

## The Only Passing Grade is "F"

### Matthew 5:3

This morning you will be introduced to the best sermon you have ever heard. This sermon is more powerful, more captivating, and more relevant than any that has ever been delivered before or since. If you listen carefully it will change your life and shape your understanding of morality in a way no other sermon has or can. Be advised, however, it is radical, it is controversial, and it may be disagreeable to some of you. But if you pay attention and obey this sermon, I can promise that you will be richly blessed.

I'm referring to a sermon that is commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount—the sermon that Jesus gave on the gentle slopes of a Galilean hillside in the first century. These slopes, covered with grass and field lilies, formed a natural amphitheater where Jesus could speak and be heard with relatively little effort. It was in this setting that hundreds of people gathered, eager to hear what this popular young Rabbi would say about the impending kingdom of God. And the folks who had gathered were all ears.

You see, when Jesus came upon the scene He entered a socially and politically charged environment. Although there was relative peace in the Roman Empire, and while Jews were allowed certain privileges, such as the freedom to worship Yahweh their God, there was a tremendous amount of resentment toward Rome. They viewed Rome as an evil political system that had usurped God's rightful place in the world, and themselves as the supreme benefactors of His blessing. *They* were the people of privilege—not the Romans or the Greeks or any other Gentile nation. And so every time they saw a soldier, every time they passed a tax booth, they were reminded that God's will was being thwarted, and they yearned for the day when they would be free and *they* would be in charge.

Then along came a strange and eccentric prophet named John the Baptist. They observed his peculiar mannerisms. They listened to his fiery sermons. They witnessed a power and authority in him that prior to this they had only read about in their Scriptures, for he was reminiscent of Elijah. He preached a simple message: "Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is near!"

He baptized people in the river as a sign of their identification with this message and their willingness to prepare themselves for what was about to happen. But John made it clear that he was not the leader of this kingdom—he was not the Messiah. One was coming who would be much greater than him—One who would not merely baptize them with water, but with the Holy Spirit and fire.

The Messiah was about to show up and usher in the kingdom of God! The Scriptures they had studied and in which they had placed their hope were about to be fulfilled right before their very eyes! Things were about to change!

And their expectations of *how* things would change and what this Messiah would do and what His kingdom would be like were very specific. These expectations were largely based on their traditions, commentaries, and human reasoning. For them this kingdom was primarily about political and military power. "We're sick and tired of being oppressed and subjugated. We want to be free! In fact, we not only want to be free, we want to rule."

Consequently, they were expecting a leader that would be a politically imposing figure. He would be so forceful, so powerful, so compelling, that the governments of this world

would melt when He came on the scene. He would be the great Emancipator. He would overthrow the secular establishment and install a new world order—a true theocracy, unrivaled, uncontested, and unending.

And these Jews were poised to get behind this Deliverer. “Just give me my marching orders. I’m ready to fight, I’m willing to wield my sword and shed my blood to help inaugurate this kingdom. Just lay out the battle plan, Messiah, and I’ll fall in line.”

They had gathered together on this peaceful slope just above the Sea of Galilee—eager to hear what their Commanding Officer would say to them. And Jesus begins His sermon by telling them, **Verse 3**. “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*”

What a strange and astonishing statement! This is not what anybody was expecting, I assure you. And when they heard it, I can imagine many of them scratching their heads with looks of bewilderment on their faces.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit? That doesn’t make a bit of sense. We have eyes. We have brains. And from our observations and experience the blessed ones are those who are rich in spirit. ‘Blessed are those who assert themselves. Blessed are those who are clever enough and powerful enough to be on top. Blessed are those who have enough resources to be in charge and secure their own destiny.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit?”

It sort of sounds like Jesus is describing someone who doesn’t have his act together. Someone who cannot help himself. Someone who is insecure.

If that’s what you think it sounds like then you are right, because that is precisely what it means.

The word “poor” means ‘poor as a beggar.’ It describes someone who has nothing—someone who is in dire straits with no means by which he can pull himself out of his desperate condition. “Poor in *spirit*” is the attitude that comes from such a condition.

Here is what it means in this context: A person who is poor in spirit acknowledges that he is morally and spiritually *bankrupt*. He is acutely aware of his moral and spiritual *predicament* before a *holy* God—that he falls way short of His glory, that she hasn’t one ounce of moral or spiritual virtue in herself that would commend her to God and win His favor, and that there is nothing he can do that would *commend* himself to God and *earn* His favor.

Being poor in spirit is the disposition of a beggar who can’t help himself, and knows he can’t.

Now, that person might possess many commendable virtues in the eyes of his/her fellow man. He may be winsome, loveable, kind, hardworking, and honest. She may have volunteered her time, efforts, and money to noble humanitarian causes. He might have attended church since he was a week old and read his Bible fifty times.

But if he or she is poor in spirit, they will have come to the realization that all these things amount to nothing in terms of achieving a favorable standing with God. There is nothing in them that makes them worthy of God’s approval and God’s blessing.

But it’s not just acknowledging one’s spiritual and moral bankruptcy, or agreeing that one is morally and spiritually unbecoming to God. It is the shocking and disturbing realization that one’s heart is deceitful above all else and desperately wicked; that one’s sin is so ugly

and offensive and it so pervades one's being that one cannot imagine God *ever* taking notice of him/her, much less delighting in him/her.

If you pay attention to the words of the songs we sing, you will no doubt have noticed that the writers of some of our greatest hymns seemed to possess this quality of being poor in spirit.

Listen to these words: "Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a *wretch* like me." "Alas, and did my Savior bleed and did my Sovereign die? Would He devote that sacred head for such a *worm* as I?" "Just and holy is Thy name. I am *all* unrighteousness; *vile* and *full* of sin I am, Thou art full of truth and grace" (*Jesus, Lover of My Soul*).

Some of these hymn writers were incredulous. They viewed themselves as such sinners that they were utterly amazed that God would notice them, much less lavish His love upon them. "And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Savior's love? Died He for me? Who caused His pain? For me who Him to death pursued? Amazing love! How can it be that Thou my God shouldst die for me?"

What do *you* think? I'm guessing the average person in our culture might read these hymns and conclude that these writers suffered from a horrible lack of self-esteem. "Wretch?" "Worm?" "Vile?" Those are self-designations that reveal a desperate need for therapy. Those people need someone who can help them feel better about themselves, someone who can elevate their sense of self-worth.

That's the modern day analysis, isn't it? Because the standard by which we measure health and happiness in our day is by feeling good about oneself. We have changed the creed and boldly declared that *the chief end of man is to have a good sense of self-worth*.

And some Christians have jumped on that wagon. One famous preacher wrote a bestseller entitled, *Self Esteem—The New Reformation*. In his church they sing a modified version of Amazing Grace. They have deleted the word *wretch* and substituted it for a softer, milder word.

But it's not just him. In our hymnbook "worm" is changed to "sinner," "vile" is changed to "false." I'm pretty sure it's because the original words were perceived by the editors to be too raw or too negative. People might read them and be offended or confused.

You know something? I think there may have been more than a few confused people sitting on the hillside listening to Jesus. "Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are the spiritual beggars. Blessed are those who cannot help themselves."

Incidentally, the word "blessed" is far too mild a translation for this Greek word. It is an exclamation, a cry of joy, something akin to "O you lucky person!"

It raises a legitimate question. How could someone possibly feel *ecstatic* by being acutely aware of his moral and spiritual poverty?

We must understand that this attitude of *poor in spirit* is not an end in itself, as though God takes sadistic pleasure in watching His creatures wallow in self-deprecating turmoil. Be assured, there is no intrinsic merit in feeling bad about yourself.

Being poor in spirit is not the goal—it is only the means by which you receive the goal.

The goal is to inherit the kingdom of heaven. The means by which we get there is by *embracing the truth*. And an attitude of being poor in spirit is the attitude that corresponds to the truth.

When we see ourselves for who we are in relation to a holy God. When we see that

everything we do is tainted with selfishness and pride and self-love; when we come to grips with the words of Scripture that “my heart is deceitful above all else and desperately wicked,” it’s then that we come to understand what Jesus is talking about here.

He’s not talking about admitting that you’ve made a few mistakes or committed a few blunders. He’s not saying, as one author said in his bestselling book, *The Be Happy Attitudes*, that ‘poor in spirit’ means “coming to grips with your soft spot, your weak link, your ignorant area...or anything which hinders you from obtaining your goal, namely the goal of having a proper self-esteem.”

Jesus is talking about realizing and being convinced that you are deceitful and selfish and sinful through and through!

I was watching a news magazine (Dateline) in which one of the segments was about lying. Lies are making headlines these days in politics, and apparently the producers of this program wanted to find out just how pervasive lying is in human experience. So they interviewed a psychiatrist who has devoted his life to researching deception in human beings. He was asked by the interviewer, “How many people lie?”

He said, “Everybody lies.”

“How often does everybody lie?” was the next question.

“All the time,” was his answer.

“Oh, c’mon. All the time?”

“All the time.”

He said we are so clever in our ability to deceive that we even deceive ourselves, we’re not even conscious that we’re lying, and we live in that tangled web of deception, even reconstructing our own concept of reality if necessary, so that we can feel comfortable living with ourselves.

I don’t know if that psychiatrist has ever read the Bible, but that is a biblical concept of humanity. That is the way we are by nature. And what happens to us when we begin to see the truth of what we are by nature, is that our deception is exposed—our sinfulness is revealed. And it is not pretty.

You say, “Well, at least I’m better than most!”

And that is part of our deception. We have devised our own standards of righteousness, our own grading system, and we grade on a curve. That was the Pharisee’s mistake in the parable we read earlier.

You cannot enter the kingdom thinking that your righteousness, if graded, would be a B- or a C- or even a D-. You see, there is not a person alive who has anything but a big fat “F.” The Scripture says, “*There is no one righteous, not even one, all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*” (Romans 3:23).

In order to enter the kingdom of heaven we must admit that we’ve got an “F” in personal righteousness. Because it’s only when we really *believe* this that we will pass. For until we admit that we are spiritually bankrupt and utterly helpless we will only see our need as partial, when the truth is, our need is total (bankruptcy means we have nothing). Until we come to grips with our sin and see that even our “good” deeds are as filthy rags in God’s sight, then we will never fully understand that we have only one hope—God’s mercy and His mercy alone. We will continue to think that we can contribute something to our salvation, be it ever so little, when, in fact, we can contribute *nothing*. Because we have nothing to

offer.

As another hymn writer so beautifully stated, “Nothing of my own I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.”

That was the Apostle Paul’s attitude. In Philippians 3 he says, “If anyone of you thinks he has reason to put confidence in the flesh, I have more.” And then he whips out his pre-conversion résumé. You talk about an impressive list of religious credentials. Paul had it all. His life was in perfect order, down to the smallest detail—his heritage, his education, his achievements—he lacked nothing.

But he says that when he met Jesus he came to the stark and humbling realization that all these things amounted to nothing more than manure. Because they were saturated with self-interest and deception. And consequently, they did not impress God in the least.

It wasn’t until Paul saw the Lord Jesus Christ—the embodiment of Truth, that his own sinfulness was exposed for what it was. Paul was confronted by the truth, and by the grace of God he embraced that truth, and the truth set him free.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. Blessed are those who see themselves for who and what they really are. Blessed are those who cannot help themselves and know they cannot, when it comes to securing God’s favor through their own righteousness.

You say, “Stan, I don’t know if I can believe that. That goes against everything I’ve been taught, everything I’ve always believed in and worked for.”

I know it does. We want to believe that God helps those who help themselves. We’ve been raised in a culture where we have been taught to believe that we can do anything. We’ve grown up in a culture that tells us that blessing comes by what you make of yourself.

“Blessed are those who are confident and in control. Blessed are those who have enough resources to secure their own destiny. Blessed are those who are not dependent on others.”

We live in the wealthiest, most powerful, most free, most comfortable, most resourceful country in the world. In world politics we call the shots. In the world economy, we set the standard. We’re not dependent on *anybody*. There isn’t any major threat to our national security. From any rational, logical, human perspective, we have it made. We are blessed.

Please. Never make the mistake of transferring that kind of self-sufficiency and self-reliance and resourcefulness to the spiritual realm. If you do, you will never inherit the kingdom of God. You will live and die in a delusional state—thinking you can do what is humanly impossible.

Friends, I plead with you, see yourself in light of the truth, even if the truth initially shames you. For the truth will set you free. The truth will let you see the kingdom as it really is, and the truth will give you admission into the kingdom. Look at the last part of **verse 3**. *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

Jesus came into this world to establish His kingdom, to be sure. But not in the way the Jews in the first century were anticipating. Yes, they were under the tyranny of Rome, but there was a more powerful, more insidious kind of tyranny from which they needed deliverance. The tyranny of sin. The tyranny of selfishness. The tyranny of self-deception. Jesus, in His infinite wisdom, knew that we needed more than a political figure around whom we could rally. We needed a Savior who could rescue us from sin’s dominion and give us

life eternal.

That's why just a couple of years after Jesus uttered these words He bore our sins in His body on the cross and suffered and bled and died on our behalf. He did it to secure our freedom—not primarily political freedom, although a day is coming when He will, in fact, visibly rule this world in unrivaled majesty and glory forever and ever. But freedom from the guilt and shame of sin, freedom from sin's enslaving power and dominion, and freedom from sin's perilous consequences—which is eternal torment in a place called hell. This freedom is available to all those who receive Him by faith. Who take their sin and their guilt, their helplessness, their insecurity, their inadequacy to the foot of the cross and say, "Jesus, forgive me, Jesus, wash me, Jesus, save me!"

And when they do something wonderful happens. God not only forgives their sin and delivers them from its power and dominion, but He gives them the kingdom of heaven. And that kingdom is not just a future hope, it is a present reality. "...*Theirs **is** the kingdom of heaven!*"

We will be exploring what this means as we continue to study the Sermon on the Mount in the next several weeks. But suffice it to say for now, Jesus wants to give *you* the kingdom. He died so that you might have it. Have you received it?

You can know if you have received it if you are poor in spirit. That does not mean that you walk around on your knees with your head bowed and tear stains on your cheeks. It does not mean that you try to contrive and maintain a feeling of shame.

It simply means that you know who you are by nature, and you know what Christ has done for you in spite of your nature. It means that you live in the light of His mercy and grace, and that His mercy and grace are what sustain you. It means that you live under the shadow of the cross.

People who are poor in spirit are the most joyous, happy, blessed people in the world. For they know the truth, and the truth has set them free.

## The Only Passing Grade is "F" Matthew 5:1-3

**Main Idea:** An acute awareness of one's desperate moral and spiritual predicament is necessary for admission into God's kingdom

### Jewish Expectations of Messiah The Roman problem

An imposing political and military leader

### "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (3) An astonishing statement

The meaning of "poor"

The meaning of "poor in spirit"

- Acknowledgement that one is morally and spiritually \_\_\_\_\_
- An acute awareness of one's moral and spiritual \_\_\_\_\_ before a \_\_\_\_\_ God
- Admission that there is nothing one can do to \_\_\_\_\_ oneself to God and \_\_\_\_\_ His favor

It is not an end in itself

It is an attitude that corresponds to the truth

How one becomes "poor in spirit"

Inheriting the kingdom

Jesus' solution to our spiritual impoverishment

# Family Life Groups

## Sermon Discussion Questions

### The Only Passing Grade is "F"

Matthew 5:1-3

**Main Idea:** An acute awareness of one's desperate moral and spiritual predicament is necessary for admission into God's kingdom.

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

1) A person who is poor in spirit acknowledges that he is morally and spiritually bankrupt. He is acutely aware of his moral and spiritual predicament before a holy God—that he falls way short of his glory, that she hasn't one ounce of moral or spiritual virtue in herself that would commend her to God and win his favor, and that there is nothing he can do that would make him worthy of God's approval. How does one come to this realization?

2) Is God involved in the process of a person becoming poor in spirit? If so, how?

3) Does God desire and expect us to remain "poor in spirit" while we live our lives on this earth? Why or why not?

4) Since this attitude of being "poor in spirit" is necessary for admission into the kingdom, does this have any bearing on how you would present the gospel to an unbeliever? How does it inform the way you pray for unbelievers?