**Momentum: Poor in Spirit**

Welcome this morning to our second week of Momentum which is an in-depth look at the Beatitudes found in Matthew chapter 5. Last week Pastor David got us prepared and ready to go for that first ring in a series of rings that represent our Christian life…the first beatitude which simply says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven…” Now at first blush this sounds wise and poetic doesn’t it? It’s the sort of thing you hear and nod your head and think yeah, that’s really good. But while you know it is something profound, you are also not sure what to make of it. It is a confusing statement…it doesn’t make a sense at face value. I’m not ashamed to say that I am often in this boat of hearing but no comprehending. I find good company in this boat…the disciples themselves being among them. Pastor Colin Smith, who authored this study on the beatitudes, poses some helpful questions to us Bible readers who find ourselves stumped or unable to soak in a particular truth. If that’s the case try simply asking of the text: Is there a promise here to believe? Is there a command to obey? A sin to avoid? A warning to heed? An example to follow? In other words, I might not know all the nuances of this passage…I might not know all the historical context or the subtleties of the original language…but I can clarify the most important aspects with these questions. These are questions of response. What is the text asking of me? What am I to do?

Let’s give this a go with today’s verse: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” We do see here a promise…those who are poor in spirit receive heaven…they are blessed. So it follows that this is also presenting a exemplary way to live…as one who is poor in spirit.

And our task today is to sit with this for a little while and not just skim over it as we move onto the next verse.

What does it mean to be poor in spirit? One of the best examples of this, again looking for examples to follow as we read Scripture, can be found in Isaiah’s vision of heaven found in Isaiah chapter 6. It says: READ Isaiah 6:1-8

Isaiah sees this grand vision of God, exalted on his throne…the King of all kings! His very presence fills the temple! Six winged angels surround him singing his praises so loudly the doorframes are shaking and there is smoke everywhere. Now I have been to some amazing rock concerts where the performers seem larger than life and the bass notes pound in your chest. The light show flashes around you, and you walk away with a memorable experience. But no matter how amazing the production, there is never a question as to who made it all work. We might wonder at how much it cost to put on a show like that, but we know it is only a show, a show put on by humans, for humans. Isn’t it interesting how a person who has never read Isaiah before might still understand what makes for an impressive show. Isaiah was certainly impressed by the majestic awe of God. He knew that there was no production budget involved. There was no team behind the scenes…there was man and God.

And Isaiah’s reaction? It is instructive here to us. “Woe is me! I am ruined! I am unclean…everyone I know is unclean! Yet, I have seen God!” This is the same response we see in our memory verse for this week that comes from Jesus’ parable in Luke 18. In the story two men enter the temple, one a righteous Pharisee. He made a career in studying and teaching the scriptures, he had dedicated his life to faithfully living out the laws and rules that he studied. The other was a dirty tax collector, basically a traitor to his own people because he worked for Rome. These two men find themselves in church together. The Pharisee comes to God with a prayer of thanksgiving! That sounds perfectly good and right. But he says “Thank you God that I am not like everyone else…including this filthy sinner of a tax collector over here. Thank you God the I am better than other people.” Meanwhile the tax collector cannot even look up to heaven. He is downcast and wrecked by his own sin. His prayer was, “God have mercy on me…a sinner.” Certainly, Jesus is presenting an example that we need to follow. We see in the tax collector the same response to God that Isaiah has.

It’s not too hard to tell here what the difference is between these two prayers…one man is prideful, and the other is humble. One man fancies himself better then others, while the other man understands his place…. it’s the same place we all occupy…we are all of us sinners. Now of course we like to rank sin. Murder is probably the worst right, while disrespecting your parents is just your run of the mill minor offense. We like to compare ourselves to others, right? I may have my faults, but I am doing a lot better than so and so over there. But there is only one comparison that matters and that is between myself and Christ himself.

Let me take you back to the rock concert for a second. I love music and I make a stab at playing music and even writing some music, but when I see some of may favorite musicians playing on stage…I realize that I am nothing. I know that I will never rise to the heights of their talent. I will never fly across the strings in that way or effortlessly hit those high notes. Now after such an experience, do I walk away with a scowl? Do I begrudge these musicians for their skill? No! I walk away inspired and impressed and grateful to have experienced what they can do!

There is a similar dynamic here with God. When we come into his presence, we are put in our place…we are brought low…we are wrecked…and yet our experience with God gives us life! We are energized and excited. In the end we are glad to be humbled, happy to know our lack, you might say blessed to know our poverty.

Those who are poor in spirit know their place…it is here among sinners. The Apostle Paul refers to himself as chief among sinners. This was not a stab at false modesty…it was an honest assessment. Those who are poor in sprit know that they bring nothing to God…our poverty demands it. We come empty-handed because we want to receive something from him.

I think we are all familiar with this scene: a little child gathers up dandelions from a nearby field. He then brings them home and offers them to his mother. She is moved by her child’s gift and even though she knows they are worthless weeds; she accepts them as a beautiful bouquet. We equate this motherly outlook to God. He condescends to us and validates our meager efforts and looks upon us with a doting love. And, in turn, we are the ignorant child unaware of the value of a handful of weeds. I think this is a nice image, a fine story, but I think God desires that we grow up. We are God’s children of course, but we are also called to be wiser than that. Isaiah and this tax collector were wiser than that. They knew full well their poverty and they were not about to pretend that dandelions held any value to God. They came before God with absolutely nothing. 17th century Puritan preacher and author Thomas Watson puts it memorably. He says, “If the hand is full of pebbles, it cannot receive gold.”

And this is why Jesus begin here with poverty of spirit. He is enacting a direct attack against our human pride. The child with the dandelions thinks that they are doing something helpful and meaningful. The child beams with pride as they hand over worthless garbage to the loving and smiling mother. But can you imagine if I pulled the same trick with my wife? Would she accept dandelions from her adult husband? Would she smile and set them in a little vase on the counter? No! I have grown up! I know better. Jesus stops us here with this beatitude and says, ‘Take another look…you’re not a child anymore….this is just weeds. You have nothing.” And isn’t coming into God’s presence as an abject beggar the best place to be? Pastor Smith says simply “People who are far from God focus on what they are doing for Him; people who live near to God find joy in what He is doing for them.” Can you see the difference in focus? There is what we do and what God does…but in the concert setting, all attention is on the stage. No one is wondering how they can contribute to a song. They leave that to the artist.

A life of humility is crucial for us Christians. Humility serves as the first ring. Humility provides the initial momentum we need to progress through this life as Christians. Earlier was asked, is there a promise in this passage? And yes, indeed there is: theirs is, right now, in the present tense, the kingdom of heaven. And if you look at all the other beatitudes that Jesus lists off here at the beginning of his sermon, their promise is yet to come. Those who morn will be comforted, those who are humble will inherit the earth, the merciful will be shown mercy. It isn’t until the end of the list, blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, theirs is, right now, the kingdom of heaven. So what we have here is a paradox that we experience everyday. The Kingdom of heaven is here and now, we can catch glimpses of it we can experience God’s presence, we can taste the glory….but the kingdom is also yet to come. We still wait upon it’s fullness. So by bookending this list of future promises with the idea of present experience, Jesus let’s us know that living out these beatitudes is a sure way of entering more and more fully into the reality of heaven, even now while we struggle here on earth.

But that journey begins with humility. It begins with poverty of spirit before God and an admission of our own sin and inability to contribute anything of value. But this is not depression or lack od self-esteem. It is recognizing our dependence on the greatness of God.

How does this work then? How do I step out of child-like behavior that offers up dandelions and step into humble maturity? Number one, compare yourself to Christ. Allow him to put you in your place…on your knees begging him for forgiveness. We can do this by reading his word. Especially if you read through the Old Testament and the prophets. When we expose ourselves to his truth, we can’t help but lose confidence in our own abilities. This knowledge drives us to worship! Worship is not about the new hit song or a stellar performance or smoke and lights…worship is simply about giving God glory and honor and praise. And lest you think this amounts to offer God some dandelions…be aware, we are only extending to him glory that is already his. In worship we ought to be small, and the closer we get to Jesus, the smaller we become. It is his greatness and majesty that even allows us to worship him in the first place.

 And what becomes of all this? Let’s look again to Isaiah. He is before God, wrecked and ruined. Then and angels comes, touched his lips and says, “Your sin has been removed.” Forgiveness. Then God poses a question, “Whom should I send?” And Isaiah raises his hand. “Here I am, send me…no because I have anything to offer, not because I am so skilled, but simply because you, God, are so great.” Isaiah’s humble stance launches him into ministry, into being greatly used by God.

I want to close with some quotes from Jesus himself. These are found throughout John’s gospel, but I want you to pay close attention to these words, because if they applied to Jesus, the only begotten Son of God, then how much more do they need to apply to me? Listen to this example of humility:

“I can do nothing on my own.” (John 5:30)

“I have come…not to do my own will.” (John 6:38)

“I do not seek my own glory.” (John 8:50)

Brothers and sisters, what a Savior we have! It is through his humility, his emptiness, that he was able to accomplish for us this great gift of salvation. And so we press on in humility. We model ourselves after Christ, not seeking our own gain or glory. As his children, we come beating our chests, begging God to forgive us sinners. And in our poverty, we will find our hands filled with gold.