

[MATTHEW 5:1-12](#)

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I'LL BE HAPPY WHEN...

How OFTEN, as I MEET with people, TALK with people, and COUNSEL with people, do I hear these words: *I'll be happy WHEN.... I'll be happy WHEN....* And I'll tell you, there must be a MILLION possible ENDINGS to that sentence, and I think I've heard EVERY one! *I'll be happy WHEN I finally GROW UP, so I can MOVE out on my OWN. I'll be happy when SUMMER comes and I DON'T have school anymore, or when summer comes and I can FINALLY go on VACATION. I'll be happy when I fall in LOVE and get MARRIED. I'll be happy when I have CHILDREN, OR when I DON'T! I'll be happy when I get a new CAR. I'll be happy when I get a PROMOTION. I'll be happy when I can buy a new HOUSE, a BIGGER one. I'll be happy when I can finally RETIRE!* Hey, I'VE even heard: *I'll be happy when they finally LAY me to REST.* Friends, how would YOU finish that sentence: *I'll be happy when....* WHEN will YOU be happy? WHAT will it take to make YOU happy? And how LONG will it take? Will it be ONE year? FIVE years? FIFTY years? How LONG?

Well, JESUS offers us some WISDOM on this subject. The only PROBLEM is that HIS wisdom DOESN'T make a lot of SENSE to 21st Century Americans! It just seems BACKWARDS! It seems UPSIDE DOWN! SO, when you hear what JESUS has to say, you MIGHT just write it OFF as a bunch of religious gobbledygook, or something so OUT THERE that the RUBBER never hits the ROAD, so to speak. BUT, be careful NOT to dismiss it too QUICKLY! MANY people through the ages have TESTED Jesus' wisdom and FOUND that it's TRUE, even though it SOUNDS backwards.

Now the FIRST thing that Jesus does is to CHANGE our VOCABULARY. You see: JESUS doesn't TALK about HAPPINESS. Oh, I know: SOME versions of the Bible DO use that word, HAPPY, in the Beatitudes. Robert Schuller even wrote a BOOK called, *The BE-HAPPY Attitudes.* BUT, that's NOT the word that JESUS uses here. No, JESUS uses the word BLESSED. IN the original GREEK, it says, *BLESSED are the POOR in spirit.*

And, I think that BLESSED is a MUCH better word, IF for no other reason, than because of the way WE use the word HAPPY. I mean: what is happiness for US? HAPPINESS for US is going on a CRUISE! HAPPINESS is taking the summer OFF! HAPPINESS is getting PROMOTED! HAPPINESS is watching the RED SOX win the World Series! THAT'S how WE use the word, happiness. It's a GIGGLE! It's a temporary HIGH! JESUS, on the other hand, has something completely DIFFERENT in mind, something much DEEPER, and something that seems quite STRANGE when we first HEAR it: *BLESSED are the POOR in spirit. BLESSED are those who MOURN. BLESSED are the MEEK. BLESSED are those who HUNGER and THIRST for righteousness....* Do you see what I MEAN? What HE says just doesn't make SENSE! It's BACKWARDS! THOSE aren't the rules that WE live by, are they? OUR rules are: *BLESSED are the RICH, because they can BUY what they WANT! BLESSED are the STRONG, because they can TAKE what they want. BLESSED are the WINNERS, because WHO wants to be a LOSER, even in a BALLGAME? BLESSED are those who hunger and thirst for the best RESTAURANTS; THEY will be PAMPERED, INDULGED, and FILLED!*

JESUS, on the other hand, says: *Blessed are the POOR in spirit!* And THEN, HE goes on to give us 8 MORE Beatitudes just LIKE that one. Now, I can't BEGIN to do JUSTICE to all 9 Beatitudes in ONE sermon. SO, I'm going to just talk about the FIRST Beatitude: *Blessed are the POOR in spirit,* because I believe this FIRST one is the FOUNDATION for all the REST. IF we are in SYNCH with the FIRST Beatitude, we're APT to be in SYNCH with ALL of them. And IF we're OUT of synch with the FIRST one, we're apt to be OUT of synch with ALL of them.

Jesus says: ***Blessed are the POOR in spirit...*** Now, the GREEK word for *poor* here is the word *ptochos* (p-to-chos). And it LITERALLY means ABJECT poverty, DESPERATE poverty. Now friends: I don't know if you've ever seen REAL poverty. MOST Americans HAVEN'T. But REAL poverty is a very CRUEL thing. It BREAKS people! The poor REALLY suffer! And BECAUSE they are confronted DAILY with their own HELPLESSNESS and POWERLESSNESS, they understand the DIFFERENCE that even a SMALL act of mercy can MAKE. SO, they watch EAGERLY for just a gesture or just a glance that MIGHT just promise a LITTLE help. And they just LONG for a little kindness, and CRAVE a little DIGNITY! And that's PRECISELY how they stand before GOD as well. They can bring NOTHING in their hands that God NEEDS, and they KNOW it. And they can bring NOTHING in their HEARTS that would compel God to ACCEPT them. And THEREFORE, they just COME to God in their poverty, HOPING for a little sustenance. They just COME to God in their brokenness, hoping to be MENDED. They just COME to God in their SIN, hoping to be forgiven. They just COME to God in their GRIEF, hoping to be comforted. They just COME to God in their ILLNESS, hoping to be healed. And UNLIKE most of US, most of the TIME, they do not BARGAIN with God because they REALIZE that they have NOTHING to OFFER in the bargain. And friends, it's THIS kind of HUMILITY, THIS kind of OPENNESS, that makes the poor extremely FERTILE soil to receive God's BLESSINGS. And SO, Jesus says: ***BLESSED are the POOR in spirit. BLESSED are those who APPROACH God on their KNEES with NOTHING in their HANDS.***

Now, let's FACE it: that's not OUR preferred MODE of travel, IS it: ON our knees with EMPTY hands? No way! We MUCH prefer to be in CONTROL! We MUCH prefer to PAY for what we get. We MUCH prefer NOT to be in anyone's DEBT, even GOD'S. JESUS says: ***Blessed are the POOR in spirit***, but WE fight very hard NOT to be POOR -- in spirit or any OTHER way! WE try very HARD to get the best GRADES we can so that WE can get the best JOB we can! And then we WORK as hard as we CAN on that job, working ENDLESS hours to do as WELL as we can and to make as much MONEY as we can, SO that WE can control our lives and our futures as MUCH as we can! And as parents, we teach our CHILDREN the SAME thing! We PUSH them to get good grades, so that THEY'LL always have control over THEIR lives. And we get them into as MANY sports and activities as we CAN, even if it means creating little STIMULATION junkies out of them!

BUT, do you know what we GET for ALL our EFFORTS to be in CONTROL of everything in our lives? Well, MOSTLY what we get is EXHAUSTED. I remember, a few years ago, *Newsweek* magazine ran a COVER, on which there was only ONE WORD, in large bold letters. It was the word ***EXHAUSTED!*** And the ARTICLE inside told of people -- everyone from the president of *Harvard University* to HOMEMAKERS -- everyone from single mothers to fathers trying to juggle TWO jobs -- and ALL of them were just plain EXHAUSTED! And I'll BET that MOST of US can IDENTIFY with that feeling most of the time. WE are constantly PUSHING ourselves to the point of EXHAUSTION! But friends, I believe that we are EXHAUSTED, PARTIALLY because we REFUSE to be *poor in SPIRIT*. WE are PROUD people, DESPERATE to be in control and to do things OUR way. And therefore, we spend INCREDIBLE amounts of ENERGY on absolutely TRIVIAL things that don't matter at ALL in the long run. WE work LONG hours to BUY things that we DON'T really need so that we can keep UP with other people, MOST of whom we don't even LIKE. And pretty soon, all of our THINGS start controlling US, and running our LIVES. It's TRUE!

But JESUS says: ***Blessed are the POOR in spirit.*** Gilbert Bowen, in his book, *The WAY to Go*, tells the true story about a young boy, who is admitted to the hospital with terrible injuries. And pretty soon, the boy's FATHER arrives. And it is CLEAR, by his manner and by his clothing, that HE has LOTS of money, and that he is USED to giving ORDERS. Well, AS the doctor tries to CARE for the boy, the father begins SHOUTING: ***WHY aren't you doing MORE? I want the BEST care for my son that money can buy. I want you to fly him to the BEST specialist in this country. DO something for my son, and do it NOW!*** Finally, the doctor turns to the father and says: *My friend,*

there is NOTHING that your MONEY can DO for your son now. ALL you can do now is WAIT and PRAY.

Well, as I READ this story, I WONDERED about that father. And my FIRST thought was that he PROBABLY doesn't even know HOW to pray. After all: HE'S used to DEMANDING what he wants, or BUYING it. And SO, I felt SORRY for the man because, here he is, facing the most TERRIBLE crisis of his life, something he can't control, and his STUNTED spirituality leaves him unprepared to FACE it. But THEN, it occurred to me that MAYBE, just maybe, this TERRIBLE moment in his life brings this man FACE-to-FACE with his OWN spiritual INADEQUACY. MAYBE, just maybe, during this crisis, this father recognizes a deep NEED crying out in his spirit, which he has IGNORED for a VERY long time. And MAYBE, just maybe, in the process, this father realizes that he's **POOR in SPIRIT**, and is finally ABLE to approach God on his KNEES, with OPEN hands like a BEGGAR. Yes MAYBE, just maybe, THIS becomes a TURNING point in this man's life. IN his brokenness, maybe, just maybe, for the FIRST time in his life, he is able to HUMBLY turn to God and RECEIVE God's BLESSING like the poor, like a beggar.

Friends, the meaning of the FIRST Beatitude -- and really ALL the Beatitudes -- is that God BLESSES us whenever we come to God on our KNEES with empty, OPEN hands, ready to receive WHATEVER blessing God chooses to give us, and ready FOLLOW on WHATEVER path God chooses to LEAD us. THAT'S what it's ABOUT! And of course, that makes me TEMPTED to CONCLUDE my sermon today by saying: *Now, just go out and be POOR in spirit, so that you will RECEIVE God's BLESSING!* But that's NOT what Jesus is SAYING here, is it? Jesus is NOT issuing an ORDER. Jesus is giving a BLESSING! Jesus is PROMISING us that WHEN our need is GREATEST, it is THEN and THEN and THERE that we find God, and that God BLESSES us, and that we experience just a glimpse of the Kingdom of Heaven. Because that's the SECOND half of this Beatitude isn't it? He says: Because that's the END of the sentence, isn't it? He says: ***BLESSED are the POOR in spirit, for THEIRS is the kingdom of HEAVEN.*** NO, friends: we don't need to go out and DO anything. We just need to BELIEVE His PROMISE. WE just need to TRUST it: ***BLESSED are the POOR in spirit, for THEIRS is the kingdom of HEAVEN.*** And when we DO trust His promise, my friends, WE will experience what's called the PEACE of CHRIST, which is a JOY and a PEACE DEEP within us! And that JOY and PEACE will be SO much DEEPER than ALL the HAPPINESS that we can possibly IMAGINE. Oh, I'm sure we'll keep on saying: ***I'll be happy WHEN....*** I guess that's just part of our human nature, and we DO need some giggles after all. But let's REALIZE that what JESUS offers us is something FAR deeper, much longer lasting and MUCH more JOYOUS than what we call happiness, and it will stay WITH us even when things go wrong and life gets difficult and out of control. Yes, THAT'S the blessing! That's the promise that Jesus offers us. Thanks be to God. Amen.