Sunday, February 24, 1980
BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT (No. 1 in a Series: Beatitudes)
Matthew 5:1-11

Probably no portion of the Bible is so highly praised but so little known or practiced as the Sermon on the Mount. That's the main reason I'm suggesting that as many of you as want to, memorize the Sermon on the Mount, which is found in the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5, 6, and 7.

Perhaps no part of the Sermon on the Mount is so widely quoted, yet so poorly understood as the Beatitudes. Anyone approaching the Beatitudes or the Sermon on the Mount as a whole would be wise to remember a saying from Mark Twain, who was more honest about his troubles than many of us are about ours. He had heard people complain that the Bible is hard to understand. But he said he was bothered more by the parts of the Bible that he could understand than by the parts he cou1d not understand. His statement fits the sermon on the mount in particular. At times as we study it, we find ourselves not understanding parts of it, but more often the words are so clear that we can have little doubt about their meaning. Then the real trouble comes because we know what a change they call for in our lives and we hesitate to make that change.

This is especially true of the Beatitudes, the first eleven verses of the Sermon on the Mount. The word "beatitude" literally means, "this is how one is blessed," or this is the way a person finds happiness. Thus, some translations of the Bible read instead of "Blessed are the poor in Spirit," "Happy are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

More than anything else, the beatitudes express how one find true happiness in life. The problem for us is that there are also so many other suggestions in our time which try to convince us of what happiness is and how to find it. Some ideas of happiness are very personal, such as — Happiness is getting to sleep late on Sunday morning if you're the preacher's spouse. Or happiness is not having to take a bath if you're four years old. Happiness is getting all the candy you want if you're the dentist's daughter.

The world is filled with its own kind of wisdom and advice on how to find happiness. The more money one has, the happier he or she will be. Or happiness is to have power and the more power one has the happier that person will be. Each one of us probably has our own version or idea of the best way to find true happiness or meaning in our life.

The way to happiness suggested by the beatitudes completely reverses most of our own ideas and the world's ideas about happiness.

The first beatitude begins on an unusual subject — "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

1. Who are the poor in spirit? What did Jesus mean with this phrase? Different translations of the Bible give us some help. One translation puts it this way — "Blessed are those who feel their spiritual need, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them." Another English translation says, "The new age comes to those who have a sense of their own need." Still another translation says, "How blest are those who know they are poor; the kingdom of heaven is theirs." And still one more translation puts it this way — "How happy are the humble-minded, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs."

So, Jesus Christ is talking about much more than being poor in a material sense. More than anything else he is describing an inner condition, an inward poverty. To be “poor in spirit” is to be aware of one’s weaknesses and imperfections and lacks and sins. Jesus Christ also knew, however, that the world’s poor in a material sense were also those who were more likely to be poor in spirit. Having a lot of things in a material sense can easily lead us to the false conclusion that we have everything we need in every way and that we have more because we deserve more.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Blessed are those who know their own weaknesses, their own failings, their own doubts, their feelings of helplessness.

One minister wrote, “Like a stream they’ve come these last few years especially. They sit in my study across from me and quite often the tears begin to come. Over and over again they say it: ‘My faith is gone. My life is in shambles. My strength is just about to the breaking point. I don’t know where to go and I don’t know what to do.'” This kind of scene is repeated over and over again in the study of most ministers across the country. It is to all such people that this first beatitude speaks especially. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.” Blessed are those who know their condition and admit it. Blessed are those who are aware of their weaknesses, who admit their troubles. When you are in life’s depths, you are most close to being blessed.

To be able to admit that you cannot handle life all by yourself is to be poor in spirit and it’s the beginning point of healing, the beginning point of receiving God’s blessing.

The first step in A.A. is based on this beatitude. “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.” It’s when we admit our weakness, our lack, our poverty of spirit that we can begin to receive help. Blessed are those who know their spiritual needs for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

But our worldly wisdom is just the opposite. The beatitudes of the world go something like this. Blessed are the strong for they shall get all they want. Blessed are those who can hide their sins, their weaknesses, who can cover them up and never admit guilt, for they shall get ahead in this world. Blessed are the proud, the pompous, the so-called beautiful people, for others worship at their feet and want to be like them. Blessed are those who think they know all the answers or who give simple but clever answers to complex questions for they shall have many followers. One presidential candidate recently said in commenting on the issue of prayer in public schools, “let’s get the government out of the classrooms so we can get God back into the classrooms.” A clever statement, but an absurd one, and it completely sidesteps the deeper issues.

The world’s beatitudes are many. Blessed are those who consider themselves perfect. When we follow this kind of philosophy there comes a time when the professor doesn’t have to read any more books, he’s settled all the issues. Then one doesn’t have to listen to any opposing points of view, we already know we are right. We don’t have to pray anymore, for we know what we need and how to get it. We don’t have to participate in worship anymore — that’s only for the weak, for those who need a crutch. A friend of mine likes to say in response, “Sure religion is a crutch, but who says you don’t limp.”

But this beatitude reminds us that wi2. can become so everlastingly proud of our accomplishments that we begin to thank God that we are not like those other poor slobs who

never did make it to where we are right now! Our prayer is like that described by Jesus — the man who prayed, “God, I thank you that I am not like other people, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like that other dumb person over there. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.” But the poor sinner, said Jesus, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast saying, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” This person was blessed, said Jesus. He was one of those who was poor in spirit.

We have so much trouble admitting our weaknesses, our sins, our mistakes, our needs. Nations have even more difficulty than individuals. As a nation we find it almost impossible to admit that we’ve ever done anything wrong or made any mistakes, particularly in foreign policy. Yet this first beatitude reminds us that confession is good for the soul. It’s cleansing! It’s refreshing! Nations as well as individuals need to be aware of their poverty of spirit and then they too will be blessed.

Recently, I’ve been reading a new biography of Gandhi of India, written by William Shirer. The book describes over and over again the fact that the British Empire could not ever come to admit its mistakes in dealing with India. The suffering of millions of people could have been avoided but pride got in the way.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. The way any person begins Christian discipleship is by admitting his or her need. As long as we are self-satisfied, confident that we have all the answers, and completely comfortable with everything around us, we think we have no need of God, and many times no need of anyone else.

But there come times when we do need God. What will you do when your world tumbles in around you? What happens when tragedy strikes one of your children or someone else close to you? What do you do with a habit you have tried to break, and nothing happens except the same old routine and disappointment and failure over and over again? What do you do when there is resentment built up inside you so deep and strong and you’ve carried it so long that it has just about choked you to death? What do you do when you are afraid of any change which seems to threaten your established way of doing things?

“Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are you when you recognize your poverty, when you admit you are in need for then help can begin to come your way — the kingdom of heaven is yours.

What is this kingdom of heaven? To be in possession of the kingdom of heaven means to begin to come to an awareness and knowledge that God is with you that God is present in your life and in the life of the world and that if God is for you, who can be against you. The kingdom of heaven means that you know now more than ever that God is ultimately in charge of all of creation.

Everyone and everything is encompassed within the kingdom of heaven, but those who are poor in spirit possess it because they are aware of it, they recognize it, and they submit to the kingdom of God and let it be theirs.

Other people would rather submit to the kingdoms of this world and believe in their power — might makes right; those who possess the most armaments and the largest armies will rule the world — they may for a time, but in the long run, in the totality of God’s kingdom — blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The Apostle Paul wrote: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than any of us and the weakness of God is stronger than any of us. God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.”

What we often perceive as weakness according to our way of judging things, turns out in God’s kingdom to be strength in a much larger sense than we ever imagined. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.