

DEEP AND WIDE

Poor

Matthew 5:1-3

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If your momma raised you right, what do you say to someone when they sneeze? Of course, you say, “God bless you.” That’s what we do in polite society. We even say it to perfect strangers whose religious preferences we know nothing about. But did you ever stop to wonder why? Why do we bless people who sneeze?

It’s actually an ancient practice, as old as the first century, when it was believed that when you opened your mouth wide to take in that big breath before you sneeze, you might just inhale an evil spirit. And so, people would pronounce a blessing upon someone who sneezed as a means of protecting them against demonic possession. Cool, right? You’re gonna be a hit at your next cocktail party with that little trivia nugget!

But let me ask you – what exactly does it mean to be “blessed”? Does it mean to be protected from evil spirits, or does it mean something more? And who is blessed? Are some people blessed and others not? And who does the blessing? Good questions. So glad you asked. Hold onto them and we’ll return to them in a bit.

Throughout worship this summer we talked about how you and I are empowered by the Holy Spirit to participate in God’s mission of building God’s Kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven.” Today we’re starting a new worship series in which we’re going to talk more specifically about living in this new Kingdom. Over the course of the next few weeks we’re going to take a deep dive into the very beginning of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, a section of Scripture known as The Beatitudes. Each week we’ll examine a new beatitude and discover what it means about how we live in this new Kingdom of God. Are you ready? Let’s get started by opening your Bible to Matthew 5. Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount spans all of chapters 5 through 7 in Matthew’s Gospel, but we’re going to focus our attention on just the first few verses of chapter 5. Today, let’s read Matthew 5:1-3 [NRSV].

Let me begin by setting the stage for everything that follows in this series. Picture this: Jesus is at the height of his popularity. He’s been teaching and preaching a message of God’s love for all people. He’s been healing those who are sick in body, mind or spirit. As you can imagine, word about Jesus has been spreading, so people from all over the countryside are following him to hear what he has to say and see what he’ll do next.

Most of the people who are following Jesus are poor peasants. Israelite society had no middle class. There were a small number of rich and powerful people, and everyone else pretty much barely scraped out a living. And common theology said that wealth and power were signs of God’s blessing. In other words, God blessed the few and the rest must have assumed that God just didn’t much care about them. These are the ones who are following Jesus, and it’s easy to understand why. Jesus is revealing God’s favor for them – the very ones that society has dismissed as unimportant.

And did you notice what Jesus did when these people gathered to hear him? He climbed a mountainside and sat down. Two things to note here. First, Matthew wants us to see Jesus as the new Moses. Just as Moses delivered the Ten Commandments to the Israelites from a mountain when God was forming them into a new nation, now Jesus is going to deliver God’s Commandments to these people as he forms them into a new Kingdom. But this Kingdom isn’t just for the Israelites; it’s for everyone. And as we’re about to learn in this Kingdom the King’s favor doesn’t rest on the rich and the powerful. In this new Kingdom of God, the King’s favor rests on those that the world has dismissed as unimportant, unworthy and undeserving. Is it any wonder the crowds flocked to hear Jesus? And that’s exactly how Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount begins – by describing who is blessed in this Kingdom.

So, let’s talk about this word “blessed.” It appears throughout the beatitudes, but what exactly does it mean? The Greek word that stands behind it is “makarios” and it’s a complicated little word. Some people translate it as “happy” but the real mean is far deeper than some temporary, emotional state. Makarios, to be blessed, means to be complete, deeply contented because one is favored by God. Interestingly, in common Greek the word was used to describe the rich and powerful. Greek culture assumed that those

are the things that made one complete and deeply contented, but did you notice what Jesus said in this first beatitude? Blessed are the poor in spirit. What does that mean?

Jesus isn't talking about economic poverty. He isn't talking about physical poverty. He's talking about spiritual poverty. Let's look at a few different translations that might help bring Jesus' meaning to light:

The New Living Translation says, "God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him."

God's Word Translation says, "Blessed are those who recognize they are spiritually helpless."

The Contemporary English Version says, "God blesses those who depend only on him."

And my personal favorite, The Message, puts it this way, "You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope."

In other words, Jesus is saying that it isn't the rich and powerful and self-sufficient who are blessed. That's what the culture believes. That's the way it is in the kingdoms of this world. But it's different in the Kingdom of God. In the Kingdom of God, it's those who recognize that they are incomplete without God, those who recognize that they need God in their lives. They are blessed because they seek God with all their heart. Later on in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus would put it this way, "Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and everything else will be added to you." In other words, in the Kingdom of God it isn't the people who have it all together and don't need God who are blessed, even though they are honored in the kingdoms of this world. In God's Kingdom those who are broken, empty, needy – they are blessed.

When I was in college I thought my life would be blessed if I was popular, got straight "A's" and held important leadership positions. And by the time I was a sophomore I had all that and more. But deep down I also had a sense of emptiness. I had trouble sleeping and a constantly upset stomach. It took some faithful friends to help me to realize that while I "had it all" according to the world's standards, I was lacking the one thing that mattered most – a relationship with God. I thought I didn't need God, I learned that I was wrong. Everything changed for me when I acknowledged my need for God, when I came to terms with my spiritual poverty. God filled that place in me that nothing else could, and I wouldn't trade that relationship with God

through my faith in Christ for anything in this world. This first beatitude has been profoundly true in my life, "Blessed are you when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there's more of God and his rule." [MSG]

The Kingdom of God is not like the kingdoms of this world. It is our hope and prayer that these beatitudes – this whole worship series – will pull you in two directions: deep and wide.

The kingdoms of this world will try to pull you into a shallow and anxious life of self-reliance and self-love, but the Kingdom of God will call you into a deeper life of trust, obedience and love for the King.

And the kingdoms of this world will try to tell you that there is only room for a few at the top, and that it's the people at the top who matter. But in the Kingdom of God there is room for all, especially those who too often lie broken, defeated and hopeless at the bottom.

This week you will cross paths with someone who is there, at the bottom, in need of a word of hope and encouragement. Just as Jesus invited everyone in, why don't you invite someone in? Invite someone to join you in worship next week as we continue this series. Let them hear the Good News of the Kingdom where they are welcomed and blessed, and the King who loves them.