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**Grace Fellowship Church, Port Jervis, New York**

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**Sermon on the Mount - Introduction**

**Matthew 5:1**

**Prayer:** *Father God, we do again thank you and praise you for your many, many gifts. Father, we thank you for the gift of motherhood that we are again celebrating this day, and what a wonderful gift that is. We just thank you for the sacrifices that all of our mothers have made over and over and over again, Lord, they're just again, one of the gifts that you give. And Lord, another gift is your son and yet another gift is your word. And Father, this morning as we open up your word, we want to unpack this gift and we want the presence of your Holy Spirit there to help us. We recognize without your Spirit, this is a hopeless task, and so we pray as we look into your word that you would give us your grace and your Spirit's presence, and we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

Well, arguably the most famous and probably least understood sermon of all time is the Sermon on the Mount. It is found in the gospel of Matthew, Chapter 5 through 7. Jesus had been preaching the good news for some time now and by the time we get to Matthew 4, we read this in Matthew 4:23, it says this: *And Jesus went about all*

*Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all kinds of sickness and all kinds of disease among the people. Then His fame went throughout all Syria; and they brought to Him all sick people who were afflicted with various diseases and torments, and those who were demon-possessed, epileptics, and paralytics; and He healed them. Great multitudes followed Him -- from Galilee, and from Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea, and beyond the Jordan.*

So Jesus went about healing the sick, the demon possessed, those in severe pain, the paralyzed, and those with seizures. And at this point in Jesus's public ministry, the crowds that are surrounding him were absolutely huge. And so we find that Jesus is going up on a mountainside and he's gathering up his disciples and he starts to preach, and he preaches the sermon that stretches across three whole chapters of the gospel of Matthew. It's not just a collection of teachings but it's a precise laying out of God's view of what a Christian really is. It goes from the general to the particular, it goes from theory to practice, it gives the essence of what a believer is, how he thinks, and what he does.

Now, there are two overarching principles that are critical to understanding this sermon. First you have to understand the importance of taking the sermon as a whole and not just in its

part, understanding what Jesus was saying literally; and second, understand that all of the Sermon on the Mount applies to all believers. There's this great danger of pulling theology out of the particulars of this sermon. Politicians love to quote the Sermon on the Mount because you can make it say almost anything you want if you're willing to take it out of context. I mean, you can always make the Bible say anything you want as long as if you're willing to take it out of its particular context. And to fail to see that context of scripture is really to court disaster.

And so we ask, well, does that mean that everything in the Sermon on the Mount is to be taken literally? Well, maybe we can't take it literally. Well, the point is this: We have to take it literally, but that word "literal" needs some explanation. I remember seeing a sign once on the front of a notoriously liberal church that said, "We take the Bible seriously but not literally." Well, we take the Bible literally. And by that I mean we take it to mean precisely and literally what the author intended it to mean. You know, if Jan came home one day and I told her that a vacuum cleaner salesman had come to the door and he was trying to sell me something that I didn't need and I told her that I quickly concluded that this guy was full of baloney and I told him to hit the road, what did I mean? Literally did I mean that the man was filled with a manufactured meat product and I told him to go out

and slap the pavement? No. I mean, to understand me literally is to understand my intent in making those statements. I mean, it's to understand that I thought the salesman wasn't telling the truth, so I told him to leave. See, the key to understanding scripture literally is understanding what the author intended. For example, in *Matthew 5:29* Jesus says this, he says: *"If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body go into hell."* Now, is a literal interpretation of Jesus's words here a command to self-mutilate? I mean, is that what Jesus intended to convey? Well, the answer's no. I mean, there are people who have done just what Jesus said and you usually find them in mental hospitals. *1 Corinthians 6* says: *Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.* I could certainly argue that gouging out eyes and cutting off hands is not showing respect to the temple of the Holy Spirit. And so we ask so what was Jesus's intent with those words? Well, is it not to treat sin as the most desperately dangerous and gangrenous thing that there is? You see, the sermon on the mount is filled with statements that are not intended by the author Jesus to be taken

literally. Let me give you another. This is what Jesus said in *Matthew 5:39*. You've heard this many times. He says: "*But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on the your right cheek, turn the other to him also.*" So we have to ask ourselves is Jesus speaking literally or is he speaking figuratively? Again, we have to ask what is the intent of the author? I mean, is he describing an attitude or is he describing a posture? And again we say Jesus didn't intend these words to be taken literally. It's Martyn Lloyd-Jones who points out why, and he says this: Jesus himself suffered the indignity of being slapped in the face. You know, it happened right after he was arrested. The Gospel of John, the 18th chapter describes it, it says this: *The high priest then questioned Jesus about his disciples and his teaching. Jesus answered him, "I have spoken openly to the world. I have always taught in synagogues and in the temple, where all Jews come together. I have said nothing in secret. Why do you ask me? Ask those who have heard me what I said to them; they know what I said."* When he had said these things, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, "*Is that how you answer the high priest?*" Jesus answered him, "*If what I said is wrong, bear witness about the wrong; but if what I said is right, why do you strike me?*" Jesus gives a perfectly controlled, absolutely true answer, and he's certainly not resisting this evil person. But you have to notice what Jesus

didn't do. He didn't turn the other cheek. I mean, instead Jesus defended the integrity of the process of testimony and then he called them to account for violating it. You see, the point is, Jesus' intent was to say "turn the other cheek" is attitudinal. It's not literal. See, turning the other cheek is an attitude of the heart, it's not a position of the face. And again, it's critical that we perceive the intent of the author, in this case Jesus, and that we treat the intent and not the words literally. I mean, trying to pick the Sermon on the Mount apart, trying to isolate statements from the whole of the sermon essentially that's about attitude is asking for trouble. So we follow the old rule. The old rule is always remember a text without a context is usually a pretext for something.

The second principle is this, and that is that all of the Sermon on the Mount applies to all believers. It's not an a la carte menu where you get to pick what you want and ignore the rest. Like I said, there are lots of folks who love to quote from the Sermon on the Mount and they throw all kinds of political and sociological threads from the sermon all the while missing the point of what Jesus was getting at. I mean, he's describing the way Christians think, the way they act, the way they respond, and he's expanding on the power of the law to include not just the externals but the internal motives that drive us, and these attitudes he insists are

under the law as well. He says, if you thought it was breaking the law to commit adultery, well then Jesus, he's got news for you, it's breaking the law to even think about committing adultery. You know, if you thought it was against the law to murder your brother, Jesus wants you to know that simply calling him a fool is a gross violation that could send you to hell. I mean, the sermon is simply a summation from God himself of how insurmountably impossible it is to follow the law on your own power. And you know, as such, it's grossly unfair to apply its standards to unbelievers, but we see folks doing that all the time. It is amazing to me how secularized this sermon has become, particularly the beatitudes. I mean, in a sense they've been co-opted by our culture. You know, Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit." That's now come to mean the poor in general. And we're going to see this morning that that was not Jesus' intent at all. Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." Well, they've become whistle blowers and class action lawyers now. Jesus says, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Well, these are now Secretary of State Kerry and President Obama. I mean, just winning a Nobel Peace Prize does not make you what Jesus referred to as a peacemaker. That's not what the Sermon on the Mount is all about. You see, these are secularized present-day largely political expressions of the social gospel, something that suggests that the kingdom of God is here and now but it's some kind of political

social order, and that's what the sermon is all about. Well, to coin a phrase: That's baloney. And you can take that literally. The fact is, no natural man could even remotely begin to live the Sermon on the Mount on his own. If God is describing what a totally God-centered, supernaturally spirit-empowered kingdom citizen is and the amazing part is that God fully intends all believers to live all the kingdom life that he's describing but all under the power of his Holy Spirit.

So let me read to you the very first part. This is *Matthew 5*, this is 1 to 21. It says: *Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so*



they persecuted the prophets who were before you. You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire." That's only a quarter of the sermon but it's enough

to bury every single one of us already, you know, and if by some degree you thought you might have it in you to do what Jesus is preaching about here, just go down to verse 48 and tell me how you plan to accomplish what Jesus is demanding there, because this is what he says in *Matthew 5:48*, he says: "*You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" Is there anybody here who's willing to step up to the plate and be absolutely flawless? To be as flawless as God in heaven is flawless? If you think you can do that, your pride has already discounted you. But if you know that you can't, if you're certain that you can't, you've already passed the first prerequisite for understanding the Sermon on the Mount.

You see, the sermon opens with a defining statement that is the key to the entire sermon. It's not only the key to that, it is the key to all of the power that we need to accomplish all that Christ is trying to get us to accomplish. In fact, it's the key to the entire Christian life. Jesus opens the sermon by saying: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.*" I mean, a lot of folks have artfully edited out two critical words in that statement, and those two words are "in spirit." Jesus is not speaking about the physically poor here. He's speaking about the spiritually impoverished and he's telling them the kingdom is for you. I mean, there's a huge difference between poor and being poor

in spirit. Being poor in spirit knows no socioeconomic boundaries. I mean, it's a quality that every single kingdom citizen must have regardless his economic status. I mean, you can be dirt poor and completely miss being poor in spirit. Just consider the two thieves, the two men who were crucified on either side of Christ. You can certainly argue that they were socio economically at the very bottom, their status was as low as it can get. They were condemned criminals. The difference between the two is that one of them had poverty of spirit and the other did not. *Luke 23* says this, it says: *Then one of the criminals who were hanged blasphemed Him, saying, "If You are the Christ, save Yourself and us." But the other, answering, rebuked him, saying, "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds; but this Man has done nothing wrong." Then he said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when you come into Your kingdom."* See, the thief without the poverty of the spirit blasphemed Jesus and demanded his freedom. The thief who had the poverty of spirit knew that his condemnation was just and he only asked that Jesus would remember him. Verse 43: *And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."* So physical poverty is not the same as being poor in spirit. See, poor in spirit recognizes that before you -- before God you've got nothing. Blessed are those who realize that their spiritual checkbooks are overdrawn,

that they can never, never get their checkbooks even up to zero, that their only currency is grace. The primary focus of this beatitude is what I think of me spiritually. It's what I think of myself before God. I mean, am I rich, am I middle class, or am I poor in spirit? I mean, it's a measure of my opinion of my status in God's kingdom. And physical wealth or poverty is not the determining factor. The poor can be just as lacking in poverty of spirit as the wealthy. And the same applies to the wealthy.

I mean, consider Zacchaeus and the rich young ruler; two men who were extremely wealthy. Once again, one of them realized that he was poor in spirit and the other did not. Luke 19 describes this, it says: *He (speaking of Jesus) entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. Zacchaeus has an encounter with the living God who insists on joining him for lunch, and in the middle of that encounter scripture says this in verse 8, it says: Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."* You see, salvation came to Zacchaeus because, as Jesus described it, Zacchaeus, in spite of his wealth, he knew he was lost. I mean, his poverty of spirit

opened up to him the entire kingdom of God.

And we compare him to the rich young ruler. This is a man also of great wealth and of great morality. Well, he has a confrontation with Jesus Christ and it does not go well. Matthew 19 describes it, it says: *And behold, a man came up to him, saying, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" And he said to him, "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you would enter life, keep the commandments." And he said to him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, honor your father and mother, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." The young man said to him, "All these I have kept. What do I still lack?"* Jesus lays out six of the ten commandments, and the rich young ruler blindly states that he's kept all of these since he was a young man. You know, that statement alone captures what it means to have no idea of what it means to be poor in spirit. I mean, this fellow thought he had it all. I mean, the fact that he was immensely wealthy only served to keep him from realizing that he was missing the most vital part. In verse 21, it says: *Jesus said to him, "If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."* When the young man heard this he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. You

know, I'm reminded of this phrase. We repeat this phrase every communion service, it's by Dane Ortlund, he says this, he says: "In the kingdom of God, the one thing that qualifies you is knowing you don't qualify; and the one thing that disqualifies you is thinking that you do." You know, the rich young ruler, he thought that his record qualified him. He mistakenly thought that he had lived up to God's standard. But God's standard is absolute flawless perfection, and no one can live up to that. So Jesus simply applies that standard to the ruler's idea of generosity and sacrifice and to no one's surprise, he can't meet the standard. But instead of recognizing his poverty of spirit, he chooses to walk away. He just couldn't accept that his goodness wasn't good enough. You see, there are those who are poor in spirit who understand this and those who are not, they never will.

But you know, we evangelicals have a big problem in this area ourselves. We often confuse orthodoxy which is "right thinking" with righteousness itself. I mean, we're the ones who revere scripture, we study the word, we memorize passages, we speak Bible, and we simply assume that that makes us pleasing to God. But there was another group who did just that. You all know about them, Jesus referred to them as hypocrites and snakes and whitewashed tombs. These are the very folks who went after and accomplished Jesus's crucifixion. These were the Pharisees. You see, it's not

enough to study scripture to accumulate knowledge, because growing in knowledge of the Bible can actually make it harder for you to remain poor in spirit. I mean, unlike any other knowledge like physics or biology or history, the Bible is not neutral. I said this many times about studying scripture, if it doesn't make you gooder, it's going to make you badder. That's the way it works. If it doesn't make you poor in spirit, it's going to make you puffed up and arrogant. In fact it was J. I. Packer who said, "Knowledge of scripture is the most dangerous knowledge there is." I've known many evangelicals who knew an awful lot of Bible and yet they acted as if they'd never met the author. And I think that's tragic. You know, many folks think the name of the game is to accumulate information, absorb knowledge, and suddenly growth is going to become automatic. If so then, the more you study, the more Christ-like you should become, but often times we all know that's not the case. Remember, you know, most knowledgeable people of Jesus's day were the ones who said he had to die. So we ask how in the world did all of that knowledge go south? Well, it's just what it did, it went south, it never made the journey from the head to the heart. It is crucial, it is crucial to study the word of God. I mean, it gets into the heart first by entering through the eyes and the ears and then it gets into the brain, but the problem for many evangelicals is that's where it stops. You know, Paul said in *1 Corinthians 8:1*, he said: *We know that all of us possess*

*knowledge. This knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.* And so if my study of the scripture doesn't increase my sense of awe and wonder at God's grace and mercy on me, I mean, if it doesn't do that, then I'm studying scripture for all the wrong reasons. And if I think my Christian growth is a function of the books that I've read, the sermons that I've listened to, the programs that I've watched, then I'm seriously mistaken. See, the kingdom of God belongs to those who are poor in spirit, and the power to love in this kingdom comes only from brokenness, weakness, and helplessness. And we can see that, we can see that on the macro level, we can see it on the micro level. On the macro level all you have to do is to chart the movement of Christianity in history and you can see this. You know, someone once pointed out that Christianity is the only religion of all the world religions whose center has moved. You know, if you look at Buddhism, Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, they are all still located, their center is still located exactly in the place where they were found in. Not so with Christianity. Christianity has moved. Christianity is always on the move. I mean, originally it moved from Jerusalem, then it moved from Jerusalem to Rome, it moved from Rome to all of Europe, it moved from Europe to all of North America and now again it's moving and it's moving south. It's moving to South America, it's moving to Asia and Africa. So by the year 2050, 67 percent of all Christians in the world will be living in these countries. And



the reason why Christianity is always moving is always the same, and it has everything to do with poverty of spirit. See, wherever it goes, Christianity brings with it righteousness. Wherever it goes, it brings with it moral order. And it is those two qualities that transform the powerless into the powerful. I mean, just look at Europe and North America, two of the most powerful places on earth. But they weren't always that way. At one time they were poor in spirit and poor in flesh as well, but it was the gospel that made them strong, so strong that much of Europe and North America has now rejected that gospel. You see, the poverty of spirit is what opens up the kingdom of God. And the poverty of spirit that opened up that kingdom evaporated as these nations grew in strength and power and influence. That same poverty of spirit evaporated from the church as well. It began to resemble the Church of Laodicea from the book of Revelation which says in *Revelation 3:17: I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.* See, that's a church where power has taken root, and once it takes root, it drives out the key to the kingdom. The key to the kingdom is poverty of spirit. "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.*"

And when we talk about church on a macro level, the pattern seems very obvious, I mean, poor cultures get the gospel, then they get rich, then they reject the same gospel because they think they no

longer need it. And when they reach the point when they become intractably no longer poor in spirit, the Holy Spirit and the gospel just moves on. That's why Christianity is constantly on the move, and it's moved from Rome to Europe itself, from Europe to North America. Now the Spirit is moving as well from North America to South America to China to Africa, and incidentally, it's moving in places where persecution, disease, hardship, and strife make being poor in spirit almost inevitable. I mean, it's a pattern that repeats itself and it repeats itself almost endlessly. And it's not like God has never warned us. Listen to what God said to his own people in *Deuteronomy 6:10*, he said this: *And when the LORD your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you -- with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant -- and when you eat and are full, then take care lest you forgot the LORD, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.* You see, on a macro level, whole nations go from poor and weak to wealthy and strong because of the gospel. And in the process they learn how to forget the Lord and scorn that gospel. But here's the hard part. On a micro level we, too, are subject to the exact same pattern. You see, here is our dilemma. Our source of spiritual power is weakness. Now, Paul said, my strength is

made perfect in weakness. And in our weakness, we cry out to God for strength and he hears and he answers us, he sends us strength for our weakness until we get strong enough to say, "Guess what, God, I don't need you any more." We do precisely what God warned us not to do when he said, *"Take care lest you forget the LORD."* You see, from God's viewpoint, every culture that has received power has ultimately rejected the source of that power, and that is God himself. So why should he bless them? Again, let's make it personal. Why should he bless us? I mean, if my hunger and thirst makes me cry out to God and God's answer is to take away my hunger and thirst and my crying out to him ceases, well, shouldn't God refuse to answer me? But he does. Repeatedly. And so is it wrong to ask to not want strife and pain in your life if that threatens to cause us to cast off God and our need for God? Is that a bad thing? I mean, I don't think so, and I don't really think the scripture backs that up. 1 Timothy 2 says this, it says: *First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.*

Well, here's the question. How do we live a peaceable life without falling into the same pattern that steals our poverty of spirit? But I can tell you, no one is more threatened by this than we are.

I mean, we look around especially in light of the persecution we see all around us and we realize we are the richest, strongest, and most secure people who have ever lived in the history of mankind. We have no idea what hunger, weakness, and terror the rest of the world lives with every single day. God has blessed us so abundantly that as a church and as a nation, we can say, "Hey, we're rich. We've inquired wealth. We are in need of nothing." But Jesus told the Laodicean church in *Revelation 3:17*: *For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.* You know what the worst part of that statement is? The worst part of that statement are those two words that Jesus said: "not realizing." Jesus was trying to bless them with the truth, and it was a truth that they had forgotten, and it proved deadly. But here's the difference: we can choose to remember. You see, that description applies to us as well. You know, we ask the question are we wretched? Well, let me let Paul answer that in *Romans 7:18*, he says this: *For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner*

*being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin.*

Are we wretched? Yes, we're wretched. Are we pitiable? Well, *Matthew 9:36* says: *When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.* We go back to the sermon, and the crowds at the mountainside, they wore their sin, they wore their sickness externally. We have the means, we have the wealth, we have the ability to cover ours. That doesn't make us any less pitiable. We ask the question are we poor? Well, the question is poor in what? In *Luke 4:18* Jesus said: *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed."* Okay. There's our definition. Jesus is defining the poor four different ways. He says they're brokenhearted, he says they're captives, he says they're blinded, he says they're oppressed. Well, has sin ever left you feeling that way?

What about naked and blind? Well, Jesus combined those two qualities in one parable in *Luke 18:9*. This is what he said, he said: *Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men -- extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.'*

You see, one man left the temple clothed not in his own righteousness but in the righteousness that had only come from Christ, but the other one left not only naked but blind to his nakedness as well. We could easily construct a 21st century version of this Pharisee's prayer, "Oh, God, I thank you that I'm not like these pro-choice liberals. Oh, I never miss church. I watch my language, I even tithe off the top." You know, we read that text of the parable, and we hear these ego maniacal words of

the Pharisee and we say ourself, "That's not real. That's not the way people talk. That's not the way people act. No one would ever say something like that." But Jesus isn't talking about what the Pharisees said. He was talking about what the Pharisees thought.

Verse 11: *The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself.* See he prayed this prayer internally. You might never say those kind of things, but the question is have you ever thought them? Part of spiritual blindness that keeps us from the kingdom is words that are never spoken, is thoughts that are never put into words. It's the attitude that is living inside us. The tax collector had one huge advantage over the Pharisee. Tax collectors were hated Jewish turncoats who bled their fellow Jews for prophet and for Rome. So the tax collector didn't have to pretend that he was wretched, he didn't have to wonder if he was poor in spirit. He knew he was a thief, he knew he was a turncoat and that he was a cheat, but at least he wasn't blind. He was poor in spirit. And the kingdom belongs to those who are poor in spirit. Jesus said so. Jesus proclaimed the gospel by saying in *Luke 4:18*: "*He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind.*" You see, it's recovery of sight that a critical here. The poor in spirit are those who can see that they're naked. I mean, they know that there's nothing they have to offer to God but a plea. "*God, be merciful to me a sinner!*" Now that plea is the key that unlocks the door to the

kingdom. Some folks say, well, that's worm theology, that's groveling. After all, we're children of the king of kings. And that's true. I mean, we are no longer wretched but free from condemnation in Christ Jesus. We're no longer pitiful but compassionately cared for by the Good Shepherd. No longer poor, we delight in the richest of fare. No longer blind but seeing now what prophets and angels longed see. And no longer naked but clothed with Christ's righteousness. But here's the key. We didn't do it; Christ did. If you think you have any standing with God on your own, you've got to go back to the Sermon on the Mount. And if you ever thought someone was good for nothing, I mean, have you ever been angry with a brother? Have you ever had a lustful thought? Have you ever said anything more than "yes, yes" or "no, no?" Well, then you've fallen short of the standard. You can't pay the price. You are poor in spirit. The question is: Do you know it? You see, this is the standard that we're up against. God sums it up perfectly in verse 48 with those three words: "*Be ye perfect.*" Can you do that on your own? No, you can't. But God can. You see, at the cross was this great exchange, Christ's righteousness for my sin, and by faith I make his perfection my perfection. See, the poor in spirit are simply people who are willing to open up their spiritual eyes. They're open to the fact that their best is not nearly good enough, that our righteousness is as filthy rags before God. *Psalm 51* says this: *The sacrifices*



*of God are the broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise. See, a broken spirit and a contrite heart are our only response to our poverty of spirit. And the question is, do you buy that? Do you buy that internally? I mean, am I the captain of my soul? I mean, the answer to that is no, no, a thousand times no. I mean, if I am truly a child of God's kingdom before anything else, I realize I bring nothing. That's what being poor in spirit is. Nothing to thy throne I bring, simply to thy cross I cling. "Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God." Let's pray.*

*Father, I -- I thank you that Your Spirit has given us the gift of eyes that can see. I thank you that you've opened our eyes and our blindness can dissipate and so we can see our true spiritual status before you. I thank you, Lord, that we recognize that we don't measure up, that we are not able ever, ever on our own to be worthy of heaven but by your sacrifice on the cross, by your death, by faith in that sacrifice we, too, are numbered among those who are worthy of you. I praise you for that gift, in Jesus' name. Amen.*