

## **The Way We Receive God's Grace**

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The Way to Grace: The Sermon on the Mount Series

Matthew 5:1-3

I am going to begin a new series for the New Year. And I am going to begin a series in the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew 5. My motivation for teaching out of the Sermon on the Mount really comes from a few different sources. The first, and actually primary motivation is that I felt like I was woken up by the Lord one evening and told to teach on this. So I am a man under authority and that really was good enough for me. I had a sense that I was to teach on, in particular, the Beatitudes.

My second motivation is that this is a time in my own life when I want to deepen my own spirituality. Each new year is a time for me for reflection and I find myself over the last several weeks drawing back toward the Lord again, wanting to become more rooted in God. So, it makes sense for me to teach the Sermon on the Mount because it is an important part of deeper spirituality. It follows, therefore, very nicely on the heels of the book of James, a series that I did on growing in spiritual maturity.

But my third motivation in wanting to teach out of the Sermon on the Mount, particularly the Beatitudes, is that I find more and more people making very serious mistakes in their spiritual lives and not understanding some of the basic principles of finding God and finding grace. The Christian life has often been described as a road that runs between huge ditches on either side. And we must always be very careful as we drive on this road not to fall into the ditch on the right side of the road, or on the other hand, the ditch on the left-hand side.

Let me apply this metaphor to the issue of God's grace. On the one side of the road, on the right side, we have the ditch of trying to work for God's favor and God's blessing on your life—what I call a performance-based Christianity. People believe that they must do a certain list of activities to merit God's blessing. Performance-based Christians are often those who were shown approval at home when they had an A on a paper. There never was a time when Dad or Mom simply hugged them and said, "I love you because you are my child. I love you because you are you." Their upbringing was entirely performance-based. Approval was based on how well you did on performing a list of tasks, performing on exams or in athletics. The ditch on the right side of the road for the performance-based Christian is this feeling that I must continually sing for my supper. I must run faster and faster and harder and harder on a treadmill of good works in order to somehow attract God's attention, gain God's notice and, thereby, earn God's favor.

Of course, performance-based Christianity is so fleeting because we can never run quite fast enough or hard enough. We get tired and we slow down. And then we lose the sense that God wishes to be favorable toward us. It was this performance-based Christianity that Martin Luther finally discovered was

bankrupting him and was ultimately completely unbiblical. It caused him to rediscover the wonderful message of free righteousness through faith in Christ alone. Luther was a man who strived to please God as a Monk in a monastery. He subjected himself to unbelievable self-deprivation. He fasted several days a week and stayed up all night in a cold monastic cell praying to God. He took vows of chastity and vows of poverty. But the only feeling he ever got when he looked up to God was a feeling of disapproval, of falling short, of not enough. When he heard the phrase “the righteousness of God” that phrase always made him shrink in terror because he understood God’s righteousness as his judgment.

But in one of his writings he described the glorious day in which he was meditating on the book of Romans and the message of the Bible opened up to him so that he discovered the righteousness of God to be that righteousness, that right standing, that God freely gives to those who simply put their trust in Christ alone. He was able to escape the ditch on the right side of the road of performance-based Christianity and he realized and taught others this wonderful message that the favor of God and the goodness of God and the blessing of God can not be merited or worked for in any measure, but was always freely given out of God’s loving heart to those who simply trusted in him and looked to him.

You know, so many folks who hear the message of the grace of God, that God’s favor, God’s goodness and God’s blessing can not be earned, end up falling into the ditch on the left hand side of the road which is a ditch of passivity. Instead of performance-based Christianity, we have passive inactive Christianity, in which people think that because God’s favor and grace is free and unmerited, there is absolutely nothing that we can do to increase our enjoyment of, or our experience of the grace of God. People in the ditch on the left side of the road say, “It really doesn’t matter what I do or how I live. It is all free anyway, and so I really need to do nothing and can do nothing to increase my enjoyment of or experience of the grace of God.” This attitude has been condemned as a heresy in the church. It is part of what has been called the Antinomian heresy – the heresy of no law, no activity, no striving. The Bible teaches that we have a great deal to do with our enjoyment of God’s favor and God’s presence.

You know, God’s favor is a pure gift. His presence is a gift. His goodness to us is a gift. But there are ways, according to the Bible, of placing yourself in the pathway of God’s gift. You can put yourself in the way of God so that when grace comes, it is going to come to you and your house. The fact that God is gracious should not lead you to total inactivity. You can put yourself on the road to being hit by the grace of God.

Let me use some simple illustrations. It rains whether you work hard or don’t work hard. Whether you deserve it or don’t deserve it. But you are more likely to get rained on if you stand outside instead of remaining in bed. You can put yourself in the way of the rain.

The same thing is true with getting a suntan. You are more likely to get a suntan if you go outside than if you stay in your room, except of course here in central Ohio, in which case there are probably as many UV rays coming from your reading lamp as there is from the sun here. But you are more likely to get

wet, you are more likely to get a sun tan, you are more likely to catch a fish if you go where they are running in a stream than where they are not running.

Friends, the Bible continually lays out to us things that we do and attitudes that we cultivate which put us in the way of catching the grace of God. In the New Year many of us are beginning to think, again, about our spiritual disciplines, disciplines such as prayer and reading through the Bible. That is why each New Year we hand out Bible reading guides and encourages you to begin a program in your own life of reading through the Bible. It is not an impossibility, it is not beyond you. You can do it. It may take you a little time, but you have the time. Your time may be going to other things right now, but you have the same amount of time as everyone else and you can read through the Bible this year using the Bible reading guide.

Now on the one hand, some may fall in the ditch of a performance-based Christianity when they see a Bible reading guide. They might say to themselves, "I had better do this or else God will never be favorable to me. I won't earn God's notice in my life." That would be wrong. That would be performance-based Christianity.

But on the other hand, don't fall into the ditch of saying, "Because I can't earn God's grace or favor, therefore, I ought to do nothing and I will keep my Bible on the shelf all year." Reading the Bible and praying and journaling and fasting, in fact all of the spiritual disciplines are ways of putting yourself in the way of God's grace. You are simply digging a channel or laying pipe so that when the water flows it will flow toward you. It is true that we can't get anything through our empty pipes, but we can lay pipe toward the Lord. And if God chooses to pour water in it, it is going to run down on us.

Every Christian that you or I would respect in the history of the church has understood the principle of standing in the way of God's grace – putting yourself in a position so that when grace comes you can receive it. That is what spiritual disciplines are all about. And that is what I believe is the true meaning of the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is not about adopting certain outward behavioral characteristics or trying to be a good Christian and, thereby, gain God's favor and notice. The Sermon on the Mount is about cultivating certain heart attitudes that enable you to receive the grace of God when it flows down from the throne of God. You can cultivate an orientation toward life that shuts you out from being able to receive God's grace. You are so turned toward sin and turned toward lust and turned toward your own desires that even though grace is flowing you are not capable of receiving it. You are not in the way of that grace. Or you can cultivate attitudes and orientations and mind-sets that give you the capacity to receive the grace of God when it comes.

The grace of God is there for every Christian to enjoy. And every Christian does enjoy the grace of God in some measure. You wouldn't be a Christian unless God's grace had invaded your life in some measure. But many Christians do not enjoy the blessing of God, the presence of God, a true experience with God because they have not cultivated heart attitudes, which enable them to receive more of God's grace. Many Christians hearts are so filled with the world and so filled with other things, like entertainment or shopping or busyness or

performance or anxiety or lust – our hearts can be so filled with other things that we leave little room for a greater enjoyment of the grace of God.

I believe the Sermon on the Mount is Jesus' instructions to the church to put us in the position whereby we can receive more of God's grace. We are not earning it by performance. We are not meriting it. We are not catching God's notice. It is like standing out in the rain. When God chooses to send rain, we are there to get wet. It is like laying pipe to your house. When the water gets turned on, it will run into your house.

This morning in a series that I have titled "The Way To Grace" I have called my first sermon, "The Way We Receive God's Grace". Let's pray.

Matthew 5:1-3

"Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying: 'Blessed are poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'"

Because this is a first sermon in a series, I do want to give you a little bit of back ground to the Sermon on the Mount in general and some of the ways that people have interpreted the Sermon on the Mount throughout history. Of course, the Bible doesn't call Matthew 5-7 the Sermon on the Mount. Where we got that title from is from the great St. Augustine back in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century who wrote a commentary on Matthew 5-7 with the title "The Sermon on the Mount." So it was Augustine who gave us that title that has come down to us through church history.

There are a host of interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount many of which, at least in my mind, have some plausibility, some possible validity. For example, some interpreters believe that Jesus is acting in the Sermon on the Mount like a new Moses. And I think that may be the case, at least in some degree. Because he does go and sit on a mountain like Moses did up on Mt. Sinai and he begins to propound a new fresh law for his followers. It is interesting that Jesus' law begins very much the way Moses law begins in the Old Testament. That is Jesus first gives us a number of injunctions about our relationship with God and then he gives us a number of injunctions regarding our relationships with our fellow man. The first four Beatitudes are vertical. They concern our relationship with God. And the next four are horizontal. They concern our relationship with each other. Just like the Ten Commandments start off with four commandments, which govern our relationship with God, and then six commandments, which govern our relationship with each other.

There are more subtle indications that Matthew was very self-consciously portraying Jesus as the new Moses. Matthew has Jesus giving five blocks of teaching just like Moses gave five books of the Law that we call the Pentateuch or the Torah. Certainly Moses anticipated that a new Moses would arise because in Deuteronomy 18 he prophesies from the Lord saying, "The Lord says to me, 'I will raise up from them a prophet like you. From among their brothers I will put my words in his mouth and he will tell them everything I command him. If anyone does not listen to my words that the prophet speaks in my name, I will myself call him to account.'" And Peter in Acts 3:22 says this specific prophesy applies to Jesus.

The point is that the New Testament does portray Jesus as the new Moses, bringing a new covenant. Where Moses gave us the old covenant, Jesus gives us the new covenant. And the Sermon on the Mount may be an exposition of the new laws that our new Moses is giving us. That is at least possible.

Martin Luther has a possible view of the Sermon on the Mount. He says that it is law, but it is a high law, a lofty law, and it is designed to drive us to our knees so that we will be broken and come under the grace of God. Martin Luther sees the Sermon on the Mount as law; basically, law that like Paul says is designed to shut our mouths, to break our pride and to make us dependent on the grace of God. And I think there is validity in Luther's view. I think much of the Sermon on the Mount is designed to bring us to our knees and to show us our dependence on God and how far short we fall. After all, one of the verses in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:48 says, "You therefore must be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect." If that verse doesn't drive you to your knees, there isn't a verse in the Bible that will. I must be perfect?

Calvin took the Sermon on the Mount to be an exposition of the Law of Moses where Jesus was teasing out the implications of the law. He wasn't acting as a new Moses, necessarily, but showing what the law was designed to do and to point out, what its basic aim always was. I think Calvin's view has a lot to commend it.

Now the Anabaptists, folks living in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries who gave birth to the modern day Mennonites and modern day Amish, believed that we are to take the Sermon on the Mount literally and give it all the force that it is designed to have as literal commandments. So when it says, "Don't make any vows" you are not to make any vows or make any oaths even in court. And when it says, "Turn the other cheek," Jesus literally meant if someone punches you in the face, you turn your cheek and let him or her punch you on the other side. Now, there are a number of reasons why I disagree with the Anabaptist view, but I do think it has some validity and needs to be wrestled with.

In the history of the church there have been a number of ways of looking at the Sermon on the Mount that I think have some validity. But there are three interpretations of the Sermon on the Mount that I think have virtually no validity and that I dismiss almost out of hand as being virtually, entirely implausible.

One view that I think is almost entirely implausible is a view that has been taught by dispensationalists, certain conservative Christians who follow the teaching of a man named Darby. These conservative Christians have in the past used the Scofield Reference Bible. They historically taught at Dallas Seminary and certain other prominent dispensationalist seminaries. But the view that was associated with this school of thinking is that the Sermon on the Mount is a teaching designed entirely, or at least primarily, for the kingdom age, that is the millennial age after Jesus returns and sets up his earthly kingdom. This is the law that is going to govern that kingdom.

Now, apart from the fact that it renders the teaching almost entirely irrelevant, we ought to rip it out of our Bibles and throw it away until the millennium comes. And apart from the fact that there is nothing in the text that suggests to us that this is for the millennium, that view stumbles over the very obvious problem that

much in this teaching would have no application to the millennium. For example, Jesus talks about not getting divorced except in the case of adultery. Both divorce and adultery I don't think will be issues in the millennium. Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek when someone strikes us in the face and he tells us to love our enemies. Again, issues that have nothing to do with the millennial reign of Christ. He tells us to beware of false prophets who will come into our midst. He tells us to strive to enter through the narrow gate. Well, that wouldn't make any sense if we were already in. So the historic dispensationalist view that this epic of the Sermon on the Mount is for the kingdom age, the millennial age, I think is an impossible view.

And I think that the liberal perspective of the Sermon on the Mount is equally implausible. Now the liberal view is not so popular these days, but was popular back at the turn of the last century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century up to WWI. The liberal view viewed the Sermon on the Mount as a map to social progress. They said, "Isn't it wonderful that we find here in the teaching of Jesus an ethic for the entire world. Jesus is teaching us all how we should get along with each other as part of the brotherhood of man, all of us living under the fatherhood of God. Jesus' Sermon on the Mount simply needs to be done by all of us and should govern our international treaties and the way that nations relate to each other. And if we all just did the Sermon on the Mount, there would be no more wars. So let's set about doing it."

The reason why I say that the liberal view is almost entirely implausible is that first of all is we just can't do the Sermon on the Mount. I quoted to you before Matthew 5:48, "Therefore, you must be perfect even as your heavenly Father is perfect." You come upon verses like that throughout the Sermon on the Mount where we just have to bow before. We can't just go ahead and be perfect. Or Jesus tells us to completely rid ourselves of all lust or all anger. The notion that we can just do this doesn't, in any way, take seriously what Jesus is telling us to do.

The second problem that I have with the liberal view and this is my problem with Christian liberalism in general, is that Christian liberals, and I am talking about liberal theologically and not liberal politically, Christian liberals always put Jesus as teacher before they encounter Jesus as Savior. They always get the order wrong. This is something that the Bible is very specific about, that we have to get the order of our encounter with Jesus correct. We always start with Jesus as Savior, as one who comes into our lives and regenerates us, makes us born again, changes our hearts, changes our viewpoint, changes our nature. And having changed us as Savior, then he meets us as teacher and says, "This is the way you ought to live." We can't get the order backwards. It is a ridiculous thing to try to apply the teaching of Jesus to those who do not know him and have not embraced him as Savior. To try to get an unregenerate person to live like a regenerate person is unbiblical.

You know, as a pastor, I am frequently called upon to marry people, as are the rest of the pastors on our staff. And these days a high percentage of couples who come in to get married are already living together. Some already have children. Now, when I speak with a couple who is living together, the first thing

that I say to them is never “Don’t you know that what you are doing is immoral according to the teaching of Jesus.” I never lead in with an introduction to Jesus as teacher. My first statement to couples who come in who are in that situation concerns Jesus as Savior. I always begin by asking the couple about their relationship with Christ. “Tell me about your relationship with Jesus. Was there some point in your life when you threw the doors of your life open and asked Christ to invade you to the core? Has there been a point in your life where you totally surrendered to Christ and came under his rule? Do you believe that as you are sitting here today that you absolutely are born again, that you know without any doubt that you are going to heaven if you die?” See, until a person is changed on the inside, they won’t want to obey the teaching of Jesus. And even if they wanted to, they can’t because they don’t have the power to do it.

The problem of theological liberalism and now, many conservative Christians who want to take the teachings of Jesus and apply it to the whole society is that we are introducing people to Jesus as teacher before we introduce them to Jesus as Savior. And friends, that just won’t work. As an old friend of mine always say, “That old dog won’t hunt.”

The third interpretation on the Sermon on the Mount that I am forced to reject as really implausible is the view that the Sermon on the Mount is for special Christians, but not for all Christians.

The teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount is meant to apply to all Christians living today, all Christians, not special Christians or particular saintly Christians. And all Christians are to do all of it. We never have a warrant to pick and choose among the commandments of Jesus, “Well, you know I really am given more to peacemaking than I am to sexual purity.”

“I am a more politically active person. I really like marching against nuclear reactors and against corporations that destroy the environment, but I am not much into this sexual purity business.”

We never have a warrant to pick and choose among the commandments of Jesus. All Christians are to obey all of Jesus’ commands.

Whereas, I think that all of the views I mentioned have some validity, the view that I hold to is the Sermon on the Mount teaches us the way that we are to receive grace. By cultivating certain attitudes and by involving ourselves with certain spiritual disciplines like prayer and fasting and giving, we put ourselves in the path of grace. We don’t earn grace, we don’t merit it, and we are not singing for our supper. We make ourselves available to God’s blessing and to God’s goodness.

Let’s take a look at the specifics of the text today for the remainder of our time. Matthew 5 says, “When he saw the crowds, he went up to a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them...” Rabbis in Jesus’ day used to sit down when they taught their followers. So Jesus was following a common cultural practice of his day. Rabbis used to sit down and their followers would sit around their feet listening to them.

The first thing that Jesus says is “Blessed is the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Now, there is some debate and discussion about this word “blessed”. A lot of translators make the word into “happy.” The Greek word is “makarios” and it can properly be translated happy, so some translators like Philips will translate the text, “Happy are the poor in spirit...” A lot of commentators will talk about these eight Beatitudes as the way to become happy. I don’t think that is entirely fallacious. I think that it is the case that every one of us wants to be happy. Anyone of you not want to be happy? Anyone here want to sign up for some misery? You want 1997 to be a year of misery and depression, a year of bleakness, the year of the locust? I don’t know any sane person on earth who doesn’t want to be happy. Most people haven’t a clue as to how to become happy. They think that the way to be happy is to do anything you want. To just do it, according to the Nike commercial. Or to date myself and go back to the 60’s, if it feels good, do it.

Some people think that the only folks in the world who can be happy are superficial people. Woody Allen had a classic line in one of his movies. He is talking about how in his opinion everyone in the world is either living a miserable or horrible existence. He sees two people walking along the street who are radiant and smiling and kissing each other. He says, “Maybe they have the secret.” He runs up to them and says, “You two seem totally happy. How can you be so happy in a world so filled with misery and horror?” And the man answers, “Well, she is entirely superficial and I never think about anything.” Like the song, “Don’t worry...be happy.”

Jesus is talking about something much deeper here. Jesus in these Beatitudes is talking about a fundamental orientation toward life. He is talking about what you set your heart on. And he is saying that as you orient yourself toward certain viewpoints, attitudes and heart commitments that result in happiness. That there is a way to happiness, but it is not superficial. It is not by burying your head in the sand. It is not by pretending that there is no moral structure to the universe and that you can do anything you want and still be happy. The truth is, friends, there is a moral structure to the universe and whether you say its there or not, it is there. God has set it up. You will continually run your head into the commandments of God and the laws of God and break your neck over them and skin your shins every time you trip over them. You can cause yourself misery and incredible sadness by pretending that there is no law in the universe, or you can come under it and live with the universe that God has given us and the moral structure that he has given us.

I don’t happen to like the word “happiness” as a translation because I think, at least in our culture; it is almost irredeemably linked to a feeling of being up. Jesus is talking about something much deeper than always being up. He is not saying that if you orient your heart in a certain direction you will always feel great. That if you fix your commitments and reposition your attitudes you will just feel wonderful and bubbly. That is what happiness communicates; that the way to feel wonderful is to be poor in spirit and to be a peacemaker and to be pure of heart.

That is why I like the more traditional word “blessed.” See, I think that what Jesus is communicating here is a more settled state. It is not necessarily an



issue of what I am feeling in the moment, but what God is doing with me in the moment. See, God may be blessing you even though things are really tough. You may be going through a period of great difficulty, a really stressful time. You find yourself in the hospital or having a family crisis. You have broken up with your girlfriend and it is just very painful. You are going through a marital separation. Your spouse just doesn't want to receive counseling and doesn't want to work on reconciliation. Doesn't want to work on making peace. But if you orient your heart in the right direction, Jesus is saying, you will be blessed. Not necessarily happy. If someone comes up to you while you are going through a crisis and said, "Are you happy all the day?" You say, "No. I have lots of periods of sadness. I am grieving. It is really painful for me." But if someone came up to you and said, "Are you being blessed?" Friend, if your heart is oriented toward being poor in spirit and mourning and meekness and hungering and thirsting after righteousness, even during times of stress you could say, "Well, I am not happy, but I am being blessed. I am experiencing the grace of God. I am experiencing closeness to God right now even in this hospital bed. In fact, I really feel the presence of God." I am not talking about a mountain top experience that only a few have, I am talking about the very regular experience of the most ordinary Christians. During times of crisis, many Christians who have their hearts oriented rightly toward God will say to you with total honesty, no super-spirituality, "You know, I really am experiencing closeness to God right now in a way that I didn't before."

You say, "Are you happy that you have this degenerative condition that will result in the loss of hearing in your left ear?"

"No, I am not happy about it."

"Are you happy that you have your thorn in the flesh?"

"No. But in the midst of it, I am being blessed," Paul would say. And many Christians would say that God's grace is sufficient for me.

See, blessing speaks to me not about my feelings in the moment. I may be sad or I may be glad. But blessings speaks to me about an experience with God, a closeness to God, an intimacy with God, a feeling of God's favor whatever the circumstances. I could be in pain. I could be lying on the beach with a glass of ice tea and have a little umbrella in it and a slice of lemon on the side. But I am being blessed because I am experiencing the Lord.

And to complete the thought, friends, the truth is that I may be happy and not be blessed by the Lord. You may be happy and the Lord is not blessing you. We can be happy in sin. We can be happy when our lives are filled with everything but the Holy Spirit – just filled up with entertainment and we are filled up with self-indulgence, but there is not blessing on that. There is no closeness to God. There is no sensitivity in your conscience any longer. There is no hearing God's voice. There is no intimacy. There is no power. There is no blessing.

Jesus is talking about the way to blessing, the way to the grace of God. Put your self in the path of receiving God's favor by certain heart orientations. The first thing he says is the way to receive God's blessing, this experience of God, this presence of God, is by being poor in spirit.

Now I want to speak about being poor in spirit. Remember I said in Christianity you could fall off the road in one way or fall off the road the other. And it really is the case when it comes to many of these heart attitudes, these basic orientations that people fall off one way or the other. You know, being poor in spirit is not what a lot of people suspect it is. It is not a matter of trying to eliminate all of your personal strengths. Trying to pretend that you are not a very good singer when you really are a very good singer. And if you are pretty than you are really ugly. And that if you are a good cook that you really can't cook very well. Or if you are a good student than you are really not very bright at all. It is not a matter of trying to put down your personal strengths or eliminate your personality. If you are extroverted trying to become introverted. If you are flamboyant trying to be more of a wallflower. It is not playing pretend. It is not something that you wear. It is not some outward thing. It is not a fake humility.

I have had the experience at several conferences of meeting people who were wearing poverty of spirit on them. They thought that it was real, but it was fake. I have been picked up by people at the airport who let me know right off the bat that they were just folks who picked up others at the airport. They weren't pastors or great teachers. They just had the role in the church of serving and that is what their little humble contribution was to the kingdom of God. They were just fetchers and bag carriers and drivers, but nothing great and I ought to know that, that they weren't great.

Being poor in spirit is the opposite of self-reliance and self-dependence and self-confidence that our culture holds up as being the bottom line and foundation of healthy living. Poverty of spirit means that you see yourself as entirely needy and dependent on God to do anything good.

See, a person who is poor in spirit has come to the end of himself or herself. They are sick and tired with what they can produce in their own strength. They have come to the end of being impressed by their own intelligence and enamored with their own acts of goodness and kindness. They are people who can say very honestly before God, "I have stopped putting my confidence in my own flesh and in my own abilities. All of what I can produce means nothing to God." People who are poor in spirit really can say along with the apostle Paul, "Yes, maybe I have reason for putting confidence in my flesh [Phil. 3], maybe I have a great family background, maybe I am a very religious person, maybe I am very intelligent, maybe I am talented. I am not going to pretend that none of those things is true. But I have come to a point in my life where I am not relying on any of that stuff, and I am not impressed by any of that stuff, and I know that God is not impressed by any of that stuff. And that the only thing that gains me anything with God is the fact that I know Jesus Christ."

Paul says, "Whatever was to my gain [Phil. 3: 2-7] I consider now lost for the sake of Christ. What is more I consider everything lost compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. And I consider them skubala, dung, rubbish. Everything in my life is to me nothing, it is rubbish, it is dung, except for Christ."

Paul was poor in spirit as he approached God. Jesus was poor in spirit. Jesus was not full of himself and what he could produce. In fact, Jesus said in

John 5:19, "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He can do only what he sees the Father doing." And in John 5:30 he says, "By myself, I can do nothing." Jesus lived in total dependence upon God. He was not working out of his own strength, out of his own mind, out of his own energy. He was working out of the energy, strength and mind of God. A person who is poor in spirit believes what Jesus says in John 15 is true. That apart from God, we can do nothing, nothing of any spiritual value, nothing of any eternal value, nothing of any ultimate significance.

There is an old hymn that puts poverty in spirit really well when it says, "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 the fountain fly, wash me, Savior, or I die." That is the language of the poor in spirit. We have nothing to offer, nothing to plead, nothing with which to buy the favor of God.

Those who are poor in spirit see that they are ultimately in need of God. And, friends, spiritual poverty, being in need, being empty, I believe is the starting point for all Christian activity. Poverty of spirit is the main driving motivation for why we do what we do as Christians.

You say, "Well, why do we pray?"

Friends, so much of the motivation of Christians to do things is not based on poverty of spirit. Many Christians pray or read the Bible because that is what good Christians are supposed to do. And so they say, "Well, if I want to think of myself as a good Christian or if I want to be a Christian leader, then I need to spend time in prayer. I had better spend time reading the Bible." That kind of motivation isn't even worthy of the word Christian.

I will tell you why we pray and why we read the Bible. Christians do it because they are commanded to. Christians do it because they love God. But ultimately the mainspring of Christian motivation is that Christians pray and read the Bible and fellowship with each other because they need to. Because Christians are folks who have come to the place in their lives where they are not ashamed to say, "I can do nothing without God."

I will tell you, friends, why I pray. I wrote it in my journal just yesterday. I was thinking about this issue of why I do what I do and the main driving motivation for me to pray is that I do not live well when I don't pray. I cannot subdue my flesh. I cannot suppress lust. I cannot keep myself from becoming angry. I cannot be a blessing to my family or a blessing to those around me unless I pray and God changes me and touches me. I just don't do well when I am not connected to God.

I pray out of a deep sense of personal need. And the times that I don't pray is when I am not in touch with my need. My family has needs and so I pray for them. The church has needs, so I pray for the church.

I read the Bible for the same reason because I need to. Because when I don't read the Bible, my mind gets more and more filled with lies and I start adopting the perspectives and viewpoints of the culture around me rather than the viewpoints and perspectives of God.

Friends, it is the same thing with fellowship. I need other Christians to live well and so do you. You need the encouragement of other Christians to move

forward in your Christian life and to put yourself in a place where you can receive grace.

I want to make an aside here, very briefly, about being involved in a small group. I have talked with a number of you and this is not in reference to any specific conversation, but to literally dozens of conversations that I have had with many people over many years. I have talked with so many folks who will tell me that they are not in a small group for one of just a few reasons:

Many people say they went to a small group once or twice and it wasn't very good.

Or it wasn't convenient.

Or the group folded and therefore they are not in a group.

Let me tell you friends, if you are not in a small group or you are not part of a church because you had a bad experience or you tried one or two and didn't like them or the group or church folded and that is why you are not going presently, the only thing that says is that you are not putting a high priority on seeking out fellowship.

Let me put it this way. How many times have we gone to restaurants and not had a very good meal? I mean I have had the experience of going to dozens of restaurants and had poor meals, poor service, poor preparation, and poor presentation. The fact is I still like going to restaurants. I still go and so do you even though you have had poor experiences.

How many videos have you watched that were miserable? And yet we all run over to Blockbuster. One bad video, two bad videos or even ten haven't stopped us from watching videos. I don't know anyone who says, "I just saw a bad movie, I am not going to watch one again." But we have a high value in our culture on entertainment. We have a high value in our culture on eating out. We don't have a high value in our culture of gathering together with other Christians and encouraging one another and sharing with one another and in building one another up. But if we are going to put ourselves in a place of receiving the grace of God this New Year, we need to commit ourselves to seeking out a small group. I want to encourage you to do that today. Go and grab a few cards. Make some calls and say to your spouse, "We are going to get involved in a small group." There are groups that meet during the day. There are groups that meet almost every evening of the week. You can find one.

Friends, the motivation to live the Christian life and to be involved in certain spiritual disciplines is the business of being poor in spirit. It is being in need.

You say, "Well, why do I want to be poor in spirit? Why do I want to come before God and say I am naked and helpless and I can do nothing? I can't produce anything of lasting ultimate value unless you help me? Why do we want that sense?"

Because biblically being empty always comes before being filled. Biblically it is the recognition that we can do nothing that always comes before God working through us. Biblically we have to fall down before God raises us up. Biblically the people that God gives the kingdom to are not those who are full of themselves, but those who have emptied themselves. Jesus doesn't give the kingdom to Pharisees who are enamored with their own sense of

accomplishment and righteousness. He doesn't give the kingdom to zealots who are going to force everyone to obey. He doesn't give the kingdom to Herodians who have given themselves to the pursuit of pleasure.

He gives the kingdom to little children, to broken up, busted up prostitutes, tax collectors. The kingdom concerns the reign of God, the presence of God, the blessing of God. You get the kingdom when you are empty. It is good to recognize at a fundamental level of your life that apart from Christ you can do nothing because then you're in the position to receive then.

But how do I get this heart attitude? How do I start in the way of grace? This is the starting point, emptiness, nakedness, and nothingness. How do I get this?

Well, let me finish with this biblical story from Luke 18 about how we can get poverty of spirit or lose it. We want it because that is a prerequisite for getting the kingdom—the grace, the blessing of God. How do we get it?

Jesus tells a little story in Luke 18 about the Pharisee and the tax collector. In Luke 18:9 he says, "To some who are confident of their own righteousness and look down on every body else, Jesus told this parable: Two men went up to the Temple to pray, one a Pharisee and one a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself [literally to himself], 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, robbers, evil doers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'"

You want to know how to miss the kingdom? Be full of yourself like the Pharisee. The Pharisee is the very opposite of being poor in spirit here. You see the way to not become poor in spirit is, to just compare yourself with other people. Use other people, and particularly other bad people, as your standard of comparison. Look around yourself, find some people who are really messing up, doing worse than you in their marriages, or worse than you morally, or worse than you on the job, worse than you as parents – find some other people who are doing worse than you. Focus upon them and lift yourself up by pushing them down. At least I am not like them. If you do that long enough, you will become full of yourself and the very opposite of being poor in spirit. Just keep comparing yourself with others.

And keep reflecting on all the things that God has done in your life. Spend a lot of time talking about and meditating on all of the good things you have done for others. Think a lot about how much time you spent praying two days ago or last week. How many people you shared your faith with. How much money you gave. Focus a lot of your thoughts on what you have done and you will become absolutely full of yourself and the very opposite of being poor in spirit.

It is a very dangerous thing, friends, to think very long or talk very much about what God is doing through you. I have found that in the giving of testimonies that the first time someone gives a testimony, they are really truly thankful to God. You hear testimonies about coming out of the occult. The first time the testimony is given, the person is really truly thankful for what God has done in their lives. The tenth time they give the testimony they are beginning to think to themselves, "I must have been pretty special or at least it sounds like it for God to take me out of the occult." The hundredth time they give the testimony they are on the lecture circuit, they are writing books about it. Any time you think a lot about how much

you are praying or that you are doing pretty well with your spiritual disciplines, you are getting filled with yourself and you are avoiding poverty of spirit.

How do I become poor in spirit? It says, "The tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you this man rather than the other went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The tax collector didn't compare himself with the Pharisee. He didn't use the self-righteousness of the Pharisee as a standard of comparison. "Oh, I thank God that I am not that self-righteous like that religious prig over there. I thank God that I don't wear my religiosity on my sleeves. I am honest enough to really give myself to sin."

He wasn't like that. He didn't care about those around him. There was only standard that the tax collector used that made him poor in spirit and that was God. He stood in the presence of God. He reflected on the Holiness of God, on the greatness of God, on the mercy of God, how patient God had been with him and how many times he had abused God's patience.

Do you want to know how to become poor in spirit? Focus on God. Take your eyes off yourself. Take your eyes off others. Turn your attention to God. Stand in his presence. Allow his greatness to overwhelm you, his holiness to convict you, his mercy and patience to break your heart. Stand alone and reflect on God. And before him you will not be lifting yourself up or talking about how much you have done. The more you stand in the presence of God, the emptier you will become of yourself and the more you will stand in the way of grace. Look at God. Compare yourself with God. Flee and run to God. Apart from him, you can do nothing. Let's pray.