

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup>“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup>“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup>“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup>“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup>“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup>“Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup>“Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup>Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

Friends, I looked at the Beatitudes this week and said, “There’s nothing else I need to say. Jesus speaks what we need to hear. I should just read the scripture once, maybe twice, sit down, and let us all meditate on what Jesus said for 12 minutes.” But when I voiced that idea midweek, I was gently reminded that one of my roles is to be a teaching elder, to provide some education, some context, and some interpretation that helps the scripture’s words come to life and have relatable meaning for us in 2026.

So, I looked at the words more closely, and I realized that there are some phrases that are not commonly used these days. “Poor in spirit,” “meek,” “a hunger and thirst for righteousness” – and I realized that while Jesus’s words were really all we needed to hear, there was some role for me to play in putting some context behind what he said.

The biggest problem is we’re mostly white, economically comfortable Americans from the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. This means we’re nothing like the original audience. And that makes a difference in how we read the text.

Let me give you just one example. If you look at many commentaries and sermons written by American scholars from the 1900s, you’d find that “poor in spirit” often gets translated as “humble.” So does “meek.” You might have heard preachers talk about humility and how close it is to godliness. Humility is even my star word for the year, and I know how important it is to acknowledge the incredible team of people around me and give credit to God.

But humility is also one of the most important spiritual disciplines in American Christianity primarily because, we have been the richest, most powerful, world-rescuing, stable, democratic superpower with the biggest military in human history. For us, humility is something we do need to work on because the average American Christian in the 1900s was able to not just make ends meet but be a proper middle-class citizen with a ton of pride in who we have been. Humility was something we needed. Something that would keep us grounded when the rest of life was going so well. Humility meant something like, “The gifts I have - a nice house, a nice car, a nice family, a nice job – these things come not just from my hard work but from my privilege and opportunities.” So yes, poor in spirit can mean humble.

But it is more than that. In the first century, poor in spirit meant things more like deeply depressed, overwhelmed, anxious, doubtful of God’s presence or interest in oneself. In angst over the world around them, at a loss about how to help a loved one, hopeless.

And yes, meek can mean mild mannered, quiet, obedient. Our parents and grandparents taught us to be seen but not heard, to not question authority but to do as we were told. To be meek. It can mean those things, but meek can also mean feeling worthless, cowering because you feel threatened, downcast because you feel unloveable. Having no power to prevent systemic abuse, physical abuse, economic abuse.

And “hungering and thirsting for righteousness”? That’s been a tricky one. For much of the 1900s, there was a rugged individualism that led to an interpretation of righteousness as an individual spiritual devotion and piety. Those who hungered for righteousness were those who practiced daily devotionals, journaled, prayed, brought food to pot lucks, and attended church faithfully. You know, the righteous ones.

But in the first century, and for many centuries before and after, righteousness was a concept that revolved around the community, not the individual. Righteousness occurred when the community was safe and healthy and practicing the commandments of love and justice. Righteousness was measured by how many people went to bed hungry or homeless.

So, I want to read the words of the Sermon on the Mount with a modern translation that I hope makes the words come to life for you.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. <sup>2</sup>And he began to speak and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, those whose spirits are crushed by fear, those who are on the verge of giving up hope, those that are doubting that there is a God or that God cares for them, knows them, would ever help them. Blessed are those who are afraid, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are they for whom death is not an abstract thought but a nightmare on replay. Blessed are they who have buried their loved ones, children, grandchildren, spouses far too young for the grave. Blessed are those for whom tears are as real as the rain. Blessed are those who mourn for

people who they never even met. Lives lost to addiction, accident, or unnecessary violence. Blessed are they who have loved enough to know what loss feels like and wonder when the pain will end.

<sup>5</sup>“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those without power, without leverage, without voice. Even though they cannot do anything but witness and watch injustice, the meek will keep standing. Even though they have no ability to command others to stop or demand the truth or even defend others, they are not apathetic and passive. They are present, and they bear witness.

<sup>6</sup>“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Now, remember, in the Bible, righteousness is not an individual spiritual score you get for being devout. It is public, communal justice. Righteousness is the whole community making sure that no one is suffering alone because we affirm that everyone, every single one of us, is made in the image of God. Everyone is valued as a beloved child of God. Hunger for that. Thirst for that.

<sup>7</sup>“Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Friends, mercy is not weakness. Mercy is strength restrained for the sake of love. Mercy is the refusal to justify violence to accomplish goals. Mercy sees Christ in the face of friends and stranger, and mercy remembers that we have all of us, all of us, all fallen short of perfection and are indebted to God eternally.

<sup>8</sup>“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. The ones who are called naïve, pie-in-the-sky dreamers. The ones whose first thoughts are run toward those in need. Who still believe in the power of a hug and a bar of chocolate. The ones who haven’t given up believing that there is good in all of us. Like Luke Skywalker who kept insisting to his father that there was still good in him. Blessed are the children. The innocent ones who don’t yet know the sting of sin and grief and injustice.

<sup>9</sup>“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. The peacemakers are often misunderstood, because some think that peacemakers are people who do not engage in conflict, the ones who stay inside and keep themselves out of harm’s

way, but there are times when, to make peace, to be a peacemaker, you have to create some conflict, some trouble. The Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it best. "True peace is not merely the absence of tension: it is the presence of justice." Peacemakers have to be on the frontlines to bring about peace but always they must work through nonviolence.

<sup>10</sup> "Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. For Americans, this is not a verse that applies to us. No one is persecuting us. We think, instead, of missionaries, Christians in countries in which they're the minority. But remember what the first readers heard. Righteousness is communal. The people of Israel saw righteousness as corporate safety, corporate fairness. Do we know anyone who is being persecuted for the sake of their community? Those who are are not the bad guys. Though they are called the troublemakers, they really are the blessed ones who are willing to lay down their lives for their neighbors.

<sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

There are lots of slanderous lies being thrown around right now. People labeling others without taking time to gather facts. The prophets were slandered and belittled. The prophets were misunderstood and because they spoke truth to power, the powerful tried to demean them publicly. This is what happens. It has happened for centuries. Millenia really. Jesus says, "if it's happening to you, consider yourself a part of the family. You're in good company. Elijah, Jeremiah, Samuel, Ezekiel, they all were labeled crazy, demonic, dangerous, and unpatriotic. They dared to question the king and the economics of the day. They dared to speak up, and they paid a heavy price." Jesus says, "if people persecute you and utter false things about you, well, welcome to the club."

Friends, when Jesus climbs the mountain in Matthew 5 and begins to speak, he is not offering some abstract spiritual poetry that might inspire listeners to do more journaling and obediently submit to our authorities. He is looking out upon a people who are scared

and suffering. Who are under a Roman occupancy that is violent and powerful. He sees the people who are wounded, overlooked, oppressed, and powerless — and declares that *God is already on their side.*

The Beatitudes are not gentle platitudes; they are a radical reordering of power, dignity, and belonging. And they remind us that God's blessing rests not on the powerful, but on the vulnerable. Not on those who enforce fear, but on those who resist it. Not on those who wield violence, but on those who seek justice for all.

Jesus preaches about the upside-down kingdom of God. A place where the least are the greatest and the greatest are the least. The blessed ones are not the ones who are rich and powerful but the ones who are poor and powerless or defend the poor and powerless. May we hear these words for what they are and be so moved that we might respond in a way so as to be counted among the blessed ourselves. May these words come alive in our hearts and minds and linger with us in the week to come, and may we never forget that no matter what we do or what is done to them, the kingdom of heaven already belongs to the blessed ones. Amen.