FIRST THINGS FIRST Sermon for January 28

* [Micah 6:1-8](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=16#hebrew_reading)  •
* [Psalm 15](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=16#psalm_reading)  •
* [1 Corinthians 1:18-31](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=16#epistle_reading)  •
* [Matthew 5:1-12](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=16#gospel_reading)

The Gospel of Matthew is sometimes referred to as the 'teaching' gospel, because even more so than the other gospel writers, Matthew is concerned with giving the reader an understanding of what Christ taught, what Christ taught about the nature of the kingdom of God, about the nature of those who can regard themselves as citizens of that kingdom, and about how to lead a Christian life in the world.

What we call the Sermon on the Mount occupies chapters 5-7 of Matthew's gospel, with the first four chapters being basically introductory materials. So it's with the Sermon on the Mount that Matthew really begins his account of the teaching portion of Christ's ministry. And it was probably never delivered as a single sermon on a particular occasion. Much more likely, it represents a sort of distillation of what his disciples learned from Christ during the course of the three and a half years they spent with him as his students, and the rest of the Gospel of Matthew is more or less a fleshing out of the material presented here.

So if we read the Sermon on the Mount as a distillation or summary of what Christ taught about living the Christian life, then we are perhaps even more forcibly invited to pay attention to what comes at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. And what we find at the very beginning is our reading for this morning, the so-called Beatitudes.

So let's read that section together now: Matthew 5:1-12

I'd like to draw our attention this morning to something very fundamental. Remembering that what we are reading here is the essence of what Christ taught about the nature of Christian life in the world, what we must surely notice is that every one of the Beatitudes, at the very beginning of that teaching, concerns character, not behavior. Christ talks exclusively, not about how to act in the world, but about how to **be** in the world.

And the reason I think it's important to draw attention to that is because it's a vital application of what is perhaps the most fundamental practical principal underlying Christ's message. To put it in its briefest and simplest form, here's the principle: First things first.

Jesus asserts this principle in many places and in many ways.

Just to stay in the Sermon on the Mount itself, in chapter six, he requires us to remove the obstruction to our own vision before we concern ourselves with repairing the vision of others. This is an illustration from anatomy but of course it's meant to inform us about the priority that must be followed in the spiritual world, if we are to be effective guides or physicians for others. Advice and judgment, regardless of how good they might be, gain their effectiveness from the quality of their source. First things first.

In chapter seven, he reminds us that "a healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a diseased tree cannot bear good fruit.” Christ is making the same point, using different imagery. It is the condition of the tree that must be tended to first, and the fruit will then take care of itself.

And at the very end of the sermon, he reminds us of the most fundamental rule of construction: build a solid foundation. Whatever else you're planning on doing, build a solid foundation. No matter how beautiful a house you build on top, unless the foundation is solid, it will all come to nothing. First things first in the Christian life. That's the rule. There are no exceptions.

So to return to the Beatitudes, when we notice that they are all about ingredients of character, we therefore have Christ's own assurance that this is what's fundamental to the Christian life, that it is the first thing that must be tended to, that without it, all one's actions and accomplishments, however grand and beautiful they might be, and however much applause and reward they may receive from the world, are, from God's point of view, by the standards of eternal reality, as fleeting as a dream.

But having come this far, let's narrow our focus even more. The emphasis on character occupies the whole list of beatitudes, and that list comes at the very beginning of the Sermon on the Mount. But what comes at the very beginning of the list? "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for of them is the Kingdom of Heaven."

As Christian character is fundamental to the Christian life, so poverty of spirit is fundamental to the Christian character. All the other elements of character Christ mentions - meekness, the passion for righteousness, the ability to bring peace - somehow gain their validity and stability only insofar as they are based upon it, upon what Christ calls the poverty of one's spirit.

So of course this makes us want to ask, what is this poverty of Spirit that Christ teaches is so fundamental to the Christian character, and therefore to the Christian life?

This is clearly an important question, but it is not the question we're going to dwell on this morning. For this morning, we will let it suffice to say that, whatever else it is, it is clearly the opposite of or the antidote to, human pride. It is our Great Physician's medicine for the spiritual sickness of pride, the pride which is both the cause and the fruit of our individual separations from God.

We'll leave it at that for now, because this morning, what we'll focus on is, not the nature of the poorness of spirit Christ's recommends to us, but of how He teaches we may acquire it.

The Sermon on the Mount can most profitably be read as telling us, first, what the Christian character looks like, what it is, and then giving us giving us instruction on how to conform ourselves to it.

So what we’re going to do is look at the Sermon on the Mount to see what practical suggestions we can find in it for how to direct our own characters in the direction that Christ himself teaches us is the sort of character the Kingdom of heaven will best suit.

I’ll emphasize at the outset that these are only a **couple** suggestions, certainly not an exhaustive list, and only **suggestions**, ideas for us to think about and see how they might work in our own lives. I’m sure that is the spirit in which Christ offers them.

So if we approach the Sermon on the Mount with this question in mind, one thing that strikes us, I would think, is the extraordinary importance it places on doing things in secret. "Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people..." he says (6:1) Instead "...when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret." (3-4) When you pray "...go into your room, close the door..."(6). "...when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, that your fasting may not be seen by others but by your Father who is in secret."

When Christ is giving us these examples, clearly he is showing us practical ways of nurturing this 'poverty of spirit' that lies at the foundation of everything else. Whatever exactly this poverty of spirit is, it is an attitude that deflects rather than invites the attention and admiration of others, and especially that deflects rather than invites the flattering attention of others towards our own moral qualities. The pride we must discourage most vigorously in ourselves is the pride of moral self-esteem.

So here are a couple practical suggestions, both of them based on the illustrations Christ offers us, for how to resist that temptation, and how to begin the laborious and never-ending process of conforming our own character to that of Christ, to whom these things are not even temptations.

Here are my two suggestions. And I’ll add that I’ve tried them all myself and always failed. But that’s okay, because the Christian life is analog, not digital; it’s a life of gradual evolution, not flipping a switch off or on.

The first suggestion is based on Christ’s illustration of not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing.

The suggestion is that during the coming week, we try to do three good deeds, things we would not otherwise have done, and not tell anyone, not ever. Let's keep them completely between ourselves and God. If the good deeds involve other people, even they must not know about them.

That last point is especially important, and is what I think Christ is emphasizing when he uses the fanciful illustration of not letting one hand know what the other is doing. How often is generosity or kindness towards others motivated at least to some degree by the admiration we expect to get from others, or at least the appreciation we expect from the recipient. And I don’t mean to be critical of that, only to say that it doesn’t conform to the perfect poverty of spirit that Christ sets before us as an ideal towards which we are encouraged to aspire.

So the practical suggestion as to how to begin that evolution in our character towards that ideal is : let’s keep our good deeds, completely and literally, between ourselves and God. At least three of them this week.

The second suggestion arises out of reflection on Christ’s illustration of not announcing it to the world when you’re on your way to church to pray. This is obviously a warning against boasting, so my suggestion is that we try to get through one day without boasting. That sounds easy, but in fact, it may be the most difficult thing of all in the Christian life.

Of course it will mean not openly patting oneself on the back, but that’s a fairly easy thing for most of us to do if our name isn’t Trump or Obama or Muhammed Ali: I am the greatest of all time! But the difficult part is to be aware of and avoid the myriad of ways we – so to say – surreptitiously pat ourselves on the back.

When we boast about our friends, how smart and successful they are, aren’t we often, at least in part, commending ourselves, that such remarkable people would want to hang out with us? And similarly when we boast about our family, or our country, or our team?

And don’t we often disguise our boasting with statements like: “I’m generous to a fault,” or, “I’m so disappointed in myself: I only made it to the gym twice this week!.” So-called humble bragging?

And isn’t Facebook a terrible temptation to boast to the world how happy we are, how successful we are, how smart we are, under the guise of simply sharing with our friends?

Most common and perhaps most subtle of all, when we criticize or judge others, doesn’t that almost necessarily come with a tacit boast about oneself, viz, that we are better than they are, in that regard, whatever it is? This is the really difficult one, and it’s difficulty is why Christ, I think, warns so many times and in so many different ways about the dangers of judging others. He was acutely aware that criticizing and judging others is, at its heart, the most tempting and most insidious form of self-pride.

So there are the two practical suggestions for beginning to exercise the muscle of ‘poverty of spirit.” Doing three good deeds within the week, doing them in utter secrecy, even from their recipient, and determining never, ever to tell anyone about them. That’s number one. And number two? Don’t boast, in any way, fashion, or form, about anything, for one day. I’d wager most won’t make through the whole way. I myself often fail before I get out of bed.

And so, Gracious Lord, because of the great and often irresistible human pleasure of self-congratulation, let this be our prayer for this morning’s message, that you help us in our practical attempts to develop our resistance to that temptation. We ask that you be with us and grant us the discernment to see through our own hypocrisy, and that you strengthen us in our earthly attempt to emulate and to manifest the heavenly character of your beloved Son, in whose name we pray.