

The Beatitudes, Part Two: Poor In Spirit

by John W. Ritenbaugh

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Jesus Christ is easily the most important figure in the history of mankind. No matter how one may regard Him, he will eventually have to concede this point. Jesus' life and death and the teachings attributed to Him have influenced the course of human history more than any other man who has ever lived—more than Alexander, any of the Caesars, Charlemagne, Mohammed, Napoleon, Washington, Marx, Freud or Ghandi. More people's lives are influenced by His doctrines; more books are written concerning Him; more speeches (sermons) are made about Him than all other historical figures combined.

Jesus was the world's greatest Prophet and Teacher. He was God, yet He took on Himself the nature of mankind. He has been the religious inspiration for the whole of North and South America as well as Europe for almost two thousand years. His religion, Christianity, has dominated and molded the destinies of virtually the entire world culturally, socially, politically, academically, technologically, economically and militarily.

Therefore, we can hardly undertake a more important task than to inquire into what Jesus really stood for. What did He teach? This task goes far beyond the scope of this series, which will delve only into His most basic teachings, as found in the Sermon on the Mount, regarding the nature of those who will be in His Kingdom. Even these basic characteristics present what some have called an impossible standard to attain; there is no doubt they are extremely high. Though they may be impossible for a carnal man to reach, with God all things are possible (Matthew 19:26; Mark 10:27). He can enable us to meet and live these admirable attributes.

Responsibilities and Blessings

During His earthly lifetime, Jesus demonstrated these qualities in His own person, and He expects us to do likewise. It is interesting and noteworthy that God places the Sermon on the Mount near the beginning of the very first book in the New Testament, immediately after Jesus begins to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God. Also of note is that it follows His call for repentance—for deep, heartfelt, sincere and radical change in a person's thinking and way of life. This change is what causes conversion to God's way. Then the Beatitudes appear as the preamble to the best-known sermon ever preached, teaching intended for those who have repented and are being converted.

We must not be deceived into thinking Jesus intended the Beatitudes for eight separate groups of disciples, some of whom are meek, while others seek righteousness and yet others endure persecution. Far from it! These are eight distinct qualities of the same group, all of whom are to be poor in spirit, merciful, mourning, making peace, etc. Nor should we pass them off as intended only for an elitist group singled out from among the disciples, thus forming a kind of spiritual aristocracy. They are Christ's specifications of what every disciple ought to be. All of these qualities should characterize each of His followers.

Just as surely as every Christian character should produce all nine segments of the fruit of the Spirit, so Christ's eight Beatitudes describe His ideal for every citizen of God's Kingdom. Unlike the gifts of the Spirit, which He distributes as He wills to different members of His body to equip them for

different kinds of service, the Beatitudes are qualities each Christian needs. We cannot escape our responsibility to seek them all.

Each beatitude pronounces the person who possesses that quality as "blessed." We need to understand this word because, as some have rightly noted, the Greek word used by Matthew, *makarios*, can also be translated as "happy." Happy, however, is not the correct translation in this context. Happiness is *subjective*; the same things do not always make everybody happy. And we can certainly rule out mourning as a producer of happiness. Instead, Jesus makes *objective* judgments about the state of the citizens of God's Kingdom. He declares, not what they feel like, but what God thinks of them. People with these qualities gain His approval. Because God thinks well of them, they are "blessed." God's blessing is far broader and exceedingly more important than merely being "happy."

The second half of each beatitude reveals what the blessing is. Just as surely as all eight of the qualities should be part of each Christian, so each should share in the eight blessings. As the eight qualities provide broad overviews of our responsibilities, the eight blessings give us insight into the broad privileges that come to us because we are meeting our responsibilities and God is pleased.

Are the promised blessings intended for the future or now? The answer is both. God does not expect a Christian to have to wait until the future becomes the present to be blessed. Although we must endure heavy trials and pressures from time to time, is it not possible to be blessed with contentment and a sense of well-being—rather than a troubled spirit and debilitating anxiety—while patiently going through them?

Is not the Kingdom of God a present reality that we can enter, receive, inherit, or as Paul says in Colossians 1:13, be "translated into" in the here and now? Can we not obtain mercy and be comforted now? Can we not become children of God now, and in this life have our hunger satisfied and thirst quenched? The reality is that all eight blessings have both a present and future fulfillment. We enjoy the firstfruits now, yet the full harvest is yet to come. As R.G.V. Tasker, professor of New Testament exegesis at the University of London, writes, "The future tense . . . emphasizes their certainty and not merely their futurity. The mourners will *indeed* be comforted, etc." (*The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, p. 61). We receive some of the blessing now but much more later.

John Donne, author of the poem used in the song, "No Man Is an Island," says of the Sermon on the Mount: "All the articles of our religion, all the canons of our church, all the injunctions of our princes, all the homilies of our fathers, all the body of divinity, is in these three chapters, in this one Sermon on the Mount." No doubt he employs a measure of hyperbole here, but it indicates the esteem that those who search deeply into this message hold for it. The Beatitudes are this profound message's introduction, paving the way for us to receive the rest. They are like a verbal bomb blast that forcefully gathers our attention by establishing standards of responsibilities of great height and depth.

Attempts to classify them into groups have met with some success, but John Chrysostom (ad 347-407) described them simply, "as a sort of golden chain." Like the Ten Commandments, each stands alone, but at the same time it is firmly linked to all the others, making a complete set of qualities each child of God must have to be in His Kingdom. One commentator sees the first three beatitudes as having overlapping qualities and combines them in one link, the following four in a second link, and

the eighth as a final link in a three-link chain. The simplest grouping is probably the best, however. The first four, dealing specifically with one's relationship with God, sets the stage for the final four, which have more to do with one's relations to man.

Blessed Are the Poor

In everyday conversation, "bread" means that staple food made from grain. But biblically it can represent all the physical things a person might require, including clothing, shelter, money, education, and even companionship. But above all, it stands for the Word of God, and thus by extension, spiritual things such as true knowledge of God and His way, perception and understanding, things that nourish spiritual life and give vitality, energy and growth.

Likewise, "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, *penechros*, 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, *penechros*, 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, 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.

Poverty of Spirit

The Old Testament supplies the background to Jesus' use of "poor." From statements like David's, we realize that when God prophesies regarding Jesus—

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound" (Isaiah 61:1)

—He is not speaking of the economically poor but those who are poor in spiritual qualities or poor in terms of a relationship with Him.

One can be spiritually poor regardless of how much money he possesses. He can be brokenhearted though living in grand houses, driving luxury automobiles, wearing the finest apparel and circulating in the highest levels of society. Is being captive to sin and Satan or addicted to drugs, fashion or the vain praise of men restricted by economic boundaries? Neither are godly attributes.

Jesus is not speaking to any clearly demarcated group. Though riches can motivate pride, the economically poor possess pride too. Jesus says the poor are blessed, but neither poverty nor wealth can confer spiritual blessings, though poverty may help to lead a person to humility. Both poverty and wealth can entail great spiritual peril. A poverty-stricken person can become very self-centered because of his desperate need, and a wealthy person can become equally self-centered through his profligacy. Jesus' words cover the whole span of mankind's circumstances because anyone without a right and true relationship with God can fall within His description. "Poor," as Jesus uses it, truly relates to a spiritual quality.

"Poor" does not stand alone; Jesus connects it with "spirit" to clarify His intention. Even as the economically poor are very aware of their need, so also are the poor in spirit. Yet a vast difference lies between this and being financially destitute. Poverty of spirit is a fruit not produced in the natural man, but a work of God's Holy Spirit in the minds of those He has called and is converting, explaining why being poor in spirit can span the whole economic spectrum. It is why an Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David or Joseph of Arimathea, all very wealthy men, can be simultaneously poor in spirit and materially blessed of God.

David referred to himself as a "poor" man, in need of what only God could supply. He perceived himself as destitute of the resources to improve his lot. He saw himself as beyond the help of men, afflicted, crushed, forsaken, desolate, miserable—as helpless spiritually as the poverty stricken are economically. Thus, recognizing his need, he cried out to God, and He heard him.

Another psalm by a thoroughly chastened and humbled David reveals in greater detail his recognition of the spiritual poverty in which he committed his sins. Notice the spiritual things David requested—things only God could supply—to fill his needs in Psalm 51:

Have mercy upon me . . . blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly . . . cleanse me from my sin. . . . Make me to know wisdom. Purge me with hyssop. . . . Make me to hear joy and gladness. . . . Hide Your face from my sins. . . . Create in me a clean heart . . . renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me away from Your presence, and do

not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with Your generous Spirit . . . Deliver me from bloodguiltiness. . . . Open my lips and my mouth shall show forth Your praise. (verses 1-2, 6-12, 14-15)

To be poor in spirit is to acknowledge honestly and with understanding our spiritual poverty—indeed our spiritual bankruptcy—before God. We are sinners and on the strength of our lives deserve nothing but God's judgment. We have nothing to offer, nothing to plead, nothing with which to buy His favor. But upon profession of our faith coupled with repentance, He allows by His grace the blood of Jesus Christ, shed for the sins of the world, to cover our sins, justifying us and providing us with access into His presence.

The Publican and the Pharisee

Perhaps no parable that Jesus gave conveys this attitude better than the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican in Luke 18:9-14. Jesus illustrates this attitude by not only showing the publican's attitude, but by contrasting his with the Pharisee's:

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God be merciful to me a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The publican's is the language of the poor in spirit. We do not belong anywhere except alongside the publican, crying out with downcast eyes, "God be merciful to me a sinner!" John Calvin, the sixteenth-century theologian whose teachings form the basis of Reformed Protestantism, wrote, "He only who is reduced to nothing in himself, and relies on the mercy of God is poor in spirit" (*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists, Matthew, Mark and Luke*, p. 261).

Notice how Jesus brought out that the underlying attitude of the Pharisee was reliance in self. He boasted before God of all his "excellent" qualities and works, things he evidently thought would earn him God's respect. His vanity about these things then motivated him to regard others as less than himself. So we see that self-exaltation is the opposite of poor in spirit.

Poor in spirit is contrary to that haughty, self-assertive and self-sufficient disposition that the world so much admires and praises. It is the reverse of an independent and defiant attitude that refuses to bow to God—that determines to brave things out against His will like Pharaoh, who said, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice . . .?" (Exodus 5:2). A person who is poor in spirit realizes that he is nothing, has nothing, can do nothing—and needs everything, as Jesus said in John 15:5, "Without Me you can do nothing."

In his commentary, *The Sermon on the Mount*, Emmett Fox provides a practical description of what "poor in spirit" means:

To be *poor in spirit* means to have emptied yourself of all desire to exercise personal self-will, and, what is just as important, to have renounced all preconceived opinions in the whole-hearted search for God. It means to be willing to set aside your present habits of thought, your present views and prejudices, your present way of life if necessary; to jettison, in fact, anything and everything that can stand in the way of your finding God. (p. 22)

Poverty of spirit blooms as God reveals Himself to us and we become aware of His incredible holiness and towering mercy in even calling us to be forgiven and invited to be in His Family—to be like Him! This understanding awakens us to the painful discovery that all our righteousness truly is like filthy rags by comparison (Isaiah 64:6); our best performances are unacceptable. It brings us down to the dust before God. This realization corresponds to the Prodigal Son's experience in Luke 15:14 when "he began to be in want." Soon thereafter, Jesus says, he "came to himself" (verse 17), beginning the humbling journey back to his father, repentance and acceptance.

An Application for Today

As the church is being scattered, it is intriguing to note that Christ's stern evaluation of the Laodiceans mentions both "rich" and "poor": "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked'" (Revelation 3:17). How close this is in principle to what the Pharisee says in the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican! Oblivious to his spiritual poverty, the Pharisee chooses to compare himself to humans he can see rather than the holy God to whom he supposedly prays in faith. Notice also his conceit in listing his wonderful works of tithing and fasting!

Though the Laodicean is indifferent, lackadaisical and inconsistent in his devotion to God, his ignorance of his spiritual condition reveals a fundamental flaw that undergirds his lukewarm condition and paralyzes his spiritual life. The Laodicean says he is rich, but Christ's revelation shatters that delusion. He completely misreads his spiritual condition! He thinks he is already complete, thus he is indifferent to growing and changing. So great is his conceit that it blinds him into saying he needs nothing!

This self-deception results in inconsistency in prayer and Bible Study and nonchalance in overcoming. Why do those exercises when he has no need? His relationship to Jesus Christ is distant and insipid. Would we want to be married to a person who could take us or leave us depending upon his momentary mood? No wonder Christ reacts so severely! The Laodicean's self-perceived "wealth" is a barrier to any meaningful relationship with Him (Proverbs 18:11).

A Laodicean is poor—really and truly poor—yet all the while thinking himself to be rich. He is unwilling to jettison anything, let alone everything in a whole-hearted search for God. Undoubtedly, he has knowledge about God and thinks this is the true religion, but it is plain that he does not know God. If he did, he would not be so blind to his poverty because he could compare himself to God's holiness, and his shortcomings would be exposed. He is intelligent, but he mistakes it for true wisdom. Christ may even have given him gifts for ministering to the church in some way, but he mistakenly judges them as grace toward salvation. He is blind yet has the light of God's truth in him—remember, this is written to converted people—but the light is turning to darkness. How great that darkness must be!

To be wretched describes life when everything one owns has been destroyed or plundered by war. Here it describes the Laodicean's spiritual destitution and pitiableness before God. He is being devastated in the spiritual war against Satan, even though to all outward appearances he may look well-clothed, well-fed and vigorous in carrying out his daily secular responsibilities.

How careful Christians must be in this time when the world and Satan are pressing their distractions upon us as never before! We cannot allow ourselves to be deluded into negligently or carelessly cheating ourselves out of so great salvation (Hebrews 2:1-3).

A Foundational Trait

Arthur W. Pink, in his commentary on the *Sermon on the Mount*, writes, "Poverty of spirit may be termed the negative side of faith" (p. 17). Similarly, Charles H. Spurgeon, a Protestant preacher of the nineteenth century, comments, "The way to rise in the kingdom is to sink in ourselves" (*The Gospel of the Kingdom*, p. 21). It is this realization of our utter unworthiness, a sense of spiritual need and destitution, that drives us to seek Christ to lift it. The economically poor gravitate to where they can have their needs met. Recognizing one's spiritual poverty parallels this, motivating us to seek to have that need supplied through a relationship with God. Poor in spirit, therefore, describes a fundamental trait found in every son of God who earnestly seeks Him.

Jesus says in Matthew 11:29, "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." This is how to cultivate this God-honoring attitude. We must do this because, while merely feeling lowly before God is insufficient, it nevertheless opens the doors to the awesome beneficence only God can give and indeed yearns to give. He says in Isaiah 66:2: "'For all these things [in creation] My hand has made, and all those things exist,' says the LORD. 'But on this one will I look: on him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.'"

Poor in spirit is one thing, contrition is another, and humility is yet a third quality. They are all related, but they are not specifically the same attitude. To be contrite is to be sorry or remorseful because of guilt, equating to "Blessed are those who mourn" in Matthew 5:4. Humility is more active than either of the other two, involving consciously choosing submission in obedience. It equates more with "Blessed are the meek" in Matthew 5:5. Poverty of spirit, then, precedes contrition, remorse, humility and meekness because it is a major factor involved in producing them.

Promised Blessings

Those who possess poverty of spirit are pronounced "blessed." In one sense, they are blessed because they now have a disposition the very opposite of their natural one. This is perhaps a fundamental proof that God has begun working in them by His Spirit to create them in His own image. Poverty of spirit is part of the nature of our Creator, as Jesus affirms in Matthew 11:29.

God makes many promises to those of this disposition:

» "But I am poor and needy; yet the LORD thinks upon me. You are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God" (Psalm 40:17). If God is thinking on someone, he has the attention of the One with greatest power, wisdom and love in all the universe!

» "The humble shall see this and be glad; and you who seek God, your hearts shall live. For the LORD hears the poor, and does not despise His prisoners" (Psalm 69:32-33). One can be glad even in difficult circumstances because God hears the poor and He will deliver.

» "For He will deliver the needy when he cries, the poor also, and him who has no helper. He will spare the poor and needy, and will save the souls of the needy" (Psalm 72: 12-13). Beyond deliverance, these verses promise mercy in judgment and perhaps salvation to the poor in spirit. No wonder Jesus calls them blessed!

» Psalm 107:41 is a psalm of thanksgiving: "Yet He sets the poor on high, far from affliction, and makes their families like a flock." God will make sure that in time the poor in spirit will receive exaltation. Their families, too, receive blessings.

» Two psalms reveal the eternal destiny of the poor. Psalm 113:7-8 says, "He raises the poor out of the dust, and lifts the needy out of the ash heap, that He may seat him with princes—with the princes of His people." Psalm 132:13-17 reads, "For the LORD has chosen Zion; He has desired it for His habitation: This is My resting place forever; here I will dwell, for I have desired it. I will abundantly bless her provision; I will satisfy her poor with bread. I will also clothe her priests with salvation, and her saints shall shout aloud for joy. There will I make the horn of David grow; I will prepare a lamp for My Anointed." In these psalms salvation and glory are definitely promised—the ultimate in blessing!

Truly blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of God! This is an attitude we should fervently seek to pave the way in becoming a whole new man.