



The Dispirited

Matthew 5:3

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We need to have *a talk*. Like the talk that every parent dreads having with their kid, or the talk parents dread having with their kid's principal, or like the talk every doctor hopes to avoid ... when you have to have *a talk*, it's very likely things won't go very well. *Talks* usually surround difficult topics, and are likely to be received by the hearer very differently than the talker had anticipated.

But we *need* to have this talk. See, right now, as a nation, things are not well. In truth, things are pretty miserable.

Not that any statement made in today's societal climate is universally accepted, I mean, we still have people who disagree that the earth is round, but if there's something we should all agree upon, it's this. Every person seems to say it, whether blue, red, green, or independent ... every person seems to agree, whether white, brown, black, or other ... every person seems to think, to greater or lesser degree, that this is truth. In a world full of mistruths and alternative facts, one of the few things we can claim without hesitation is to say, that as a nation, things are bad.

I tend to scan for important news from a variety of news sources; I watch clips from multiple news media outlets; and I've found it doesn't matter if you watch CNN, FOX, or MSNBC; it doesn't matter if you read the Times, the Post, or any of the smaller papers that are plastered online; it doesn't matter where you get your news. Every outlet and paper is publishing under the same premise – things are not good for us as a nation right now.

This might be the *only* commonality between the varying news outlets – it might be the *only* thing they all agree upon. But they do agree, that we are not unified as a nation.

Perhaps what's most interesting to me about this is that we lack unity as a nation not because we can't agree on *solutions* to our problems ... it's that we can't agree on our problems. Because we can't even agree on our problems, instead of working to find solutions to problems, we are spending more and more time disagreeing with those who ... well ... with whom we disagree. It's as if disagreeing has become America's new favorite pastime in and of itself.

And I think we like disagreeing on the visible problems because it keeps us from really doing the hard work of naming the root of these problems.

See, we've always had problems. We've had political, racial, religious, and cultural disagreements for decades – centuries even. Our nation is founded upon political, racial, religious, and cultural disagreements. Why do you think the first wave of colonists left Europe?

The Christian Church itself is built upon religious differences. And today we celebrate the 350th birthday of Susanna Wesley – John Wesley’s mother – largely because of her political and religious disagreements with the Church of England. Her disagreements were learned by her son John, who started a movement based on these religious and political disagreements, which led to the formation of the Methodist Church. We are here today both religiously and politically because of the problems our founders had in the past.

Problems aren’t new. We’ve always had problems throughout our nation’s short history; we’ve had differences of opinion in the past; we’ve had disagreements regarding right and wrong. But we’ve never had the kinds of failure as a people that we have right now.

And we will continue to have problems, and be at an impasse with these problems, until we’re willing to name the underlying root of the problems. I think in our messed up situation as a nation, the idiom that is most applicable is, “keep the first things first.” See, our problem isn’t, well, our problems. Our problem is that we lack the necessary civility that is required to work together to identify problems and their discern their solutions. Our problem isn’t our problems, it’s *us*. It’s we, the people.

Civility is defined by Merriam Webster as, “a polite act or expression.” It’s defined by Google as, “formal politeness and courtesy in behavior or speech.” Do you know what happens when civility is not present? Just imagine a parent yelling at a child. Or a spouse complaining at a partner. Or a boss shouting at an employee. Or a constituent berating an elected official. Or an officer profiling a resident. It doesn’t matter the situation or place – when we encounter a lack of civility, our response, as defined by physiologist Walter Cannon, is fight or flight. We hear stories of both, and both are detrimental to civility, and thus society. Like the child who goes into their room and slams the door. Or the partner who responds in an act of domestic violence. Or the employee who quits. Or the elected official who stares deadly into space.

You can find both responses present in almost every avenue of life. Consider social media. Facebook is a case study for these fight or flight reactions. I’ve got one Facebook friend, someone I went to high school with, who posts things all the time that spark heated arguments on her page. People will offer both well thought out responses and angry tirades at her. Her response is usually the same. Usually in all caps, she responds, “If you don’t like my opinion, just leave. It’s my page, and I get to say what I think without you telling me I’m wrong.” She’s ready to fight anyone who challenges her way of thinking. Alternatively, I see other friends posting more simplistically, “You’ve made the cut!” That’s a favorite of many today. Instead of even attempting to address a difference of opinion, or continuing to be beaten down with negative attacks by others, we just disengage. We cut people out altogether.

It’s this lack of civility that elicits a fight or flight reaction that I think is our biggest problem, because it claims that we have the right to treat others as insignificant, or inferior, or unworthy. And that *this* is our biggest problem as a nation is why I think we, as people of Christian faith, are uniquely called to *Be the Change*.

Over the next five weeks we're going to consider how it is we, as people who profess Christ, are called to *Be the Change* needed in the nation today. Using the Beatitudes offered by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, we will consider how it is we can, while disagreeing on lesser elements, lead in a witness of unity.

I say we are uniquely called to lead in this witness, because the witness that is needed today is the very witness we see by God in Christ. Consider, God sends Christ as the ultimate form of *engagement*. Christ came as Immanuel, as God with us, as the incarnate One, so that we might have the ultimate understanding of faithful engagement. God sends Christ as an example of what it looks like to draw close to those who believe and think differently, and who are outcast in society. And Christ is the living witness of God as love. Christ exemplifies the patience, the kindness, and the humility that is the very basis of the love that allows us to engage with others in a manner that reflects God's will for humanity.

To our benefit, Christ outlines the traits necessary to offer this kind of witness in the world in the beatitudes. We will consider them independently, but this is one sermon. These lessons of Christ stand as one statement on faithful discipleship.

We begin with this first clause in Matthew 5:3, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Quite notably, Matthew's version of this varies from that of Luke's gospel, which just records Jesus as saying, "Blessed are the poor." Scholars have tried to explain the difference as a nuance of the purpose behind the authors' writings. Luke is said to be writing to a disenfranchised people, and if you pay close attention, he uses every opportunity in his gospel to lift up, praise, and speak God's salvation to those who are considered unworthy in the community. For example, the story of Zacchaeus is *only* found in Luke's gospel. It's an example of Christ's salvation being extended to one who, though he was wealthy, was outcast from society, and he promised he gave away half of his wealth, and that he paid four-fold back to anyone he mis-taxed. Luke praises the outcasts and those who give up of their wealth.

Matthew on the other hand is said to be writing to a wealthier community. He's not claiming that the wealthy are excluded, like Luke seems to claim. Matthew's addition of these two words "in spirit" offers quite a different understanding. But what does being poor in spirit really mean?

It's worth naming up front that being poor at all – whether in wealth or in spirit – is by our 21st Century standards *not* a reason to consider yourself blessed. We are a nation that idolizes wealth and rewards those who prove themselves as being best. We mock those who are poor, whether in spirit, wealth, knowledge, or any other standard of measuring a person. That the beatitude begins "blessed are the poor" is already a direct contradiction to who we have become as a nation of individuals who desire great personal success.

To understand better what Matthew's Jesus is trying to say here, it may help to consider some Biblical examples where Jesus encourages this poor *in spirit* type of living.

Consider first the story of Nicodemus in John, chapter 3. Nicodemus was a Jewish leader, who came to Jesus at night to avoid detection by other Jews in the community. Nicodemus believed that his birthright into the Jewish community was sufficient for salvation. Jesus tells him that to see the kingdom of God, he must be born again.

Perhaps expectedly, Nicodemus is quite confused. How does one climb back into their mother's womb to be born again? Is that even possible? That doesn't sound comfortable for anyone involved.

Nicodemus is perplexed, and has no clue what Jesus means. He was so confident in his birthright, in his position as a Pharisee, in his knowledge of the Biblical word, that when Jesus tells him what he needs to hear, what he needs to have true life, Nicodemus is unable to comprehend. He doesn't get it.

Consider too the Samaritan woman, whose story is found in John, chapter 4. Jesus was standing at a well around midday in the region of Samaria – a place outside of the Jewish community. As he is standing there at what is likely the hottest time of the day, a Samaritan woman comes to draw water from the well. Jesus asks her for a drink of water. Her response makes it clear she wants nothing to do with him. She knows better than to engage. Not only is she an outcast in his presence, her being a Samaritan woman and he a Jewish man, but she's present at the well in the heat of the day for a reason. She's not even welcomed by the Samaritan community. Her life has proven to be unbecoming for others, and she is left to seek water in the heat of the day when no one else will be at the well.

But amidst her concern, Jesus flips the script. He says, "If you knew who I was, you would be asking me for a drink of water." After Jesus displays a knowledge of her extra marital affairs, she runs back to the community and says to them, "Come and see this man who told me everything I have done!" It's as if she reveres him because he's a fortune teller, but she seems to lack the understanding of what he's offering her. She doesn't quite get it.

Consider one more, from John, chapter 8. The Pharisees have brought before Jesus a woman who they claim to have caught in the act of adultery. They are seeking to trap Jesus, but in doing so, they are willing sacrifice this woman, who they are claiming is guilty to be stoned to death. They proclaim the ancient Hebraic law gives them permission to proceed, and they want Jesus' approval.

Jesus again flips the script, offering the simple word of invitation, "Let the one who is without sin be the first to cast a stone." He gives them permission to stone her, so long as they are blameless. As he bends down and draws in the sand, they all leave.

To the man who thought his birthright was all he needed, Jesus says you must be born again.

To the woman who was seeking water as an escape from the community, Jesus says drink of the living water.

To the Pharisees seeking to trap Jesus and stone the woman, Jesus says, let the one without sin go first.

See, when we think we have all the right answers, when we think we are better than others because of our status, or our wealth, or our position, or our knowledge ... when we think we know what we have to do, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

“The first thing we must do to change our society is to recognize that we are not better than those around us.”ⁱ We don’t always have the right answer. We aren’t always the smartest in the room. We’re not the ones on whom others must always depend. If we’re going to receive salvation for ourselves, much less claim it for society, we must begin by acknowledging that we are not superior to others. Our race, our degree, our job, our home, our car, our clothing label, our security clearance, our birth right, our religious beliefs, our moral positioning, our political affiliation – none of these make us better than the other. What will make us better, what will lead to change, is our willingness to claim that we are all as one, united by our dependence on grace.

This is the *poor in spirit*.

Matthew isn’t saying that the blessed are those who have no wealth – who are materially impoverished. He’s not saying blessed are those who have no energy in life – who lack spirit like a sullen cheerleader. *He’s saying*, blessed are those who have an appropriate spirit, or attitude, given their condition – one that is humbly dependent upon God’s grace.ⁱⁱ This poverty of spirit is not a weakness, it’s admitting to powerlessness. The first step to becoming a better nation is for each person to claim an impoverished spirit.

See Nicodemus, the Samaritan Woman, the Pharisees, they couldn’t be agents of change, they couldn’t be who God had called them to be until they were willing to admit they were wrong, until they admitted they lacked understanding, or until they were humble enough to be led by the Messiah to receive new life.

Thus, if we want to see change, if we want to *be the change* our nation so desperately needs, we must become dispirited. We must live with an impoverished spirit. Acknowledging that *we* are not who the world needs. *We* are not the savior. *We* are not the rescuer. But that we know *the One* who is what the world needs. We know *the One* who is the Savior. We know *the One* who rescues us from our sin and who offers new life to all.

We are united in our need, no one person greater than the next, but all equal participants as part of God’s created humanity. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

ⁱ Rob Lough. *A Kingdom of Paupers*. Ebenezerumc.org. Retrieved January 16, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Douglas R. A. Hare. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Matthew*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993.