3rd Sunday after Trinity
SERIES ON DISCIPLESHIP - THE FIRST BEATITUDE
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IN NOMINE JESU

St. Matthew 5: 3 Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

All over the world people are looking for the secret of real happiness. More than anything ~~Above everything~~ else we would like to be happy. One can hardly open a book or turn the pages of a magazine without seeing numerous recipes and suggestions for living a happy living life. We are led to believe that happiness consists in the things we possess - in having the latest conveniences in our homes, in using this brand of toothpaste or that make of soap. But then we notice that there are many people who possess everything that money can buy - and yet they are of all men most miserable. We are told that happiness consists in climbing the ladder of social success and prestige; but then we read about the ulcers, nervous breakdowns, and heart attacks of those who have climbed the ladder, and we know that this is not the secret of real happiness. We are told that happiness consists in drinking to the dregs the pleasures of life; but when we break through the outer shell of those who have become slaves of their passions and flesh, we find that they are anything ~~everything~~ but happy. We are told that happiness is laggely dependent on what happens to us: success, good fortune, a friend, enjoyable fellowship; but when the wrong things happen to us, this kind of happiness quickly turns into sadness.

Our Lord Jesus Christ has a completely different conception of happiness. He holds out to us a happiness that (does not depend on what happens to us) is not touched by news reports or physical pain or misfortune. It is a happiness that prosperity cannot produce and that adversity cannot destroy. Christ begins His Sermon on the Mount with eight pronouncements about blessedness or happiness that have come to be known as The Beatitudes. Each of them describes, not a different person, but the same person - the true disciple of Christ - from a different angle. Today we want to study our Lords first recipe for real happiness - The First Beatitude: Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

What does Christ mean? Christ certainly is not recommending poverty as the road that leads to blessedness. No man is happy just because he is poor and no man is unhappy just because he is rich. The Bible reports that Dives, the rich

man, went to hell, but not because he was rich. Lazarus, the poor man, went to heaven, but not because he was poor. A man may be as poor as Lazarus and also as greedy and as mean as a Scrooge. A man may be as rich as Dives and also as kind and as generous as the Good Samaritan. Poverty or wealth, in themselves, have nothing to do with it. The contentedly poor and the usefully rich may be equally happy. The covetous poor and the greedy rich may be equally unhappy.

There is nothing in the teachings of Christ to suggest that we should despise material things. He certainly never encouraged laziness and he never recommended that man should live as a hermit, shut off from the world. Christ did not believe that hunger and want were desirable for a man, and He still looks with pity on those whose life is crushed by poverty. He fed the hungry and He suggests that we help those who are in need.

When Christ says, Blessed are the poor in spirit, He cannot mean either that when a man has lost all spirit, he is on the way to finding blessedness. He does not in any sense suggest that weakness is preferable to manliness. A man may be so lacking in spirit that he is a coward, and Christ never recommended that. When the disciples fled in terror the night Christ was taken captive, we would hardly describe them as blessed men. They were shamefully and sinfully lacking in spirit.

Goodspeed translated this Beatitude better when he wrote: Blessed are those who feel their spiritual need. True blessedness begins with being poor in one's own esteem. We could say, Blessed are they who are truly humble in the sight of God.

In the original Greek New Testament two words are used to designate poverty. One refers to the pauper, who lives from hand to mouth. He works to support himself, but he ekes out only a scanty existence and has nothing left. The other word is used here. It refers to the beggar, who earns nothing and is completely dependent on the alms of others. The pauper has nothing left, but the beggar simply has nothing. Christ says that in the sight of God man is a beggar

and he must recognize that he is a beggar. He must realize that he is completely helpless by himself and completely dependent on the mercy of God. He must be humble.

In his list of the seven deadly sins, Dante correctly puts pride first. Augustine, the early church father, had the same thing in mind when he asked, What could begin this evil will, but pride, that is the beginning of all sins? And the fascinating modern writer C. S. Lewis states, Pride leads to every other vice; it is the complete anti-God state of mind... Pride is spiritual cancer; it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense. This is why Christ begins the Beatitudes by saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit. The foundation of real happiness must be humility. Pride is self-centered and man is made to be God-centered. Pride is a declaration of independence of God. True humility is a declaration of complete dependence on God. It is the foundation of all other virtues and graces.

The Bible gives many illustrations that bear out this fact. Moses was probably the most unpromising prospect for leadership that a people ever had. Yet he goes down in history as one of the greatest. He had an Egyptian name, a speech impediment, a weak set of knees, an ugly disposition, a criminal record, a price on his head; he was despised by Hebrew and Egyptian alike. His life was bankrupt, and because of that, God could use him.

I am fond of the story of David in the cave of Adullam. He was being hunted down like an animal by the king's troopers. He was hiding in a dirty cave in a primitive and poverty-stricken land, and his crew matched the environment. We are told: Everyone that was in distress, and everyone that was in debt, and everyone that was discontented, gathered themselves unto him; and he became a captain over them. They had nothing to lose, and were ready for anything - even for God. That meant God could do something with them, and He did. He met David with blessing upon blessing, until finally he became king over Israel.

Christ told an excellent parable contrasting the attitude of a man who imagines he is spiritually rich and the attitude of a man who recognizes his

spiritual poverty. We find the two men, a Pharisee and a tax collector, in the Temple. The Pharisee has proudly taken a position where all may admire his piety. He feels no need of God, except as a spectator of his own goodness. But God is not interested in the boasting of an arrogant fool. The prayer of the Pharisee therefore never reaches the ear of God. It does not rise out of the small circle of his own self-centeredness. Listen to it: O God, I do thank Thee that I am not like the rest of mankind, greedy, dishonest, impure, or even like that tax collector over there. I fast twice every week; I give away a tenth part of all my income. Christ's answer to that is that everyone who sets himself up as somebody will become a nobody. The tax collector, on the other hand, is a humble man, distressingly conscious of his own unworthiness. He casts himself completely on the mercy of God. That kind of prayer God will hear. Taking his place in a far corner, head bowed in shame, he pleads, God, have mercy on a sinner like me. Of him Christ said, The man who makes himself nobody will become somebody. He is justified in God's sight.

Christ also told the story of the Prodigal Son. Proud and defiant, the Prodigal Son demanded from his father whatever his inheritance might be. With money jingling in his pockets he went out to lick the world and find happiness. Little did he realize that the world would give him the licking of his life. Littl did he know how much unhappiness was in store for him. It would have done no good to try to advise him. He was too proud. The scene shifts. In the far country the Prodigal is having the time of his life, with wine, women, and song. I can just imagine what he would have answered if someone had told him, You'll never find true and lasting happiness that way. The scene shifts once more. The Prodigal has lost his money, his carousing friends, his shallow happiness. In desperation he has become a swine herdsman. He shares the food and companionship of pigs. Now comes the great awakening. Life has beaten the last vestige of pride out of his heart. Suddenly he sees himself as he really is. By himself his lot is a hopeless one. He makes a confession to himself, I am dying of hunger. Now there is hope for him. I will get up and go back to my father. On that he can build a new life.

Before Christ can be your Savior, you must recognize your need of salvation. Before Christ can fill your cup with the Water of Life, it must be emptied of all other waters. When a man is proud, determined to build a successful, happy life without God's help; blind to his insignificance and sinfulness; he is building on a foundation that will inevitably crumble, if not in this life, certainly when he comes to stand before a just and holy God. There is no blessedness in that. When a man humbly recongizes his complete dependence on God, sincerely confesses hi the sinfulness of his life, willingly renounces everything that stands between him His God, devoutly loves God as his Father and Christ as his Savior, that man is blessed.

Blessed are the poor in spirit; for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. As Messianic Giver Christ gives absolutely, into emptiness. He gives to the poor in spirit, and He gives to these beggars no less than the kingdom of heaven itself. Theirs is the total of all the gifts of God in Christ Jesus as they are enjoyed here on earth: the forgiveness of sins, a conscience free from guilt, a peace and confidence that those who know not God will never understand, a hope that no misfortune on earth can ever dim. Theirs is an eternity of blessing, free from care and trial, filled with the joy that Christ alone can give those who are His own. Pray God it may be yours.

Amen.