and other people was changed by this awful experience and the very long and very painful recuperation time after the accident.

Sjogren writes: "Being strapped to a hospital bed forced me to immediately change my pace. There was no choice. I had no option. For me, it was the Big Slow Down... God's message was loud and clear. He wanted me to decelerate and walk in a more balanced way of life. His words were strong. He said that my life had been a lie. Publicly, I had the appearance of living in balance, but privately -- when all of the trappings were stripped away -- I was anything but balanced. In the weekly messages I gave at church, I talked about how to live a balanced life. I had lots of practical pointers and told great stories. I was good at teaching others how to do it. The problem was that I wasn't doing it myself."

Sjogren heard God and emerged a man who was much more able to practice humility. And, even though his health is still frail, Sjogren would say that he definitely has a better life now.

That's a very dramatic story -- it's very worthwhile reading. But let's bring this whole subject of finding humility into our immediate lives right now. Let me ask a question:

SLIDE THREE

How many of us have had a bad cold this winter that has laid us low for a couple days -- kept us in bed, not able to do anything other than lie there and think about things? I had a cold in January and one day I knew that, to shake it, I had to spend the whole day in bed doing nothing. And the exhaustion and the discomfort and the fact that I was doing nothing took me to place where it was just me and God. And He spoke to me about several things in my life -- and His basic message was that I was dependent on them and I was not dependent on Him. And as this feverish day in my sweaty bed continued, God

started to sort stuff out for me in my head and made all sorts of wise pointers and He convicted me about certain things that weren't right.

And what I realized is that I was able to really hear God and take all this good stuff He was giving me on board because I had come to Him in a pretty helpless state. Somehow, this nasty cold had led to a point where I was humbling myself before God. Today we're going to be looking at what "poor in spirit" meant when Jesus said it, and I was definitely "poor in spirit" that day -- and it turned out to be very helpful -- somewhat pivotal for my life.

And what's interesting to me is that I've spoken to two other people who've had bad colds recently and they've been laid low -- and in their mucous sick beds, God has really done something very similar to what He did with me. They, too, have seen the benefits that come from "poor in spirit" humility. How many others of us have felt that happen?

OK, like I said, we're going to be looking at what Jesus meant when he used the term, which we today translate as "poor in spirit." Now, we're going to do that as we kick off a series of talks on what are called the Beatitudes. These are key teachings of Jesus and rather than describe what the Beatitudes are, I may as well just show you them. Here, they are:

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Mt 5:1 Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, Mt 5:2 and he began to teach them, saying:

Mt 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Mt 5:4 Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Mt 5:5 Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Mt 5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Mt 5:7 Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

Mt 5:8 Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Mt 5:9 Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Mt 5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Those are the Beatitudes. Now, they are important because they represent the both the cream and the core of Jesus' teaching. This isn't just a one-off sermon -- the underlying Greek in the Gospels makes it very clear that Jesus spoke these Beatitudes repeatedly. Jesus is telling his disciples these teachings, so he probably wanted them to pass them on.

As we shall see, this teaching is challenging, profound but Jesus said these things so that they'd bring us closer to God in such a way that our lives would be improved. (x2)

Yes, some of them are quite difficult. The language can be a little confusing and the underlying invitations that Jesus is putting on us are also quite challenging. And I think that is particularly true of the first beatitude, which we are going to look at today.

SLIDE FIVE

Mt 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

There is a lot to explain in that one line. Jesus is making a super point in this one line, but to us today it may not be immediately clear exactly what that is in every respect, so let's take this one verse apart to get a good handle on what Jesus is saying here. We started to get close to the meaning of this partic beatitude at the start of the sermon, but I want to use Jesus' actual words now in Matthew 3:5 and go a lot further.

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Let's start with the word "blessed." That basically means a special and unique joy that comes from God. I don't like to use the word "joy" too much because it sounds sort of churchy. No one uses joy outside of the church very much. [*How ya doin? - Joyful*] Most people use "doin fine" or happy, but the problem with happy is that it can carry a sense of being dependent on circumstances -- in fact, the root word for happiness is the word "hap" which means chance. It may be there, but it may not. But this word blessed implies God is involved -- the joy is from Him. And we know from Jesus that God doesn't snatch back the happiness he gives us, so his blessedness is secure, it's unassailable, it can't be swayed by circumstance. God is behind it, **not chance**. So let's see blessed as an unassailable happiness from God.

SLIDE SEVEN

But, how does blessed go with being "poor in spirit?" When we're feeling emptied out, or crushed, or at the end of our tethers, that last thing we feel is happiness. When we hear Jesus teach "blessed are the poor in spirit," it almost sounds like irony.

It's like when people say something like: "Oh, lucky you -- you've got to travel to Chicago in this blizzard." Or something.". You could almost read this Beatitude with that same irony: "You're poor in spirit? Oh, wow, you're totally blessed, man!" Irony.

But Jesus actually means this. He does. And we get the sense of why he has such an excellent point if we look at what "poor in spirit" means here exactly and if we factor in the last part of the sentence about the Kingdom of Heaven. Btw, the KoH is the same as the Kingdom of God (Matthew was Jewish and thus tried to avoided as best he could using the actual word God. *Emails from Jewish friends...spelt G-D*)

SLIDE EIGHT

OK, most theologians translate poor in spirit something like this: someone is poor in spirit if they've come to the pint where they're "recognizing before God their utter helplessness and deep need for Him." (x2) And that is today's first fill-in...

It describes that mindset when we realize that it just makes so much more sense to base our lives around God than around ourselves. In a sense, we recognize our poverty, against a God who is perfect in every way. We recognize our poverty when we see Jesus on the Cross -- Jesus, possessing the fullness of God, as Colossians puts it, being executed for our sake. When we see God doing that for us, naturally we're going to feel like we come up short against a God whose love is so complete and so profoundly self-sacrificial.

And Jesus tells us in this beatitude that this poverty of spirit is a good thing. In other words, good things spring from recognizing our deep need for God. **There are benefits from showing this deep humility before God -- and they make us feel blessed!** (x2)

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The benefits are explained in the phrase: "theirs is the Kingdom of God." The Kingdom refers to God's inbreaking rule. God is not satisfied with a lot of things that are going in the world, and he wants to rescue and restore His world and pour His love and healing into every heart.

As His Kingdom comes, Jesus wants to heal every relationship, for example. God wants to heal us so we don't do things that mess up relationships. He shows us how to treat others -- and gives us pointers on how to be more loving -- and His Kingdom even has the power to bring about that change in our hearts. Those things that happen when the Kingdom comes are all huge blessings.

So a *really* amplified translation of "blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven" would be something like this:

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Anyone who recognizes their deep need for God and humbles themselves before Him will experience the unassailable happiness that comes from living life with a loving God who is breaking into His world to heal, rescue and redeem it.

Jesus says it better. But that's his message there -- in a rather large nutshell. There you have it.

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So, second fill in: We are blessed when "poor in spirit" BECAUSE "Humility **before God** allows us to more fully experience and participate in God's inbreaking Kingdom." That applies to our whole lives.

But this also works when we actually feel "poor in spirit" -- the feeling of being exhausted, crushed and depressed, feeling like things are too much. If we go to God and say: "I need you," God's Kingdom will come, then, too -- and that's a blessing. Because one of things that God does when He breaks in is He sustains us and He comforts us when everything just seems too much. A tangible comfort arrives.

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So this works at every level. It works for our whole lives -- every day of our existence, no matter what our circumstances are. But it also works when we're feeling very down.

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Anyone who recognizes their deep need for God and humbles themselves before Him will experience the unassailable happiness that comes from living life with a loving God who is breaking into His world to heal, rescue and redeem it.

How do we get that going in our lives? What might be some practical things we can do to get us before God in deep humility?

Very important is repentance -- saying sorry to God. Repentance is extremely hard, but it's really powerful. Think about this for a second, why does repentance always cause everyone involved to start crying? Every time I've been involved in serious repentance, everyone's crying. That tells me the HS is right there! The HS loves repentance.

Here's a little story about repentance. [Tell story]

The point was that I couldn't wait to get back into my in-laws house to say sorry. I felt like there was no way I could ever be with them again without repenting. They didn't demand it, but I had been such a jerk. And repentance is powerful because it really throws us at God's feet -- and then we're much more malleable -- and so much healing can take place. I really believe that episode made a real dent in my pride.

What's something else we can do to help us practice this deep humility before God? Contemplative rest. The Steve Sjogren story is very instructive for us. *"Being strapped to a hospital bed forced me to immediately change my pace. There was no choice. I had no option. For me, it was the Big Slow Down..."* Sjogren writes...

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So often, those big moments with God happen when we've slowed right -- and it's just us and Him -- no other distractions. And we don't have to wait till we feel terrible. We can do it by taking regular rest. And when we do that, we have to practice what I call: Clear the Decks Therapy. CDT. We can do CDT when everything is going fine. And we can do it if we're feeling crushed and unbalanced, or we're sinning in some big way and can't seem to stop. And clear-the-decks therapy means this: stop doing as much as we can and spend time in deep rest -- talking to God. Give God the space to speak. Create the space to get humble before God.

And let's do it before we get sick -- or in real trouble. Rest is so key. That's why God advised that we take a Sabbath. We have days-off but do we rest? Do we take real rest days with God? They're so effective!

PAUSE

Ok, Each time we look at a beatitude, I want to look at one or two great new things that happens in our new Kingdom lives. Things that happen that really make us feel the blessedness that Jesus talks about.

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Here's our paraphrase again: *Anyone who recognizes their deep need for God and humbles themselves before Him will experience the unassailable happiness that comes from living life with a loving God who is breaking into His world to heal, rescue and redeem it.*

When we practice humility before God, one of the things that starts to happen is that He starts to give us new wants and desires. As we make ourselves poor before God, when we declare our bankruptcy before God, He then makes us rich in the Kingdom sense -- and He makes us rich in the Kingdom sense by giving us great new desires -- desires we may never had before. Much more selfless desires!

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So, going to the last fill-in: One thing that God often does to bless the "poor in spirit" is give them new desires, which are often selfless in nature. That's how we become rich in Jesus.

As we make a habit of practicing humility, God will use that humility, create a more servantlike heart, and then ask us to go serve others. He takes the humility we show Him and uses it to bless others. Even though Steve Sjogren is still quite weak, he does a lot to help other churches. One of his ministries now is to help people who pathologically fear death. That desire he now has to bless others, came, and comes from, practicing humility before God.

In fact, I would go as far as saying that if we're not seeing ourselves growing more selfless, we probably aren't going before God and being poor in spirit as often as perhaps we should. (x2 and slowly) I know that's often the case in my life. But I throw that out as food for thought.

SLIDE 17

Jesus said: Mt 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

You know what's interesting about Jesus saying this? He really did practice what he preached there. Who practiced humility more deeply than Jesus? The Kingdom has come in such fullness because of His humility. Jesus on the cross was absolutely poor in spirit.

What I am saying is that this all makes sense in Jesus. So, if we have some very understandable objections to this whole idea humbling ourselves, or we find it hard, we do have one very helpful reference point -- and that's Jesus himself.

Jesus did almost everything He asks us to do. He paved the way. He knows how it feels. He knows that He has to help us do it. So he sends His Spirit to help us do the tough stuff. But the point is that Jesus is the man -- He has done "poor in spirit" more deeply and more painfully than anyone -- and He did it for us. The Cross was for us...incredibly.

And I wanted to end with some words that Paul wrote about Jesus and they're from Paul's letter to the Philippian church.

SLIDE 18

^{Phil 2:5} Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

^{Phil 2:6} Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, ^{Phil 2:7} but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...

I am going to pray a prayer now that should help us be nothing before God. No one has to say this with me. We can actually humble ourselves if we're not ready, right? Or it wouldn't be humility, right. But Jesus makes us ready -- seeing those words makes us ready to be nothing before God. Just as Jesus became nothing for us -- each one of us.

And as we make ourselves nothing, I am sure God will meet each one of us and speak to us -- and already this morning, the HS will impart to us the amazing benefits of this humility and God's Kingdom will come. After all, blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.