

“It Is Well with My Soul: The Soul’s Virtues -Humility”  
Matthew 5:3

What comes to your mind when you think of the word “blessed?” What are some popular images from our culture?

We begin a sermon series today based on the beatitudes Jesus taught, inviting us to dig deeper into the theme of “It Is Well with My Soul.” The beatitudes turn our expectations about life upside down as they give us the wisdom of the soul. These sayings offer a radical vision for living a life that is grounded in the goodness and love of God. Yet, this wisdom is challenging to our common ways of thinking and being in the world.

Today’s beatitude comes from Matthew 5:3, a part of Jesus’s famous Sermon on the Mount. Let’s listen:

‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’

At face value, this statement seems puzzling. How could those who are poor in spirit be blessed? Our normal assumption is that blessed people are those who have a lot—a lot of wealth, a lot of knowledge, a lot of spiritual depth, or a lot of power, beauty, or health. That was also the assumption of the people in Jesus’s time. We think that the blessed life is about having no troubles, worries, or faults.

Jesus was well aware of the human condition and its challenges. The context of his ministry was the imperial rule of Rome over his people’s homeland. In that worldview, those seen as blessed were the rich and powerful. Having material wealth, high social class, and power were seen as things given by the gods to those who were deserving. If you were powerful, beautiful, and rich, these were signs of divine blessing on you. So, when we hear Jesus saying that the ones who are normally considered cursed are the ones who are blessed, we can see that Jesus was turning the dominant worldview of his time upside down. He was challenging the imperial theology of Rome and giving his people a real alternative. With the mindset that only the rich and powerful were blessed, most people felt they had nothing to do to change their circumstances because the oppressive system was considered part of a divine plan. That is why the central theme for the teachings of Jesus was the kingdom of God as an alternative to the kingdom of Rome.

It is easy to miss the power of Jesus’s message about the kingdom because we tend to think of it as some distant reality experienced only after death. But if we take the context of his teachings seriously, we see that the kingdom of God was about the here and now. Similarly, the beatitudes are not just individualistic commands. When we take these words in their context, a larger image becomes clear to us.

Jesus was trying to change people's consciousness, the very way we think and believe, so that we can see life from the soul's perspective. The good life, a life of blessing, is not about getting what we want. It is about knowing that in every moment, we have access to eternal love. Our work is to access the virtues of our souls, the deep well of our being and our connection to God.

The virtue that Jesus highlights in today's beatitude is **humility**. When we feel a poverty of spirit—when we are at the end of our rope—that is when we can access God's spirit. Humility is not about thinking less of ourselves. It is about staying open to what comes next from God's spirit.

There are so many ways the fears and struggles of life can shut down our ability to live with an openness of spirit: broken relationships, financial hardships, health challenges, abuse, war, violence, hatred, and cruelty. We cope with these challenges by playing it small and safe, trying to control things. This happens even in religious life. There are people who find safety in asserting religious certitudes. You've probably heard people say, "God said it. I believe it. That settles it." They use the Bible as a weapon to assert their belief systems, painting a world where all matters are divided into good and bad with little room for uncertainty, and for that matter, for growth and change. Such assertions may sound appealing, but they are just another attempt to control life.

Jesus invited the people to let go of their ideas of the "blessed" life to embrace God's presence in every aspect of life, especially in those places where one might feel broken, fearful, or alone. And the gift of the soul for this is to embrace humility, an attitude of always being willing to learn, grow, change, and stay open to God's promptings in our lives.

So how does one allow the soul's virtue of humility, this poverty of spirit, to grow?

Richard Rohr gives us guidance from the mystic John of the Cross, a Catholic priest and a monk who lived in the 16th Century. Rohr writes, "John of the Cross understood the true meaning of humility, which is not self-deprecation or low self-esteem, but a simple acknowledgment that I am very small, quickly passing, and insignificant as a separate self. That is just objective truth. Our dignity and sacredness precisely comes from our **connection**. With this deep and experienced and inherent connection, John was free to rest in a union that could not be taken from him... In the dark night of the soul, the only thing left to do is to let go of the ego's need for self-importance and validation and simply turn our attention toward God. There is no need any longer to achieve or manufacture our union with God. Soft piety and sweet feelings are no longer necessary. God is much more trustworthy and solid than feelings. We are henceforth able to give ourselves over to a now natural flow of loving and being loved. What once

seemed impossible and 'supernatural' is now enjoyed as both total gift and yet totally natural to our deepest being.

“John taught that humility meant accepting our unquenchable thirst and need for God and acknowledging our emptiness at the same time—they work together! This is why the contemporary “I am special” and “I have dignity” eventually falls apart for lack of foundation. I want to offer you here, through them, an objective foundation for a positive self-image, which can never be taken from you. It does not come and go; it is you at your deepest core.”

This morning, I invite you to see that true blessing isn't in what you have or what you can control. True blessing is in the quiet, humble acknowledgment of your need for God, in the knowledge that your emptiness is the very space where God's presence can dwell. When we are poor in spirit, we are not empty; we are ready to be filled. That is the source of a deep, abiding peace that allows us to say, “It is well with my soul.”

### **Guided Meditation: Resting in Humility**

I invite you now to get into a comfortable position. You may want to close your eyes, or simply lower your gaze. Let's take a moment to be still.

Take a deep breath in through your nose, feeling your lungs fill completely, and then exhale slowly through your mouth. As you breathe, allow any tension you are holding in your body to soften.

With your eyes closed, bring to mind the idea of “poverty of spirit.” This is not a judgment or a failure. It is simply a state of being. It's the moment when you feel you don't have all the answers, when your control is slipping, or when you feel vulnerable. Acknowledge this feeling of emptiness.

Now, imagine that this emptiness is a gift, a space ready to be filled. Instead of trying to fill it with your own ideas, accomplishments, or control, simply open it up to the presence of God. You don't need to force anything. Just imagine a light, a warmth, a gentle presence slowly filling that space.

As you sit with this image, repeat these words to yourself, either out loud or in your mind:

"My deepest dignity comes from my connection to you, God." "I am small, and that is where you meet me." "In my poverty of spirit, I am blessed."

Stay in this quiet space for a moment, simply resting in the knowledge that you are loved, just as you are.

When you are ready, gently bring your awareness back to the room. Notice your surroundings. And with a final deep breath, open your eyes.

Amen.