Wisdom calls us to trust God and doubt ourselves: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding” (Pr. 3:5). But our culture turns that on its head and say, “Trust yourself and doubt God.” That inversion is as old as the Garden of Eden, and it’s all around us today. The person who says, “Believe in yourself,” is putting himself or herself in the place of God. This is pride, pure and simple, and pride can only live in the soul of a person who is far from God.

Pursuing humility is a challenge, not only because it goes against the grain of our culture, but also because it goes against the trajectory of most religions. Religion works on the idea that you must live a life that is pleasing to God in order to win God’s favor. Every religion in the world offers some variation on this theme. Did you make the right choices? Pursue the right disciplines? Follow the right paths? At the end of the day, this approach boils down to merit: did you earn God’s favor? And that trajectory always promotes pride.

The Christian faith is different, because Jesus is different. Jesus says, “Believe in God, believe also in me” (John 14:1). By God’s immeasurable grace, we already have God’s favor through Jesus Christ. Salvation is ours by our faith in the mercy and grace of God. The choices we make and the paths we follow – right or wrong – cannot change the redemption available to us. We are blessed to follow a God who saves us first, then asks us to follow.

In a world where personalities loom large and God is often regarded as a prop on the stage of our own performance, people who are poor in spirit know that they are a small blip on the radar screen of eternity. They know that God is glorious and awesome in God’s holiness. They know that God owes them nothing, and they see that, even at their best, they are unworthy servants who depend completely on the mercy of God. To be poor in spirit is where the blessing of God begins. This is the gateway blessing that leads to all the others, and without this none of the other blessings can be reached.

The blessing promised to the poor in spirit is nothing less than “the kingdom of heaven,” and this kingdom is promised in the present tense: “theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven.” Since heaven is a future blessing, we might expect Jesus to say, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs *will* be the kingdom of heaven,” but Jesus doesn’t say that. What makes this present-tense promise even more striking is that all the other blessings are promised for the future: those who mourn *will* be comforted, the meek *will* inherit the earth, those who hunger for righteousness *will* be filled.

But the promise of haven breaks the pattern. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs *is* the kingdom of heaven.” Jesus is talking about a taste of heaven that the poor in spirit can enjoy right now: the greatest blessing of heaven, which is the presence of God. As God declared to Isaiah: “I will dwell in the high and holy place, and also with [the person] who is of a contrite and lowly spirit” (Isa. 57:15). The sovereign God of the universe lives in two places: God dwells in heaven, but God also dwells with the person who is poor in spirit. Heaven is to live with God, and the poor in spirit get a taste of it, because God comes to live with them. Heaven comes to the humble before the humble get to heaven.

This truth is repeated in the Psalms: “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit” (34:18). And again, “For though the LORD is high, [God] regards the lowly, but the haughty [God] knows from afar” (138:6). If you want to move beyond relating to God from a distance, and feel God’s presence on your life, you must begin by humbling yourself.

This promise of God’s presence with the poor in spirit opens the door of hope, because the blessing is promised not on the basis of what we have, but of what we lack. When you find yourself saying, “I don’t have what it takes to face this,” God says, “I will dwell with you here.” When you say, “I am not worthy,” God says, “I am worthy, and I choose you.”

When we feel we have something to offer God, we come to God with our hands full; and as long as our hands are full, we are not in a position to receive the blessing of God’s presence. When we are poor in spirit – humble – we bring nothing to God, trusting God for everything. When we know that we have nothing to offer God, we are in a position to receive all that God offers to us. When we accept that we cannot claim God’s blessing as a right, we are in a position to receive it as a gift.

Empty-handedness is where the blessing of God begins. Empty-handedness:

* Releases us from the idea that God owes us: when we list our demands we move toward pride, but the blessing of God belongs to those who are humble.
* Positions us to ask and receive in prayer: God always heeds a call for help.
* Helps us to bear affliction: God opposes the proud but to the humble God gives grace and power to endure.
* Nourishes our love for other: love gets choked by the weeds of pride, but it grows and thrives in the soil of a humble heart.
* Strengthens us to overcome temptations: is pride leads to a fall (Pr. 16:8), then it follows that humility helps us to stand.
* Frees us from the tyranny of self: our focus shifts from self to Christ.
* Leads us to worship God: once we recognize our poverty, we can recognize the gift of Jesus and the blessing of the Spirit, and we will rejoice in God’s blessing.

So, how do we cultivate this kind of humility? It’s a lot like remodeling a house. There are two stages in the process: demolition and renovation. You begin with the “demo” day: old carpet gets torn up; old cabinets and counters are ripped out; old walls come tumbling down. The pursuit of humility begins with doing a “demo” on pride. A good place to start the demolition is by regularly examining ourselves in the light of God’s Word. We must measure ourselves by what God calls us to pursue. If we fall short and recognize our need for Jesus, we will discover what it is to be poor in spirit. The “demo” makes way for the “reno.” The old and ugly is removed so that the new and beautiful may be installed.

Pastor Andrew Murray explains that humility is deeper than simply remorse: “It is our participation in the life of Jesus.” Being poor in spirit is part of becoming like Jesus, who humbled himself. He said, “I can do nothing on my own” (John 15:30); “I have come down from haven not to do my own will” (John 6:38); “I do not seek my own glory” (John 8:50). Since these are the words of the Son of God, how much more should they be our words, too? The blessedness of Jesus is seen in his gentle and lowly heart. In pursuing humility, we are reflecting the beauty of Jesus’ life.

I encourage you to grasp this first ring-of-blessing today. Humble yourself. Come to Jesus and tell him that you do not have what it takes to live a holy life. Tell Jesus that you do not have the power to change. Ask Jesus to give you what you do not have, and then trust him, look to him, believing his promise that he will come to you, live with you, and bless you. True Christians know their own poverty: they look to Jesus for what they do not have, and find in him all that they need.

Prayer: Lord God, help me to accept my brokenness, emptiness, and utter need for you. Enable me to reject the values and pride of the world and, by Your grace, to make wise choices today. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Source: Colin S. Smith, *Momentum: Pursuing God’s Blessings Through the Beatitudes*. Moody Publishers: Chicago, IL. 2016.

**Bring Nothing**

Sunday, September 17, 2017

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Matthew 5:3

I’ve heard it said that you can’t rush through life and hope to gain any great joy or depth. Some things need to be savored. Fine art deserves to be contemplated. Great music deserves to be experienced. Fabulous food deserves to be relished. And the Beatitudes deserve to be treasured. These are truths over which we should linger. These are God’s Words in which we should delve deeply and take to heart.

The first Beatitude tells us the poor in spirit are blessed. Well, what does that mean? *Poor* means you don’t have much, and there’s nothing particularly blessed about that. If being poor could bring us into the blessing of God, our path of progress would be simple: we’d give away all our wealth and end up perfectly happy. The problem is, it doesn’t work that way. Money is a gift and a trust from God, but getting more of it will not bring you under God’s blessing any more than having less of it can keep you outside.

In this beatitude, Jesus defines a particular kind of poverty, being “poor in spirit.” To be “poor in spirit” means that you recognize your poverty *before God*. It’s an attitude by which you know and affirm that you have not lived the life to which God calls you, and that, without God, you cannot do so now.

To be poor in spirit is the first mark of a person who walks with God. You may be a multitalented sports star or a high flyer in business. You may be a mega mom, a brilliant musician, a technical guru, or a political genius, but once you truly meet with God, you will know that you do not have what God requires of you.

Becoming poor in spirit goes against the grain of our self-affirming culture. Writing in Great Britain in the 1950s, Martyn Lloyd-Jones described the mood of his time: “Express yourself, believe in yourself, realize the powers that are innate in yourself and let the whole world see and know them. That is the spirit of the age.” Not much is changed today. In our culture of affirmation, it seems that parents, teachers, counselors, politicians and advertisers all conspire to tell us how great we are, and we’re apt to believe them.