

Barratt Ministries Challenge

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THE POOR IN SPIRIT - The Beatitudes Part 1

by Maurice Barratt

The Sermon on the Mount begins with the beatitudes (Matthew 5:1-12). Before we examine each one in detail there are some important facts to note about them generally.

The Beatitudes are the character of Christ

There are 9 beatitudes, just as there are 9 fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), and this is not coincidental. These are not a list of “Thou shalt nots” like the Ten Commandments. The beatitudes and the fruit of the Spirit are both simple statements of fact. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” “The fruit of the spirit is love.” In fact, both lists are descriptions of character. Whose character? God’s, Christ’s, the Holy Spirit’s. Certainly not ours! It is not natural to us to be poor in spirit, meek or pure in heart. What comes naturally to us is, unfortunately, the opposite to the fruit of the Spirit - the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19). This tells us our first important lesson. We cannot achieve these characteristics of the beatitudes ourselves. They can only come from God, because they are part of His character, not ours.

The Beatitudes are progressive

Poverty of spirit, the first beatitude, is the foundation for all the others. Poverty of spirit is the only way to enter the kingdom. A consequence of poverty of spirit is that we mourn for our weak and helpless state. And this begins to affect our lifestyle, our way of thinking, our reactions - we become meek and submissive. All the arrogance and pride is knocked out of us. And all this creates in us a great hunger and thirst for righteousness. And so on. The one characteristic progresses to the next. The culmination of it all is when we are persecuted (for the right reasons - “for righteousness’ sake” and “for My name’s sake”) - and then we have become salt with savour, and a light that shines in the darkness (verses 13-16).

The Beatitudes are promises with conditions

9 times Jesus says “Blessed”. Christians love blessings! We all want blessing - for ourselves, our family, our church. We fill our promise boxes with all the blessings we can find in scripture. We can all say we have been blessed by what we have received from God, but Jesus has a different list of who is blessed, because He is talking not about what we have received by grace but about what we become after that. And the reason why the people He lists are blessed is because of what the future holds for them. But it is a list of promises with conditions.

To inherit the Kingdom of heaven, to be comforted and filled, to receive mercy, to see God - these are great blessings. But they are only for those who fulfil the conditions. Is it all Christians who will be given the kingdom of heaven? Well, Jesus says it is the poor in spirit. Will every Christian inherit the earth? Jesus says that the meek will inherit the earth. It is wonderful to have blessing, but we must understand what blessing is.

Firstly, blessing does not mean something that necessarily makes us feel wonderful or happy. This is obvious as soon as we look at the beatitudes. "Blessed are they that mourn". A person who is mourning does not feel good or happy; they do not feel blessed at all. But they are blessed, because blessing means God's favour. God is pleased with them. Secondly, blessing is a consequence of obedience. This is a principle throughout the Bible. In the Old Testament law, God said that He would bless those who kept His commandments, and curse those who didn't. The condition for blessing was obedience. In the New Testament, nothing has changed. Blessing is still a consequence of obedience - of choosing to go the way that Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount, the way of the strait gate and the narrow road; the way of poverty of spirit, mourning, and meekness; a way that brings persecution as its immediate consequence. Persecution certainly does not sound to us like blessing; but Jesus tells us it is so much a sign of God's favour that we are to "rejoice, and be exceeding glad" when we are opposed and insulted.

Each of the beatitudes has 3 parts. The first is the same in each case - the proclamation "Blessed", God-favoured. The second is the condition which brings blessing, the obedience we are called to. The third part is the reward which is the ultimate consequence of our obedience, often not for this life at all but reserved for the future. With all this in mind, let us look at the first beatitude - poverty of spirit.

The poor in spirit

"Who then are the poor in spirit? Without question, the humble; they who know themselves", said John Wesley; and Wesley's definition of humility is the best I know. Humility is knowing yourself, having a true assessment of yourself. Pride, the opposite of humility, is a false assessment of yourself. Pride makes us believe things about ourselves which are lies. It leads us to delude ourselves, and the reason is that we cannot bring ourselves to face the truth about ourselves; seeing ourselves as we really are is uncomfortable.

I'm sure we all know this, deep down. We spend time, money and effort on getting our outward appearance just as we would like it to be. We create an image for ourselves so that people will be attracted to us or think well of us. And if we are so keen to present a good physical appearance, how much more care we take to present a respectable spiritual face to people - especially if they know we're Christians. How important it is to us that people think we are good, loving, humble, patient, generous and unselfish! And yet, how foolish. This is pride at work, protecting our reputation. Poverty of spirit involves the smashing down of all these delusions. The poor in spirit see themselves as they really are.

The Worm

One day my wife Joanna saw a vision of a worm. This worm was a bit different. It was standing upright like a man, and dressed like a man, in a very grand top hat and coat. Every time this worm heard about a great man, it identified with him. The worm heard about Moses, the meekest man on earth, and thought to himself "Yes, I can identify with that; I think I'm meek". It heard about Abraham's faith and thought "Yes, I can relate to that; I have faith too". People looked on at this ludicrous spectacle, a worm kidding itself that it was a great man. The people could see the folly of it, but the worm couldn't.

However, God was watching the worm, and He put a mirror down in front of it. The worm didn't realise it was a mirror: it thought it was seeing someone else; and immediately it thought, "How ridiculous! Look at that worm dressed up like a man!" But when the worm moved, the figure in the mirror also moved, and gradually it dawned on the worm that the foolish figure in the mirror was itself, and it fell flat on the floor. Its hat flew off, and the coat flew off, and it was left on the ground, a naked, crawling worm.

God looked down and saw all this. But instead of despising the worm, He had compassion for it, and reached down His hand and picked the worm up, coiling it round His finger like a ring. Then God pointed His finger and did mighty things. Demons were cast out and great deliverances happened, and God said, "I can use worms".

Self-love or Self-hatred?

To Israel, His chosen people, God said "O thou worm Jacob" (Isaiah 41:14). This was not an insult. It was the truth. "What is man", said the Psalmist, "that thou art mindful of him?" We are nothing, and we need to realise it! Today more than ever we are being bombarded with the idea that we should not have a negative self-image, that we should not have any hatred for self, that we need to love ourselves and esteem ourselves highly. This all comes from a terrible misunderstanding of self. The Bible says that "no man ever hated himself" (Ephesians 5:29). The teenage girl who has acne doesn't hate herself, as she says she does. If she really hated herself she'd be pleased she had acne! In fact, the problem is exactly the opposite - she loves herself, and it hurts her pride and her reputation that she doesn't look nice. It is pride that is at the root of the problem. The person who says "I'm no good" is really suffering from self-pity, which is just another form of pride.

Pride is an insidious and subtle thing, and none of us are free of it. We are all as foolish as the worm. But the solution for us is the same as for the worm - God has to put a mirror down in front of us so that we can see ourselves as we really are, so our pride and false ideas can be exposed. Only that way can we know the truth, and only when we know the truth about ourselves can we be humble.

Peter's Revelation

It is a great moment when we see ourselves. Peter had such a moment when he realized who Jesus was. After the miracle of the huge catch of fish, Peter fell at Jesus' feet in worship; but in seeing

Jesus, Peter also saw himself; and he saw, not the similarity between Jesus and himself, but the awful difference between them. Peter was terribly aware of the fact that he was a “worm”. He cried “Depart from me; for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Luke 5:8). But that was the moment when Jesus knew He could use Peter, the worm. “Fear not”, He said. “From now you will catch men.” Poverty of spirit is the door into usefulness to God.

We are beginning to see why it is the first of the beatitudes, the foundation of everything else, the essential prerequisite. There can be no more powerful proof of the truth that we need poverty of spirit than the fact that Jesus himself had it. “Let this mind (this attitude) be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). What did Jesus do? He “humbled Himself”. He “made Himself of no reputation”. This gives us an important key. Jesus didn’t allow Himself to be humbled. It was not a passive reaction to circumstances. The Romans and the Jews who crucified Jesus didn’t humble Him. He had already humbled Himself. Jesus didn’t say to God that He was willing to be humbled. He made an active decision of obedience. That is the secret of learning humility. James tells us to make such decisions. “Submit yourselves to God”, he says (James 4:7). That’s an active, positive act of obedience. “Be afflicted, and mourn, and weep”, he adds, echoing the second beatitude. “Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up” (James 4:9-10).

Becoming humble needs grace

There’s one more thing to note. Humbling yourself doesn’t make you humble. Only when God shows you yourself will you be humble; and it’s an act of God’s grace to put the mirror down in front of us so that we see ourselves. But by humbling ourselves, by honestly confessing before God and submitting ourselves in obedience before Him, we are at least putting ourselves in a position where God can show us ourselves. James says that “God gives grace to the humble” (James 4:6). A proud man fears and respects other people. But a humble man fears and respects only God. That is an excellent test of our spiritual state. Do we fear men, or God? Do we respect men, or God? Are we influenced by what people say about us, or how we appear to people? Or are we influenced by what God thinks about us, and how we appear to Him? We will obey and submit to those who we fear and respect. “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Why? Firstly, as we have seen, because they are promised the kingdom of heaven. But there are more reasons why it is blessed to be poor in spirit, to be humble.

1. If we humble ourselves, God will heal our nation. 2 Chronicles 7:14 says “If my people will humble themselves ... I will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

Poverty of spirit is the first of the conditions for God to heal a backslidden nation. How relevant for us today!

2. “He that exalteth himself shall be abased; but he that shall humble himself shall be exalted” (Matthew 23:12). There’s no doubt that we are going to do one or the other. By our words and actions we will either humble ourselves or exalt ourselves. If we humble ourselves we have a

wonderful promise to look forward to. To be exalted by God is a wonderful thing. But if we do not actively humble ourselves, the old nature in us is enough to ensure that we will, even unknown to ourselves, be subtly and quietly exalting ourselves, looking after our reputation, fearing and respecting men. And that carries a terrible warning: we will be abased, born-again Christian or not.

3. “By humility and the fear of the LORD are riches, and honour, and life” (Proverbs 22:4). Here are promises not just for eternity but for this life. God will exalt the humble in this life as well as in heaven. Why? Because God gives grace to the humble. Grace is not something we can demand; it is God’s favour - but God shows favour for a reason, and He says that He shows it to the humble. So let us follow Peter’s advice and “humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt us in due time” (1 Peter 5:6).

Experiences From Life

by Joanna Barratt

God’s Grace Is Sufficient

The idea of my “Experiences from Life” page is to give people hope that whatever Maurice’s sermon is about, these attributes are obtainable in some measure, either small or great. There’s nothing more soul-destroying than hearing a sermon on holiness, for example, and walking away with your head downcast, feeling as though you will never reach that particular pinnacle. I’ve realised after studying the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus never asks us to do anything that we cannot do. And if He says that we can be poor in spirit, meek, merciful, pure in heart, etc., then it’s obvious that Jesus thinks this standard can be reached, even by us. I found that our worst battle is recognising what these qualities are. We often don’t see them as qualities ... the truth is we often see them as times of failure that we would prefer not to talk about.

Our Need Of God

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” .On casting my mind back over my life I recognise that there are many times when I’ve been poor in spirit, or, to use other expressions, unable to cope, out of control of a situation, or humiliated by circumstances. I suppose one of the very first times I accepted the fact that I was poor in spirit was the time I asked Jesus to come into my life and take control of it. Instead of circumstances moulding my character and making a better person out of me, they were destroying me, and making me very bitter. This acceptance of God’s help is one that we like to talk about in terms of the time when we “saw the light” and “got saved”, but the truth is that we need God’s salvation time after time after time.

For those of us who are proud by nature, being poor in spirit is one of the nastiest pills to swallow. It's very hard for people like us to ever admit that we are wrong or weak, and harder still for us to accept help in any shape or form because we like to be able to do things on our own. We think that accepting a Saviour at one time in our life is enough - but really we need to accept our Saviour and His help time and again during our Christian life. My wrong attitude towards bosses and people who had any authority caused me no end of trouble, and it took a long time for me to accept the fact that it wasn't the bosses who were at fault but me and my own character. Once I came to this conclusion, God could do something in my life to change me, but until I'd recognised that pride was at the root, then God couldn't do anything but carry on allowing the trials in my life, hoping that one day I would see myself as others saw me.

Ready For A Breakdown

A few issues back I wrote about the dilemma I'd been in after having my first child, Nathan. I'd had a very regular and disciplined prayer life for a long time, and was suddenly plunged into my new role of motherhood where so many unexpected demands were being made upon my time. Prior to Nathan being born Maurice and I had allotted a 10 week recovery period before accepting ministry engagements because I felt in my mind totally capable of handling the situation - yet in reality I had no idea what this would cost. We took our 10-week-old child to America for 4 weeks, came home for 10 days, and then embarked on another tour of Holland which lasted 5 weeks. The endless spiral of looking after my baby during the day, ministering in the evening at meetings up to 3 hours away from our base, and breast-feeding at hourly intervals during the night, took its toll and at the end of the 5 week tour I felt ready for a nervous breakdown. The thought of the imminent tour planned in Scotland filled me with dread and before leaving Holland for home, I told Maurice that he had to ring the ministers and let them know I wouldn't be going. I felt certain God had told me this was the only way out and, indeed, this was the only thing that relaxed my mind. I don't think I'd ever recognised being literally poor in spirit before this situation, and each night I went to minister with Maurice I felt a terrible hypocrite, because I knew that I had not had the opportunity that day to read my Bible or pray, and if I had managed to snatch some moments, my mind had not been able to take in anything I'd read, as my concentration level was so low.

God Speaks Plainly

Being hormonally imbalanced didn't help the situation, and I cried out to God in desperation that He would help me. A few weeks after our Dutch tour Maurice took Nathan and I away on holiday and we visited a church where nobody knew our present circumstances, and God spoke very clearly to me. The minister preached about Simon Peter who had been a radical disciple of Jesus and had received the call of God on his life - and yet, when the crisis came, he denied Christ and ended up going back to his former lifestyle. But the story didn't end there. Jesus came to him after He had risen from the dead and gave him a second call, and told Peter that God really did want to use him. Jesus didn't speak to Peter of his failure, He just emphasised the fact that God had called him for His service.

The minister then spoke plainly and said that as far as God was concerned, circumstances weren't important, but the call was. This phrase went right home into my spirit and God used it mightily to change my attitude. At the end of the service I went out to the front of the church and re-dedicated my life to God, telling Him that I knew that discipleship was costly, and if being in the ministry with a child in tow was the cross God wanted me to carry, then I would carry it for Him - especially now, knowing the cost involved. At the end of the meeting I let Maurice know how I felt, and told him that I would be accompanying Him on the Scottish tour. It was then that God began to work.

God's Help Is At Hand

If I had made a detailed list of the things I needed God to do to help me out of this situation, I'm absolutely positive that I wouldn't have come up with His solutions. God brought to the house somebody who would relieve me of the office work in Barratt Ministries and also come with us to Scotland as a nanny for Nathan, to babysit for him each evening that I went out to minister with Maurice, or to look after him during the day when I was feeling very tired or just needed time to pray. I was also given a financial gift which enabled me to buy a suit comprising a jacket, skirt and blouse. God even led me to the women to purchase this from, who, knowing that I was in the ministry, added two further blouses, a skirt, a pair of trousers, a pair of shoes, handbag and earrings, all co-ordinated with the jacket, enabling me to "mix and match" so much that I had about three or four outfits out of this one suit that I'd purchased initially! My difficulties had not gone away, but God certainly gave me the boost and encouragement that I so badly needed at this particular point in my life.

More Problems!

This hard period passed, as it always does when children begin to grow up, and I was able to get my prayer and Bible reading back into some sort of routine, as Nathan was now able to sit on his own and read while I had a bit of quiet time in the mornings. And I didn't have any shortage of babysitters to look after him in the evenings when I went out to minister. But then Isaac came along, and even though I'd already experienced the trauma of having a child, I didn't know what hit me when I had two! Whereas I'd been able to have a sleep in the afternoons with Nathan, there was no chance of this now that I had a 3-year-old child as well as a small baby. Fortunately, I'd realised from past experience it was futile to take on engagements so soon after the birth of my child, but even so, now that I'm beginning to resume my position again in the ministry, I find it very difficult having to take the baby with me. The nanny God provided for me to take care of Nathan moved on some time ago into other occupation.

Back To Square One?

In a sense I feel as though I'm back to square one, but the words that the minister spoke when I was so much in need still ring true in my heart: "the circumstances aren't important, the call is". Some days I feel really unable to cope, and have no patience whatsoever. I know that a quiet time and

some spiritual input into my life would make all the difference, and yet I find it so difficult to get to grips with this. At Barratt Ministries we hold meetings together on a couple of evenings each week, which Izaac also has to attend. I always wait with anticipation for him to fall asleep, and yet as Izaac only sleeps for approximately 15 minutes at a time during the day, this gives me little respite to drink in the spiritual life that I so desperately need.

Maurice has seen my situation and, even though he's a very busy man, has made an effort to encourage me. He takes time out of his schedule to pray with me each day, and usually during this prayer session he will tend to Izaac if he causes a disturbance, which relieves me no end. I suppose, in a way, it's very easy to serve God when all your circumstances are ideal, and to be quite honest, before my children came along, my circumstances were very ideal indeed - I had time, freedom, a husband who also served God and was alongside me in the ministry. It's very hard to feel poor in spirit when so much is going for you. And without realising you can lapse into self-righteousness and pride.

The Value Of Trials

My present situation is not what I would have chosen, but I realise its value in keeping me low. It emphasizes to me that I've been saved by grace alone and not by works of my own doing, capabilities or talents. God's call on my life to serve Him is a gracious act of His loving kindness. Whatever circumstances God has to use in either your life or my life, He has to make sure that we understand and remember that we are only dust that He has had mercy on. David talks in the Psalms about the fact that he would prefer to be a door-keeper in the house of the Lord rather than to dwell in the tents of the wicked, and he meant, in essence, that he didn't care what position he held in the kingdom of God just as long as he was in there. Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" - in other words, if we admit defeat and totally depend on God, we can be in the kingdom, we don't have to have a fantastic position, just being there is enough.