

## Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

Matthew 5:3

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

Today we are starting a new series on the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7). Having reflected on the tumultuous year just passed, and having seen the church's response, both to cultural and political pressures, and to the pandemic, (deeply morally deficient, lacking substantive engagement with Holy Spirit) I was driven to this text as being, I think, especially relevant to our time.

This is the first piece of ethical teaching in the first gospel, ethical banner over the New Testament. Among the fathers of the first three centuries, it was quoted far more than any other passage or series of chapters. It has been called "the greatest moral document of all time." Augustine, in the fourth century called it "the perfect measure of the Christian life." Escaped our attention.

It is a stark, challenging, penetrating piece of teaching, which cuts deep down into our hearts. It challenges cherished assumptions. It drives us to Jesus, it summons us into the way of the cross, it reminds us of what we so easily forget. Namely, that the Christian life, the Christian ethical and moral vision, cannot be co-opted (left or right), it cannot be tamed or domesticated. Jesus is our image, our model, our guide and our goal. And he will not fit into our boxes. He will shed our boxes here, even our carefully constructed Christian boxes.

The first thing that strikes one who – with any seriousness at all – engages the Sermon on the Mount, is its seeming impossibility, its preposterous demands. Ayn Rand, the famous author of *Atlas Shrugged*, felt that its prescriptions were among the vilest ever uttered. Every noble, strong, manly virtue – every ancient notion of valor, and autonomy, and independence and strength, seems to be turned on its head here. And the church has been shocked and scandalized as well. Some have held that the sermon is an impossible ideal, some that it applies only to some elite group like priests and monks, some that it doesn't apply at all in the church age.

Pinchas Lapide, an Orthodox Jew who wrote a commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, describes the situation this way:

*The history of (reading) the Sermon on the Mount can largely be described in terms of an attempt to domesticate everything in it that is shocking, demanding, and uncompromising, and render it harmless.*

But the early church, the reformed, and others, have always taken it seriously as the ethic of the kingdom which has arrived in Jesus. This is eschatological wisdom teaching. That is, wisdom teaching for life in the future, which has broken into time in Christ. Here, Jesus the Sage, on the Mount as the new Moses, the embodiment of blessedness and virtue, the icon of the flourishing human life, instructs us in the upside-down, radical, dis-orienting ethic of the Kingdom of God.

The sermon begins with the beatitudes – which comes from the Latin word *beatus*, which was used to translate the underlying Greek word *makarius* (makarisms), rendered in English as blessed. And today we will look at the first beatitude, from Matthew chapter 5, verse 3: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

We will make three points: The Blessedness, the poverty, and the kingdom.

## **I. The Blessedness**

First, the blessedness. Since all the beatitudes start with this “Blessed are the” we will only look at this once. So, what does Jesus mean by the word “blessed” when he uses it of the various types of people in the beatitudes? Some translations render it as happy, though that may carry too much psychological baggage for us. I think it is important to see that, while it is certainly true, that the person in view is objectively blessed by God....*there is a focus on the person as the blessed one. In other words, the state of the soul, the subjective life of the person is in view.*

So a good translation, at least a plausible one, is something like “flourishing or even delighted, deeply happy and fulfilled.” Jesus is here the fulfillment of both the Greek philosophical tradition (sought virtue) and the Jewish wisdom tradition (life in the covenant). He is teaching on the good life. The life of virtue. The life of Shalom and peace and wholeness. This, he is saying, is the way of human maturity, human flourishing.

These, despite all appearance to the contrary, despite the paradoxes, despite the disenfranchisement, these are the blessed, happy, flourishing ones. This is what a truly formed, integrated, Christ-imaging, person looks like. You will notice that the beatitudes are statements of fact. They are indicatives. Blessed *are* the poor in spirit. But, by implication, they are also exhortations to us to be the type of disciples upon whom this blessedness (benediction) can be pronounced.

## **II. The Poverty**

That is, here we are being called to be poor in spirit. And that brings us to our second point, the poverty. The poverty here is not purely economic poverty, since Matthew adds the qualifier poor *in spirit*. (absent in Luke, who just says blessed are the poor). Literal poverty can, of course, be a prod to becoming poor in spirit, just as wealth can be a hindrance to being poor in spirit. But the point here is poverty *of spirit*. What might that mean? Well, it does not mean we lack dignity, or that we are of no value.

But it means for starters (in the context of the ministry of Jesus) that the kingdom does not come to us on the basis of race or ethnicity. (Sons of Abraham) Nor does the kingdom come to us on the basis of merit or achievement, or zeal, or wealth. This is why pride, even in our real virtues, is deadly in this kingdom. It comes to the poor, the weak, the despised publicans, the prostitutes, to those who know they have nothing to offer...

Who places NO confidence in the flesh, in their pedigree, in their track record – the kingdom comes to those who beat their breasts and cry out to God for mercy. The kingdom comes to those who, for all their gifts, realize that, in and of themselves, before the face of God, they are spiritually bankrupt. They have, in Calvin's words, cancelled their own account. The poor are low. They do not have the altitude to criticize others (insufferable moral scolds). Often the poor in spirit are brought low by adversity or affliction. By their own sin. They know they are unclean, they have an acute sense of their unworthiness, and of their powerlessness.

Poverty of spirit means recognizing our emptiness, our deep and abiding need of grace and mercy, our utter moment by moment dependence on God. The poor are interior vagabonds, impoverished beggars. Paupers of the heart. (puffed up pontificators). They revel in weakness. The poor in spirit, thus, know themselves. They know what they are made of. They don't paper over their sins or corruption. They estimate themselves in the light of the bloody cross of Christ, and they agree with the judgment rendered there (all their finger-pointing is at themselves). They confess: *Nothing (nothing) in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; Naked come to thee for dress; Helpless look to thee for grace; Foul, I to the fountain fly; Wash me, Savior or I die.*

They have emptied themselves to be filled. Emptied themselves of all self-righteousness, all pride, all vainglory, all delusions of their own sufficiency or goodness, all egoism, all self-glory. And thus they seek all fullness, all riches, and all true wealth, all righteousness, all life, from the all-glorious (replete and full, life of) God. God is their portion, their wholeness, their delight, their fount of flourishing, their blessedness and their reward, their all in all. Like panting deer, they thirst for God in the dry and weary land that is their own strength. For they know, as Isaiah (ch. 57) says:

*That One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy, dwells in the high and holy place, and also with those of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite.*

They know, also from Isaiah (66), that *Heaven is the Lord's throne, and the earth is his footstool, and that he will look to the one who is humble (Heb. Ani, poor) and contrite in spirit, and who trembles at his Word.* Humble and contrite — or broken in spirit — let's take these in order.

## **Humble**

The poor in spirit are humble. The most elusive of virtues. They don't walk around haughty in their superiority. They don't put on airs. In the most important sense of the phrase: they don't wear masks. They lack the confident strutting of the self-made, self-sufficient man. They don't secretly congratulate themselves on their spiritual attainments and knowledge. They don't display their spirituality, because they know that before the face of God, they are unworthy servants.

## **Contrite**

They are broken (for there is no contrition without brokenness), and they embrace their brokenness as a gift. They tremble at Holy Scripture. They do not neglect it (more robustly than the scrolling through the current political news). They do not stand over it as masters, but under it as desperate, hungry, hearers. They are never self-satisfied, content with their spiritual state, or at ease in Zion.

They cannot be casual toward the Word of the transcendent and holy God, or indifferent, as if they've heard it all, and have it securely in their grasp, and under their control. They tremble because they know whose speech it is. And they know it will slay them to make them alive. They know that without it, they will soon wander off, drift, and imperil their salvation. With Wesley, they know Scripture is the place where: He speaks, and listening to his voice, new life the dead receive. The mournful, broken hearts rejoice, the humble poor believe.

The poor in spirit, then, know they are in the wilderness, they are pilgrims, they are not yet home, and that dangers and toils and snares lie behind AND ahead. Having the first-fruits of the Spirit, as Paul says, they *groan* for the coming redemption. The reception of the Spirit has made them thirsty. Having but a down payment, an earnest, they *long* for the fullness of their inheritance. As strangers they confess that they *seek* another city, whose architect and builder is God.

The poor in spirit are eschatological people, people who yearn for the future fullness and restoration of all things. They know that the hardships and difficulties, the sufferings of this age, are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed, and they pant for that glory.

### III. The Kingdom

That brings us to our third point is the kingdom. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. For Matthew, heaven in a circumlocution (a long way of saying) for God. Kingdom of heaven roughly equals kingdom of God. But calling it the Kingdom of heaven hits a critical note. Heaven is contrasted with earth quite a bit in the sermon. They are different (often contrasting) realms. And Jesus' kingdom is the kingdom of HEAVEN. That's its origin, that is its location, its epicenter. That is where those who are in the kingdom live, by faith through the Spirit, and that is the destiny of kingdom dwellers. The kingdom of HEAVEN creates heavenly people. And it will come and heavenize, transfigure, the whole earth.

Notice that here, the tense is present. Thiers IS the kingdom of heaven. And it is bracketed by the eighth beatitude. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. In the other beatitudes, in between, the tense will be future. So, surely both present and future are intended. Now Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, has been called, by scholars, an eschatological wisdom teacher. He teaches what the good life, the heavenly life, the life of the world to come – what form that life takes now. For this kingdom has appeared in Jesus Christ. It is the very heart of his own preaching ministry. Repent for the kingdom is at hand.

The Spirit anointed him, he says, to preach good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, and to bind up the broken hearted. Thus, the kingdom comes as gift. We do not receive the kingdom because we have the virtues of the poor in spirit. Rather, being poor in spirit is the sign that we have received this kingdom. Being poor in spirit is the form, the shape of receiving the kingdom. (Absence. Means not citizens of this kingdom)

This is the great paradox of the beatitudes. The impoverished ones, the emptied-out people, the broken and contrite, THEY, contrary to all appearances, are flourishing, partaking of the wholeness of the age to come, even now in their weakness. The poor in spirit – by their poverty -- show themselves to be citizens of the kingdom now, and they shall receive the kingdom for which they yearn, in fullness, when Christ comes again in glory. It was a recognition of our poverty, wrought by the Spirit, which brought us to repentance and entrance into the kingdom. And it will be a life of continual repentance and brokenness -a perpetual poverty of spirit - that will lead us safely home.

Let us then, as we embark on this most daunting, bracing, cutting, healing and life-giving text, let us grasp that, at the outset, Jesus insists, that we do not possess the resources for this life. In fact, we don't even have a map for it. For the world's noble and great men and women, often present us with a distorted image of the blessedness, of the wholeness of this eschatological life...

This paradoxical life of being emptied-- and yet – in that very emptiness – already possessing the glory of the coming kingdom. We must guard our hearts against all false narratives – for they abound on the left and the right – all false narratives of what human flourishing looks like. Rather it looks like the teacher here, the One who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped.

The one who emptied himself, becoming poor in spirit, that we too might become rich precisely by becoming poor in spirit. Let us imitate the master, for he alone is the pattern, the archetype, the image of the truly flourishing, happy and blessed life. (The Sermon on the Mount will not let us be content with the threadbare persons we are – will call us into the deeps). Let us heed the warning given to the church at Laodicea, to which the risen and exalted Christ said:

*You say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I have need of nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.*

Blindness to our true poverty means we are rich, not poor, in spirit, and can only lead to judgment. The embrace of our true poverty, our weakness, is the path to overcoming. Overcoming in the strength, the wealth, and the fullness, of the One who promises *that we will sit with him on his throne even as he sat down on the Father's throne* in the glorious and indestructible kingdom of God. That future promise is tasted already by the poor in spirit, for theirs IS, now, the kingdom of heaven. Amen.

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