

“What an incredible and timely new book from my friend Allen Holmes. *Redefined* beautifully connects Christ’s teachings in the Beatitudes and practical life application. Allen shares some of his own life stories and how important it is for all of us to have the correct view of what a genuine relationship with God really is. A relationship with Jesus is so much more than checking “to do” boxes. *Redefined* is a must-read for every person wanting to Re-ignite and Re-vision your life in a way you have never fully experienced.”

—LEE DOMINGUE

*Author of Pearls of the King and The Family Meeting Guide
Founder of Kingdom Builders U.S., Legacy Pastor of Church of the
Highlands, Birmingham, Alabama*

“The genius of Allen Holmes’ book, *Redefined*, is that he is able, through this writing, to make deep truths accessible. You get it! He writes in such a way as to make it simple. But he doesn’t dumb it down. He makes it livable. Life-changing!”

—MICHAEL FLETCHER,

Senior Pastor, Manna Church

“The world needs more life-giving churches! Churches that teach people how to walk with Jesus so that we can change our world. If you are looking for a book that will help you understand what it means to follow Jesus and experience a blessed life, this book is for you!”

—GREG SURRATT

ARC President and Founding Pastor of Seacoast Church in Mt. Pleasant, SC.

“What I love most about Allen Holmes is how he loves hurting people. I have witnessed time and time again Allen come alongside a beat up, tired, or burned out pastor to be a friend. He has a direct, but gracious way of leading people into a deeper relationship with Jesus so they can experience redemption through their crisis. If you are tired of religion, if you are hurting, if you have drifted away from Jesus this book will breathe new life into your soul!”

—DINO RIZZO

*Executive Director of ARC (Association of Related Churches) and
Associate Pastor at Church of the Highlands, Birmingham, AL*

“America is full of hurting, discouraged people. Jesus stepped into a similar context and said, ‘come to me all who are weary and carry heavy burdens.’ Every time Allen visits our church, I hear Jesus inviting the weary to draw near and find rest. If you are hurting, discouraged or know someone who is, read this book. Jesus is inviting you to draw near, to rest, to be blessed!”

—MATTHEW BARNETT

Founder of the LA Dream Center and Senior Pastor of Angelus Temple.

FOREWORD BY CHRIS HODGES
Pastor, Church of the Highlands

redefined*

re·de·fined | /,rēdə'fīned/

**A SIMPLE PATH TO
A HOPE-FILLED LIFE*

DR. ALLEN HOLMES
With Jesse Barnett

Redefined: A Simple Path to a Hope-filled Life

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DEDICATION

To my mentor Dr. Bill Bennett. Dr. Bennett and I met in 1997 when my life was falling apart. Dr. Bennett was 74, a retired pastor and a friend of pastors. He spent the last 20 years of his life mentoring and fathering me. When we were together in public, he would introduce me as his son. It was Dr. Bennett, in the middle of my crisis, who taught me how to be with Jesus which transformed my life. For years, Dr. Bennett urged me to begin writing. He would say, "anything worth saying is worth writing." I know he would love this book. Dr. Bennett, I miss your love, friendship, encouragement, and corny jokes. Your life had such a profound impact on my life and I cannot wait to see you again!

There are several other people I want to thank:

Tina, thank you for being patient with me. Life-change takes time and your beauty, grace, and friendship have been such an inspiration to me. You are my favorite person in the whole world and I am so lucky to be your husband.

Definition Church, thank you for allowing me to be your pastor. I love our church family. My family and I have been so blessed by this community. Despite my imperfection, for the last 20 years, you have trusted me to help you become all that God wants you to be. The best is yet to come!

Jesse Barnett, thank you for all your hard work on this book. I had no idea this first book would go so well and the truth is it would not have without your help.

Civil Creative and *Sam Tesh*, thank you for believing in me and *Definition Church*. You helped us rebrand and helped me take a bold step into a new season of ministry and I am so grateful.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword	1
Introduction: A Life Undefined.....	7

PART I: Reconnect with God and People

Blessing: Redefined	27
Chapter 1: The Poor in Spirit.....	35
Chapter 2: The Mourners.....	45
Chapter 3: The Surrendered	54
Chapter 4: The Hungry	62
Chapter 5: The Merciful.....	72
Chapter 6: The Pure in Heart.....	81
Chapter 7: The Peacemakers	89
Chapter 8: The Persecuted.....	97

PART II: Recommit to Impacting Culture

Introduction: Love Over Laws	107
Chapter 9: Be Bright and Flavorful	111
Chapter 10: Be Righteous.....	119
Chapter 11: Be Calm	128
Chapter 12: Be Pure.....	136
Chapter 13: Be Faithful.....	145

Chapter 14: Be Truthful	152
Chapter 15: Be Bigger	160
Chapter 16: Be Generous.....	165
Chapter 17: Be Connected.....	173
Chapter 18: Be Content	182
Chapter 19: Be Careful	190
Chapter 20: Be a Follower.....	197
Conclusion: Be Unshakeable	203
About the Author.....	215

FOREWORD

When our kids were growing up, my wife and I noticed that as each one entered adolescence, they began to redefine themselves. Seemingly overnight, our daughter, Sarah, went from being a little girl playing with stuffed animals to a young woman experimenting with nail polish and lipstick. With our four sons, each one chose to mark his entrance into young adulthood with a radically different haircut than the “little boy” style he’d been wearing. For both genders, this adolescent redefining process also included buying new jeans and shoes that always seemed to cost more than the last pair.

While I didn’t always agree with their fashion choices, I understood their desire to express themselves in a more adult, or at least peer-approved, manner. The funny thing, though, is that despite whatever fads and fashions they tried, each child remained uniquely and distinctly who they are and had always been. Because ultimately, redefining who they are became a matter of which sources they consulted.

On one hand, they could be influenced by their friends, classmates, social media heroes and followers, along with the

messages from online media, TV, and movies. When these proved insubstantial, however, they could come back to what we had taught them is the ultimate source of their identity, God's Word. Relying on Scripture and their relationship with God, maturity then became a journey of discovery as they explored *how* God made them, *why* He made them, and *what* He created them specifically to do in this life. Basically, they learned that the real discovery of redefining themselves takes place on the inside.

I suspect this redefining-as-maturing process is one we all experience, regardless of our age, when we first encounter God and invite Jesus into our heart. From there, our spiritual journey is often a matter of seeking, finding, failing, forgiving, and persevering. No matter how much we may try to grow closer to God in a sequential, step-by-step, chronological process, our reality is usually messier. We take one leap forward and two steps back. We obey and focus on our relationship with the Lord until we're pulled away by various urgent demands or alluring temptations.

Along the way and throughout our process, we discover new facets of God's character, new dimensions to His love, and more relevant truths in His Word. We also learn more about who we are. We realize we don't know as much as we once thought we did. Humbled and teachable again, we revisit certain aspects of what we believe and why we believe them. We begin to grasp a new understanding of what it means to be spiritually mature as we redefine our faith by going deeper in our relationship with God. Otherwise, we remain stagnant—stuck in our immaturity.

In fact, the author of Hebrews, writing to the followers of Jesus at Corinth, warned them about falling away from their faith and instructed them to reconsider their spiritual nourishment.

“You need milk, not solid food!” he wrote. “Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil” (Hebrews 5:12-14, NIV).

The author of this book you’re holding, Allen Holmes, knows this same truth, that when we’re in danger of falling away, sliding back, and giving up we must redefine our faith. And I can’t think of anyone better qualified than Allen to infuse our current understanding of being a Christian with a fresh perspective. I’m biased, of course, because I’ve known Allen for more than a decade now, ever since he introduced himself at one of our first GROW conferences. From his friendly demeanor to his thoughtful questions, he radiated a passion for knowing God and sharing His love with the world around us in a deeply personal way.

As we got better acquainted, Allen asked me to mentor him, a privilege I agreed to take on. It’s humbling to pastor another pastor, and I made it clear to Allen that I didn’t have all the answers, but that I know the One who does. Over the years I’ve been blessed to watch Allen grow and mature in his faith. While we communicate almost every month, I’ve especially enjoyed the in-person visits two or three times a year when we can spend time learning, growing, and fellowshiping together. We have both discovered more of what it means to follow the example of Christ, leading others by serving them.

One of the most dramatic ways Jesus served others was to redefine their understanding of faith, religion, and grace. And that’s what this book is all about. Drawing on the first public sermon Jesus gave, the Sermon on the Mount, and His opening blessings,

the Beatitudes, Allen explores just how shocking Christ's new definitions must have been for his listeners. They were accustomed to the rigors of the Jewish religion, a culturally complex system that relied on merit and a hierarchy more social than spiritual. There was no room for grace.

Then suddenly Jesus, this carpenter's son from Nazareth, showed up and turned their notions upside down. Instead of reinforcing a religious system, the Messiah invited his listeners to experience a relationship with the Living God, a merciful Father who loved them enough to send His only Son to forgive their sins. Jesus made it clear it's not about outward appearances and pleasing Jewish leaders but about what's in our hearts. It's about divine relationship, not human religion.

Consequently, Christ forever redefined how we know God.

Redefined literally means to define something again. But the very necessity of defining something more than once is revealing in itself: either the concept being redefined has been misunderstood, its meaning has changed contextually, previous definitions were lacking, or all the above. As followers of Jesus, we discover redefining our understanding of faith is essential to our spiritual maturity.

Which is why I'm so excited about this book. With his careful exploration of the Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount, Allen takes us back to Jesus' initial redefinition of what faith is all about. The result is a breath of fresh air that will cut through the social, cultural, and religious clutter that may be distracting you from knowing God and following Jesus. Whether you're unsure what it means to be an authentic Christian in our 21st century world or you're tired of people misunderstanding your relationship with the Lord, *Redefined* is for you.

Don't get stuck. Don't get distracted. Don't settle for milk.

Don't cling to what others have conditioned you to believe about God when He invites you to experience knowing Him for yourself. If you want to mature in your faith and discover more of your true identity in Christ, then enjoy the solid food of God's Word that's about to be served in these pages!

—CHRIS HODGES

Pastor, Church of the Highlands

Author of What's Next? and Out of the Cave

Introduction

A Life Undefined

It was a night I can never forget, although looking back, twenty-four years later, I shouldn't be surprised—no one can forget when the only world they've known comes crashing down around them.

It burns into your memory and shapes the rest of your life.

If you think of your life like the scenes in a movie, that one would have had all the elements of the climax in a drama.

After ten years of marriage, my dad was done.

He picked up his suitcase, turned, and walked out of the front door and out of our lives.

He never came back.

We lived in a small house in Wilmington, North Carolina. I was five years old, and my baby sister was just two. Mom and I were sitting side-by-side on our small second-hand couch; my sister played on the floor.

With two small kids to raise as a now single mother, my mom knew that her high school diploma wasn't enough. So after a period of grieving, she went back to school. In between working at least two jobs at once, she squeezed in her classes, housework, and taking care of her kids.

With my dad out of the picture and Mom working so hard to provide for us, it left me with a lot of free time on my hands. This taught me a powerful lesson that embedded itself in my mind at a very early age—*I was on my own, and if it was going to happen, it was up to me.* This spirit of independence and self-sufficiency served me well for years but would eventually almost destroy my life.

When I reflect on my childhood, it seems good, and it seems normal. Kids are resilient, and this new normal was all I knew, so at first, I was happy. With that spirit of independence and self-sufficiency, I started working in fifth grade delivering the paper and cutting grass around the neighborhood.

My mom eventually remarried, but neither my biological father nor my stepfather was very involved in my life. My dad had moved to a town four hours away, so I did not see him often; my stepfather lived just down the hall but worked all the time. A college professor, he also headed up the literacy council and ran the local food bank. Ironically, while he was working hard to save the world, I was falling apart in his home. He did not have time and did not seem interested in me—my sports, academics, or church activities—and this created a lot of tension in our relationship. He had very high expectations for me but was completely unengaged with my life. He barked out plenty of orders but never expressed any love or approval. In fact, the only thing he would express to me was his disappointment.

Once again, I was on my own and not sure if I would ever measure up.

By the weeks leading up to my eighth-grade year, the situation at home had deteriorated almost beyond repair. My stepfather and I were always fighting; I was constantly in trouble at school, and my grades were awful. He and my mom were desperate. They were not sure what to do with me, but it was obvious the path I was on was

not headed in a good direction. We met with the school guidance counselor and concluded that if I was not able to turn things around, they would be forced to send me to a boarding school.

The school year began, and as an eighth-grader, I was eligible to play football. One day, after getting into trouble in class (again), I had two brief but life-changing conversations. The first was with my vice-principal. He told me he thought I had real potential as a football player. In fact, he even thought I could play college football one day. However, he said that in order to do that I needed to do my best in the classroom.

Since we were on a first-name basis, this clearly wasn't happening.

In what may have been a calculated one-two punch, my football coach also pulled me aside after practice. He told me he wanted me on the team but he was getting bad reports from my teachers. In that gruff way that only coaches have, he put his arm around my shoulders, gave me a hard squeeze, and said, "Son, if you want to remain on *my* team, you need to get your act together in the classroom."

For whatever reason, those two conversations were *exactly* what I needed to hear, and their words stuck. I decided to make some changes to the way I was handling myself. First, I started applying myself in school. From that day on, I never got in trouble again at school, and I never made less than a B in any class. (Until I got to seminary. Seminary was hard!) Second, I decided to start attending church. Church was great for me. I made new friends, was loved and encouraged by several families, really connected with my youth pastor, and began to discover my passion for ministry. Third, I started playing sports all year long. I played football, basketball, and baseball. This constant activity kept me out of trouble, provided lots of friends, and taught me valuable life lessons.

Through all this I discovered something about myself—if I worked hard, I could be successful in school, at church, and in sports. Finally, I was winning, and it felt great! For the next several years I appeared to have it all together. As I moved into high school, I was excelling at school, sports, and church. Everyone was amazed by my turnaround.

Life was good, and I loved all the attention my performance gained me.

I graduated and headed off to college at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, where I realized God was calling me into vocational ministry. I was very involved serving in church, and ministry became my greatest passion. I finished my undergraduate degree at UNCW, married Tina, my college sweetheart, and was off to seminary.

I was living the dream!

Seminary was like heaven on earth. I was surrounded by men and women who loved Jesus. Every day I was being taught the Bible by some of the world's greatest theologians and America's best pastors. I was making new friends who wanted to change the world, and I was married to the woman of my dreams.

But suddenly, and unexpectedly, everything came crashing down.

In early April, with the spring semester winding down, I came home after class to find Tina lying in bed and crying. We were still newlyweds; we'd only been married for five months. Tina's move to Wake Forest and her transition to married life had been more difficult for her than it was for me. She had grown up in a very close family and had left behind lifelong friends. I, on the other hand, grew up in a broken family and had moved eighteen times before getting married. Home was a moving target.

She was working a full-time job for the first time as an assistant manager in retail. I was in school full-time *and* working 25 hours a week at night and on the weekends, just like I did all through college. This life and schedule felt great to me but overwhelming to Tina. I would leave in the morning for class before she got up. She would then go to work all day and on her way home I would pass her as I made my way to work. We were in a new city, at a new church, and trying to make new friends.

We were both working very hard and did not have time to invest in our new marriage. We were away from both family and friends. Again, this seemed normal to me. It was how I grew up. Independent, self-reliant, and hard working. Give me a challenge, and I was all in for the climb. For Tina, this was all physically, emotionally, and relationally overwhelming. She was falling apart, and as a young husband, I didn't see the signs. Even if I did, I really didn't know how to help.

Finally, Tina reached her breaking point.

As we talked that afternoon, Tina said to me through her tears, "I don't love you. I don't think I want to be married; I will never be in the ministry, and I am moving back home." At that moment, everything that was important to me began slipping through my hands. I was losing my marriage and my dream of being in ministry.

How could this happen? The answer to that question is what this book is all about!

That afternoon changed my life.

Tina didn't leave, but because of her honesty that day, over the next few years, we learned many things about life and marriage. The most important lesson was this—*I did not know how to cultivate or maintain a personal relationship with God, with Tina, or with anyone else.*

The pressure we were under and the changes we experienced exposed the weakness in all my relationships. From the outside, I looked like I had it all together, but underneath, the foundation was rotted and weak.

Theologically, I was “saved”. Like a lot of Christians, I had trusted Jesus for forgiveness and salvation, but I had no idea how to *talk* to Him, *listen* to Him, *follow* Him, or allow Him to transform my life.

Legally, I was “married”, but I had no idea how to connect with my wife *spiritually* or *emotionally*. Previously, she’d had rich connections from family and friends; now we were alone, and the issues in our relationship came bubbling up to the surface.

I was working *for* God and Tina but did not understand how to allow God’s Spirit to work *in* me. That independence and self-reliance I’d spent years honing to a razor-sharp edge were destroying me. I wanted to earn God’s approval but did not understand approval was not something I could earn. God’s approval comes by faith in the redemptive work of Christ. I was living under the law but was desperate to learn how to live under grace.

I couldn’t see it yet, but everything I knew about faith was wrong. And if I couldn’t redefine this foundation, I was in trouble.

A Blessed Life

In John 15, Jesus teaches the well-known parable of the vine and the branches. Using the metaphor of a vine, fruit, and a gardener, he explains to his disciples the key to life was for them to remain connected to the vine.

Of course, the vine represents the connection to God through His son Jesus.

Stay connected, and we will live fruitful lives.

Disconnect, and you are cast aside and worthless.

I did not know how to have that kind of relationship with Christ. I did not know how to have that kind of relationship with Tina. In fact, I did not understand relationships at all. All of my life I believed I was on my own and success was up to me. I was independent, self-sufficient, and driven—and I liked it that way. I was *desperately* trying to win the approval of my new wife, my friends, my professors, my parents, and ultimately God.

My relationships were all *unintentionally conditional* because I didn't feel I could ever measure up. I was religious—which meant all work, no relationship. I was working hard; that's something I knew how to do well. But it was work in my own strength; it was *for* God but independently *of* him, and it was exhausting.

For years, I had been a success wherever I'd put my effort. People admired me and wanted to be like me. I was good at everything. Even all my friends' parents wanted them to be more like me.

Augustine said, "Pray as though everything depends on God, but work as if everything depends on you." I had the second part down to a science, so I was proud of my performance, my discipline, my obedience, and my zeal. But it was almost all *me*, and no *God*.

Suddenly, through the tears of my heartbroken and overwhelmed wife, I could see that all my hard work wasn't enough. Not even close. I was exposed. My marriage crisis humbled me, broke me, and brought me to a place of surrender and dependence.

But through it all, something amazing happened—it empowered me to love my wife. It was strange. When my family and friends thought I should be mad at Tina for saying she wanted to leave me, I discovered a love for her that surprised me. I did not understand

what was happening. How could I feel so much love, mercy, and desire for someone who was rejecting me?

I was not *trying* to love her; I simply could not help it.

Something was happening inside me that I could not explain.

I knew that if I had any hope of becoming the husband, the pastor, and the man I wanted to be in this life, then I had to figure some things out before moving forward.

As we dropped out of seminary and moved back home to try to rebuild our marriage, I had this strange, inexplicable faith that God was doing something in that moment that would change everything. For the first time in my life, I was free from the burden of performance and managing everyone's expectations. I didn't quite understand it at the time, but I was getting a taste of the life we were all created for. In the midst of my crisis, which was the most painful moment of my life, I began to discover a new life, a *blessed* life.

A lot of people use that term loosely to mean a variety of things. Most of them have to do with more or better *stuff*. But in the midst of this storm, I discovered what blessed truly means. In Matthew 11:28 Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle at heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy to bear and the burden I give you is light."

This is the Christian life! It is a life of humble dependence. It is not working *for* Him but *with* Him. I read this verse with new eyes, and it changed me from the independent and self-reliant achiever I'd always been, to a wholly-dependent and helpless-without-God servant.

Here's the lesson we don't always want to learn: once we come to the end of ourselves and turn to Jesus in desperation, we discover *new life*. When we are "yoked" to Jesus, He does the heavy lifting, and we find rest. We can lay down the burdens of religion, self-sufficiency, independence, and performance, and trust in the work of Christ for us and in us.

We begin to focus on being rather than doing.

We begin to feel his love and acceptance.

We begin to appreciate the beauty of the Gospel.

We begin to experience joy.

We begin to fall in love with Jesus.

We begin to live from our heart, which is captivated by the grace and generosity of God. He begins producing His life in us. This is the Christian life. This is what Jesus came to accomplish. This is the blessed life!

Life Undefined

My story is basically the American story in a nutshell. We are religious, and we want to do good, but somewhere between our heads and our hearts, we have lost God. We pride ourselves on our independence. We are "self-made." We are far more concerned about *what* we do than *who* we are. We have lots of acquaintances but very few friends. We know all *about* God but do not know how to develop our relationship into a friendship with Him. We want Jesus to get us to heaven, but we are unsure of how he can help us with our family, our work, or the heartbreaking issues in our world. We believe God has a big set of rules that we doubt we can never live up to, but we

do not understand His love for us, His desire to commune with us, and His willingness to carry our burdens.

It's a fuzzy faith with poorly-defined edges and uncertain application.

This is a problem, not only in our relationship with God, but also in our relationships with each other. Our relationships have been distilled down to simple transactions. What do you want from me, and what should I expect from you? This kind of thinking produces a relational tug-of-war with our spouse, our kids, our friends, our co-workers, and our neighbors. The problem with a relational tug-of-war is someone always finds themselves with blisters on their hands and covered in mud.

Why has this become such a problem?

Honestly, I am not sure I am the best person to answer that question. I am certainly not a sociologist, but after more than 20 years in ministry, seeing people at their very best and very worst, I do have a few thoughts.

First, we all long to live a blessed life. Most people in the world would not use that language, but the desire for blessing indwells us all. Mankind was created for Eden, and we've been trying to find our way back there whether we realize that or not. We want to be happy but fail to understand that our happiness, the very blessed life we were created for and searching for, is *dependent* upon a healthy and growing relationship with God.

Most people seek happiness independently of God and wonder why nothing fills the void. In fact, this is a pretty good stripped-down description of our sinful nature. We are created in God's image, but sin separates us from relationship.

Sin is our declaration of independence, and it is killing us.

Sadly, this is how our story began.

In the Garden of Eden, “God created the heavens and earth.” All that God created was good (Genesis 1:31). The sacred beauty and majesty of Heaven touched the water, dirt, and sky of earth. God and man walked in the coolness of the garden—together.

Life was good.

God’s plan in the very beginning was to create mankind in His image, to rule and reign with Him, under His authority, for His glory and the blessing of all people. God wanted to share Himself with us. He created us for relationship with Him and each other, and all that we needed for life would flow out of that relationship.

In Genesis 2:15, God commissioned Adam to “tend and watch over” the garden. My Hebrew professor, John Sailhamer, who is the editor of Genesis in the Expositor’s Commentary and the author of *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, as well as several other books on the Old Testament and Hebrew Language, says this translation is the result of a scribal error. He argues quite convincingly that this verse should be translated, “The Lord placed the man in the Garden of Eden to **worship and obey.**”

This translation is supported by a close examination of the original language, fits the narrative of the story, and coincides with the overall message of the scripture. The idea here is that God put Adam and Eve in the garden to enjoy Him and to enjoy each other. He did not create them to work. Work was the result of the fall (Genesis 3:17-19). He did have work for them to do, but God would provide all they needed as they walked with Him, and they ruled together over all of creation. Everything they needed for life, for relationships, and to rule would flow out of their relationship with God.

However, in Genesis 3, Satan convinces Adam and Eve that God is holding out on them. Satan convinces them that they can have it all,

without God, independent of His oppression. What Adam and Eve failed to understand, and what we still misunderstand today, is that *they already had it all, and God was doing the heavy lifting*. They were created to rule, to be a King and Queen, and build a royal family in paradise.

The world was perfect. No sin, no hard labor, no sickness, pain, disease, or death. No storms, no earthquakes, no plagues. No corruption, no abuse, and no slavery. However, Satan convinced them, if they declared their independence, they could be like God.

Their ambition and desire for independence blinded them to the fact that *they were already like God*. They were created in His image to rule and reign with Him (Genesis 1:27), to reflect His glory and enjoy His creation, but they were deceived. They decided to play God. They wanted to decide for themselves what was right and wrong. They did not want God or anyone else ruling over them.

In a moment that would change the world, they ate, and everything changed.

Heaven and earth were ripped apart.

God and man were separated by sin.

Adam and Eve introduced evil, pain, suffering, rebellion, independence, pride, war, and death into God's good creation. When the intimate, lifegiving connection between God and man was severed, all of creation suffered—including you and me. Adam and Eve sinned first, but our relationship with God has suffered ever since. Rather than enjoying and receiving from God, we began to hide. Rather than walking with unabashed intimacy, we began to cover ourselves in shame. We create a public image to hide our private sin. We are full of guilt, shame, and fear.

Not only did our relationship with God suffer, but our relationships with each other were affected as well. We became

victims, pointing fingers, and placing blame. Control and power struggles replaced love. We fight for our rights rather than fighting for our relationships.

All of creation suffered as a result of one choice. Paradise was lost, and our perfect home of safety, beauty, abundance, and delight began to die. We were put out of the garden and forced to work, to suffer under the sun, and to carry the burden of provision (Genesis 3:17-24).

Since that day, we have had one overwhelming desire—to get back to Eden. C.S. Lewis once said, “If I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.” We were made for another world; we can all feel it. Most do not understand the origin or object of their desire, but it all goes back to the garden where paradise was lost.

The question is, how do we get back there?

How do we find our way home?

How do we redefine what it means to live a life of faith?

In this twisted world where things seem to be spiraling out of control, where is Eden?

We have been reaching for heaven ever since the fall, but no matter how high we climb, no matter what we achieve, no matter how much we learn, we are still a long way from home. We experience glimpses of paradise. We get a taste of heaven in the ecstasy of love, in the beauty of creation, the satisfaction of food, in the complexity of the universe, in the birth of a new baby, or the wrinkled face of a beloved and wise elder. Each of these delights only increases our appetite, our longing for home.

Many have tried to satisfy this longing with worldly pleasures. Financial success, entertainment, sex, intoxicating substances, food,

education, competition, and accolades can't fill the void. Each of these pleasures only reminds us that something is missing. These temporary pleasures satisfy our hunger for a moment, but they fail to quench our thirst that comes back time and again.

How can we find our way back?

In a word, Jesus.

It sounds like the Sunday school answer, and it is, but there is so much more depth in that one name, and most Christians are simply scratching the surface. Jesus did not come just to get us into heaven (although that's what most people latch onto). The story is so much better than that! Jesus came to reunite us to God, the Father. Jesus came to reunite heaven and earth. Jesus came to redeem all of creation. Jesus came to invite us to come home, to experience a blessed life.

Jesus came to *redefine* everything about our lives.

Jesus came to show us the way home and give us a blessed life until we get there.

Back to the Garden

This is the compelling story and message of the Bible. In the first two chapters, God creates paradise, creates mankind, and invites us to rule and reign with Him forever building the kingdom of God on earth. Then, tragically, mankind declared our independence from God. Our relationship with God and each other was destroyed. The rest of the Bible describes man trying to create heaven *without* God and God trying to reveal to man His heart and character.

God patiently endures our sin, independence, and the pain and suffering we have caused hoping we will see His heart and hear His

invitation to *come home*, to be blessed. Finally, God goes all-in. He sends Jesus, His only son, to demonstrate a living example of God's character for us to follow and to redeem mankind. In the last two chapters of the Bible, God *has* redeemed all of creation.

Heaven and earth; God and man are reunited through the redemptive work of Christ, and we live with Him in paradise forever. Jesus came to make salvation available to all who put their trust in him.

When Jesus was here, he modeled and taught what life in the garden looks like. This is a life of humble dependence. The result? A life of blessing! That is the kind of relationship Jesus wants. He did not come to give us a list of rules.

The garden was not about rules but relationships. Jesus reduced the law to two relational directives; "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind... love your neighbor as yourself. The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commands." (Matthew 22:36-40)

The Kingdom of God is not about rules, but relationships. Rules come with loopholes, but love comes with mercy, authenticity, peace, and hope! When we love God and love each other we begin to experience the abundant life Jesus longs for us to experience (John 10:10). We are living life redefined. This is what Jesus is describing in John 15. Jesus wants us to understand that everything we need in life is going to flow out of our relationship and connection with him. Jesus said, "If you abide in me you will bear much fruit, but apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5). This is the life we lost that Jesus came to restore! This is the *blessed* life Jesus came to give us.

I'm a pastor, so naturally, I am around a lot of Christians. If asked, most would say, "Of course I love Jesus." And I believe them.

They do love Jesus.

They love what Jesus has done for them.

They love who he is.

They love knowing they will be in heaven one day.

Usually, they love the church and all their church friends.

But that's kind of where it stops. It's a shallow kind of love.

Very few Christians can honestly describe a personal, conversational, and daily connection with Jesus. They know they need Jesus to go to heaven but are not sure what he could possibly do to help them with everyday life. In fact, when they look back over their Christian life, if they were completely honest, they may even admit, *when I have been in trouble I have prayed and prayed but God never answered me*. Unanswered prayer is a topic too broad for us to tackle here, but one reason God is not answering is that we have departed from Him. I do not mean we are no longer Christians, but what I am saying is that at some point, we started making independent decisions, calling the shots, created a mess, and are now trying to talk God into bailing us out. God is not into bailouts. God is into character building, and the pain of our independence is often the catalyst that drives us into humble dependence and abundant life. This has certainly been true for me.

This is the path to a blessed life!

Often people wonder, why is there so much pain and suffering in our world?

On a macro-level, man declared independence from God and invited sin, rebellion, evil, pain, and suffering into God's good creation. God created a perfect paradise without any pain and suffering, but mankind corrupted God's good creation. The suffering in our world is the result of our sin and rebellion.

On a micro-level, each of us must decide if we are going to allow Jesus to be king. Is he going to be in charge, or are we going to declare our independence, make our own choices, and build our own kingdom? We are all born with a sinful nature. We are born revolutionaries. We are born with a stubborn determination to be in charge.

Hopefully, at some point later in life, usually motivated by the pain we have experienced on a macro- or micro-level, through our independence and rebellion or the independence and rebellion in our world, we are humbled, broken, surrender, and learn to live in dependence on Christ. We invite Jesus to be our king. This begins our journey into a blessed life. Therefore, God patiently tolerates the pain and suffering in our world, with a broken heart, knowing our pain points us to Jesus and leads us into a blessed and eternal life (John 11:1-44).

We have all heard that Christianity is about “a relationship, not religion”. What most mean by that is the way to heaven is through Jesus, not rules. This is true. Jesus is the only way to heaven, but cultivating a personal, tangible, conversational relationship with him now is the only way to experience a blessed life. This is what Jesus is describing in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus came to redefine for us what a relationship with God should look like. Jesus came to invite us out of the emptiness of religion and into the fullness of abundant life in Christ.

This book is about how to find your way there—to find your way home.

PART I

Reconnect with God and People

Blessing

Redefined

Jesus begins his ministry with a bang. You probably know the basics of Jesus's bio—he was born to Mary (a virgin) and Joseph in Bethlehem. The wise men came with gifts; Herod went on a rampage, and they fled to Egypt for safety. At some point, they made it back to Nazareth where Jesus was raised as the son of a carpenter. At age twelve, he taught in the temple and astonished the people there with his knowledge and wisdom. For nearly twenty years we don't know much about Jesus's life. But when it's time to begin his ministry, he starts with an intense forty-day period of prayer, fasting, and testing. Then, his wild-haired, camel-hair-wearing, locust-eating cousin baptizes him in the Jordan River.

His first miracle? Turning water into wine.

His first sermon? The Sermon on the Mount.

This very important sermon lays out Jesus's teaching on a variety of subjects. In this sermon, Jesus describes our relationship with him, each other, and our world. When Jesus climbed up the hillside to address the crowd on that first-century day, he looked out on primarily a Jewish audience. Most of these people were beaten down. They'd been occupied by the Roman empire, who took what they

wanted and cruelly punished those who didn't play by the rules. The prophets had been silent for four hundred years, and the followers of Yahweh were beginning to lose hope.

One thing they had plenty of was religion.

The Jews were very religious, and their relationship with God and each other was all about rules. But when Jesus began to teach that afternoon, he turned everything they thought they knew about God on its head.

Jesus came to show them—to show us—that God wants much more for us than to struggle to obey a list of rules. Anyone can obey the rules yet hate the rule-giver. Wayward teenagers and shackled prisoners know this. Jesus knew the rules were important, but he is after more than just our obedience. He wants us to have a strong relationship with him and with each other, which eliminates most of the pain and suffering in our world.

The Jews understood *religion*; Jesus was about to give them a crash course on *relationship*.

The Sermon on the Mount is his first, longest, and most famous sermon. It lays the theological foundation for the rest of his life and ministry, and the groundwork for the Christian faith. He begins with what we call the *Beatitudes*. The Beatitudes describe our spiritual posture before God and each other. These Beatitudes are the foundation of a blessed life.

Just as the ten commandments begin by addressing our relationship with God and then describe how our relationship with God should impact our relationships with each other, the Beatitudes do the same.

The first four Beatitudes describe *our relationship with God*; the second four describe how our relationship with God impacts *the way*

we relate to each other. It's only once our relationships with God and each other are healthy and growing that we are able to address the crucial ethical and moral questions of the day from a *relational* framework.

The teaching from the Sermon on the Mount helps us understand how each of these issues can be understood by filtering them through our love for God and our love for each other.

This is crucial for two reasons.

First, Jesus makes it clear that our first priority must be our relationship with God. If our relationship with God is strong, *He* changes our character and empowers us to love other people well. You don't have to be around people very long before you realize that some of them aren't always easy to love.

Second, this relational focus on both God *and* people illustrates the difference between Christianity and every other religious system. Religion compels us to work hard, follow the rules, and if you do enough, *maybe* you can earn a relationship with God.

It's like running a race without a finish line.

Jesus taught the opposite.

Jesus taught us to come to him just like we are, and he would change us *from the inside out*. This change means we would love him and he would fill our hearts with love for each other (Romans 5:1-5). We do not earn the right to be close to Jesus; Jesus did that for us by his death, resurrection, and indwelling presence. We do not work at loving each other, God *produces* His love for each other in our hearts. When we understand this, it sets our hearts free, takes the pressure to produce off, and leads us into new life, abundant life, a BLESSED life!

What Does it Mean to Be Blessed?

You may have heard this from a cashier after handing you your receipt: “Have a *blessed* day.” You may have even said it to someone else. But have you ever wondered what that actually means?

The word *blessed* means happy. At the moment Jesus delivered the Sermon on the Mount, the Jews were anything but happy. They did not look or feel *blessed*. They were suffering under the harsh, immoral, and pagan rule of the Roman Empire. They were hopeless and discouraged. For the last 400 years, God had been silent.

In today’s culture, Americans probably don’t feel much different.

We are more prosperous, more entertained, overfed, oversexed and yet—when you look around—miserable. We are stressed, afraid, anxious, empty, isolated, angry, broke, and lost. If our political party isn’t in office, we feel angry and oppressed. We fear missing out when we look at our social media feeds and see everyone else’s blessings.

We can’t hear God because the noise of culture drowns Him out.

We want hope and blessing but aren’t sure where to find it.

This is where the Jews found themselves that day.

So when Jesus steps on the stage, the people pay attention.

Jesus begins his ministry with an announcement, a proclamation. It’s wonderful news concerning the kingdom of God. It’s an unspoken question that stirs at the heartfelt desire that every person longs for—a life of blessing.

Jesus begins his ministry by inviting us into a *blessed* life, a new life, a happy life!

Think about how refreshing that must have felt to a broken and oppressed people.

They had no idea what was coming next, but he must have hooked them with this promise.

Jesus wants us to have the same things: be blessed and experience kingdom living. But what does that look like today? For most people (and maybe for you too) a blessed life means a life of security, popularity, prosperity, and health. These things may be nice, but they aren't what Jesus had in mind.

Jesus *redefined* what it means to be blessed.

Jesus is not offering a superficial, circumstantial blessing. Jesus had a new definition of blessed: *a deep sense of wellbeing, satisfaction, and contentment that comes from having a thriving relationship with Christ and cultivating healthy relationships with other people.*

Think about your own life for a moment. How might that kind of blessing change your life? What if you knew *exactly* how to begin your day in God's presence and experience His peace all day long? What if each of your relationships with the people in your life were healthy, vibrant, and thriving?

How might that change your life?

It's what Jesus would do for the next three years with his disciples. Every day they would walk *with him* and experience a relationship *with each other*. This would change everything.

You see, the Christian life is not about working for him or knowing about him but being **WITH** him. When we are with him, he works in and through us. When we are with him, we know him and people see him in us. When we are with him, we begin to relate to others the way he relates to us.

The blessing is not in doing but in being.

The blessing is the experience of walking with him.

The blessing is new life, the power of Christ at work in us.

Jesus is emphatic—*nine times*—he invites us into a new, blessed life in Christ!

Christ's words in this invitation, expose the emptiness of our pursuits. How many Americans would honestly describe themselves as blessed? Today we live like kings, and yet we feel empty, isolated, angry, disappointed, desperate, and lost.

We have luxuries today that were unimaginable in the first century. Electricity, air conditioning, indoor plumbing, refrigerators, cars, internet, cell phones, and beautiful houses with green grass in the yard are the norm. We have access to free public education, health care, hospitals, grocery stores, and unlimited entertainment. Yet deep down, we often feel empty, alone, and desperate. No matter what or how much we manage to stuff in our souls, we leak, feel empty, and the hunger pains remain.

What is missing? Where is the blessing?

Into our discontent, Jesus describes a life of blessing.

Jesus also models, over the next three years, what this life looks like. Humble dependence on the Father, unshakable strength in his purpose, plan, and power, and vibrant, giving, serving relationships with others.

This was the blessing.

Jesus was poor, misunderstood, falsely-accused, under constant spiritual attack, rejected, and crucified, yet because of his connection to the Father, he had peace of mind. He was blessed!

I know what you're thinking.

Well, sure he was blessed. Jesus was God, which is much different from me.

How can I experience this blessed life?

I'm glad you asked.

Jesus's Big Idea

The rest of Section 1 is going to unpack the Beatitudes from Jesus's Sermon on the Mount. It may turn your thinking inside out and upside down. That's good. That's how the Word of God changes your life.

But before we look at each of these Beatitudes, let's first ask the question *what is the big idea?* What is the overarching point Jesus is trying to make? What kind of life is the Christian life, a blessed life? The blessed life is a life of humble dependence that produces unexpected blessings.

Religion is about *my* effort, *my* works, *my* discipline, and what *I* can produce.

As Mr. Self-sufficient and Independent, this kind of religion worked for me because it was something I could control.

That's not the Christian life.

It's time to face the facts—what if everything you *think* you know about faith is wrong?

This may be jarring, but trust me; I've seen it for years, and when people allow Jesus to redefine what they know about faith, it's life-changing.

Jesus came because he was *pleading* for people to realize there was more to life than simply following the rules. The secret to a blessed life is coming to the end of yourself. It's recognizing that no matter how hard you try, and no matter what you accomplish, it does not satisfy.

Like a frustrated child who finally admits he needs a parent's help, you must give up to discover the blessing of a father's strong and generous touch. When you humble yourself and learn to live in dependence, you discover a new life. And in this new life, something wonderful happens—the pressure is off. Forgiven, united with

Christ, and walking with him, he produces his life in you, and you are blessed.

All of our striving only moves us further from God and hardens our hearts. All of our self-accomplishment builds walls around our souls. We must tear down these walls and accept God's gracious invitation to live a blessed life in Him.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus begins by describing the condition of a person's heart, the spiritual posture of those who live in him. Jesus is describing what it looks like to yield to him and allow the Holy Spirit to transform your life from the inside out.

Humility, brokenness, surrender, and dependence are the steps into new life and a new relationship with him. Once we taste this new life in Christ, it radically changes how we begin to relate to other people. We begin to experience unexpected mercy towards those who are hurting, a desire for authenticity, a passion for peace, and a willingness to value what is eternal over what is temporary.

Our relationships with God and each other begin to prosper. This empowers us to address the moral, social, and ethical issues of our day. It allows us to experience a blessed life and share that life with others. Most importantly, it equips us to *become like Jesus*. Jesus teaches us how we can be profoundly, deeply, and spiritually satisfied in our relationship with him and maintain this state throughout life's inevitable disappointments and suffering.

It's time to climb the mountain and sit at the feet of the Master.
Are you ready?

It's time to be blessed.

CHAPTER ONE

The Poor in Spirit

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs
is the kingdom of heaven.*

Here's a quick exercise for you: think of five adjectives you'd hope best describe you at the end of your life. Did you write them down? Now, look at your list. Was *poor* written anywhere on your list? How about *insignificant*, *not highly regarded*, or even *looked down upon*?

I'm guessing that none of those made your list.

If you're like most people, those descriptors wouldn't even be found in your top-50.

So why does Jesus begin his most famous sermon with these words: *Blessed are the poor in spirit*. To understand the why you have to first understand the what.

Being poor in spirit means recognizing that apart from the redeeming work of Christ, you are spiritually bankrupt. This is not an easy thing to admit. This challenges our cultural understanding

that all people are morally good. The truth is, we are born sinners. All people are born bad, evil, self-centered, and immoral.

God wants to produce humility in each of us. He can't do that when we lie about who we are.

In Romans 3:10-12, Paul says, "No one is righteous, no not even one. No one is truly wise; no one is seeking God. All have turned away; all have become useless. No one does good, not a single one."

Jesus said, "It is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come—sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person" (Mark 7:21-23). If you have the courage to look at the deepest part of your soul, you understand the truth in these words.

But that takes courage and a willingness to own up to your shortcomings.

Most people would rather gloss over them and present an inauthentic version of themselves that they think the world wants to see. This isn't the way to God's blessing. His blessing does not come from *denying* our wickedness but by understanding and experiencing the transforming power of God's grace.

When we understand the depth of our depravity, we can appreciate the beauty of the Gospel and begin moving toward humble dependence. This dependence *upon* God (being poor in spirit) becomes the foundation of our relationship *with* God and people.

Having a proper understanding of our spiritual condition without Christ and all that Christ has won for us through his death and resurrection produces humility, gratitude, and wonder as we discover the depth of God's love, grace, mercy, and generosity.

This produces worship in our hearts.

This is what it means to be humble in heart and poor in spirit.

In this selfie generation, we've become impressed with ourselves. We stand so close to the mirror that the glory of God is hidden from our sight. We worship ourselves—we look to ourselves for identity, security, and happiness—but if we are honest, we find the burden of playing God exhausting.

In Romans 1:18-32, Paul describes what happens when we reject God and attempt to find or create a blessed life without Him. He describes how our vain pursuit, independent of God, has produced a curse not a blessing, death not life, bondage not freedom, and rage not joy. This is why when you look at our world you see and can even feel the rage of our frustration and disappointment. In the words of the cultural philosophers U2, "We still haven't found what we're looking for."

Jesus says stop striving, stop trying to produce what you are incapable of producing. Empty yourself and turn to me. In essence, see yourself for what you are and *give me room to work*.

Religion says if you work a little harder and do a little better you can please God.

We like that because it makes us feel in control.

However, the Bible teaches the opposite. It says my good works are like filthy rags (Isaiah 64:6). Apart from Jesus, my good works are an expression of my independence and rebellion. It is my way of saying to Jesus, just like a small child, "I can do it all by myself!"

It's funny in children, not so much in people who should know better.

You see, good deeds are a way for me to exalt myself over God. They put the focus on me and make me the hero of the story. But

if I am going to be blessed, Jesus says, I have to come to the end of myself. I must come to the place where I realize that despite my religious activity or my best efforts, without Him, I am nothing.

Religious activity and good works may impress people, but if they are not the fruit of our relational connection with God, they become a self-imposed barrier and overlook the condition of our hearts.

We may long and beg for God's blessing, but God's presence is optional. However, if we humble ourselves and turn back to God, if we admit our bankruptcy and cry out to Him, He will bless us.

Sometimes this can be a painful process.

Lessons in Humility

This is one of the real dangers of religion and what Jesus came to combat. Religion convinces us we are good. With religion, we feel like we have done well, especially compared to our non-religious friends. The problem is, rather than humble dependence, religion creates prideful *independence*, which becomes a barrier between us and God and robs us of a blessed life.

This is one of the dangers of American culture. You can live an immoral, self-centered life for years and experience "success" without ever recognizing the condition of your soul and the long-term consequences of your pride.

But this has been going on for as long as people have walked the earth.

We see this pattern throughout the Bible in the lives of the biblical characters. Most of these men started out like me. They did not know how to walk with God, so their relationships were a mess. Rather than humble dependence, they were prideful and

independent. This pride led to their fall. Then through their suffering (poorness of spirit) they learned humility and dependence, and despite their trials and suffering, began to experience a blessed life.

Joseph was the spoiled, favored son of Jacob. This made him proud and mouthy. He was a dreamer, ambitious, and chosen by God. However, he was immature. By not learning to walk with God, he damaged his relationship with his brothers. His judgment towards them drove a wedge in their relationship. You probably remember the story—Joseph ends up being sold into slavery, his beautiful coat of many colors covered in blood.

I am sure Joseph asked himself the question, *What have I done?*

Over time, he began to see how his pride and disrespect for his older brothers led him to this place. This once arrogant young man reached rock bottom and realized he desperately needed God's grace.

The first step into a blessed life is not physical freedom but spiritual freedom, not pride but humility. Joseph needed to be freed from pride before he could be freed from slavery. His pride produced his bondage and blocked his blessing. It does the same for us until we become poor in spirit.

Moses was rescued by God as a baby and raised in the Palace of Pharaoh. Growing up in the palace provided Moses with a world-class education and military training. He was connected, influential, wealthy, and powerful. However, his privileged upbringing also had a downside. It made him arrogant and intolerant, religious but unspiritual, impulsive, and independent.

A young, strong, zealous man, he witnessed an Egyptian soldier mistreating a Jew and reacted without thinking. In a moment of passion, he killed this soldier and was forced to flee the country as a fugitive.

In the years that follow, Moses goes from being a prince of Egypt to a lowly, unknown shepherd. Day after day and night after night as he watched his sheep and contemplated the turn his life had taken, he found himself asking the question, *What have I done?*

When we do something foolish and life falls apart, we all ask this question. In those quiet moments, Moses began to see his arrogance, pride, and independence—not as assets, but as liabilities. He assumed God was finished with him, but God was just getting started. Moses was becoming poor in spirit.

Even walking in-person with Jesus, you can still fail to be poor in spirit. Peter was proud and independent. At the Passover Meal, he boasted, “Even if all these other disciples fall away, I will never fall away; I am prepared to die for you.” But later that night after Jesus was arrested, Peter denied him three times and was exposed. As Jesus looked into Peter’s eyes, Peter must have been thinking *What have I done?*

Those next hours must have been torture for Peter as he looked at himself with shame. His arrogance and his boasting were broken as humility and broken spirit flooded in. Peter thought he was finished, but God was just getting started. After the resurrection, a humble Peter reconnects with Jesus and becomes the Rock of the early church and begins to understand the blessed life.

Paul was a religious zealot, a Pharisee, a defender of Judaism, and a persecutor of the church. Paul traveled from city to city to arrest, punish, and kill Christians. He was an international terrorist and proud of it.

However, on his way to the city of Damascus, Paul was surrounded by a blinding light and was about to make a shocking, life-changing discovery that would break his arrogance and pride

and force humility on him in an instant. As the light shone upon him, Paul fell to the ground and Jesus asked, "Saul! Saul! Why are you persecuting me?" Paul does not know who is speaking to him, so he asks, "Who are you, Lord?" A voice, out of the blinding light responds, "I am Jesus, the one you are persecuting!"

In that moment, time stood still. Paul's mind was racing. *Could this be real? Am I dreaming? Have I gone crazy? Is Jesus, the one I have been persecuting, actually the Messiah?* Jesus told Paul to go to the city and he would receive instructions about what to do next. On that long, quiet ride Paul was in shock, asking the question, *What have I done?*

God showed him the depth of his depravity, his pride, his violence, and his judgment, and once his eyes were open, poorness in spirit flooded in. This self-confessed "chief of sinners" now had a new life and a new blessing to pursue. His mission: share the Gospel with the world.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son. In his pride, this son rebelled against his father, declared his independence, left home, and began indulging in immorality. After squandering his inheritance, he finds himself working for a pig farmer. He is so hungry he is longing to eat the pig's food. He must have been asking, *What have I done?*

The once-proud young Jewish man is completely humiliated and decides to return to his father. He is poor in spirit. When he finally crosses the field to stand before the father he rejected, he says, "Father, I am not worthy to be your son." In response to his son's humility, the father covered his filth with his robe, trusted him with authority and responsibility, and threw a party to celebrate his return.

These stories show us what it's like to become poor in spirit and serve as a reminder that it's a continual battle. Rebellion and independence always drive us away from the Father. Sometimes our rebellion and independence are expressed in our immorality and sometimes our good works, but either way, we find ourselves a long way from home.

The Christian life is a life of humble dependence. God wants to bless us, but we must come to the end of ourselves, return home, and throw ourselves on His mercy. But how do we come to the end of ourselves?

I learned that lesson the hard way.

When I left home to attend seminary, I was the opposite of poor in spirit. In fact, I arrived feeling pretty good about myself. I was more zealous than most. I was bold, courageous, strong, and passionate. I possessed a great work ethic. I was a natural leader, and I loved church.

Church had provided me a platform to lead and excel.

Ministry earned me the respect and admiration of others.

I loved Jesus and was grateful for my salvation, but my life was a façade.

Despite all my efforts, I did not know how to have a personal relationship with him. I did not understand the importance of connecting with him each day. I had no idea how to follow his lead. I couldn't see how my relationship with Jesus impacted my other relationships.

Jesus was my job.

From outward appearances, I had it all together.

Inside, I had the shallowest of relationships with Jesus, was fiercely independent, battling a secret porn addiction, and critical

and judgmental towards those who did not match my religious zeal. I was just like the Pharisees that Jesus criticizes in Matthew 23.

Outside, I looked great; inside, I was a complete mess.

I had the same problem in my marriage. The relational issues we have with Jesus will manifest themselves in all our relationships. I loved my wife and enjoyed being a husband. I thought I was working hard to do what husbands are supposed to do. I was a good provider, I helped around the house, and I was committed to our marriage. But marriage is more than just doing the right things.

Since I did not know how to connect with Tina's heart, she felt unloved.

We were married, but to her, it felt like we were just roommates. We lived in the same home, but we were living separate, independent lives, and it was killing her. When my marriage fell apart and the illusion was shattered, I realized how relationally bankrupt I really was.

It left me thinking, *What have I done?*

Without Jesus I was nothing; I had nothing.

It was the first time I really understood what it meant to be *poor in spirit*.

Sometimes it takes seeing your world blow up to drop the pretense and embrace authenticity.

From then on, I stopped faking it. I made a commitment to kick my hypocrisy to the curb.

I'd been trying to live a perfect life; now I wanted to live a transparent life.

I knew that without Jesus I was going to lose everything that was important to me. Perhaps you've found yourself there before. Maybe that is where you find yourself now—desperate, broken,

and humiliated. It's not a fun place to be, but that's exactly where you find God.

The Kingdom of God does not belong to the well-meaning but to the desperate.

Humility is rarely our default. It's much easier to slip into pride, but pride and independence eventually lead to our downfall. If you are serious about becoming like Jesus, it's time to be broken in spirit.

Jesus says the poor in spirit will get a taste of the kingdom of heaven here on earth. It comes through our union and fellowship with Christ in the person and work of the Holy Spirit. Although we are not back in paradise yet, and things are not yet as they will be, we *can* experience a taste of God's kingdom on earth if we learn to empty ourselves of pride and walk with Him.

Kingdom living is not just a future promise but a present reality for the poor in spirit. Those who recognize their spiritual bankruptcy and throw themselves on the mercy of God can rest in His grace and experience a blessed life. When you humble yourself and learn to trust God's grace the pressure is off.

You do not have to perform.

You can rest in His grace and trust Him to produce his life in you.

And that strengthens every relationship.

That leads to a blessed life.