



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

No Resumé Required

SERMON BY REV. JUNE BARROW ■ AUGUST 12, 2018

We've all written resumé's. It is best foot forward, make a good impression, and dazzle them if you can. The pressure is on: polish your presentation, figure out who you need to be in this setting to be successful. Some have yielded to the temptation to pad a resumé, sometimes with fictional credentials, and it lands them in big trouble. We all have felt the pressure. There's *imposter syndrome* where we feel like we are pretending to be someone we aren't. I felt that way on my first day of teaching high school English, standing in front of towering, intimidating teenagers. I had a credential and a license, but I felt like an imposter that day, pretending to be a confident, in-charge educator.

It happens in all the settings of our lives. A lovely woman had a husband and three sons, two of whom were teenagers. One day her husband told her that the company had a guest consultant in town and that he had volunteered their home to host a reception for him. She worked hard, ordering food, planning a menu, organizing it all. On the day of the event, the house was spotless, the refrigerator was full, the counters were loaded with trays of food. And every single thing had a note on it for those boys: "This is not for you!" "Don't eat this." "This is for the party." "Don't touch this."

All evening she moved from room to room, seeing that everyone was comfortable and had all they needed. It all went beautifully. Finally the last guest departed. As she walked toward her bedroom, she took a side step into the guest bathroom, and there, she saw it. Still pinned to the untouched guest towels was a note: "Touch these and you're dead!"

I remember my own moment. Many years ago, when I was a young woman, I planned to shop for a new car for the first time ever. I had read an article saying young women were easy pickings for car salesmen. So the next morning, as I dressed carefully, I made sure my assertive attitude was intact. Walking confidently into the dealership as a salesman approached, I swept the sunglasses from my unsmiling face and said in a flat tone, "I'm shopping for a car and I'd like to look at a Taurus." I looked him right in the eye. He looked back at me and said, "That's going to be difficult since this is an Oldsmobile dealership." I slid my sunglasses back on and replied, "Well then, never mind."

I have good news today. For the deepest relationship in your life you need not submit a resumé, polish your image, or create an impression. Just the opposite actually. Jesus talked about this repeatedly. It seemed too good to be true to the listeners of His day, and it's the same today. It was counter-intuitive then and still is. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus surprised His listeners.

It was early in His ministry. There would have been people who had heard Him before, some who had only heard of Him, some who just happened to be there, and some who were already His disciples. These were insiders and outsiders, all waiting to hear what advice He would give.

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountain-side and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them:

He said,

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

Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Matthew 5:1-12

That’s how Jesus began His great teaching. Here’s how He ended: “When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority, and not as their teachers of the law.” (Matthew 7:28-29)

What does it mean to be blessed?

In Numbers chapter 6, while Israel was still in the desert, the Lord instructed the priests to speak these words over the people: “The LORD bless you and keep you; the LORD make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up the light of his countenance upon you and give you peace.” Thus, said the Lord, they will put my name on the people and I will bless them.

This great blessing is about relationship. The Lord will see you, know you, keep you, show grace to you, grant peace to you, and seal your very identity by putting His own name on you. This is blessing.

The New Testament uses a form of the word *bless* more than 100 times, not one of which connects blessing to material prosperity. Instead, it says “blessed are you if your sins are forgiven” (Romans 4:7),

or “blessed are you if you hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28), or “blessed are you if you stand fast when difficult trials come” (James 1:12).

Sometimes, the blessing of God comes as beauty, comfort, prosperity, ease, health, security. But circumstances are no barrier to God’s presence and favor. Uncertainty experienced in the certainty of God’s presence, love, protection—this is blessing. You can be blessed when you lack something, or have lost something, when trials and difficulties surround you. You live blessed when these are experienced in the certainty of God’s presence, love, and protection, even when life is hard.

The Mountain and the Weather on the Mountain

It’s like this: there is a mountain, strong, immovable. And there is weather on the mountain. The sun shines, the rain comes, and sometimes an impossibly fierce storm rolls in. But the weather is the weather; it is not the mountain. Our circumstances are the weather and always, underneath it all, is the mountain that is God. Circumstances swirl and change but underneath them all is the firm reality of the almighty, altogether loving, eternally wise God. This is the great blessing of God. I am His and He is mine.

No Resumé Needed

This blessing is for everyone, and it’s a message Jesus repeated. God’s blessing is not earned; there is no resumé required. This was shocking to His listeners then; it’s counterintuitive to us now. Recall the story of Luke 18. Two men went to the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee, someone with a long list of spiritual credentials. He prayed, telling God that he was thankful he was not like that sinful man over there, but instead he recited his list of good deeds. The other man, despised by the community, in a profession known for its corruption, prayed only this: “Oh God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Jesus told them the second man, not the first, went home in right relationship with God.

The second man had no resumé to submit, and he knew it. Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Blessed are you when you know your own poverties and can face them. Blessed are you when you know what you’ve lost, what you lack, what you’ve done and what you have failed to do. That’s how Jesus began his great teaching: blessed are you when you know your own spiritual poverty.

“The first step to joy is a plea for help, an acknowledgement of moral destitution, an admission of inward paucity. Those who taste God’s presence have declared spiritual bankruptcy and are aware of their spiritual crisis. Their cupboards are bare. Their pockets are empty. Their options are gone. They have long since stopped demanding justice; they are pleading for mercy.” (Max Lucado) The apostle Paul said, “My power shows up best in weak people.”

All of your poverties make an opening for God’s grace and supply. What you didn’t get that you truly needed, as a child or as a wife or husband or worker or friend, that’s a poverty. Things you know you should have done but didn’t do, that’s a poverty. Your own failings and the ways others have failed you, all those poverties are an opening for God, the Lord who is eternal, almighty, perfect in holiness, altogether wise, and fully in control.

Come with Empty Hands

As in the lyrics from the classic hymn, *Rock of Ages*, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.” Every one of us comes to His table with empty hands. The communion meal will never be a potluck or a pitch-in. We have nothing to offer, nothing to bring. We come with empty hands to receive the grace of God given to us in the gift of Jesus. His life, teaching, blessing, healing, suffering and dying, that perfect life lived in obedience to the Father’s eternal plan, is our credential, our resumé. The Father’s stamp of approval on the work of Jesus. Christ is our credential. His resumé is the only one we need to offer, the only one we can offer.

Awareness of our spiritual poverty often comes at the *beginning* of our spiritual journey. Remember the prodigal son who wasted all his

inheritance: he began to be in want ... then he came to himself. Remember Chuck Colson, the White House aide to President Nixon. He was arrested, convicted, sentenced, imprisoned. He met himself and then he met the Lord. Their low points made their own spiritual poverty absolutely clear to themselves. There God met them.

When my husband Al and I visit in Indiana, we go to a small storefront church with a start-up congregation and a dynamic young pastor whom we have come to love and respect. That young man came to know the Lord during his second stretch in prison because of drugs. His own foolish actions brought him to a very low place of many poverties and there the Lord met him.

But sometimes the awareness of being poor in spirit happens right in the middle of our long walk with the Lord. Think of the prophet Elijah. No character in the Bible was bolder or more faithful than Elijah. This great, obedient, risk-taking prophet, in the middle of his life, faced a crisis of exhaustion. It came just after a great victory. There had been a contest, a showdown on a mountaintop, with the prophets of the terrible pagan god, Baal, pitted against this lone prophet of the true God. God gave a great victory that day and the crowds there knew who was truly God. Elijah was brave, obedient, and gloriously successful that day. I don't know what reaction he expected, but the Bible tells us the reaction he received. He infuriated the pagan Queen Jezebel and she called for his death within 24 hours.

The bold, faithful prophet simply became too exhausted. He felt so depressed, so discouraged, so weak, so alone and so unable to face the future, that he isolated himself, went alone into the desert and told God that he wanted to die. That is discouraged. What was God's reply? Did God correct him? Rebuke him? Disapprove of him? Oh no. The Lord sent an angel—twice—with a supply of food and with these messages: eat; rest; the journey is too much for you; there is more for you ahead.

Why does the journey include acknowledging our own spiritual poverty? Because pride is a prison. Pride blinds us to our own blessings

and to the works of God. Pride hardens our hearts. When our past sins and failings are within our sight, if we do not turn to God's mercy, we must either self-justify, excuse, defend, compare and say we are no worse than others, or refuse to allow the sorrow to come, whereby we harden our hearts. In a world without God that is how it is.

The Progression in the Beatitudes

There is a progression in the beatitudes we read today. You are blessed when you know your own poverties and mourn over them, over how you were sinned against and how you have sinned against God and others. That creates an opening and you become teachable, which is what meekness means. And then you begin to desire what is truly right and truly good. You begin to hunger and thirst for it. Have you ever heard someone say, "I don't care what happens to me; I just want to do the right thing." That is hungering and thirsting after righteousness. And then you become more merciful to others, your priorities become clearer, you become more peaceable, and you may even find yourself criticized or persecuted because of it. This is the progression of the blessings of the beatitudes. And it begins with our own poverties in front of us. Blessed are the poor in spirit.

For his anger lasts only a moment,
but his favor lasts a lifetime!
Weeping may last through the night,
but joy comes with the morning.
Hear me, Lord, and have mercy on me.
Help me, O LORD.
You have turned my mourning into joyful dancing.
You have taken away my clothes of mourning
and clothed me with joy,
That I might sing praises to you and not be silent.
O LORD my God, I will give you thanks forever!

Psalm 30:5, 10-12

Psalm 34:18 says: "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted. He saves those who are crushed in spirit."

The Great Blessing of God

Do you remember where you were in 1979? I do, because that's the year I became engaged to be married. I know just where I was that year. But something was occurring in Jerusalem that year. A group of archaeologists on a dig found a small ancient disc. They discovered it was silver and nearly 3,000 years old. As they cleaned it up, they uncovered engraved letters. They soon found exactly what it said. Three thousand years ago, someone hired a craftsman to create a silver amulet with these words engraved on it: "The LORD bless you and keep you. The LORD make his face to shine on you. The LORD lift up the light of his countenance upon you and give you peace."

So, blessed are you if you know your own poverties and need. Blessed are you if your marriage feels harder than your friends'. Blessed are you if your heart is breaking over a family member. Blessed are you if your finances have not behaved according to plan. Blessed are you if you have had a hard diagnosis in your family. Blessed are you because you belong to the eternal, almighty, sovereign, altogether wise and good God, who has placed His name on you. And *nothing* will separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. ■