

Well, good morning. Alan mentioned we're starting a new series this week on the Beatitudes, the blessed life. And to start, I want to do a little history lesson. Now, I asked this question earlier. I'm looking around the room right now, and we've got a good percentage of people under the age of 30.

So you were not around when this happened. But how many of us, I won't say older, but we know that we actually are. Remember living through what was termed the cold war. Anyone remember that time period? We were living in Germany in the mid eighties, and I remember we traveling all over the place.

But there was a certain point when you're traveling in Germany that you would start to see signs that would say, warning, you're getting close to. Anyone know what we were getting close to? The border. So the border was the border between West Germany, where we lived, and East Germany, which was a whole different thing over on that side. The war ended, and the country of Germany was divided into four separate sections.

Anyone want to call them out for me? No. The US had a portion. The Allies had a portion, the traditional allies, us, Great Britain and France. And then there was the fourth section, which was also a world war two ally, but we didn't consider them an ally much longer.

Russians. Exactly. So two different systems of governance became equated with Germany. There was on one side, the west side. There was the sort of capitalism on the east side.

They sort of continued the socialism that Hitler began, the national socialism that he began sort of continued in a different sort of twisted. But what ended up happening then is in the east side in this new system of governments, or in this old system of governments, they would look across the west and go, oh, I see lots more opportunities over there. And so for a long time, that border was wide open, and young professionals, doctors, even farmers, would leave East Germany and move to West Germany, called the brain drain. Now, we use that term quite a bit now, but that was sort of the first time it was used. So the East Germans had a problem.

What are we going to do? We're losing all our best people. The people who are going to make this country succeed are moving to the west. So they built a wall. Almost overnight, they put up a wall separating one part of Berlin with another part of Berlin.

Now, it's not just a wall. What ended up happening is over time, this whole thing became a system of security, not to keep people out, but to keep people in three layers of barriers with guard towers and guns and landmines and attack dogs designed to keep people in a prison. Now, what's amazing to me is that that wall stood for less time than.

It's not stood at this point in time. It stood for about 30 years.

That was. That was it. In 1989, in a very boring press conference sponsored by the East Germans, an official misread a press release about changes in travel requirements. It was boring. They tacked it on at the very end because it.

It was not even a big deal, but he misread it, misunderstood it. And within hours, television and radio stations were letting the East Germans know that the borders were now effectively open. And within a very short time, those gates were flooded with thousands of East Germans wanting to be let through, and young guards, overwhelmed by the sheer numbers of people, simply put down their guns and opened the gates. Now, maybe you remember this visual here. I remember seeing that going, this is unbelievable, a miracle of the 20th century.

Anyone felt that with me as well. If you lived through this, that was an incredible moment. I remember seeing people, and again, maybe because we lived in Germany, I was more attached to this moment. But I remember seeing people weeping as they were reunited with family and friends they hadn't seen for 30 years. Now, within a year, east and West Germany were on the way to fully reuniting as one country, reuniting their currency, reuniting their government, reuniting their infrastructure.

It was a lot of money, a lot of effort, and it was a lot of stresses in the middle of that. And you would think that given the differences between the two, people would have just embraced this new freedom with open arms. But in fact, what happened was this. Germans who grew up on the east side and all of a sudden were dealing with the freedoms and the liberties associated with the west. The culture, the knowledge base, languages and terms that the west was familiar with, but the east simply had never heard before.

Differences between sort of a collective mindset and an individual mindset, collective responsibility, individual responsibility, differences in the way government systems were navigated, all proved to be very, very challenging for east Germans, more so than I think anyone assumed. And many of them moved back to the east, to their small towns, where they could live with some semblance of the familiar. Now, why do I begin a sermon on the beatitudes with a history lesson on the Berlin Wall? Here's why. Because today we're going to begin a new series around this very famous talk that Jesus gave his followers.

And in this new talk, Jesus describes a new country, a new place, a new place to exist in with new rules, new ways of being governed, a completely different sort of spiritual economy that's going on there, a different way of living and a different way of thinking. And it's such a different mindset that many christians, even many christians,

rather than fully embracing this new Jesus way, try to live somewhere straddled between the two.

Jesus will call us as true disciples to fully cast off the old life and embrace this new, blessed life. Turn to Matthew, chapter five, and we're going to jump in this morning. Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word which instructs us, which brings light and life to our soul. Holy Spirit, we pray that you would do the work of interpreting, you would do the work of challenging and taking these words that I'm going to say and bringing life to them, life that it only comes from you. And plant these words, Jesus own words, deep in our hearts, so that we can fully live in this new country that he's calling us to live in.

I pray this in Jesus name. Amen. Jesus began his ministry in this little area of Israel called Galilee, and he immediately began to attract a lot of attention. Just a few verses up in Matthew, we're told that large crowds of people are showing up, blind, the crippled, the demon possessed. Everywhere Jesus goes, he is surrounded by people wanting a piece of him.

So Matthew tells us that he pulls his disciples aside at some point, and at this point in time, it's officially Peter, Andrew, James and John. He's not fully built his whole cadre yet. And whoever else is hanging about, we don't really know. But people who are following Jesus closely, he pulls them aside from the bigger crowd and he goes up, it sounds like, to a higher elevation. He climbs a mountain and he begins to teach them.

And here in Matthew chapter five is what he teaches them. Now let's begin at verse one. Now, when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him and he began to teach them. And he said, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Now, we are so familiar with these words that they may not fully resonate with us today, but these words lay the foundation for everything that will come after this talk. I believe, I believe this verse establishes sort of the baseline if you're going to live in this new country, the kingdom of heaven, he calls it this new country. Then it begins right here with this idea of being poor in spirit. Now, there's other words here. The word blessed, this is sort of the title of our series.

Blessed has a variety of meanings. You can research this if you want some translated as happy. Maybe your versions of the Bible do say happy, but it's more than happy. Most theologians would agree, some translated as fortunate, but it's much more than most people would agree. For me, blessed means simply living in this place where you are experiencing the favor of God.

Now, what that doesn't mean necessarily is that you have the beautiful wife and the obedient children, the perfect family. That is a blessing. But that's not necessarily what Jesus is talking about when he talks about the blessed life. It doesn't mean that you're driving the latest model of truck. You're not living in the biggest, most beautiful house.

Those are all blessings as well. But I don't think that's what Jesus is talking about. It's not even in the sense that you feel pretty good about yourself and your life and what's going on around you. Although mental health is certainly a blessing. Those are all wonderful blessings.

But this is not exactly what Jesus is talking about when he's talking about the blessed life. All of those things are sort of me centered, my family, my life, my well being. When Jesus uses the term, he's coming from a different direction than us. We are here, but Jesus says, you are blessed, meaning that God has decreed something about you irrespective of your life situation. For Jesus, this blessed life centers around our relationship and God's relationship with us, our relationship with God and God's relationship with us.

And that relationship. That blessing, I believe, exists in both the state of mind and the state of our hearts that he calls being poor in spirit. It's a very odd term, isn't it? But here's what I think Jesus means when I'm processing through this. Jesus says, you are blessed when you are in a place where you recognize you need God.

Someone said a place where you recognize your own need, where you recognize your own poverty, your own spiritual poverty. So you're in a place where you recognize that you need God. That's a good place to be. You're blessed today if you're in a place where you realize, I need God, and you're blessed if you're in a place where you are willing to let God take control today, that's a good place to be. If that's you this morning, you are blessed as well.

But it doesn't stop there, because I believe when Jesus says, poor in spirit, this is an ongoing thing. You are in a place where you are willing not just for God to lead you the next step, but God to lead all your steps. That is this idea of poor in spirit, this idea that we bring nothing and Jesus provides everything. Oh, how good, how good it is oh, how sweet, how sweet it is to trust in you, Jesus. People who are poor in spirit are those who recognize they are totally dependent on God's grace.

And Jesus tells a very famous story about this. You'll recognize this almost immediately. It's in the book of Luke, the Gospel of Luke, and it's in chapter 15. It begins in verse eleven. Jesus continued, there was a man who had two sons.

You know where I'm going with this, don't you? So the younger son decides that he's ready to do life on his own. And so he goes to his father and says, dad, you're getting really old and up there, you're probably not long for this life, so why don't you go ahead and sort of divide all of your holdings and give me my share. The dad, for whatever reason, decides to do this. He says, I love my son.

This is a request he has made. I'm going to do this for him. So the son takes his wealth and he blows it all. The scriptures say he parties hard, he wastes all his money, and he wastes himself living, quote unquote, the good life. And one morning, he wakes up in a bed that's not his own, and he's trying to get out quietly.

He calls an uber, and he realizes that his black card is declined. He's got nothing. It's all gone. He has nothing to show for all the money that he spent. So now with his money gone, his friends quickly follow suit.

His money is gone. His friend's gone. His health is gone. He's a wasted life. The good times are over, and he's taking out trash.

One day into the alley, the back of the bar that he's found a job being a bouncer for. And he's looking in that dumpster at the food he's throwing away. And he reaches in and he grabs a half eaten hamburger, and he pulls it to his face, and he realizes something. He says, what have I become?

And he comes to his senses. Verse 17 says, when he came to his senses, he said, how many of my father's hired servants have food to spare? And here I am starving to death. I'll set out and go back to my father and say to him, father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I'm no longer worthy to be called your son.

Make me like one of your hired servants. So he got up and went to his father. What happens?

This guy realizes that he is left with nothing to offer. But he knows his dad. His dad just might take him back. So he goes back. And his father, this is the most remarkable thing.

His father, despite the way his son disrespected and dishonored him, runs to meet him and welcomes him back into the family fold. And then in a few hours, this son finds himself seated at this beautiful table surrounded by people who love him and care for him. There's an amazing meal. He has eaten all he can. He's trying to answer questions.

People are being polite to him and asking him non anxiety inducing questions. And he's just taking it all in. And his dad's there. And his dad's so happy to have him there. And I don't think this guy can help but be aware that if it wasn't for a few days earlier when he was

standing at that dumpster with that moldy hamburger in his hand, if he had not had the humility and spirit inspired courage to truthfully look at how needy he was, he would not be here at the table.

It takes courage to recognize that the only thing good in our lives ever and always have centered around our relationship with God.

That attitude, that realization, that understanding, I believe, is the bulk and the thrust of this idea of what it means to be poor in spirit, where we recognize that the relationship with God, with our good and gracious Abba father, is more important than any gift, wealth or honor that may come to us in life. Now, some of you may be out there, and when you hear this story, you go, I don't know. That doesn't sound like a great life to me. Now he's totally dependent on his old man to take care of everything. It sounds pretty demeaning.

Like, wouldn't you hate to be in the place where you're totally needy on someone else and totally dependent on someone else? And I would say, yes, if you're still living in the old country, that is demeaning. In the old country, the blessed guy is the one who's self reliant and self sufficient. By golly, he worked hard. He saved his money.

He doesn't need handouts. He doesn't need charity. He doesn't need food stamps. He makes his own way in the world, and he attains success by pulling up himself by his own bootstraps. No weaknesses, no wimps allowed.

And I would tell you that there is a guy in this story that resembles that description quite a bit. Those of you who know the story, know who I'm talking about, and Jesus doesn't say, that's a bad life. He doesn't say that. But he doesn't say that it's the blessed life. And the blessed life is what Jesus wants to bring us into.

The blessed life is when we can open our hands and realize that they are empty. There's an old hymn, rock of ages, that goes like this. Nothing in my hands I bring only to the cross I sing. You may know this one better. All I am and ever hope to be I owe it all to thee, to God be the glory.

Do you know that one? It's a good song. All I am and ever hope to be, I owe it all to thee. And the one who realizes that Jesus says is blessed, blessed because to be here in that mental space is to already be living in the kingdom of heaven. Yours.

It's the kingdom of heaven, he says. Now, what is this kingdom he's talking about with Jesus? The kingdom of heaven always exists in both the here and the after. The here and the here after. So we're pretty much familiar with the after.

That's the place where the streets are paved with golden the pearly gates and all of that. But there's also the here kingdom. And the here kingdom doesn't seem to have fixed boundaries. It doesn't have hard borders. It doesn't have security gates.

According to Jesus, when you talk, when he talks about the kingdom of heaven, he says it like this. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. He says the kingdom of heaven is in you. He says the kingdom has come near or come upon you. When he talks about the kingdom of heaven, he says it can be given to you, but it can also be hidden from you, and you have to search for it, like a valuable pearl or treasure or coin or a seed that's planted, and you have to be patient and wait for it to grow and bear fruit.

The kingdom, this country that he's inviting us to, is different than the country we came from. Mark, when he talks about the kingdom of heaven, lays it out like this in Mark 114 15. Again, the kingdom is where we live with this awareness of our need for God. And Mark 114 says this, Jesus crying out, says, the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.

What is the gospel? The gospel that good news from Jesus is that we have a father who is desperate to have his relationship with us restored. No matter which son you are, he wants to be in good relationship with you, in right relationship with you. That's the first aspect of the kingdom that we live in this place where we are aware of how much we need our father. And the kingdom is where we follow Jesus.

Then so Jesus continues in Mark one, where he invites people to follow him. He says, follow me, and I will make you fishers of men. And immediately they left their nets and followed him. So this aspect of the kingdom is where not only are we willing to say, I need you, Jesus, but I am willing to take the first step in following you. I'll lay down what I'm currently working on, my little projects, my plans, my hopes and my dreams.

I'm gonna lay those aside, and I'm gonna go, okay, I don't know where you're gonna take me, but I'm willing to take the first step. And then the last thing is this where we recognize that from here into eternity, Jesus is the final word on everything. Everything. Mark 121 28 says that those who heard Jesus were amazed, so that they questioned among themselves, saying, what is this? A new teaching with authority?

In the sermon on the mount, we will tell. We'll hear Jesus say time and time and time and time again. You know that it was written. But I say to you, you know what you learned in the old country, but I'm telling you, a new rule and reign and authority is present. It's me.

It's Jesus. So Jesus is going to say things to us as we walk into this new country, as we begin to live in this new place that we're going to disagree with. Have you ever heard Jesus say something to you that you disagreed with? I have. He's told me lots of stuff.

I go, I don't. I don't think you. You know what you're talking about, Jesus. You need to walk in my shoes a little bit, Jesus. And I'll tell you, poor in spirit is, first of all, recognizing that Jesus knows our shoes better than we do, Jesus is going to say something you don't agree with.

But living in the kingdom means that you commit to following Jesus over the old way of thinking.

That means that the humble person, the poor in spirit, is much better able to experience and thrive in the fullness and freedom of this new country. Matthew says it this way as well. Matthew 18, Jesus tells his followers, truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. For those of us who find becoming like children a little bit unsettling and unnerving, we don't know what that's like.

It's been a long time since we've been children. And again, it goes against everything we know about how life should be. Where we become adults, we take care of ourselves, we manage our stuff. To become like children is like, uh, what the new country, the kingdom of heaven, can feel like a very foreign place. Frederick Buechner said it this way.

The world says, mind your own business. And Jesus says, there is no such thing as your own business. The world says, follow the wisest course and be a success. And Jesus says, follow me and be crucified. The world says, drive carefully.

The life you save may be your own. And Jesus says, whoever would save his life will end up losing it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. The rules in the new country are different than the old country. Yeah. And it can be very disorienting.

Very disorienting. Angela Merkel, former prime minister of Germany, reunited Germany, was seven years old when she saw that wall being built between her and freedom. She grew up in East Germany. She later became the first former east German to be elected as chancellor of Germany. And she said this, she goes, after the reunification, there was a certain sense of foreignness, because daily life and the former east German states was completely turned inside out.

Everything from the shops to the bureaucracy to the working world, it changed.

When Jesus invites us into this new kingdom, this new country, and into this new freedom, it can feel very, very strange to those of us who have only ever lived with our own self sufficiency.

Perhaps that's why still today, Christians try to straddle. I'm going to work really hard to do exactly what God wants me to do, and he's going to be so proud of me. And also nothing in my hands. I bring only to the cross. I cling.

And again, we have a sense that we should be doing both, don't we? But Jesus says, that's a hard place to live. I'm inviting you into the kingdom where you are poor in spirit, and you recognize I am totally dependent upon God for everything.

There's a certain freedom that's found in admitting that you got nothing, that you are poor, that you have nothing to offer.

It can be scary. But in the new kingdom that Jesus calls us into when we say, I got nothing, Jesus says, and now you have everything. The kingdom of heaven is yours. Welcome to the blessed life. We're going to take communion here in just a moment.

I love this illustration of the wall and the division between the two countries, because what Jesus says in Ephesians really resonates with me now. Again, this verse is talking about the borders and boundaries between the Jewish and Gentile world. But I love this because it also applies to the old world and the new world that Jesus has brought us into. And he says this, he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility. And Jesus says, listen, you can live in the here and also experience the kingdom.

You can live in the right now. You can drive on asphalt streets and barbed wire fences and corn and alfalfa out there. You can live right here in that here and also experience what will be the after, the true embodiment, the true fulfillment of the kingdom. And he allows us. And this is made possible because Jesus has broken a through.

He has taken walls down, he has opened up the gates. He's disarmed the enemy, and he's provided safe passage for those of us who want to leave the old world and walk into the kingdom. So today, as we share in our time of communion, we need to remind ourselves, I don't know what you've come in with, what kind of attitude you've come in with, but as you take communion this morning, I want us to remind ourselves that we bring nothing to this table. This meal has been prepared for us. We bring nothing to this table.

You say, I've really had a rough week. I've not done what I need to do, and I feel really bad about it, and I know I've really messed up. And Jesus says, yeah, of course you have. Of course you have. But

here's the deal.

This table is not about what you have done. It's about what I have done. And I have provided a way for you to sit at my table and enjoy this new country in my presence. You just have to admit that you bring nothing. You are poor in spirit.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that our citizenship is secured not by the fact that we bring a lot of skills, our education, our resources. Our citizenship in this new kingdom is not based on anything that we bring, but it's based purely on what you have done. And so as we pull up to this table, as we take the cup and we take the bread, we give thanks for your grace and your grace alone.

We want to be poor in spirit, because when we recognize that we have nothing, that we bring nothing, then we also begin to experience your provision in each and every aspect of our lives. We give thanks for that in Jesus name. Amen.

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