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Foreword by
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NEIGHBORHOODS

REIMAGINED



How the Beatitudes Inspire our Call to be Good Neighbors

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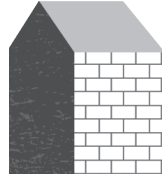
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Contents

Foreword	01
Introduction: How the Beatitudes and Neighboring Go Together	05
1. Spiritual Zeros	19
2. Good Grief	39
3. From Me-ness to Meekness	57
4. Not Just a Drive-thru	75
5. Forecasting Compassion	93
6. Be Whole and Behold	111
7. Making a Difference in Difference	127
8. Counting the Cost	147
Conclusion: Beatitude Recap	167
Acknowledgments	173
Endnotes	175





INTRODUCTION

How the Beatitudes and Neighboring Go Together

Breakups are never fun. Chances are, you've been through at least one in your life, and whether you were the dumper or the dumpee—the one ghosting or being ghosted—it had to be done.

Before we were married, we both went through our fair share of breakups. Our favorite is the time I (Chris) had to endure the insufferable goodbye-drive to the airport after “letting someone go.” To ease the awkward silence, I turned on the radio to a cruel joke: Coldplay’s “The Scientist.” You know—the one where Chris Martin agonizes over how hard it is to part ways, and how no one had ever prepared us for how difficult it could be.

I can laugh about it now ...

Some breakups are mutual, some one-sided, some ugly, and some out of leftfield. Sometimes you are looking for different things and just decide to “work on yourselves” and “see other people.”

Neighborhoods Reimagined

“It’s not you, it’s me.”

“You’re gonna make someone really happy someday.”

“We can still be friends, right?”

But it’s not just teenagers. Somewhere along the way, as a society, we culturally broke up with our neighbors, the next-door ones. It wasn’t sudden or premeditated; it may even have been an accident. It just kind of happened. You could say it was mutual, but we never said it out loud. Life got busy; work got crazy. There was no bad blood. We just kind of drifted apart and now we haven’t spoken for years.

A neighborly breakup happened at some point. It isn’t just a feeling, it’s a fact.

In 2005, a Georgetown University study found that 47 percent of Americans knew almost none of their neighbors.¹ Thirteen years later in 2018, the number of people who knew only a few or even none of their neighbors’ names climbed to 68 percent.² And no doubt we will all recognize the spike in the post-2020 graph.

We said there’s no bad blood, but that’s not entirely true. There’s some mistrust. The truth is, as we’ve grown apart, the social fabric of our neighborhoods has torn and frayed. Trust has waned to the point where we now feel a sense of panic when there’s a knock at the door (*Quick—Hide!*). We have bigger peep holes and more sophisticated doorbells, complete with security cameras and smart speakers.

Research confirms our newly installed trust issues. Surveys say less than half of us trust our next-door neighbors and those in the youngest demographic, ages 18–29, check in at an even higher rate of 61 percent.³ We no longer value introductions, and without having names and relationships to buffer our urban and

How the Beatitudes and Neighboring Go Together

suburban differences, we get awkward and can't find common ground. We assume nearby strangers are strange, and we stick to our inner circle and social media tribe.

Our political and social climate has further exacerbated things even more. We're so entrenched in our viewpoints that we consider it exhausting to listen to another perspective. It's tough to stay engaged when our neighbor drops political no-no's into casual conversation at the mailbox. Big issues have called for big fences, and they're so tall now we can barely see over them. As a culture at large, we've decided it might just be better for everyone if we all minded our own business and left our neighbors alone.⁴

We would never say these next-door strangers have become our next-door enemies—we just ignore them. But Jesus said that's what religious people do to those they don't really love (Lk. 10:30–37). He pointed out that even the churchiest-of-the-churchy put in their AirPods when faced with those they consider non-neighbors. So, if being more religious isn't the pathway to better neighboring, what is?

Move that Bus

Since no one really knows who discovered Chip and Joanna Gaines, let's just say I (Elizabeth) did. I was *for sure* one of the first to watch their HGTV show *Fixer Upper* when it initially aired, and I remember telling Chris I had two new best friends. But it's not just Joanna's flair for design, Chip's mad carpentry skills, or even their dynamic relationship that makes it a compelling show. There's a single story we love in every episode and the million others like it. *Property Brothers*, *Flip or Flop*, *Love It or List It*—they're all versions of the same home-reno fairytale we've

Neighborhoods Reimagined

been watching for over twenty years now. There's one playbook and it gets us every gosh-darn time.

First, we do the walk-through of the house in crisis. There's clutter, water damage, mold, and termites. We're convinced no one can turn this wretched space into something functional, let alone beautiful. Cue my favorite, the virtual tour. We marvel at the impossible vision the host presents. How could they have even imagined *this* from *that*? We're mesmerized, but by faith we believe. The design meeting wraps up. The host turns to the homeowners and smiles: "Let's get to work!" Off they go.

You know what comes next: demo and problems. The foundation is crumbling, the electrical wiring needs to be totally replaced, and the HVAC ducts need to be rerouted. Inevitably, as these problems arise, the homeowners get irritable. When they take their frustrations out on the host, their grievances are met with reassurance that they're right on track. They're gently reminded to refocus their hope on the future vision of their remodeled home.

Finally, the big reveal. We channel the homeowners' nerves and excitement. Our eyes are closed and the host asks if we're ready to see our fixer upper. The house is blocked by a huge picture of its original state—or a massive automobile—and we chant, "Move that bus!" And then ... Our minds and hearts can't handle the shock of seeing the remodeled home in all its glory. All the stress is behind us, we can't even remember what it was like before. It's restored to its original beauty, it's better. It's as it ought to be.

Different Strokes

Early on in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount, three stunning chapters that open with the beatitudes—

How the Beatitudes and Neighboring Go Together

eight pithy statements laying out the qualities Jesus is looking for in his followers along with the blessings they'll bring. In the beatitudes, Jesus gives us a virtual tour of what life can be like once the bus is moved. And while they're meant to be applied to all areas of our life, over the next eight chapters we're going to specifically imagine how our neighborhoods could change if the beatitudes were lived out right where we are, right now. Jesus is lifting our eyes and giving us a better vision for what could happen if his renewing and transforming work were to come home with us.

In doing so, he knows the broad, sweeping obstacles we face in our neighborhoods. He sees the general ruin and disrepair. He understands the specific and unique challenges of our individual addresses—the isolation, independence, social anxiety, overscheduling, suspicion, inattentiveness, and other seemingly insurmountable hurdles. But he has plans.

Just picture it: long shadows cast on a scenic, sunlit mountainside covered in wildflowers and laced with olive trees. A gentle breeze meandering through the murmurs of the crowd, stretching toward the Sea of Galilee in the distance. Jesus is about to give us the first eight verses of what many would call the greatest sermon of all time.

Are you ready? ... Drumroll, please! ... Here it comes, the big reveal ...

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn,
for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek,
for they will inherit the earth.

Neighborhoods Reimagined

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful,
for they will be shown mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:3–10).

(Crickets)

We are crestfallen. *Seriously?! That's the big reveal? We're dumbfounded.* These renderings are not the ones we expect or have our hearts set on. These are ... *different*. R. T. France highlights just how different: "Imagine a different world, different identity, different set of practices, different relationship to the status quo."⁵

Jesus' blueprints are all upside-down and backwards.

Dale Allison says: "the beatitudes were intended to startle."⁶ Startled is one way to put it. How could Jesus think this upside-down vision would be the means to restoring glory and beauty to our neighborhoods? They're nice teachings (if you could do them) but don't they seem a little pie-in-the-sky-esque? Jesus didn't think so. He offered them as a way of life meant to be lived out in nitty-gritty ways in our local communities.⁷

Jesus is introducing us to a radical new vision for what it means to be human.⁸ He's presenting a countercultural view to what we've learned in the world, and possibly in our Christian subcultures as well. They are "not ideas to strive to attain or

How the Beatitudes and Neighboring Go Together

formulas for power, rather descriptions of a kind of people characteristic of the new age.”⁹ They are the characterizing markers of a faith rooted in Jesus.

The beatitudes are both the vision and the pathway to seeing the renewing and transforming work of Christ’s kingdom come more and more to our neighborhoods. In *your* neighborhood. However upside-down this way of living might appear, it’s the way Jesus turns neighborhoods right-side-up.

The Good Life

Our newsfeeds give a health and wealth perspective on what it means to be happy and #blessed. We find ample humble brags about romantic island getaways, new cars, a heroic significant other, skincare regimens, and family Easter pics—you know, *the good life*.

The good life philosophy goes back to Socrates. It’s a life in which we’re living in the nicest neighborhoods with the best school districts, right beside a beautiful park. We are talking high on comfort, low on problems. There’s a measure of pleasure—even luxury, fulfillment, and meaning. It’s a don’t-worry-be-happy life that can be earned and achieved, we think. But no. Though it’s easier said than done, we must disentangle from these worldly #goals though they run so deep in our culture.

In contrast to these worldly ways, Jesus offers an alternative understanding of what it means to live the good life. As Jonathan Pennington puts it, these are “wisdom invitations to the kind of life that will experience flourishing ... though they seem profoundly non-flourishing in nature.”¹⁰ These blessings are not rewards we earn for right behavior. They are the route

Neighborhoods Reimagined

of heart-formation that will take place when we reorient ourselves as neighbors who identify with the ways of Jesus.

Grace and virtue are not enemies; they're best friends. We are not redeemed by the beatitudes, but the beatitudes show we've been redeemed.

David paints a picture of the kind of unexpected flourishing we find in living Jesus' way:

Blessed is the one
 who does not walk in step with the wicked
or stand in the way that sinners take
 or sit in the company of mockers,
but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and who meditates on his law day and night.
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,
 which yields its fruit in season
and whose leaf does not wither—
 whatever they do prospers (Ps. 1:1–3).

What if you and I were like this flourishing, fruit-bearing, shade-making tree in our neighborhoods? What if our neighbors were attracted to the fruit and shade of Christ in our lives? What if they saw us live out this kind of “different” and flourish with a poverty of spirit? Would it cause them to be curious about Christ for once ... or again?

Would it challenge their thinking to see a Christian neighbor flourish in an all-together different kind of way? What if our neighbors saw that Jesus made a difference in how we think about our politics? Or the way we talk about our bosses? What if they were to see meekness and peace in us? What if entitlement

How the Beatitudes and Neighboring Go Together

and rage were missing? Would they think we were living our best lives?

If your neighbors had a bird's eye view into your living room or kitchen, would they see this alternative good life?

Our Story

When we moved into our home eleven years ago, we never set out to write a book on neighboring. We were quite fine hunkering down like everyone else around us. Except that we weren't fine. In truth, we were in one of the most stressful seasons of our life and it was really our neediness that prompted us to consider connecting with those in our proximity. This in turn, led us to the conundrum of how to meet "said neighbors," since we were all so isolated. We needed an excuse ... ours was a fish fry. That's when something special happened—though we hardly recognized it at the time—we went from side-by-side strangers to acquaintances, the first step.

What started as a little get-together with a few couples, became a tradition for our little suburban subdivision and grew over the years to include five streets and a few cul-de-sacs. Now yearly when the weather gets nice, we gather as singles, empty-nesters, young parents, toddlers and teens—everyone showing up outside our home with a big appetite and food to share. Some are holding newborns, some swapping health sagas, some making TikTok videos; all feeling like we're a part of one big family. The fish fry became the first of many excuses we've made to hang out and build relationships with those around us. Whether through hot sauce nights, yard sales, egg hunts, or our walking school bus, we've grown close to neighbors across generations, racial demographics, and worldviews. We've sought

Neighborhoods Reimagined

the common good of the neighborhood together and seen our community come alive.

It felt vulnerable at first, though. After all, no one had appointed us the mayors of our neighborhood. But as we pushed through obstacles and insecurities, we found that most neighbors were just waiting for someone else to make the first move. Over time, what began as casual connections at a yard sale or neighborhood clean-up day evolved into deeper friendships that could bear much weightier conversations ... conversations about struggle and loss and purpose and God. We started to see some neighbors try church on for size and some begin to follow Jesus. Not every neighbor has been baptized or is even spiritually interested of course, but God is at work on these five streets, we can tell you that.

Aha Moment

On the heels of Jesus' beatitude vision, comes a familiar passage:

You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt loses its saltiness, how can it be made salty again? It is no longer good for anything, except to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, *let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven* (Mt. 5:13–16, emphasis added).

I (Elizabeth) was already sold on the idea that each follower of Christ has been placed in a particular neighborhood to serve

How the Beatitudes and Neighboring Go Together

him there, but when Chris initially proposed the idea of writing a book about neighboring and the beatitudes, I wasn't so sure. The language felt unfamiliar and intimidating to me. Words like poor, hungry, and persecuted were ones I'd rather avoid than write a book about. Overall, I feared we'd be out over our skis with a passage too difficult to understand, let alone apply.

But I had an "aha moment" when I discovered that the well-known and beloved salt and light passage immediately followed these strange, upside-down phrases on kingdom blessing.¹¹ I felt convicted that if I wanted to grow in showing and sharing the love of Jesus in a bright and salty way, it would serve me well to back up twelve verses to the beginning of Matthew 5. So, Chris and I dived in together and both became convinced that these beatitude renderings are not only the roadway Jesus gives for our flourishing, but for living as salt and light in our dark and flavorless world.

And we can begin right in the place we're arguably our most authentic selves: at home. Whether your neighborhood consists of five streets in the suburbs like ours, five homes in the outskirts, or five stories in the city, you've been placed for a purpose and your context is unique. Maybe your closest neighbor is a mile away or maybe they're living right above you and you can hear them shuffling about as you're reading this page. Whether you're rather spread out, all crammed into the same building, or somewhere in-between, God has placed you to bring salt and light right where you are.

We Can't Even

But before you go making beatitude banners and hanging these adages on your bathroom walls, we should ask—have you tried

Neighborhoods Reimagined

to be merciful for an hour? Is meekness or mourning your cup of tea?

In a way, we're all kind of like those awkward television singing-competition contestants, and no one (not even Mom) has the heart to tell us that we're unprepared, unqualified, and just don't have what it takes to live out this opening section in the fifth chapter of the book of Matthew.

If we'll listen, the beatitudes will break our hearts. In our strength, we just cannot do them. Not with our neighbors, not with anyone.

But when all hope is gone, a hidden door opens and light shines in. Jesus peeks through. He reveals himself as our true example; the fulfillment of each and every beatitude. When we find him persecuted, poor in spirit, pure in heart, and peacemaking, we will no longer despair. We will worship as we find our mourning, meek, and merciful Savior, hungering and thirsting to put right the wrongs around him.

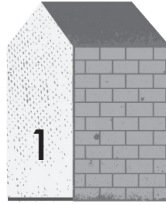
Then, as those newly dependent on his Spirit, we'll have new eyes to see Jesus' ongoing renovation of our neighborhoods, imagining how these invitations might play out. When we get discouraged by all the obstacles and all the problems we see in ourselves and around us, that's part of the work, too. Jesus, our gracious host, comes to us in our hardhats and bootstraps, and he gently reassures us that his vision will one day be reality. He reminds us it's his work from the start. That his kingdom is advancing and will one day cover the entire world as the waters cover the seas, including the very corner of the world in which we now live, our neighborhoods. He will do it and we will live in restored and renovated neighborhoods where we wholly reflect him.

How the Beatitudes and Neighboring Go Together

Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God (Rev. 21:3).

As we mull over Jesus' upside-down kingdom, watch him live out each beatitude, and save us from our inability to do them ourselves, we will be transformed into new kinds of neighbors. Thankfully neither Jesus nor our neighbors expect polished, pretty, or perfect. Just you, as you are. We'll be changed by Jesus together.

But we start at the end ... the end of us.



Spiritual Zeros

Jesus said: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The world says: "Blessed are the self-assured, for they will retire early with spiritual independence."

Imagination is a good thing. Everything that exists is a product of imagination—airplanes and alarm clocks, sidewalks and sandcastles, vending machines and the internet. Before they existed, they lived in someone's mind.

Our imaginations bring hope to all the maybe and what-if possibilities that run through our heads. We can be transported to an exotic beach across the ocean simply by closing our eyes or replay a conversation with the witty remark we wish we'd said. We can see ourselves traveling the world, buying our dream home, or even just losing a few pounds. Creative juices are unlocked when we envision what it would be like to do the big thing we've talked about for years.

Neighborhoods Reimagined

With the beatitudes, Jesus is inviting us to reimagine ourselves and our neighborhoods—to picture what it would look like for his kingdom values to take up residence in our hearts and our neck of the woods. These eight beatitudes are his invitations for you to see yourself and the half-mile radius around you in a whole new way. Ready? Here comes the first one, so buckle up.

You carefully tear open the envelope with one eye squinted closed. Long pause ...

The first invitation is totally empty.

Insufficient Funds

Ambiance is everything, is it not? A tidy classroom, an aromatic kitchen, a candlelit dinner. What would be a fitting venue to set the tone for arguably the greatest sermon of all time? Jesus was gaining notoriety and needed somewhere he could deliver his manifesto. Matthew tells us just prior:

News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him (Mt. 4:24–25).

He had the magic touch and people were taking note. He was gaining followers from every direction. It was becoming clear this wasn't some low-key thing; it was a movement. All this buzz called for a massive stage with bright lights and two massive screens, minimum ... or a grassy hill. You can guess which one Jesus picked.

Spiritual Zeros

Amidst high-running religious tensions and messianic expectations, Jesus was setting a different kind of stage with his first beatitude. This was a mountain vision of downwardness, so to speak. If his fans were wanting in on celebrity, platform, and power, Jesus' opener had a lot of potential for side eyes and awkward silences. Just when they thought there was nowhere to go but up, all signs were pointing down. And we're talking way down.

There they were, squeezed in near some neighbors they hadn't spoken to in years, fiddling grass between their fingers, the sun in their eyes, their worldviews about to get rocked.

Imagine you're there, too. Jesus taps the microphone a few times and the sound bounces back with a high-pitched squeal. Finally, he sits down and begins: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:3).

Come again? Since you've never before heard the words "poor in spirit" strung together in a sentence, it sounds like Jesus is speaking a foreign language. Why would anyone want to be poor—in spirit or in any regard for that matter—and how could spiritual brokenness be something that leads to personal and collective blessing?

In a world of haves and have-nots, this sounds like an invitation to disadvantage. Who would choose being poor over being privileged? Candidly speaking, the first blessing sounds more like a curse.

Needy Neighbors

Neighbors come in all shapes and sizes. Over the last eleven years, we've gotten to know lots of different neighbors from all different backgrounds. Atheists and agnostics, Hindus and

Neighborhoods Reimagined

hedonists, swingers and seekers, pantheists and palm readers, the list goes on. Our neighborhood is filled with progressives and conservatives, old and young, introverts and extroverts, partiers, busy-bodies, empty-nesters ... you get it.

What are your neighbors like? If you stopped to chat for a bit after grabbing the mail, how do you imagine the conversation would flow? Would it feel clumsy? Would they dodge you? Would they be pleasantly surprised by your initiative? Perhaps they would hold you hostage and talk your ear off, ignoring social cues that your groceries are getting heavy and you're anxious to get in and let your dog out? At the end of a long day, these unknowns are a lot to navigate, especially if the neighbor is ... needy.

Our culture demonizes needy people. At best they're insecure and socially unaware; at worst, they're manipulative and never satisfied. We instinctively fear neediness and dissociate ourselves from it. But before we write off this kind of vulnerability, we need to turn the spotlight on ourselves. What if we're the needy ones? And what if it's supposed to be that way? Jesus has a different gauge for being a needy neighbor and it isn't all bad.

Jesus knew what he was doing with this first beatitude. With it, he offers us a deep dive into understanding our self-lack. We started our discipleship journeys by coming to Jesus with nothing in our pockets, and being poor in spirit means we *keep* coming to God that way. We never move on from the fact that we were down and out without Christ. It's not our goal to retire early as spiritually independent. Even with all the riches of Christ now ours, there's an ongoing acknowledgment that he did all the work, and without that early inheritance transfer into our account, we'd be bad-off and spiritually broke without him.

Spiritual Zeros

Being poor in spirit has a lot to do with our view of the “self.” It’s resisting the urge to be self-supported, self-ruling, and self-sufficient; it’s believing we flourish when we stay listed as dependents.

Though Jesus’ first preaching point might strike us as unfortunate, it’s not out of the blue. The Bible has a habit of highlighting beggars and borrowers. Inadequacy, weakness, inability, emptiness—some of Jesus’ best conversation starters.

It’s true. God has a thing for the weak ones. Remember Moses was not overly impressed with himself and was hyper aware of his incompetencies, Gideon thought his lowborn beginnings would make it impossible for God to use him, and Isaiah was dumbstruck when he saw how messed-up he really was. And that’s just getting started. Each one held their own “Help Wanted” sign.

Rather than imagining the kingdom of heaven will come to our neighborhoods when we arrive as self-sufficient saviors with all the answers, we need to readjust our mental image and come empty-handed, having insufficient funds, and a deep God-dependence. And we stay there. In the words of the hymn writer, “Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling.”¹

But it’s not easy.

Me Monster

A while back, we saw a comedic sketch about a “Me Monster,” a narcissistic dinner guest whose favorite thing to talk about is me, myself, and I.² As he goes on, the comedian wants to know what it is about the human condition that likes to one-up and top people in conversations. His social fantasy involves beating the Me Monster’s story with a much better one. We laugh because we can relate, both to being topped and doing the topping.

Neighborhoods Reimagined

We all have an inner Me Monster. It's our first counterfeit beatitude, the version of us that believes we're self-proficient. It's why we look inside ourselves for answers, help, and resources, and the reason we posture and pretend. Me, myself, and I want to be seen as important and put-together. We love to hear ourselves talk. Listening? Not so much. Gifted, sharp, interesting—we like it. Poor, empty, needy ... it's a no from me, dawg.

Our Me Monsters wonder why Jesus didn't start his sermon with something more practical, like tips about self-confidence and self-expression, to give us a better shot at becoming neighborhood influencers. In a culture where our neighbors' fences already feel so high, we feel the urge to put our very best selves forward and yet, me, myself and I stands as the biggest adversary to the first beatitude.³

This is where all those DIY videos maybe haven't just helped but hurt us. We can watch a five-minute YouTube tutorial on how to finish our decks, install bathroom tiles, and update our light fixtures—All. By. Ourselves. Our counterfeit beatitude persuades us: “Blessed are the self-assured, for they will retire early with spiritual independence.”

Living as salt and light amongst our churched, dechurched, and unchurched neighbors however, is going to require outside help. When Jesus calls us to be poor in spirit in our neighborhoods, it involves admitting our great need to do what only he can do.

Speaking as someone who loves personality tests, I (Elizabeth) come in as an extroverted and persuasive dolphin who likes big ideas, freedom, and creativity. Chris's results reveal he's an introverted and intuitive wolf who values innovation, hard work, and loyalty. Since his parents are certified coaches in some

Spiritual Zeros

of the more involved assessments, you can imagine our holiday dinner discussions. For those of you who resist being put in a box, it would be your worst nightmare, but we enjoy it.

Funny though how these personality appraisals are mostly designed to help us present our very best. No one would pay twenty dollars for an online test called Weakness Finder. We like to focus on our more favorable traits and get better at those, not dwell on the parts that reveal our brokenness.

So, how much does temperament play into all of this? Are some of us wired as deferential and therefore genetically predetermined to “succeed” at the beatitudes? Are some of us more likely to present as poor in spirit and others of us naturally bent toward autonomy and self-regard?

Thankfully, Jesus is talking about spirituality, not biology. A mild-mannered, polite predisposition should not be confused with a work of the Spirit.⁴ Neither should a feisty bent be cause for self-elimination this early in the sermon. This kind of work cuts through nature and nurture, and offers rescue from the Me Monster for every type.

Why then, do we resist the rescuing? Unfortunately, our Me Monsters are tricky. They appear so slick, so cool, so helpful. We’re convinced our own competencies can get us in the door. But over time, we realize our self-reservoirs run short.

We see this come out in our snarky comment on the neighborhood Facebook page, in our temper toward the neighbor whose trash keeps blowing in our yard, that passive-aggressive remark ready for the guy whose music keeps us up at night ... and just an overall lack of love.

Whatever our default settings, left to our instincts and inner resources, we learn we’re naturally neighbors who are touchy,

Neighborhoods Reimagined

grumpy, selfish, sometimes aggressive, sometimes indifferent. Not a great place to dig a well.

Our neighbors notice, too.

Whether it's jumping to file a neighborly dispute rather than talking face-to-face or making assumptions based on the color of our neighbor's skin or the political sign in their yard, we look a lot like the world. Our neighbors are wondering—is this really Jesus' brand?

This first beatitude invites us to begin with our arm around our Me Monster and gently say, "We don't got this."

For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out (Rom. 7:18).

Or as the psalmist would say: "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:26).

Don't know about you, but all this Weakness Finder and Me Monster talk has us a little melancholy. It's exposing and deflating to think about reimagining our neighborhoods in light of our faulty neighboring tendencies. The more we think about it, the more we realize how generally incurious we are toward the other image-bearers across the street.

We wonder how God could ever use us to show his love and light to our neighbors when we're so full of ourselves and so short of him. We need saving from our counterfeit beatitudes, we need an up-close showing of this God-dependence, and we need a new reservoir.

The Nothing Verses

As kids, a movie came out based on the German fantasy novel called *The NeverEnding Story*. The film's main antagonist is a raging storm known as The Nothing, which aims to destroy the vast, mystical universe, Fantasia. The Nothing manifests itself as a dark sky filled with swirling clouds, strong winds, lightning, and thunder. This non-being devours its enemies, leaving behind a void of nothingness.⁵ The threat to take something and turn it into nothing strikes terror in its adversaries. Really, what could be scarier than ... nothing?

For most of us, nothing is a dirty word. It implies loss, insignificance, and non-existence, all of which send us running because we want to be somethings and somebodies. Jesus didn't feel this way, however. Nothingness doesn't scare him in the slightest:

[Jesus], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, *he made himself nothing* (Phil. 2:6–7, emphasis added).

To describe his relationship with the Father, he spoke of himself using lots of nothings and nots:⁶

- "... the Son can do nothing by himself" (Jn. 5:19).
- "By myself I can do nothing ..." (Jn. 5:30).
- "I do not accept glory from human beings ..." (Jn. 5:41).
- "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will ..." (Jn. 6:38).
- "My teaching is not my own" (Jn. 7:16).
- "I am not here on my own authority ..." (Jn. 7:28).

Neighborhoods Reimagined

- “... I do nothing on my own ...” (Jn. 8:28).
- “I have not come on my own; God sent me” (Jn. 8:42).
- “I am not seeking glory for myself ...” (Jn. 8:50).
- “The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority” (Jn. 14:10).
- “These words you hear are not my own ...” (Jn. 14:24).

This nothing language was his way of rejecting the world’s self-relying, self-realizing, self-actualizing highways and surrendering to the all-ness of God. He wasn’t afraid of embracing his neediness through a posture of moment-by-moment dependence. He yielded to God in private (Mt. 14:23), in public (Mt. 19:13), in early mornings (Mk. 1:35), and all-nighters (Lk. 6:12). He put his confidence in God in the face of sad and scary circumstances (Mt. 26:38–44), and even while dying on the cross (Mt. 27:46).

Jesus was poor in spirit but rich in Spirit.

But all this begs the question—how can we practice this posture of self-poverty in our neighborhoods? ... Or can we? After all, why spend time reimagining our neighborhoods with these kingdom values if they’re impossible to live out?

It is possible, but we need help.

“Lord, Help!”

A friend of ours was hired as a nanny for a two-year-old little girl, Amelia. For play time, they’d sit down on the floor and work together on one of those shape sorters—those cube-shaped early development toys covered with cut-out holes designed to fit triangles, squares, circles, and half-moons. For a toddler who’s just learning, these can be extremely frustrating. Luckily for Amelia, her parents had taught her two words to say every

Spiritual Zeros

time she needed assistance: “*Help, please.*” Whenever she found herself trying to smash one of her squares into the circle-shaped hole: *Help, please.* If she was tired and her best efforts just weren’t working: *Help, please.* Just didn’t want to do it herself: *Help, please.*

At two years old, Amelia learned to do what so many of us never do in our relationships with God: ask for help. Inspired by this, we adapted it as a prayer to help us choose dependence over independence in even the simplest of circumstances: “*Lord, help.*”

No wonder Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 18:3).

Jesus knows our lack of inner resources and hasn’t left us alone in this world to just do the best we can. When he was walking about on that big, grassy hill, he wasn’t stooping to hand out commitment cards; he was offering little white flags. More than our efforts, he wants our dependence. Yes, being poor in spirit involves the initial confession of our spiritual bankruptcy but also the surrender and acknowledgment that we need new manna from God every day of our lives.

Jesus said, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever—the Spirit of truth ... you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you ...” (Jn. 14:16–18).

The same Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead is alive in you (Rom. 8:11) to help you live the life you could never live apart from him. He wants to work in and through you to love your neighbors in ways you can’t imagine ... yet.

What does it look like to be poor in spirit where we live? The answer lies in who is doing the neighboring. Rather than

Neighborhoods Reimagined

see ourselves as the ones responsible for neighborhood God-growth, we know that's on him. We shift from seeing ourselves as neighborhood fruit-producers to neighborhood fruit-bearers. We don't trust our inner Me Monsters to garner relational capital or avoid our neighbors altogether. We believe that God is at work, he causes growth, and we need to stay connected to him all the time.

Do you live in a highly isolated neighborhood where no one speaks to one another, and it would feel weird to try to build relationships? *Lord, help.* Has there been bad blood between you and the neighbors ever since you did that one thing that really bothered them? *Lord, help.* Are you an introvert who hates small talk? *Lord, help.*

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing (Jn. 15:5).

God's Spirit—not stronger bootstraps—is the answer to our big neighboring obstacles.

Do you have a job that's highly demanding, where you travel a lot and are barely home? Are you home with young kids and feel you have nothing left to give? Never given it much thought what it could look like to love your neighbors?

Lord, help.

Lord, help.

Lord, help

Spiritual Zeros

“Declaration of Dependence”

As the parents of four young kids, we’ve strived to raise daughters who tie their shoes, pick out their clothes in the morning, put their dishes away, and help with the laundry. After all, the goal of parenting is to raise independent children ... right?

Our friends Jess and Alex have a daughter, Avonlea, who has a rare genetic syndrome called Cardiofaciocutaneous (CFC). She is blind, has epilepsy, is G-tube fed, and does not communicate verbally. Jess recently posted on social media:

Adding a new level of care to Avonlea’s day which at times feels we’re moving backwards in her level of independence. However, it also doesn’t feel sad or tragic anymore. God has given us Avonlea. Our service to her and her body is worship to him. Daily opportunities to live in a dependent relationship that brings mutual joy. The forever question swirling around in my mind: ‘Why is independence our #1 goal?!’ Avonlea encourages me to see the neediness and vulnerability of all of humanity and myself. We are needy people that cannot thrive in isolation and that is so, so good.

Jess and Alex are blessed. They are flourishing not only as they care for their daughter, but in declaring their own neediness and alternative good life as well.

If we want to become neighbors who are poor in spirit, we start with this kind of dependence on God’s Spirit that we never outgrow, also known as prayer. We learn from Jesus and start talking to God more often. We ask him to change us from being emotionally detached and instead open our hearts to scary things like humility and sacrifice. We stay connected

Neighborhoods Reimagined

to the vine when we're at the mailbox, choosing grace rather than guilt. We don't rely on ourselves as good entertainers or conversationalists; we recognize our God as the better, most welcoming Host. Our stock is not in whether or not there's a pre-established sense of neighborhood community or thinking we can woo our neighbors with our own sort of street cred; rather we transfer our trust to the one who made the first neighborhood from scratch. All our fears, inadequacies, weaknesses, and limits make us needy for God. And in God's kingdom, the needier the better.

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

God's Kingdom has Entered the Chat

We might wonder as we read the promises tagged to each beatitude—are these assurances for today or for tomorrow only? Does the promise that the poor in spirit will inherit God's kingdom only apply in eternity future or will we see it before then?

There's good news. In the words of New Testament scholar Scot McKnight: "This blessing, while its focus is future, begins now."⁷

But what does that mean? It's hard to imagine seeing the kingdom of heaven breaking into our now-neighborhoods. Heaven is the hope that anchors our soul and yet, at times, it can feel so far away.

Thankfully, we have a window into the experiences of Jesus' friends and followers, when they heard him say things like, "the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt. 3:2, NASB) and "the kingdom

Spiritual Zeros

of heaven has come near” (Mt. 4:17), all the while undoing the effects of sin’s curse right before their very eyes. Everywhere he went—everywhere he stepped foot—the kingdom of God was imminent. God’s future reign was no longer solely something to expect down the line. God’s manifest presence was breaking in through the person of Jesus, bringing an overlap to our current and future realms.

This kingdom break in stopped and shocked onlookers when he un-withered the withered man’s hand (Mk. 3:3–5), restored the sight of blind beggars like Bartimaeus (Mk. 10:46–52), and told the tongue of a deaf and mute man to “Be opened!” (Mk. 7:31–37). Curse-reversals such as these were signs that Jesus came not only to save, but to rule as king of a kingdom where his people would one day be healed and free forever.

Can you imagine what it was like for the woman who’d been hunched over for eighteen years to feel her back straighten as Jesus touched her with both hands (Lk. 13:11–13)? What about Malchus, the servant of the high priest who came to arrest Jesus (Lk. 22:50–51)? What ran through his mind after Jesus hooked his ear back on like it was no big thing? What happened when he went home that night? Did he sleep?!

Imagine the joy, surprise, laughter, and lightness that came to those who heard their stomachs growl and then sat with their jaws dropped as Jesus multiplied a few loaves and fish to satisfy the hunger of thousands, including their own. God’s promised reign wasn’t just for later; it was breaking through. His kingdom had entered the chat.

There will come a day when the kingdom will be fully here. Until that time, when we feebly live out these beatitude blueprints, we give our neighbors a taste of what’s to come.

Neighborhoods Reimagined

When Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” he was inviting us into abiding lives with these kinds of kingdom reversals. When we show up weak and needy for God’s Spirit to move in our neighborhoods, we can imagine him using the smallest of steps to push back against the curse of culture wars and usher in cultures of hope and love. We wonder what kind of healing would come if we were to say hello or introduce ourselves to a next-door image-bearer. We imagine how he might interrupt our loneliness if our dinner tables were filled with neighborly conversations about our singleness, stress at work, or a difficult relationship with our teenager.

What joy and peace would it bring to the new refugee family who just moved in across the way if a group of neighbors reached out and welcomed them with open arms? How might God use that little phrase “Lord, help” to give us the words we need when a neighbor has lost their child ... or the strength to stay in the moment and not offer words at all but rather the gift of our presence? Can you imagine how this kind of value-reversal might shift things on your street?

A Taste of the Kingdom

We are both low-level foodies. We try to be adventurous eaters, but we don’t have the endless options of an urban neighborhood to indulge our ethnic food cravings. We began to realize however, that we do have neighbors from many different parts of the world in our own little neighborhood. As we pushed through language barriers and worked hard to learn names, friendships budded, and we had the idea for an international food sampling.

Then a reserved, Christ-following couple of Indian heritage—Arjun and Aadya—moved in from Chicago. Despite their

Spiritual Zeros

insecurities that they weren't "leader-types" and their initial fears of it flopping, they got swept away by the idea. Arjun admitted this seemed like an answer to their daily prayers for God's help to love their neighbors well. They envisioned tables where neighbors could bring a large dish to share and small "exhibits," including recipes, artwork, herbs, spices, decorations, and flags. They loved the dream of gathering neighbors together to honor, esteem, and celebrate unique food flavors, skin colors, dialects, languages, and clothing. So, the vision of God's good image on display won them over and we prayed and we planned.

When the night finally arrived, neighbors from China, India, Israel, Brazil, Mexico, Bulgaria, and Turkey proudly presented their "Bite of the World," as Aadya called it. We had no idea there were so many cultures represented in our humble five-street neighborhood. The night felt magical, and we couldn't help but marvel at how God had used two people who'd been so tentative to do such important work—work like helping neighbors enjoy good food, shake hands, and properly pronounce each other's names.

We can't forget about Bina. Bina met Aadya in the planning process, and conversations about food led to deeper conversations about life and faith. Bina was recently divorced and her honor-shame culture had her wondering if the gods were angry with her. Aadya shared the hope of Christ and Bina asked her to pray to God on her behalf.

Arjun and Aadya reached out and received the blessing "theirs is the kingdom of heaven" when they showed up, poor in spirit, and took a step of faith. They offered Bina—and our whole neighborhood—a glimpse of the kingdom breaking into our little community.

Neighborhoods Reimagined

Reimagining our neighborhoods begins with taking the first beatitude seriously. What would it look like to embrace the flourishing that comes with humility and dependence? And then to trust God's Spirit to continue the work that Jesus did in neighborhoods like Bethesda and Capernaum? Imagine him restoring in part now, what he will restore fully the day he returns: every square inch of our neighborhoods. Picture how he might lay hands on our gossip, jealousy, favoritism, and indifference, and cure these propensities within us. Can you visualize your neighbors being wooed by this alternative flourishing?

Envision yourself living in a community with neighbors marked by this contrasting humility, how it might serve as an up-close apologetic for our faith. Can you conceive how religious seekers and skeptics could be startled by this contradictory sort of posturing? What unexpected friendships might form with the family next door or the lady upstairs if rather than the same ol' self-absorption, they saw self-forgetfulness? Just think if our neighbors discovered the rest Jesus offers from the hustling, hiding, and striving that's demanded of them each day. What healing would come?

When we receive this first invitation to be poor in ourselves and rich in Christ, the kingdom of heaven breaks through. It comes as we begin to exchange our sweat for surrender and relax under his influence. Our vague notions of what heaven will be like are updated by the restorative work we see in our neighborhood corners. Jesus' reign and rule, which felt far off and distant, becomes our hope here and now. And prayerfully, as our own faith is strengthened, this upside-down flourishing will capture the attention and imagination of our neighbors, by instilling a sense of wonder that Jesus' kingdom is real after all.

Spiritual Zeros

For Reflection:

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

What might God want you to trust him for in your neighborhood?

Our daily prayer: “Lord, help!”

Neighbors and situations to pray for this week:

Neighborhoods Reimagined

For Discussion:

1. Thinking about the introduction, how has your personal view of what it means to be “blessed” been shaped by the world’s view of “the good life”? Contrast this with the biblical vision of flourishing. Are there points of overlap? Points of contrast?
2. Share whether you agree or disagree with this statement from the introduction: “We are not redeemed by the beatitudes, but the beatitudes show we’ve been redeemed.” Explain your reasoning.
3. In one or two sentences, describe what it means to be poor in spirit.
4. Summarize the concept of the Me Monster and how it impacts the way we relate to our neighbors.
5. Choose one of the “nothing verses” and share how Jesus exhibited a “Lord, help” posture. How does this challenge you personally to increase your dependence on God?
6. List five to ten needs in your life that your neighbors could meet. What about being a “needy neighbor” challenges and/or energizes you?