

Matthew 5:3/Luke 18:18-30
Choosing Fool's Gold or Godly Faith
Grace United Methodist Church
July 5, 2009

At the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven." With these words Jesus tells us that the prize, the pot of gold, the Kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are poor in spirit. The Kingdom of heaven is not a perquisite for the rich or the famous or the self-made man or woman. The Kingdom of heaven is God's gift to those who recognize their spiritual poverty, who recognize their spiritual need and cry out, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

Being poor in spirit is simply lacking pride. The poor in spirit know they have lost control, should never have tried to take control, and never again want control.

This is what Peter learned when Jesus taught him a lesson about fishing. From all we read in the Bible about Simon Peter he appears to have been a strong, take charge, man. He liked being in control. He didn't like yielding control to others, especially a carpenter who couldn't possibly know anything about fishing. You can almost see the thoughts that passed through Simon's mind when Jesus told him to push out into deep water and let down the nets. To Jesus, Simon said, "Master, we've worked hard all night and haven't caught anything, but because you say so, I will let down the nets."

To himself Simon was saying, "Doesn't he know it's the wrong time of the day. I'm an expert and I've been skunked. He's a carpenter, what's he know about fishing?"

Nevertheless Simon obeyed. Suddenly the net was full. They caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to break. So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink." Talk about a fish story!

It's at this moment that Peter realizes who Jesus was. At the same time he realized who he was: He was the one who told God what God couldn't do!! Suddenly, Simon fell at Jesus' knees, knee deep in fish and says, "Get away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"

Friends, this is the picture of spiritual poverty. We see in Peter a complete absence of pride, a complete absence of self-assurance and of self-reliance.

August Toplady describes spiritual poverty so well in his hymn, *Rock of Ages*:
"Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to thy cross I cling; Naked, come to thee for dress; Helpless, look to thee for grace; Foul, I to thy fountain fly; Wash me, Savior, or I die."

Reinhold Niebuhr once said, "The gospel of Jesus is not a gospel of obvious success, but of ultimate success through obvious failure." The good news Jesus proclaims in this first Beatitude declares that we can honestly admit that spiritually we don't have a dime to our name - and that this admission opens us to the kingdom of God. Friends, we meet God more often in the manure of failure than on the mountain of success. Jesus' teaching stands in stark contrast to the gospel of success which says: "Blessed are those who believe in themselves, for theirs is the kingdom of success."

The world places its emphasis on its belief in self-reliance, self-confidence and self-expression. The gospel of success says, "If you want to get on in this world, believe in yourself.

Against this Jesus says we will find happiness and wholeness and joy through recognizing our spiritual poverty. The important question which I want you to ask yourself and wrestle with this morning is this: "which gospel do I believe?" The gospel of Jesus Christ which says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven or the gospel of success which says, "Blessed are those who believe in themselves, for theirs is the kingdom of success." **Which do you believe? On which gospel are you choosing to stake your happiness?**

In Luke 18 Jesus tells us the story of a young man who had swallowed the gospel of success hook, line and sinker. I love Max Lucado's exposition of this story. Listen to his description:

"He's rich. Italian shoes, Tailored suit. His money is invested. His plastic is golden. He lives like he flies - first class.

He's young. He pumps away fatigue at the gym and slam-dunks old age on the court. His belly is flat, his eyes sharp. Energy is his trademark, and death is an eternity away.

He's powerful. If you don't think so, just ask him. You got questions? He's got answers. You got problems? He's got solutions. You got dilemmas? He's got opinions. He knows where he's going, and he'll be there tomorrow. He's the new generation. So the old had better pick up the pace or pack their bags.

He has mastered the three "Ps" of yuppiedom: Prosperity, Posterity, and Power. He's the rich young....ruler.

Till today, life for him has been a smooth cruise down a neon avenue. But today he has a question; a casual concern or a genuine fear? We don't know. We do know he has come for some advice.

For one so used to calling the shots, calling on this carpenter's son for help must be awkward. For a man of his pedigree to seek the counsel of a country rube is not standard procedure. But this is no standard question.

"Teacher," he asks, "What good thing must I do to get eternal life?" The wording of his question betrays his misunderstanding. He thinks he can get eternal life as he gets everything else - by his own strength. "What must I do?"

What are the requirements, Jesus? What's the break-even point? No need for chitchat; go straight to the bottom line. How much do I need to invest to be certain of my return?

Jesus' answer is intended to make him wince. "If you want to enter life, obey the commandments." A man with half a conscience would have thrown up his hands at that point. "Keep the commandments? Keep the commandments! Do you know how many commandments there are? Have you read the Law lately? I've tried - honestly, I've tried - but I can't."

That is what the ruler should say, but confession is the farthest thing from his mind. Instead of asking for help, he grabs a pencil and paper and asks for the list: "Which one?" He licks his pencil and arches an eyebrow.

Jesus indulges him. "Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself."

"Great!" thinks the yuppie as he finishes the notes. Now I've got the quiz. Let's see if I pass:

"Murder? Of course not!

Adultery? Well, nothing any red-blooded boy wouldn't do.

Stealing? A little extortion, but all justifiable.

False testimony? Hmmmm....let's move on.

Honor your father and mother? Sure, I see them on holidays. Love your neighbor as yourself..."

"Hey," he grins, "a piece of cake. I've done all of these. In fact, I've done them since I was a kid." He swaggers a bit and hooks a thumb in his belt. "Got any other commandments you want to run past me?"

How Jesus keeps from laughing or crying is beyond me. The question that was intended to show the ruler how he falls short only convinces him that he stands tall. He's a child dripping water on the floor while telling his mom he hasn't been in the rain.

Jesus gets to the point. "If you want to be perfect then go sell your possession and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven."

The statement leaves the young man distraught and the disciples bewildered.

Their question could be ours: Who then can be saved?"

Jesus' answer shell-shocks the listeners, "with man this is impossible..."

Impossible!

Jesus doesn't say improbable. He doesn't say unlikely. He doesn't even say it will be tough. He says it is "impossible." No chance. No way. No loopholes. No hope. Impossible!

To modern ears Jesus' message strikes us as cold because all our lives we've been rewarded according to our performance. You get grades according to your study. You get commendations according to your success. You get money in response to your work.

That's why the rich young ruler thought heaven was just a payment away. It only made sense. You work hard, you pay your dues, and "zap" - your account is credited as paid in full.

Jesus says, "No way." What you want costs far more than what you can pay. You don't need a system, you need a Savior. You don't need a resume, you need a Redeemer. For "what is impossible with men is possible with God."

Friends, we need to be careful not to miss the thrust of what Jesus says. You and I cannot save ourselves. Not through the right rituals. Not through the right doctrine. Not through the right devotion. Not through the right goose bumps.

Jesus' point is crystal clear. It is impossible for human beings to save themselves.

It wasn't the money that hindered the rich man; it was the self-sufficiency. It wasn't the big bucks; it was the big head.

It's not just the rich who have difficulty. So do the educated, the strong, the good-looking, the popular, and even the religious. Jesus says that heaven and happiness can't be bought. They are a gift given to those who know their true poverty. **"Blessed are the poor in Spirit."**

How do we become poor in Spirit? The way to become poor in spirit is to look at God. Read the Bible. Read about God. Read His law. Look at what He expects from us, contemplate standing before Him. Also look at the Lord Jesus Christ and see Him as we see him in the gospels. The more we look at him and keep looking at him, the more we will see how poor in spirit we truly are. You cannot truly look at Him without feeling your absolute poverty, and emptiness. Then you say to him, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling."

Jesus congratulated the poor in spirit because they know just how needy they really are; they know it's time to move over and let God take control; they know they are absolutely dependent on the grace of God. They are the blessed ones, because this helplessness is the **first and only requirement for receiving God's help.**

Friends, we cannot be filled until we are first empty.

Jesus congratulated the poor in spirit because having given up on their own power they are ready for the power of God. "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." So the question is: "which gospel do you believe?" - the gospel of Jesus or the gospel of success? Jesus says that happiness, wholeness and eternal joy our just one choice away. Which have you chosen?

Rembrandt's great painting of the woman caught in adultery in a beautiful way depicts the very essence of the first Beatitude. His use of light, as in many of his works, reveals the truth of the gospel. All light flows from Christ, the tallest figure on the canvas. The men near him, upright in self-righteousness and judgmental attitudes, stand in the shadows. The sinful woman is lowest of all; she alone kneels with head bowed, poor in spirit. But the light of Christ bathes her, surrounds her with splendor. She receives grace through her humility. Hers is the kingdom of heaven.

"Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."