

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit • Matthew 5:3

Jesus preached sitting down, but it was not his physical position that made the Sermon on the Mount the most famous sermon ever preached. It was his words. The record in the book of Matthew says,

When Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were amazed at his teaching, because he taught as one who had authority and not as their teachers of the law. (Matthew 7:28-29)

The Sermon on the Mount begins with what is called the Beatitudes in Matthew 5. The word “beatitude” comes from the Latin *beatus*, and it means “happy.” It is here that Jesus defined happiness with a definition that seemed upside down by many of the standards of our world, one that is extraordinary, absolutely revolutionary. It is no wonder that the people were amazed at what Jesus had to say.

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying:

*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.*

*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 sons of God.*

*Blessed are those who are persecuted be-
cause of righteousness,
for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. (Matthew 5:1-10)*

Point number one in Jesus’ sermon is unquestionably the most important point of all, for in it he establishes the entry point to all the rest. It is the essence of the sermon that he preached. If the first point is missed, then the rest of them really cannot

be understood. Jesus said, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*”

Lets face it, poverty is something that is seldom sought or spoken of positively and yet the Greek word *ptochos* used here describes the poorest of the poor. It describes the destitute beggar on the street corner who covered his face in shame with one hand and held out the other asking for a coin or food. Could this be the happiest person of all?

Actually, Jesus said, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit*” referring not to financial assets on the outside, but to attitudes on the inside. Poverty of spirit means emptiness. This is the person who comes to God with empty hands, with nothing to give to him. She does not offer any kind of a deal because she knows that she has nothing to deal with.

Jesus is explaining that as long as we think we’re okay, as long as we define ourselves as rich and full and having everything together, then we cannot have God. We can never be filled with God until we are emptied of ourselves.

It reminds me of the time I learned how to transfer a document from one computer to another back when computers used those five inch floppy disks.

The manual gave exact rules to follow. I needed a source disk and a target disk. The file name had to be exactly the same on both disks.

But the target disk had to be completely empty or the transfer from the source disk wouldn’t work.

In essence, that is what Jesus is teaching us here. Only when we are spiritually empty, destitute, when we experience poverty of spirit, can we be filled full by the source Deity. There can be no fullness from God unless first there is emptiness.

Poverty of spirit is emptiness, but it is also the person who comes to God in brokenness. The psalmist said in Psalm 34:18 “*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit.*” Psalm 51:17 says, “. . . a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.”

When I was a boy I amassed quite a collection of Lionel trains. I had all the little houses, train stations, switches, mountains and valleys. I used a

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lot of my allowance and gift money to accumulate what I considered to be a wonderful collection. Of course, as a child, I did not know that far away in my distant adulthood Lionel trains would become extremely valuable collectors items; nor did I know that while I was away at college my mother would give away all of my Lionel trains to some other kid. I tried not to have a bad attitude toward my mother about it but she knew how I felt.

Years later to atone for what she had done, she gave me a starter Lionel train set for Christmas. I started playing with it and discovered a rattle in the steam locomotive. Like any good engineer I wanted fix it, but instead I broke it. I took it all apart, trying to remember the order of the parts so that I could put it back together again. And I still remember a sickening feeling when I recognized I had no idea how to put that thing back together again. I just didn't know where to begin. So I did the heroic thing and put all the parts in a grocery bag and left it in the laundry room for the next couple of years. I simply could not bring myself to face a repairman in a hobby shop with nothing but a bag full of parts. Fortunately, I'm married to a courageous woman, and one day she took all the parts in the grocery bag to the hobby shop and paid a repairman to reassemble it.

It was finally fixed, but I couldn't have fixed it. The person who is "*poor in spirit*" admits to brokenness. He comes to God with all the parts of his broken life in a grocery bag and says, "God, I don't know where to begin. There was a point when I thought I could put all the pieces back together and make it work, but I can't. I don't know where to start. And, God, if you can't fix it, my life can never be repaired." Brokenness.

Poverty of spirit is emptiness and brokenness and humility. Jesus gave a powerful illustration of humility that is recorded in Luke 18:10-14. It was specifically spoken as a parable to some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men — robbers, evildoers, adulterers — or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.

But the tax collector stood at a distance.

He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Then Jesus summed it up and said, "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

It was St. Augustine who, in his confessions, admitted that pride and pride alone was his barrier to becoming a Christian. Pride is an enormous barrier for most of us. We want to be able to say, "I've got it together, I'm O.K.". We go to great lengths to make the outside look the way we would like to be on the inside. Pride can be an impenetrable barrier between God and us. We want to be good, and so we say that we are and are reluctant to admit otherwise.

The Bible says in Proverbs 16:5, "*The Lord detests all the proud of heart.*" God himself is quoted in Isaiah 66:2, "*This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.*" In other words, to be a Christian, to become a citizen of heaven, we must admit that we are sinners and that we can do nothing to save ourselves. We are empty and we are broken. That is a humbling thing to say — that is poverty of spirit.

Jesus said, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit.*" The Greek word for blessed is the word *makarios*. It is often translated "happy." In fact, you may have a version of the Bible that, for each one of the beatitudes, starts out "happy" is this person or that person, the peacemaker, or the meek. The ancient Greek poets used *makarios* to describe the bliss of the mythical Greek gods who didn't have to be bothered with all of the circumstances and problems of mortals. They didn't have to worry about getting sickness, dying, unpaid bills or getting old.

But there was more to it than happiness. *Makarios* means "the fullness of God," so when Jesus said, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit,*" he was saying that they are the ones who experience the fullness of God, the awareness that God is in charge of everything and everything is O.K. It's a fullness of heart and of life that is indescribable outside of the Christian experience.

After the last Christmas Eve service some years ago, our family got into the family vehicle and left directly to drive through to South Florida. As we left, I was concerned that the fast food restaurants

and the gas stations wouldn't be open on Christmas Eve and we had two problems: empty gas tank and empty stomachs. It was with a certain level of anxiety that I noticed that all of the golden arches were turned off and all the gas stations were empty. And so it was with great delight somewhere east of Hudson, Wisconsin on Interstate 94 that we found a truck stop that was open. We went in and filled up. You eat differently when you think this may be the last meal that you're going to have between Wisconsin and South Florida! We got back into the car and onto the Interstate, with a good feeling of fullness.

Yet what Jesus is talking about here is a fullness that is infinitely beyond that. He is talking about the fullness of God. That's what it means to be blessed. That's what *makarios* is all about. Not to be filled with gasoline in the tank and food in the stomach, but to have your life filled up with God himself. It is the reality of well being which transcends circumstances because of the indescribable fullness of God himself.

In addition to fullness, *makarios* means "joy." Most of our concept of happiness is one that relates to superficial circumstances. And superficial happiness is often not possible because of illness, divorce, worries about recession and all of our emotional baggage. But the blessing of God is a joy that is deep down inside that says that God is in charge and that everything is good because of him. Proverbs 10:28 says, "*The prospect of the righteous is joy.*" Joy is the deep-seated conviction of good because we know that God is good and God is in charge.

On several occasions at military bases in Europe I talked to soldiers about the interesting experience they have described of watching a Super Bowl or the final game of the World Series by delayed telecast after the game is already over. Some of them try to not find out the score or whether their team won, but that means you can't look at a newspaper, listen to a radio or listen to the conversation around you. Often it is impossible to avoid knowing the outcome. But you watch the game anyway and you discover a difference in attitude when you know who's going to win. If you know your team is going to win, then no matter how bad the score or how unfair the call, you have prevailing joy — a

joy that goes beyond the difficulties that are out on the turf.

That's the Christian joy that comes with the blessing of God. It is not that we don't have tumbles, fumbles, pains and problems playing the game of life, but we have the assurance that God's team will win and as Christians we are on that team! It is joy.

The blessing of God is fullness, joy and exaltation. "Blessing" also means "exaltation" — that God will not only fill our emptiness and heal our brokenness, but that he will also lift high those who are humble. Jesus told the proud Pharisee and the despairing tax collector that those who think they are great, who are so proud, will be humbled. But those who are humble, who are poor in spirit, they will be exalted.

Peter taught the same thing in 1 Peter 5:6 when he said, "*Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.*" God's blessing guarantees that through Jesus Christ every once-empty Christian will someday be hon-

ored in heaven — lifted up and exalted. We will share in the glory and the grandeur of God. We will be given extraordinary exaltation beyond anything that we ever could have imag-

ined — not because we are great, but because he is great.

Jesus said, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" What makes a kingdom a kingdom is a king. The primary definition of the kingdom of heaven is the reign of Jesus Christ. Those who are poor in spirit, who are Christians, who are blessed — are those whose lives are ruled by Jesus Christ as king. It is those who sincerely pray and say, "Thy will be done on earth (in my life), as it is done in heaven," who really mean it when they say, "Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever." Those who, by contrast, are not poor in spirit seek to be the monarchs of their own lives. It is the poor in spirit who gladly renounce any crown at all in favor of Christ's reign.

As Christians, we recognize that our citizenship is in heaven, regardless of what our passport or birth certificate may say. As an American I can live in another country yet still be an American citizen. In fact, there are hundreds of thousands of Americans living around the world. They are still

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American citizens with all the privileges and responsibilities, and they always have a home base to which they can return.

As Christians we may be poor of spirit, even poor of wallet, living anywhere on earth, but our citizenship is in the kingdom of heaven. With that comes the responsibility of representing our kingdom and king, and all the privileges of heaven's protection and resources, with the prospect that someday we shall go home to where our citizenship is recorded.

When the Bible talks about the kingdom of heaven, it speaks in two different dimensions – it is both “here and now” and “there and then.” It is talking about the reign or the rule of Jesus Christ in our lives here and now, but it is also talking about the kingdom of heaven as the place where we will spend eternity with God — the “there.”

When countries are torn by war, sometimes the citizens flee to other countries. The refugees still identify themselves by their country of origin, waiting for the day that they can safely return to their homeland.

And so it is that the poor in spirit, who are blessed, are citizens of heaven, with all the privilege and responsibilities here and now, but looking forward to that day when we will be in that place called heaven, with the King.

My friend, does Jesus here describe you? Do you come to him empty and broken and humble, offering nothing of your own and accepting everything of him? Do you accept Jesus' love and forgiveness, fullness, joy, exaltation and heaven?

Then may Jesus' blessing be your blessing, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.”

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