



# Blessed Are The Poor In Spirit

SCRIPTURE:  
Matthew 5:1-12

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February 21, 2021 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are

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**A**s Jesus began his ministry, he said that the kingdom of heaven had come near. His followers, no doubt, wondered, “What is this kingdom like?” The kingdom of heaven is more than heaven itself. The kingdom of heaven is the life of heaven that pushes its way into the here and now. Jesus’ ministry can be understood as his effort to teach and to show us what kingdom living is like. His first words about this kingdom life are found here in what we call the beatitudes—descriptions of the blessed life.

During this season of Lent, we will consider a number of these beatitudes. I have titled this series “The World Turned Upside Down”—not the song from Hamilton—but rather the description of what Jesus considers a blessed life, which is a bit upside down.

Barbara Brown Taylor remembers standing on her head in the backyard as a child. Hurts me to think about that myself. She says if she could maintain her balance long enough that the grass hung like fringe and the blue lawn stretched out forever. “I could tap dance on the sky while birds and clouds passed beneath my feet.” She then says, “I think Jesus should have asked the crowd to stand on their heads when he taught them the Beatitudes because that was what he was doing. He was turning the known world upside down.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus sees blessing in the most surprising places. I wonder if you agree with Jesus on where you find blessing in your life. Jesus said the blessed are not those whose life is put together and comfortable and filled with work that matters and beneficiaries of communal respect. Blessing is not found in having the right answers or even in a successful life. None of these are bad. They can even be desirable. But from

the perspective of the kingdom of heaven, they are incomplete.

Jesus says that the truly blessed are those who know what it is to have a broken heart. The blessed are those whose hearts are pure. The blessed are the meek and even those who are persecuted. Do you think he’s right about that? What does it mean to be blessed like this?

Dr. Kate Bowler is a professor of church history at Duke and has written a book titled *Blessed*. It’s a study of the prosperity gospel—common theology in the American church. In a nutshell, the prosperity gospel is an understanding of faith something like this: God wants to bless you. God wants you to have a wonderful life. The way that God will bless you is by being your provider of good health and also wealth. All you need to do is have faith. In short, if your faith is strong enough, you will be rewarded.

It sounds good, but it’s hard to reconcile such a transactional God with the life of Jesus, which was not defined by wealth but by service and eventually the cross. Jesus held different values. Nevertheless, I think there is a bit of prosperity gospel in all of us. What I mean is, if we look at the good things in our lives through the eyes of faith, we tend to say, “God has been good to me. God has blessed me.”

But blessing is less having life’s circumstances fall in pleasant places and more living in the right place. The first right place is the poor in spirit. So, what does that mean?

The poor in spirit are those who know they are lacking something—impoverished in some way. They are in need.

Every day, you and I, we work to build a life. We set our goals. We devote our energies. We make our plans. We build a life. It’s a good and faithful thing.

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1 Barbara Brown Taylor, *Blessed are the Upside Down*, *Gospel Medicine*, (1995) p. 145

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But there is a shadow side; there is a temptation, particularly, when that life-building goes well. The more successful we become, the easier it is to assume that we are the builders of our own lives.

If you are as old as I am, then you remember Michael J. Fox as Alex Keaton on the TV show, “Family Ties.” He later starred in many movies, most successfully, the “Back to the Future” series. He’s a funny guy. But he has a serious side to him. He says that one morning he was awakened by his own finger tapping the back of his head. It was the first noticed symptom of Parkinson’s disease.

Like it does for most, Parkinson’s changed his life. In his book, *Lucky Man*, Fox surprisingly describes Parkinson’s as a gift—a blessing. Being sick is never a gift, he knows that. But blessings come from the most surprising places. He calls it a gift because his own testimony is, before he got sick, his life was focused on himself. He was successful and loved and everything was moving upward. He had built his life and lacked nothing. Or so he thought. He says it took his getting sick to realize what he failed to see. He couldn’t control everything; he was deeply in need. I think that is what it is to be poor in spirit.

We are finite. There is a limit to what we can do. Being finite is not a bad thing, but it is an inescapable reality of being human. We are creatures, not the creator, so we have limits.

A dozen years ago when my son was going to high school, he decided he would run cross-country track. This surprised me because I couldn’t remember seeing him run before. So, to get him ready, I asked him, “Hey, wanna take a run together? Get ready for cross country?” He said, “okay.” So, we set off—three or four miles. He started off strong, talking about things while he ran. But then he began to fade. By the end of the run, I had left him in the dust. I got home several minutes before he came in gasping. That happened the next time we ran, too. But then, the third time, we switched roles. It took him just three times out before he left me behind and I have never caught up with

him since.

I’m limited. Because we are finite, there is a limit to our strength, there is a limit to our wisdom, there is a limit to our knowledge, and there is a limit to our days. And to live life in the right place—the blessed place—we need to depend on God. Jesus says, knowing that we need God is where a blessed life begins.

Think of it this way: Do you have a person in your life who is your go-to person? A spouse, a friend, a roommate, a sister? Do you have someone—when the day has disappointed—that you can call or sit with and just unload it all? In that moment, we know that we need someone in our lives. We are dependent and that is a good thing, a blessed thing. We can’t build our life alone. We need God. When you know that and lean into that, it’s blessed.

I met Wilkin a few years ago when I went with some of you to the Dominican Republic. Wilkin runs the Light A Candle ministry that we help support. He has a hard life compared to most of us. He is surrounded by the crushing poverty that defines that island. He battles it every day with a grace and strength that I have never demonstrated in my own life. Every day is hard. But Wilkin is a joyful guy. He loves easily. He’s a talented musician and a remarkable leader and a man of deep faith. And he was quick to tell me, “Tom, we depend on Village. We can’t do this by ourselves. This ministry, caring for these people... we depend on you.” He knows his dependence on us and others and on God. When it comes to seeing the blessed reality of being poor in spirit, Wilkin is my teacher.

His circumstances may make it easier to see that he is poor in spirit. Maybe. But Jesus didn’t say some are dependent on God and they are blessed. He said every one of us depends on God and you are blessed if you see it, if you know it.

It’s not something you have to achieve; it’s just something you have to see. The truth is, when you know you need God, that is the beginning of a blessed life.