

# KINGDOM MANIFESTO

## The Sermon on the Mount



### Part 2: 'Who do you think you are?'

17<sup>th</sup> January 2010

Someone once said: *'An optimist is the person who believes this is the best possible world, and a pessimist is the person who is afraid the optimist is right!'* The point is that so often our reactions reveal more about the sort of people we are, than what is actually out there. So, different people can view the same situation or respond to the same person in entirely different ways.

Every so often I hear someone say they feel I am unapproachable. They hesitate to bring their concerns or complaints to me directly. I really struggle with that because I try so hard to be accessible and available and just 'normal'! But so often there is a difference between the way people see us and the way we see ourselves. So, how do you see yourself? That calm, confident, warm and approachable person that we want other people to think we are – or perhaps the rather anxious, insecure, jealous and irritable person we realise we often are?

Now whether we are looking at the world or looking at ourselves, problems arise when our view of ourselves does not square with what's actually there. Reality has the habit of having the last word. So many of life's crises and tragedies stem from the way we see ourselves, because that determines the way we behave. The way, for example, Western man sees himself determines the way he uses the earth's resources, the way he treats the developing world and the way he treats nature.

Now bring it down to the individual level, and you see again that the crises people often go through in life – and not just the obvious ones like adolescence – but also later in life – flow from the way we see ourselves. So many people who have carved their place in society and think they have settled their identity, suddenly discover as they face various challenges and crises that life is not so sure, and they are not so sure who they are. It is part of what we mean when we talk about someone having a mid-life crisis. Sometimes a strange restlessness and even deep unhappiness comes as people have to face up to the reality of who they really are. It is this fundamental issue of how we see ourselves that Jesus addresses with the opening words of the Sermon on the Mount, when he says: ***'Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.'***

Here was Jesus announcing the kingdom of God, the in-breaking of God's rule into this world. The people were flocking around – hungry, frustrated, angry, hopeful. They were looking for so much. And here he was about to give the founding manifesto of the kingdom of God, the outworking of God's justice and freedom in a world where there was brokenness, chaos, sorrow and disaster, the great charter of the Christian way of life. They were all on tiptoe. Jesus opens his mouth and says: ***'Blessed are the poor in spirit.'***

***'Blessed are....'*** And they must have expected something they'd heard a thousand times before. *"Blessed are the rich, blessed are the happy, blessed are the bold, blessed are the clever, blessed are the satisfied, blessed are the winners, blessed are the safe and well-respected."* 'Blessedness' was a very common idea to the Jew. But ***'blessed are the poor'***. Oh, no! Here was a collision of ideas that was completely new.

Greek culture very much influenced the way people thought, and the Greeks had a very low view of poverty. It was a state to be despised and rejected. It didn't just mean you had very little to live on – there was another word for that – a simple frugal life. This word meant complete bankruptcy and there was the connotation of a despised person who deserved what he got.

For those who knew the Hebrew background, the word had a different sense. In the Old Testament the poor man was not just a man who was economically poor. He was a man who in his poverty knew he had no one to champion him and found faith in God. When he was pressed to the wall he cried out to God and God vindicated him. So the poor man was very often the man of faith whom the extremities of life had reduced to the point where he knew he had nowhere to go but God.

**'Blessed are the poor in spirit.'** In that clash of ideas, Jesus was saying something completely new. Blessed are those who, before God, see themselves as they really are, and see themselves to be **poor in spirit**. This is not just the financially poor, but those who in their deepest evaluation of themselves, acknowledge they are bankrupt.

These are strong words. But, can you see why, as Jesus introduces the kingdom of God, this comes first? Because everything else flows from who we think we are. Every thing we do, every word we speak, every comparison of ourselves with others assumes something about who we think we are. So Jesus is putting his finger on the very root of all human problems - our evaluation of ourselves.

Now people reacted to Jesus' teaching in different ways. People heard him not necessarily according to what he was saying but according to the state of their hearts and minds. And that is the same with us today. What is said to everyone is the same but what is heard and how we respond, depends on the condition of our hearts and minds.

Think of the various ways Jesus' words might have struck people. For many they would have been **a calculated insult**. That was the force of **'Blessed are the poor in spirit.'** They had come to hear what the kingdom of God means. They had come to the unveiling of the door. As Jesus pulls aside the curtain they suddenly see that the only people who can get in are those who are willing to get down on their knees. They didn't expect that and they're damned if they are going to bow. You can see them stiffening. **'Blessed'** – yes - **'the poor in spirit'** – oh no! People who admit they are nothing, people who have come to the end of their rope. For some those words would have come as **a calculated insult**.

Do you think it was a mistake – that Jesus had not done his market research properly? No – the very reason they wouldn't give up this view of themselves was the very reason Jesus had come into this world. And the kingdom of God had to begin by saying 'No' to every other kind of approach. A German philosopher said, *'How can man bear not to be God.'* Sartre, a French philosopher said, *'To be man means to have to be God.'* So many personal and global tragedies happen because human beings try to be more than they are. To such people, the gentle words of Jesus come as **a calculated insult**.

I wonder if there is anyone here today for whom the words of Jesus are **a calculated insult**. Because there are so many in our society who, if you look at how they relate to their families, their work and their world – are not facing up to the reality of who they are.

To a second group of people, these words would have come, not as a calculated insult, but as **a comforting invitation**. They had lived and learned and suffered; and they had to be real. They knew they were not able to face up to so much of what life brought and –

whatever the reasons – there was a hunger bringing them to listen to Jesus. ***'Blessed are the poor in spirit.'*** This was their promise. And whenever the gospel is preached it strikes a chord with those who know their need. To the self-sufficient the good news is of no interest. But to those who are realistic enough to realise human need in general and their own need in particular, it is extremely good news. This is how it is right through the Scriptures. God is not a God of the privileged and the powerful. He is the God of the poor, the rejected, the sufferers and the weak. The God who has come down to us in the person of Jesus Christ speaks with an invitation to such people. David said: *'My sacrifice, God, is a broken spirit.'* Mary said, *'The arrogant of heart and mind are put to rout, but the humble have been lifted high.'* And so for the second group these words would have come as a **comforting invitation**. If you are here today and you are in that group, then in Jesus you have someone who not only knows you intimately and cares for you passionately but who can also meet your deepest need whether it is spiritual, emotional or physical.

But then there is a third group, because for many of us, these words come as a **challenging insight**. We know that we are not to be poor in spirit once and then forget it. This is a way of being. This is a description of those who enter the kingdom of God and remain in the kingdom. In other words, it is easy for us to go from the state where we are like the first group of people, self-sufficient and proud, to that moment of realisation when we are like the second group, crushed and broken in spirit. Then we live in a position where God has saved us and redeemed us and brings us out into the light of the Christian faith – and slowly we grow rather big for our boots again.

We must allow God to deal with that autonomous self-sufficiency in our lives so that we are more and more aware of his grace at work. If you think about it, every sin in the world comes out of a wrong view of oneself – pride, slander, envy - they all exist because we are thinking of ourselves more highly than we should. It is not a matter of running ourselves down. We are not denying the good things in man. In fact, no one has a higher view of man *'made in the image of God'*. But we are realising that apart from God our humanness becomes pride and destroys people.

***Blessed are the poor in spirit.*** How do these words impact you? How do you see yourself? In the light of your relationships, ambitions and priorities – and all you think you are – do these words come as a **calculated insult** to your way of living and thinking? Well Christ is gentle and he allows you to go your way. But be sure you know where your way goes. Because one day, gentle Jesus will not be so gentle – and judgement means that God allows us to see the paths that we have chosen and insisted on travelling.

Or do these words come as a **comforting invitation**? You know your need and there is no reason to delay. Accept his invitation and come to Christ today. And if you have already come to Christ, allow that **challenging insight** to govern your thinking, speaking and acting today and for the rest of your life.

*For use in your*

**Cell, Accountability Group or on your own**

Have a time of **worship** that brings you to a place of submission and learning before Jesus.

**Read** together Luke 18:9-14 and Matthew 5:1-12

The kingdom manifesto begins with what we normally call the '**beatitudes**' – eight statements that tell us what kinds of people Jesus regarded as well off, having the good life, are fortunate and blessed. What do you think Jesus' first audience were expecting? What kind of beatitudes do we normally live by? (Happy are those who have ...)

How does Jesus' parable in Luke 18 help you to understand the first beatitude?

How does Jesus grab the attention of his hearers?

Where do you find intrigue, mystique and shock in what he says?

How does Jesus draw the hearers into his circle as he moves through the beatitudes?

Jesus sets up a tension between peace (the meek, the peace-makers, the pure in heart) and conflict (persecution, insult, false accusation). He is setting the stage for talking about his radical, counter-cultural kingdom that seems to turn everything upside down.

Is there a danger that we are just 'normal' people with a particular religious preference?

How can we become radical participants in this highly subversive kingdom endeavour?

**Challenge each other and pray for each other that you make a real difference in the world this week.**