

## “The Double-Blind Discovery”

Luke 18:1-14

*Series: The Experiment Week 1. Blessed are the Poor in Spirit*

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A simple experiment sent her to the eye of the storm. While preparing a lesson for her elementary school class, Jane Elliot was shocked to learn of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The tragedy ignited an idea. The next morning the third-graders in her Riceville, Iowa class were abuzz about the slaying of this pastor and peacemaker. Ms. Elliot thought the best way for her students to understand multi-syllable words like discrimination and segregation is to experience it. She asked if they would like to try an experiment. A chorus of “yeahs” came back.

Jane decided to divide the class by eye color. Blue-eyed children suddenly became the superior group and were advanced to the front row while their brown-eyed peers, the minority group, were sent to the back. Blue-eyed children enjoyed special privileges such as second helpings at lunch, access to the new jungle gym, and five extra minutes at recess. They were encouraged to play only with other blue-eyed children and ignore the brown-eyes. The two groups were not permitted to drink from the same water fountain and brown-eyed children were frequently criticized for their mistakes. What happened?

In a very short time, those deemed “superior” became arrogant, bossy, and otherwise unpleasant to their “inferior” classmates. Their grades on simple tests were better, and they completed mathematical and reading tasks that had seemed outside their ability before. The “inferior” classmates also transformed – into timid and subservient children who scored more poorly on tests, and even during recess isolated themselves. These children’s academic performance suffered, even with tasks that had been simple before.

The next Monday, Elliott reversed the exercise, making the brown-eyed children superior. While the brown-eyed children did taunt the blue-eyed children in ways similar to what they received, Elliott reported it was much less intense. At 2:30 pm on Wednesday, Elliott announced the experiment finished and asked the children to write down what they learned.

Their reflections, first printed in the *Riceville Recorder*, were picked up by the Associated Press and spread around the world. The eye color experiment transformed Jane Elliot into an instant celebrity who appeared on the Tonight Show. She eventually became an advocate for diversity training in businesses, schools and government. The reception at home, however, was not so sunny. Fellow teachers refused to speak to her. Riceville residents complained her experiment damaged the children and portrayed them as a town of racists. Psychologists questioned the validity of her methods and results. Yet maybe some of the reaction is really revulsion at seeing the truth about yourself. It’s painful to have your blinders ripped off and your blind spots exposed. It’s easier to point out the prejudice, bias, self-righteousness and weakness in others. Through her simple experiment, Jane Elliot held up a mirror to America and for the first time we could see.

Our Spring series **The Experiment** begins with a beatitude designed to open our eyes. You might say it’s a double-blind discovery. A traditional double-blind experiment is a study where both the participants and the researchers do not know who is in the group receiving the drug or treatment and who is in the control group receiving a placebo sugar pill or no treatment. The double-blind practice is supposed to prevent bias, prejudice or influence over the outcome. The

eye-color experiment was not a double-blind study. Yet it did expose bias and prejudice. In a similar way, Jesus exposes our double-blindness.

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. He said: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Matthew 5:1-3

The Master Teacher begins the Sermon on the Mount not with a parable but a list of eight proverbs. We call these “The Beatitudes” because they begin with the phrase, “Blessed are...” Each beatitude has three parts. It begins with “Blessed are,” then describes people dealing with a condition and ends with a promise of what will come to them. The original meaning of the word “blessed” is happy, rich, prosperous. Yet that doesn’t fit here. How can those who mourn be happy, the poor be rich or the persecuted be prosperous? Isn’t that just like Jesus? He flips everything: the lost are found, the blind can see, the losers win. Everything about Him is unconventional, unexpected, upside-down. “Blessed” does not mean they are happy, they should put on a happy face or have a be-happy-attitude adjustment. Blessed means when you are facing these circumstances, when you are struggling with these conditions God is with you, God is helping you, God gives you grace. As you read down the Beatitudes you discover the people cast off, criticized and crushed by the world are the very ones God cares for, comforts and calls His children. He gives joy in spite of the circumstances, peace that passes all understanding, love that never ends.

So the Beatitudes reveal what God is doing in each of these situations. They also tell us who we are to be and what we are to do as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, as followers of Jesus. They are not just pretty poetry or snappy sound bites. Each one is a powerful formula for living. Like all formulas, you must try and test them, experience and experiment with them in order to unlock the blessing inside. The Beatitudes are the gateway into the Kingdom of Jesus and the first Beatitude is the doorway to all the rest.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Matthew 5:3

So God’s kingdom belongs to those who are poor. Apparently you have to be poor to enter the kingdom. Do only the poor get in? And how poor do you have to be? The word in Greek describes someone who is reduced to begging, a person possessing no wealth, influence, position. They are helpless and powerless to accomplish anything. This is where Jesus exposes our double-blindness. When it comes to poverty, you and I are blind in two ways.

**We are blind to our spiritual poverty.** There is nothing you or I can do to merit or earn a way into God’s Kingdom. Jesus proves this in a parable.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. Luke 18:9-10

Twice a day – at nine in the morning and three in the afternoon – a service of worship and prayer is offered in the Jerusalem Temple. Two vastly different men ascend the sacred steps and join the congregation. One is a Pharisee – the ultraorthodox side of Judaism who seek to completely obey the Law of Moses. The word *Pharisee* originally means “separate.” To be pure and avoid spiritual contamination, Pharisees lived in the world but were separate from it. It was a hard life and I think we should give the Pharisees some respect. They were people of deep faith who tried to love and obey God with all their heart, mind and strength.

Some went to extremes. That’s the case with this Pharisee.

The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ Luke 18:11-12

He is so separate he’s outstanding – that is he’s out standing by himself in the Temple, apart from all the other worshipers. In his prayer, which he speaks out loud, he praises not God but himself. He labels everyone else as thieves, sinners and perverts to prove his superiority. To make his point he publicly points out a tax collector in the congregation. Then he reads out his resume of righteous deeds...and they are impressive. The Law of Moses requires fasting once a year on the Day of Atonement. This man fasts twice a week. The Law commands tithing – giving ten percent to the Lord – on certain items. He tithes on *everything* he has. He is, in every way, perfect, pure and undefiled by the world.

The same cannot be said of the other worshiper in our story. Tax collectors also lived separately from their fellow Jews but for a different reason. They were a vital cog in the oppressive Roman machine. They squeezed every shekel out of their dirt poor neighbors, paid the tax to their overlords and kept the extra for themselves. As such they were hated and shunned. I wonder if there were many raised eyebrows and rejecting stares as the despised tax collector joined the congregation. He certainly felt unworthy.

But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ Luke 18:13

His distance from the others can’t compare with how far he feels from God. How can he hope to make amends for all he’s stolen? He doesn’t even deny the Pharisee’s public accusation and condemnation. Unable to look God in the eye he pounds upon his chest and begs forgiveness. So what is the verdict of Jesus?

I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Luke 18:14

Now wait. The one who does everything right is wrong and the one who wrongs everyone is right? The religious “A” student is rejected and the rip-off artist is rewarded? It’s unjust and unfair. Until you look deeper. The Pharisee’s eyes are on himself. He boasts and brags about himself and berates and belittles others. He is so full of himself there is no room for God. How foolish it is to stand before the Lord and boast. Max Lucado writes,

You don’t impress the officials at NASA with a paper airplane. You don’t boast about your crayon sketches in the presence of Picasso. You don’t claim equality with Einstein because you can write “H<sub>2</sub>O.” And you don’t boast about your goodness in the presence of the Perfect.<sup>1</sup>

The tax collector is empty. Despite his worldly riches he suddenly discovers he is utterly, spiritually poor, nothing but a beggar in the house of God. The Pharisee was blind to his spiritual poverty. The tax collector’s eyes were wide open. Humbly he threw himself on the grace of God.

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<sup>1</sup> Max Lucado, *The Applause of Heaven*, p. 29.

Like the third-graders in the blue/brown eye experiment, we can easily take a superior position over others. Numerous studies reveal our tendency to overestimate ourselves. For instance, when researchers asked a million high school students where they fit among their peers, none of the students rated themselves below average. 60 percent of students believed they were in the top 10 percent; 25 percent rated themselves in the top one percent. College professors were just as biased about their abilities. Two percent rated themselves below average; 10 percent average and 63 percent above average; while 25 percent rated themselves as truly exceptional.

Of course this is statistically impossible. One researcher summarized the data this way: "It's the great contradiction: the average person believes he is a better person than the average person." Christian psychologist Mark McMinn writes,

One of the clearest conclusions of social science research is that we are proud. We think better of ourselves than we really are. We assume the worst in others while assuming the best in ourselves.<sup>2</sup>

From time to time we all indulge in comparisons, labeling and judgment. Yet when we come before the Cross we are all beggars desperately in need of grace. None of us can stand on our resume of religious acts and good deeds. What occurred at the worship service these two men attended? It was an atonement service. A lamb was sacrificed on the altar. The blood of the lamb reconciled God and His people. The literal cry of the tax collector is "God! Make an atonement for me, a sinner" Luke 18:13. That is our cry to Jesus, the Lamb of God. We are spiritually bankrupt. We need a Savior to enter the kingdom of heaven.

At the same time, **We Are Blind to the Physical Poverty of Others.** In the same chapter Jesus tells this parable,

"In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' "For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'" Luke 18:2-5

When we read this parable we usually see ourselves as the persistent widow. The typical sermon tells us to keep praying and don't give up because God will answer our prayers faster than an unjust judge.

Yet for a minute, let's put ourselves behind the bench with the judge. He doesn't fear God or care what people think. Judges in the Middle East lived on bribes, something the widow can't afford. The only reason he grants her request is to get her off his back.

There are times when we are blind and deaf to the cries of the poor, the hungry, the oppressed and the abused. I'm not talking about the panhandlers who hold up signs at intersections. Once I walked down Canal Street in New Orleans and a beggar cried out, "Can you help me get drunk." I walked a few more steps and he said, "I'm not gonna lie." Giving on the street may quiet our guilt but it rarely really helps. There are many deep and desperate needs which demand our attention and help. God blesses each of us with time, skills and financial resources so we can assist others with a hand up. Let's not make them badger us or beg us. God cares about the poor and He cares for the poor usually through you and me. God's priorities must be our priorities. You are a

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<sup>2</sup> "Study: Self-Images Often Erroneously Inflate," ABC News (11-9-05); Mark McMinn, Why Sin Matters (Tyndale, 2004), pp. 69-71

very generous congregation. Our teens fasted, prayed and raised \$3,310 to fight hunger through the 30 Hour Famine. You also gave \$3,704 to help rebuild after the devastation caused by Cyclone Idai in Mozambique.

Each week during this series we'll give five ways to experiment with a Beatitude. Do it with a lab partner or your Growth Group. Here are the experiments for this week:

- Read Psalm 40 every day for a week
- Donate to a food collection
- Give away something important to you to someone who needs it
- Journal or pray about your sins, ask God for forgiveness and thank Him for His mercy
- Do something for someone anonymously

Here are more ways you can help:

- Sign up for the Dinner Ministry
- Help out with the Recovery service in May or the Special Way VBS in August
- Join the Dominican Republic Mission trip June 26- July 5 or any of the mission trips
- Sign up for the Habitat for Humanity Build day on May 31/June 1

Flat broke and homeless, brothers Geza and Zsolt Peladi literally lived in a cave near Budapest for years. They left their dank home only to scrape together whatever money they could through selling scrap metal and candy. Theirs was a hopeless situation. But then everything changed. One day, out of the blue, charity workers informed the brothers that they had inherited a substantial portion of their late maternal grandmother's \$6.6 billion fortune. Geza told the papers, "We knew our mother came from a wealthy family, but she was a difficult person and severed ties with them, and then later abandoned us." Just like that, two destitute brothers can, if they wish, leave their cave and call a castle their home.<sup>3</sup>

Because of Jesus we are heirs to a kingdom so glorious it will make this world look like a cave. Open your eyes and come out of your cave.

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<sup>3</sup> Mike Krumboltz, "From Cave to Castle," [www.buzz.yahoo.com](http://www.buzz.yahoo.com) (12-3-09)