

## HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

JUNE 26, 2022

### “THE BEATITUDES, PART 1—BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT” MATTHEW 5:3

It's been at least a few years since I have done a sermon series on some Scripture passage or important part of our Orthodox beliefs---something hard to cover in just one sermon. I've decided to do one starting today---a series of sermons on the Beatitudes taught by our Lord Jesus Christ. One sermon at a time on each one of His Beatitudes. It could be some Sunday I will veer off this for a week, but for the most part we will go through the Beatitudes one at a time on the upcoming Sundays.

Most likely, our Lord taught the Beatitudes many times---after all, He was preaching for three years! They are given twice in the gospels---in both Matthew and Luke in slightly different versions. This sermon series will be on the version written down by our parish patron, St. Matthew. This version of the Beatitudes is written down in Matthew 5, part of our Lord's most famous teaching, the Sermon on the Mount.

The word “beatitude” (“*macarios*” in the original Greek) means to be blessed. To have joy, peace, and goodness.....to have the truest blessing: to be part of God's kingdom now and forever. In the Beatitudes, Jesus tells us how to live as part of that wonderful kingdom....how to be truly blessed!

Today we will look at the first Beatitude in Matthew 5:3. The words of the Lord---“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Christ starts the Beatitudes in the most direct way possible by asking “Do you wish to have the kingdom of heaven?” And His answer is, “Then you must be poor in spirit.”

Being poor in spirit means to be humble because we realize we are not rich in spirit. The normal way to think is that the way to get to heaven is to be *rich* in spirit, to be spiritually strong. Christ (as He often does!) turns our usual thinking upside down by saying we need to be *poor* in spirit to have the kingdom of heaven!

We need to come before God with empty hands----having nothing to show that we deserve heaven. Empty hands---asking only for mercy. The Lord is telling us in this first Beatitude that if we think we will make into His

kingdom by being rich in spirit, then we won't make it in.

The late priest from Minneapolis, Father Anthony Coniaris, spoke about this in one of his many books. (*Very* many---he must have written more than 50! My wife and I used them a lot when homeschooling our children.) He told a story about a man who had a dream about striving to enter heaven. He was building himself a very tall ladder so he could climb right into heaven. Every time he did something good, it added another rung to the ladder. If he prayed, if he went to church, if he obeyed a law of God, if he gave to a beggar, etc.----another rung was on top. After a long time the ladder was getting very, very tall. One day he decided it was so tall it must be all the way to heaven. So he climbed up and stepped off at the top-----and fell all the way back down to earth. His ladder was tall, but not even close to tall enough to reach heaven. (Father Anthony Coniaris, Sacred Symbols That Speak, Vol. I, p. 67)

We can't reach the kingdom of heaven by being spiritually rich----only by being poor in spirit.

So how can we become poorer in spirit than we now are? A few ways---  
**One.** Always plead for mercy from God. Make that the main topic of your prayers! Our most common prayer in our church services is "Lord, have mercy!" Make those words and similar words the leading part of your own personal prayers.

Do not pray for God to be fair to you, to be just to you. Because if God is fair to us, we are bound for hell for sure. Don't pray for fairness, pray for mercy!

**Two.** Always work at seeing other people as better than yourself.

In England, in the early 1800's, two writers became very popular at about the same time, both of them turning out their most famous books almost simultaneously. One was Sir Walter Scott, with his famous novel, Ivanhoe. The other was Lord Byron with his famous long poetic work, Don Juan. It seemed everyone was reading these two authors...and there was lots of debate about who was the greater writer....Sir Walter Scott or Lord Byron. There was an anonymous article in a leading magazine that attempted to settle this debate. The writer closely analyzed the writings of both Scott and Byron---and came to the conclusion that Lord Byron was the superior author. Sometime after the article was published, word leaked out about who the anonymous writer was. It was Sir Walter Scott. ("Our Daily Bread", 1/13/83)

Follow Walter Scott's example. Strive to see others as better than yourself. That will help you to be spiritually poor.

**Three.** Of course, do your best for God, strive to draw nearer to Him and to obey Him in every way....*but* always remember that it's not enough. Remember the story about the man building a ladder to heaven!

Even as you live for the Lord and serve the Lord----remind yourself of your spiritual poverty. St. John Chrysostom, our great Father from about 400 A.D., said that this first Beatitude was given by the Lord partly for the sake of the 12 Disciples themselves. It was important for them to hear it, so they wouldn't get proud of being Christ's Disciples. And if the Holy Apostles shouldn't get proud, obviously we really shouldn't! (Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers, 1<sup>st</sup> Series, Vol. X, St. John Chrysostom, "Homilies on St. Matthew", Homily 15, p. 92)

So do your best for the Lord----and then remind yourself about how spiritually poor you really are.

**Four.** Avoid praise. Compliments about our spiritual life are actually harmful to us. Being complimented that we are "so religious", "a very spiritual person", or "such a committed Christian" are not healthy for us to hear----we start to think we are spiritually rich. So don't seek praise. Avoid hearing praise. When it happens, quickly remind yourself of your own sins (always easy for us to remember those!).

The person praising us may not know about our sins---but we do! So remind yourself of your sins while you are being praised. Hopefully, that will somewhat neutralize the great danger that comes to us when others say good things about us. For praise and compliments can indeed be deadly.

There is an old fable about a frog and two ducks who lived at the same country pond and were very good friends---for some reason the ducks weren't interested in eating the frog! They had a very nice life at that pond but a bad dry spell came on the area and the pond was drying up. Eventually, it wasn't much more than a puddle. The ducks said that as they flew around they had seen a nice lake 5 miles away and they proposed to their amphibian friend that they all move over to it to live. The frog liked the idea but said, "For you ducks a five mile trip is a matter of a few minutes. But for me it's an enormous distance to cover by hopping---I doubt I can do it!". And so they tried to think of a solution.

The frog came up with one. He told the ducks to pick up a good strong stick and each grab on one end of it with their bills. Then he, the frog, would hold on tight with his mouth to the middle of the stick. And the ducks could easily carry him through the air to their new home. The ducks loved the idea and quickly found a good stick....and off they went.

At first everything was going great-----then they happened to fly over a

farm. The farmer was working outside and happened to glance up and saw a strange object flying over him---it was the duck/frog combo. He was so impressed that he hollered up to them---“That is a great idea! Who was so smart to think of it?”. The frog just swelled up with pride and couldn’t help but holler down to the farmer---“It’s all my idea!”. But, of course, in order to holler those proud words, he had open his mouth which meant letting go of the stick ----and he fell all the way down to the ground and was killed. (“Our Daily Bread”, 6/26/22)

Yes, praise is dangerous. Avoid it, ignore it, disregard it. Because it can keep you from being poor in spirit. Don’t be like that frog. Instead, live by the words of St. Dorotheos of Gaza from 1500 years ago---“In everything, try to find something to blame yourself for.” (Soul Mending, Deacon John Chryssagis, Holy Cross Press, p. 174)

Do you wish to be in the Kingdom of Heaven? Do you wish to have that blessed life, both in the here and the now and forever? Jesus tells us in the first Beatitude that then we must be poor in spirit.

How? A quick summary list of the 4 things I mentioned.....

1. Always plead for mercy and forgiveness.
2. See others as better than yourself.
3. Do your best for God, but always remember it’s not nearly enough.
4. Avoid and disregard praise that comes your way. Don’t be like the frog!

With God’s grace and help, we can become poor in spirit. And then we indeed can be blessed---both now and forever in the Kingdom of Heaven.