Blessed Are the Empty-Handed

MATTHEW 5:1-6 (BSB) · SMALL-GROUP LESSON · DIGDEEPER.AI

The Big Idea

God gives his kingdom to people who have run out of their own resources, because only someone who knows they're empty will take it as a gift.

Opening Lines

Every list the world keeps of who's got it made reads the exact opposite of the one Jesus is about to give. Watch who he calls blessed.

Before You Teach

- Goal: Get the room to feel the shock a first-century Jew felt when the King blessed the poor, the grieving, and the starving instead of the strong. If people leave thinking the Beatitudes are a soft list of nice qualities, we missed it.
- If you're short on time, cut: Cut the extended history of Moses and Sinai if time runs short. Keep the four blessings and who they land on.
- Where the moment lives: It lives in the moment a person admits they're empty-handed before God rather than propping up a résumé. That confession is the door into the Kingdom Jesus describes.
- Your prep: Sit with 'poor in spirit' until you can name your own empty-handedness out loud, not in theory. If you can't do it, you can't ask the room to.

Run It In Your Setting

The same lesson, sequenced three ways. Pick the one that fits your group and your clock.

CLASSROOM · ~20 PEOPLE · 45 MINUTES

Use the classroom opening — the two-column board (0-8 min). Read the passage (8-12). Teach the word ptōchos with the empty-hand image and the keepable line + silence (12-22). Questions 1, 2, and 4 — save the friction question for when they get comfortable (22-40). Land on the fist prompt and commitments out loud (40-45). Transformation happens at question 2 when someone names their own emptiness. Cut first: the Moses/ Sinai background.

SMALL GROUP · ~8 PEOPLE · 60 MINUTES

Use the small-group opening — the end-of-resources question before opening the Bible (0-10 min). Read the passage, teach ptōchos and the empty hand (10-22). Work questions 1-3 slowly, you go first on question 2 per the drill (22-42). Question 4 to break up any sentimentality, then question 5 (42-54). Commitments out loud and spontaneous prayer over what was named (54-60). Transformation lives in the honest silence after question 2.

Cut first: question 3 if time's tight.

COFFEE · 2-3 FRIENDS · 30 MINUTES

Use the coffee opening — one honest sentence about who Jesus blesses (0-5 min). Read verses 3-6 aloud (5-8). Say what ptōchos means with the empty hand, one line (8-13). Skip straight to question 2 — a time you were empty before God — and go first yourself (13-25). One closed fist each and a short prayer over it (25-30). Transformation is in whether you two actually tell the truth. Nothing to cut; just protect the honest question.

Go First, Go Real

Here's a habit for every lesson you'll ever teach — this week we drill it deliberately. Before you ask the room to be honest about anything, you go first, and you go real. Not a polished testimony with a clean ending. A true, specific, slightly-costly bit of your own life that models the vulnerability you're asking for. This week the passage is about spiritual emptiness, so you name a time you were genuinely empty before God — before anyone else has to. The room will only go as deep as you already went. If you hedge, they hedge. This is level one: just do it once, on purpose, out loud, before the first question.

Why This Passage Matters

This is the opening line of the most famous sermon ever preached, and most people have heard it so often they no longer hear it at all. Your job this week is to make it strange again. A people who prized strength, land, and law-keeping heard their King sit down like a rabbi taking his seat to deliver binding instruction — and then bless the exact people everyone assumed God had passed over. The broke. The grieving. The gentle who never win. The ones starving for a righteousness they can't produce. This is not a self-improvement list. It's a map of who the Kingdom actually belongs to, and it belongs to beggars, because only beggars will take it as a gift. Every person in your room is quietly keeping a résumé for God. This passage takes it out of their hands and tells them the Kingdom was never for sale. When someone in your room stops performing and admits they're empty, and hears Jesus call that person blessed, something opens. You get to be in the room when it does. Few passages hand a teacher that privilege.

Catch the Fire First

Before you teach a word of it, you do the table question on yourself, alone, this week. Sit down with a blank page and finish this sentence honestly: 'The time I felt most spiritually empty was...' Don't clean it up. Then write what God met you with in it — or write 'nothing that I could feel at the time,' if that's the truth. When you can read your own answer back without flinching, you're ready to ask the room for theirs. You cannot lead people into a room you haven't walked into yourself.

Bring Your Own Story

- Prompt: a time you were 'poor in spirit' — flat broke of your own spiritual resources — and what, if anything, met you there.
- Prompt: a season of mourning where the comfort came slower or stranger than you expected.
- Prompt: a stretch of waiting that wore you down, where you had to learn to hunger for the right thing.
- SAMPLE (polished vs. real): Polished — 'God taught me to depend on him through a hard time.' Real — 'I sat in my car in the church parking lot for twenty minutes because I couldn't make myself go in and pretend I was fine.'
- Guardrail: real is not raw — bring the healed scar, not the open wound; if you'd cry telling it, it's too soon.

Three Ways to Open

CLASSROOM: "On a board or slide, write two columns: 'The world says these people are blessed' and 'Jesus says these are.' Fill in the world's list with the class — winners, rich, confident, self-made. Then read verses 3-6 and let them see the second column write itself as the opposite."

Prime the shock before the familiar words dull it.

SMALL GROUP: "Ask before you open the Bible: 'When was the last time you felt completely at the end of your own resources?' Let two people answer. Then read the passage and say, 'That's the exact person Jesus just called blessed.'"

Start with the felt experience, not the text, so the text lands on real ground.

COFFEE: "Say it plain: 'Jesus opens his most famous sermon by blessing the broke, the grieving, and the starving. Not the people we'd pick. Why do you think he starts there?'"

One honest sentence beats a full lesson over coffee.

Teaching the Word

Teach the word behind 'poor in spirit.' The Greek is ptōchos — and it doesn't mean the working poor who scrape by. It means the beggar, the one crouched with an open hand who owns absolutely nothing and knows it. Not 'a little short this month.' Flat empty. Here's the image: hold out your own hand, palm up and empty, in front of the room. That's ptōchos. No résumé in it, no leverage, no bargaining chip — just an open, empty hand. Now listen to what Jesus does with that hand: 'theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.' Not someday. Theirs, right now. God gives his Kingdom to beggars, because only beggars will take it as a gift. [Then say it slowly and stop.] Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. (Let the silence sit. Don't rescue it.)

Discussion Questions

1. The world keeps a list of who's blessed — full, confident, winning. Jesus

keeps the opposite list. What's actually on the world's list in your own life right now, the things you'd quietly want people to know about you?

Coaching note: Let them name real status markers — job, kids doing well, being the dependable one. Don't moralize; just get the world's list visible so the contrast can bite.

If it stalls: Simple version: finish this sentence — 'I feel like I'm doing okay when ___.' What goes in the blank?

2. 'Poor in spirit' means the beggar with an empty open hand. When was a time you felt like that before God — nothing to offer, nothing to trade?

Coaching note: This is the heart of the night. You go first (the drill). Give real silence after. Don't fill it, and don't fix anyone's answer.

If it stalls: Easier way in: has there ever been a moment you couldn't even pray, or didn't know what to say to God? Just yes or no to start.

3. Jesus says the mourners 'will be comforted' and the hungry 'will be filled' — future tense. What do you do with the gap between the promise and the day you're actually living in?

Coaching note: People will want to rush to the happy ending. Slow them down. Let the waiting be honest before you talk about the promise.

If it stalls: Concrete version: think of one thing you're waiting on God for right now that hasn't broken open. How's the waiting going?

4. Here's the hard side: who reads these blessings and finds them offensive or even unfair? What's the strongest objection someone could raise against 'blessed are the poor'?

Coaching note: If the room's gone soft and agreeable, THIS is your friction question. Assign someone to argue against the text. Don't let everyone nod their way past it.

If it stalls: Try: does part of you resist this? Wouldn't you rather Jesus blessed the people who have it together — because you're trying to be one of them?

5. If the Kingdom belongs to the empty-handed, what's the one thing you're still holding onto with a closed fist that this passage is asking you to open?

Coaching note: Land here. Push for something specific and costly, not a tidy answer. This is the commitment that walks out the door with them.

If it stalls: Make it a fill-in: 'The thing I keep trying to prove to God is ___.' What is it for you?

Questions You May Hear

"Why does it matter that Jesus 'sat down' before he taught?"

In the first century a rabbi didn't lecture standing up — he sat, and sitting was the signal that authoritative, binding teaching was about to begin. Matthew wants us to see a master taking his seat to deliver settled instruction, not casual hillside chat.

"Is 'blessed' just a fancy word for 'happy'?"

No — it's not a good mood. It's the settled, God-given wellness of a person who stands in right relation to their King, and Jesus locates that wellness at the point of emptiness, not

comfort.

"Doesn't this contradict the version in Luke, where Jesus blesses the actually poor and hungry?"

Luke 6:20-21 records these same blessings spoken to the literally poor and hungry in the crowd, which guards us from turning them into abstractions. Real, physical need meets real grace — Matthew draws out the spiritual dimension without erasing the concrete one.

"Is Jesus giving us a new law here, a list of qualities we have to produce?"

No. Every line has roots in the Old Testament — Psalm 34:18, Isaiah 61, Psalm 37 — so Jesus isn't inventing a new spirituality; he's revealing the heart God has always sought. And he's describing who the Kingdom is given to, not a checklist to earn it.

For Experienced Leaders

- When the room turns into warm agreeable mush and every comment is a variation on 'that's so true,' stop and ask the hard-side question they're steering around: 'What would this verse ask of us that none of us actually want to give?' Sentiment isn't the same as being moved.
- Don't over-explain 'poor in spirit' into a doctrine. Show the empty hand, say the word, let it be a picture before it's a concept.
- Watch the future-tense promises. If you preach the comfort too fast, you rob the people currently mourning of permission to still be in the middle of it. Let the promise be a promise, not a demand to feel better tonight.

Landing the Lesson

Commitments: Go around and have each person say out loud one closed fist they're going to try to open this week — one thing they've been trying to prove to God or hold as leverage. Out loud, specific, no explaining it away.

Close by praying out loud over the actual things people just named — the specific fist someone said they'd open, the specific waiting someone confessed. Don't reach for a written prayer; saying their real words back to God is the whole point.

If you run out of time: If the room only gets to question two and someone finally tells the truth about being empty before God, stay there. That confession is the lesson. Don't drag them to question five to feel finished.

Midweek follow-up: Midweek, text each person one line: 'Still praying about the fist you named Tuesday — how's the opening going?'

Free at digdeeper.ai/devotionals/matthew/5-1-6/lesson

Handout

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During the lesson:

- The world's list of who's blessed (write 3 you secretly believe): ___
- 'Poor in spirit' = the beggar with an empty open hand. A time I felt like that before God: ___
- One promise I'm waiting on that hasn't broken open yet: ___
- The strongest objection someone could raise against 'blessed are the poor': ___
- The one closed fist I'm going to try to open this week: ___

Take-home actions:

- If grief is heavy, set aside five minutes tonight and name your loss out loud to God — say plainly what you're missing and ask him to comfort you where the ache is sharpest. You don't have to tidy up the sorrow first.
- Send one message today to someone who's lost something — a job, a marriage, a parent. Don't fix it or explain it. Just tell them you remember and you're praying.
- Pick one hour today — maybe the commute — and instead of numbing the wait with your phone, ask God to grow your appetite for him, not just for your circumstances changing.

The one who taught these words on the mountain is keeping every promise in them.