

**Be Happy - Poor in Spirit / Those Who Mourn 1-17-10**  
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**Matthew 5:3-4**

<sup>3</sup>“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup>“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

What can we know about what God's intentions are for us humans? There's a lot of talk about what God wants or how God judges or who is in and who is out as far as "God" is concerned. And many people purport to speak for God. One of those very prominent spokespersons for God made the news this week in the aftermath of the horrific earthquake that struck the poorest nation in this hemisphere. I don't mean to state the obvious, but some things need to be said out loud and in public so there can be no misunderstanding. And so, I feel compelled to speak up.

Just one day after the earthquake struck Haiti someone who professes to be a minister of the gospel went on national TV and made statements that would place the blame for the disaster on the people themselves. In the face of unimaginable suffering and death and

destruction, Pat Robertson went on TV and said, and I quote, "They were under the heel of the French. You know, Napoleon III, or whatever. And they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, we will serve you if you'll get us free from the French. True story. And so, the devil said, okay it's a deal [...] ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after the other." If you look at the demographics of Haiti, you will see that 80 percent classify themselves as Roman Catholics or Christians. So how could Pat Robertson make such an outrageous claim?

Sometimes when people say outrageous things I think it is better to ignore the behavior. But when we are talking about someone who has such power and ready access to people's ears, then it behooves us to point out that, as the story goes, "the emperor has no clothes." Pat Robertson's statements last week exposed how out of touch he is with the one he calls Lord, Jesus Christ.

Matthew's gospel tells us how Jesus came out of the water of baptism, called followers and then immediately began healing and

teaching and proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand. The first words recorded by Matthew are the character of God's world - yes - as it looks among us here on earth. What is the character of that way of being? Well, the first thing Jesus says is, "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom of heaven is not a phrase to mean the afterlife as it so often gets interpreted. The phrase kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven are one and the same. Often words were used to mean "God" but that name was considered too holy to speak. Not long after Jesus spoke these beatitudes, he encouraged his disciples to pray, "Thy kingdom come, they will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Jesus didn't have this separation that we have added on about earth versus the afterlife at some future time. He came to usher in God's ways - to invade human ways with the God's intention for humanity.

Who is it that lives right now in God's presence? Who is it that experiences the abundant life God offers? Jesus answers that it is "the poor in spirit" and theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Sometimes we

can learn the meaning of something by first seeing what it is not. That's kind of how the Berenstain Bears books teach lessons to children. Everybody learns by the bumbling and mistakes of the father bear. Well, Pat Robertson this week offers a very clear example of the opposite of being "poor in spirit". Pat Robertson is a good example of someone who has lost their way. He has become wealthy and powerful. He has the ability to be heard by thousands, if not millions of people. He is educated. He is well fed. He wants for nothing. And that affluence has made him blind and deaf to his own need to listen to the cries of others, or even to the voice of God. He is rich indeed. He has so much he no longer sees his own need. How else can you explain his ability to stand in cold judgment over a devastated and suffering people? His heart has turned to stone because he thinks he has the answers. He thinks he speaks for God. How convenient for him.

Now I know that Pat Robertson makes an easy target. He says such outlandish things. But sometimes we can take those stark examples and use them to examine our own tendencies and hearts. We

who come from relative affluence compared to the rest of the world, can easily stand in judgment over those whose lives involve so much more suffering and struggle. We can easily create a storyline, like Pat Robertson, in order to separate such poor people from us. If they are poor, they must have done something or not done something in order to end up as they did. And on, and on. If we can somehow blame them for their circumstances then we don't have to feel so bad for them, and we certainly don't need to feel the responsibility to act. Most situations you and I face are not of the magnitude of the Haiti earthquake, where all our defense mechanisms get stripped down and taken away.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the poor in spirit for they see their need for God and they see how God speaks to them through the cries and experiences and conversations with the most vulnerable of this world, and they find a connection and a movement of God's presence and a passion that comes from God. Blessed are the poor in spirit for they no longer feel compelled to judge those who suffer. They no longer feel the need to

perpetuate fear, but rather seek understanding and empathy. Blessed are the poor in spirit for they understand that they need the other as much or more as the other needs them.

I know that many here have been to places of great need in order to help out. There was a large group of people from First Christian Church who went down to Texas during spring break in 2006 in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina in order to help people rebuild. I did not go with that group, but I heard the stories upon your return; stories of how being there among such people of faith, in the midst of ruin, changed you. You went down there to help them and realized that they had as much to give you as you them. And you built friendships and bigger understanding of how God works and the value of giving of yourself, just as Jesus said, to find yourself. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. That delegation from First Christian experienced a bit of that heaven on earth as God's presence gave hope and grace not just to those suffering, but also to those who

were willing to be open to receive what these poor ones had to give as well.

Some time ago, I shared how my call to ministry came as I witnessed the amazing faith of those who received me in Nicaragua. There I was, in the midst of people who had lost nearly everything due to civil war. Homes had been destroyed. In many cases, family members had been killed or disappeared. And yet, their faith in God and their witness to the power of God in the midst of suffering was so powerful that I came home and went to seminary. You see, these people had something I needed... perspective, gratitude for another day, no pretense about their own importance or their own need. And as I listened to them and opened my life to theirs, I experienced, if but for a moment, the kingdom of heaven. Tomorrow we observe Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Dr. King understood about being poor in spirit when he said, "Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality."

A terrible tragedy has happened to the people of Haiti. And as the days unfold, we will learn more and more of the devastation, and we will rejoice when people are found alive and we will grieve when people are found who did not make it. Our hearts go out to those poor, suffering people. And we want to help. We want to do something because we care. The second beatitude Jesus spoke is, "blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted." As followers of Jesus, we certainly want to be among those who offer such comfort on behalf of God. We want the people who suffer to experience God's presence in the outpouring of care and resources. Those needs will be ongoing, and the grief alive for some time to come. We at First Christian Church want to be part of the expressions of comfort and care for those who mourn in Haiti. There will be discussions among the leadership and within the Stewardship Committee of ways we can respond, understanding that as we open ourselves to those in need, we acknowledge and become more aware of our own need. But here, immediately, we are collecting additional money for Week of

Compassion who is already working hard with others to respond to the immediate needs and to coordinate efforts for the long term. Any money you give to Week of Compassion, you can be sure will be spent to provide relief. You'll find white envelopes in the pews marked Haiti Relief - Week of Compassion. This is just the beginning, but it is important as we reach a hand of comfort to those who mourn. For they shall be comforted as God's presence is made known in the midst of the suffering and pain and grief.

What does living by God's design look like? Well, we can see it when we admit that we do not have all the answers, when we acknowledge that we need God and others in order to be whole, when those who mourn are not blamed for their misfortune, but rather offered a shoulder of comfort along with food and shelter and a listening ear. For that is where you'll find the kingdom of God - on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.