



[Matthew 5:3](#)

(3) "Blessed *are* the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

New King James Version

The word "poor" has a wide variety of meanings and applications in both testaments. The Old Testament uses five different words from the Hebrew language, while the New Testament uses two from Greek. However, these seven are translated into a large number of English words. Besides describing destitution, they appear in contexts indicating oppression, humility, being defenseless, afflicted, in want, needy, weak, thin, low, dependent, and socially inferior.

Of the two Greek words translated "poor" in the New Testament, *penes* designates the working poor who own little or no property. People in this state possess little in the way of material goods, but they earn what they have through their daily labor. A form of this word, *penekhos*, describes a poor widow who may be receiving a small subsistence from a relative or social agency. *Penes* is used only once in the entire New Testament ([II Corinthians 9:9](#)), and its cognate, *penekhos*, is used only to indicate the poor widow of [Luke 21:2](#).

This, therefore, is not the word used in the beatitude in [Matthew 5:3](#), "Blessed are the [poor in spirit](#), for theirs is the [kingdom of heaven](#)." Here, "poor" is translated from *ptochos*, which literally means "to crouch or cower as one helpless." It signifies the beggar, the pauper, one in abject poverty, totally dependent on others for help and destitute of even the necessities of life. In [Galatians 4:9](#), it is translated "beggarly."

At first "poor" simply indicated to be in material need, to be in poverty. Gradually, its usage spread to other areas besides economics to indicate people in weakness, frailty, feebleness, fragility, dependence, subservience, defenselessness, affliction, and distress. The poor were people who recognized their utter helplessness before what life had dealt them. They recognized that nothing within their power solved their weak state,

The Berean: Daily Verse and Commentary for Matthew 5:3 (<http://www.theberean.org>) thus they would eagerly reach out to others for assistance in rising out of their situation, as a beggar would.

Eventually, the word took on spiritual overtones because some began to perceive that these afflicted people often had no refuge but [God](#). Thus [David](#), a person we would not consider as defenseless, nonetheless says of himself in a situation where he felt only God could deliver him, "This poor man cried out, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles" ([Psalm 34:6](#)).

To grasp how [Jesus](#) uses "poor" in this beatitude, we must contemplate the mind of a person who finds himself in poverty. One who recognizes his poverty takes the necessary steps to be poor no longer. He may seek advice on how to resolve his dilemma, get or change jobs, curtail spending to only necessary items, pay off his debts, and/or get rid of financially draining liabilities. In other words, he tries to change his circumstances. God wants His children to have this recognition of poverty regarding true spiritual things, and possess the drive to seek their enrichment from Him.

— John W. Ritenbaugh

To learn more, see:

[The Beatitudes, Part Two: Poor in Spirit](#)

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