BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT

Matthew 5:1-16

Key Verse: 5:3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The central theme of Matthew’s gospel is the kingdom of heaven. The first message of Jesus was, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” (4:17)We call Matthew 5:1-7:27 ‘the Sermon on the Mount.’ The Sermon on the Mount is a parallel to Moses giving the law on Mount Sinai. Jesus’ sermon does not start with “Do or Do not, or you should…”, but rather “Blessed are those who…” The Sermon on the Mount provides Christians with blueprint of future life in the kingdom of heaven.

This sermon starts with the Beatitudes. We call the beatitudes “Eight Blessings.” The word ‘beatitude’ comes from ‘*bēatitudo*’ in Latin, which means ‘happiness.’ The word ‘Blessed’ *makarios* in Greek, also means happiness. So the Sermon on the Mount is a message of happiness. This happiness is not a temporary emotional and physical satisfaction which comes from possession and achievement from this world, such as wealth, health, honor, relationship and so on. Happiness in this sermon is a supreme, permanent, enduring, deep, and spiritual fulfillment which comes from the kingdom of heaven. Let’s see how Jesus taught his disciples the secret of this blessing.

First, Blessed are the poor in spirit (3). Let us read verse 3 all together. “***Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.***” Who are the poor in spirit? The poor in spirit are those who seek God earnestly, realizing their utter helplessness, and put their whole trust in God. D.A. Carson said about this, “To be poor in spirit is not to lack courage but to acknowledge spiritual bankruptcy. It confesses one’s unworthiness before God and utter dependence on him.” (Expositor’s Bible Commentary, p 132) Who are the poor in spirit in the Bible? Hannah was desperate in seeking God’s presence in her life. She cried out in the temple day and night, realizing her helplessness in seeking God’s favor. David realized his nothingness before the constant threat of death by King Saul. If he had wanted, he could have removed his enemy. But David feared God and spared Saul’s life because Saul was God’s anointed king. Between his conscience and his demand for justice David realized his helplessness and came to God in desperation for his help.

The situation of being poor in spirit is a spiritual, emotional, and mental vacancy. This vacancy can be filled only by God alone. Blaise Pascal said, “There is a God-shaped vacuum in the heart of every man which cannot be filled by any created thing, but only by God, the Creator, made known through Jesus.” Poverty is not evil but a channel to meet God. Suppose you do not have even one cent to buy milk for your crying baby; you will seek God desperately. Historically speaking, poor countries were evangelized through the gospel message and became rich Christian countries. Brokenness provides a chance to experience God’s healing. Loneliness is a space for God. Your heart is broken from this world, losing all your hopes and dreams, draining them away. You yourself remain alone, filled with emptiness, sorrow, sense of rejection, betrayal, worthlessness. This is the time when God heals your broken heart, enters in you, and fills your space. Then, the kingdom of heaven is yours. D.A Carson said, “The kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit; it is they who enjoy Messiah’s reign and the blessings he brings. They joyfully accept his rule and participate in the life of the kingdom.” If you think that you are poor financially, give thanks to God! You are rich in the fellowship with God and close to the kingdom of heaven. If you think that you are rich, give thanks to God! You experience God’s favor and are excited to use your wealth for God and for his kingdom! Thomas A. Kempis said in his book, ‘the Imitation of Christ’, that God allows affliction to Christians for two reasons; first, through sufferings they seek God and depend on Him alone. Second, through sufferings they put their hope in the kingdom of heaven, not on this earth. Amen!

Second, Blessed are those who mourn. (4) Let’s read verse 4. “***Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.***” Mourning is the expression of sorrow. The Bible says that there are two kinds of sorrow; Godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret; worldly sorrow brings death. (2 Cor 7:10) Those who do not overcome worldly sorrow fall into depression. Our God is compassionate; he comforts those who are mourning from tragedy and misery of life. Our God comforts those who are mourning for their sins. Jesus comforted the weeping widow who lost her only son. Jesus also comforted the erring Peter who disowned Him three times. Jesus promised his disciples to send the Holy Spirit as Another Comforter. These days the Holy Spirit comforts us unlimited by time and space. The Holy Spirit comforts those who lose their family members. The Holy Spirit comforts those who suffer from the brokenness of this world. The Holy Spirit comforts those who suffer from persecution. Those who are comforted by God are truly happy men. This is because they meet God personally in their time of suffering. They experience the presence of God in their sorrow.

Third, Blessed are the meek. (5) Let’s read verse 5. “***Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”*** Who are the meek? The meek are not the week, but the gentle and humble, like Jesus Christ. (Mt 11:29) The meek are strong in self-control and dependence on God. Isaac in the Old Testament was meek. He dug wells for his family and for his animals. But his bully neighbors came and threatened to chase Isaac out, claiming that the well belonged to them. Isaac did not quarrel with them, but he moved away and dug another well. The wicked neighbors came again and stopped up the well with dirt. Isaac moved away and dug another well. The same story was repeated until the neighbors stopped following him. Isaac did not fight against them, not because he was powerless, but because he trusted in God who would provide and give him final victory. Later, the bully neighbors came back and apologized by asking him to make a peace treaty with them. Moses was a humble man. Once, his leadership was challenged by his people, his elders and even his family members. But Moses did not fight against them. Instead, he knelt down before God and prayed. Moses trusted in God. Isaac and Moses are the shadow of Jesus Christ, who was gentle and humble. Although he was the Son of God, he became obedient even to death on the cross for the sins of the world. Psalm 37:11 says, “But the meek will inherit the land and enjoy peace and prosperity.” Jesus brought the kingdom of heaven through his obedience and humility. Those who are meek will inherit the kingdom of heaven.

Fourth, Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. (6) Look at verse 6. “***Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled***.” How can those who are poor be happy? How can those who mourn and those who hunger and thirst be happy? Jesus’ sermons sound very paradoxical from a human point of view. How can those who hunger and thirst for righteousness become happy? The situation of being hungry and thirsty is a longing and craving like a newborn baby who craves for milk. The Apostle Paul said in 1 Corinthians 1:30 that Jesus Christ is God’s righteousness, holiness and redemption. Sinners cannot become righteous by their own power, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. (Ro 3:23) Jesus died for men’s sin, and through faith in him men become righteous before God. Men can have a right relationship with God only through Jesus Christ, who died for our sins. Those who are hungry and thirsty for God’s righteousness, Jesus Christ, will be filled. The Holy Spirit fills them with heavenly joy and peace. The kingdom of heaven dwells in their hearts.

Fifth, Blessed are the merciful. (7) Look at verse 7. “***Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.***” Our God is merciful. He is compassionate and gracious. Moses called to God before he received new stone tablets on the Mount Sinai, “The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness…” (Ex 34:6) God demonstrated his mercy upon undeserved sinners by cancelling the debts of our sins. So we, the recipients of God’s mercy, must show our mercy to our brothers and sisters. Our task before God is loving and forgiving. Those who are merciful to others are happy people, because God’s mercy fills them all the days of their lives. Forgiving and loving are good medicine for the soul. Bitterness and hatred are poison, which lead to death.

Sixth, Blessed are the pure in heart. (8) Let us read verse 8. “***Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.***” Here, the word ‘pure’ does not mean only moral or sexual purity, but also undivided singlemindedness toward God. God delivered the Israelites from out of Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land. Before they entered the land, God told them through Moses, “The Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.” (Deut 6:5) But when his people entered the Promised Land, the land flowing with milk and honey, they forsook God and worshiped idols. When we lose our focus on God, we see many impure and dirty things of the world. When King David lost his focus on God for a moment, he committed adultery. He had to pay a very painful, humiliating, and costly price caused by his sin. Psalm 119:9-11 says, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” Do you want to see God? Repent of your sins and receive the forgiveness of sin. Then the Holy Spirit opens your spiritual eyes to see God in your clean heart.

Seventh, Blessed are the peacemakers. (9) Let us read verse 9. “***Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.***” Jesus’ concern in this beatitude is not with the peaceful but with the peacemakers. Peace is very important and necessary, especially these days, when threats of terror are warned to the whole world. We need peace between husband and wife, between parents and children, between brothers and sisters, between tribes and tribes, and between nations and nations. As long as hostility remains, there is no peace. So Jesus came to this world as a peace maker. His name was Prince of Peace. (Is 9:6) Ephesians 2:14-15 says, “For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and had destroyed the barrier, the diving wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace.” Sin separated men from God. Men who sinned against God were the object of God’s anger. But Jesus died on the cross to make peace between God and men. So anyone who believes in his heart in Jesus as Lord and Savior will be free from God’s anger and enter into the world of God’s permanent love and grace as a child of God. Peace is not accomplished by gun and powder. Peace comes from reconciliation through forgiveness. Freedom is not free. Christ Jesus paid the cost to give us real freedom and peace. Those who preach the gospel of Jesus are true peacemakers. They are truly blessed and called children of God.

Eighth, Blessed are the persecuted. (10-12) Look at verses 10-12. “***Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you***.” The word ‘hate crime’ came from racial cleansing during World War II. These days, anyone who speaks against homosexuality is charged with a hate crime. One of our church members was warned by his professor not to be offensive, because he wrote about his viewpoint on homosexuality, based on the Bible truth. The anti-Christianity atmosphere is rapidly growing louder at school, in government, and at work, while the voices of Christians are becoming weaker and smaller. Christian students suffer from peer pressure and marginalization. Paul said in 2 Timothy 3:12 , “In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” Paul himself was a persecutor of Christians. But after his conversion, he became a fervent gospel preacher. He received much persecution because of his faith in Jesus. There were hate crimes against Christians in Paul’s day.

What did Jesus say about those who are persecuted because of him? Jesus said, “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven…” Amen. One young girl lost credits in her science class because she didn’t agree in the true/false question about the theory of evolution. She received an F in that class and came home crying. But her father encouraged her to have faith in God, who will reward her greatly in heaven. At the end of her semester she finished that class with an A+! We need the courage of the college student who wrote the Bible truth in his paper and the boldness of the young girl who kept her creation faith in her science class. The days are becoming more evil and anti-Christian. We Christians should be ready to fight against the power of evil spirit and darkness.

All these eight blessings have common points. True happiness comes from Jesus Christ through whom we experience the kingdom of heaven. We human beings cannot be satisfied with short and temporal pleasures. This is because we are spiritual beings who long for eternity. So people despair before death, which takes away all the pleasures and hope from this world. Men long for eternal happiness and eternal life in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus brought us this eternal life and kingdom of heaven. Therefore, in order to gain eternal life, eternal happiness, and the eternal kingdom of heaven, our short and temporary poverty, sorrow, difficulties, and persecutions are not even worth to be compared. This is the reason why Christians become joyful in the time of persecution and thankful in the time of affliction. This is the secret of possessing true happiness in our lives.

Lastly, verses13-16 are about the influence and duty as Christians as the witness of the kingdom of heaven. Look at verses 13-16. “***You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot. “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.***” Jesus called his disciples the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Nothing is more useful and important than salt and light in our lives. Salt gives flavor to food and preserves it from corruption and decay. In the winter time, salt melts icy roads. But if salt loses its saltiness, it becomes useless. Saltiness is a metaphor of influence. Christians gives influence to this corrupted world. If Christians do not repent, but compromise with this world, they lose their influence as God’s children, like Lot who perished in the city of Sodom.

While salt affects and functions invisibly, light affects visibly. Christian’s influence must affect more actively and visibly, so that people who live in darkness may see our Christian good behavior and come to God. No one who lights a lamp puts it under a bowl or in the corner of a room. The lamp should be put on its stand so that everyone may see the light. The city on a hill can be seen from every corner of the world. The words ‘The City on a Hill’ used to be the motto of the United States of America. We must pray that America may become the City on a Hill for the whole world, which shines the gospel light to every corner of this dark world.

Salt and light has common points. Both function by destroying themselves. The happy, blessed, and influential Christians live selfless, sacrificial, heaven-oriented lives. May God bless us when we possess the kingdom of heaven through Jesus and live as salt and light of this world. Amen.