

# The Poor in Spirit

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*Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Matthew 5:3

If you were to search the Scriptures for the word *blessed*, you would discover that the majority of occurrences are in the Old Testament. Not surprisingly, therefore, the Beatitudes found at the commencement of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount are all rooted in the Old Testament Scriptures. His objective in preaching this sermon was to expound the foundational truths of the Old Testament. After all, the Old Testament was the Bible of the church of Israel. Christ therefore preached from these Scriptures and quoted them regularly. The Old Testament contained the entire body of truth, which Jesus Himself had come to fulfill.

However, the interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures had been grievously corrupted by the scribes and Pharisees. Because of their erroneous teaching, the majority of Israel's population lived in spiritual ignorance about the coming Messiah. Since these misguided souls had entirely wrong ideas regarding the kingdom of God, their understanding of what it meant to be a citizen of that kingdom was also erroneous. The Lord Jesus therefore began His sermon by painting for us a verbal portrait of what a Christian—a citizen of God's kingdom—looks like.

In the previous chapter we saw that each of the first seven beatitudes is a feature of that portrait. As is true of any portrait, this spiritual portrait can be assessed accurately only when one looks at all the features simultaneously. To facilitate viewing the whole portrait as an organic entity, we have therefore first given a wide-angle view of the entire picture, showing you the interconnectedness of its individual traits.

All of the traits articulated in the Beatitudes will be found in some measure in the lives of all genuine Christians. Having said that, let me reiterate that all of these traits are not manifested equally in every believer. Although there are weak and strong Christians, I wish to emphasize again that the first seven beatitudes constitute an integrated whole, and therefore you cannot arbitrarily select which of these applies to you. As we will see, one beatitude presumes the previous one and anticipates the next. In the next chapter, we will focus on the blessedness of those who mourn, which presupposes that the one who mourns does so because he knows himself to be poor in spirit.

Let us thus begin by examining the first of these beatitudes—namely, being poor in spirit. We will first examine what Jesus means when He describes believers as being poor in spirit. Christ does not merely say, "Blessed are the poor"; rather, He explicitly says, "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*." Second, we will consider the happiness of the poor in spirit. At first glance, the dispositions of being poor in spirit and happy appear to be mutually exclusive. We will therefore consider why Jesus pronounces the poor in spirit to be happy as well as what that happiness consists of. And third, we will consider the citizenship of the poor in spirit, for Jesus remarkably says that the poor in spirit are citizens of His kingdom.

## *The Poverty of the Poor in Spirit*

Jesus' audience was astonished by His preaching, which was very different from what they were accustomed to hearing from the scribes and Pharisees. The gist of their teaching would have been "Blessed are they who are like us; blessed are they who are as prominent as we are; blessed are

they who know as much as we do; blessed are they who are as righteous as we are.” But Jesus begins His sermon by saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit”; that is, blessed are they who consciously recognize their spiritual poverty.

Jesus never used words randomly. There are two Greek words that can be translated as “poor.” One refers to people who are poor in a general sense. They live under very humble circumstances, have very little income, have no money in the bank, barely make ends meet, and live from day to day. Although poor in a general sense, they are not utterly destitute. The other Greek word describes someone who has been reduced to beggary, has literally nothing but the clothes on his back, does not have a penny to his name, is radically poor, and is thus utterly bankrupt or destitute. Jesus chooses the latter word, thereby declaring that the blessed realize how spiritually destitute they are, recognize before God that they are utterly void of all righteousness, and recognize that they are spiritually poor in the most radical sense.

Such is Christ’s assessment of our state as fallen sons and daughters of Adam! We are by nature spiritually destitute and bankrupt—a condition we are utterly unaware of without divine illumination. We are as oblivious to our desperate plight as the woman who met Jesus at a well in Samaria (John 4). She was entirely ignorant of her condition until Jesus exposed her spiritual bankruptcy and poverty. Our natural condition is like hers!

Why is our spiritual poverty so radical? We can answer that question correctly only when we reflect on man’s state prior to his tragic fall in paradise. Neither the gospel nor the objective of God’s redeeming work will be evident to us unless we reference it against the background of man’s original creation. God’s goal in redemption is to restore fallen man to what He originally created him to be.

By highlighting this radical poverty of spirit, Christ implies that man in his original state was unspeakably rich. What constituted these riches? What made Adam and Eve so unspeakably wealthy? As the crown jewels of His creation, God created Adam and Eve in His image. They reflected His glory and were also temples of His Holy Spirit. God uniquely crafted Adam and Eve out of the dust of the earth, molding and building them to be a temple for Himself. Upon finishing His masterpiece, He breathed His Spirit into them, and they became temples of the Holy Ghost.

Thus, before they fell, Adam and Eve were truly Spirit-filled people. They were unspeakably rich because God created them explicitly to be the dwelling place of His own Spirit. God Himself dwelt in Adam and Eve! Prior to their fall, they were God-focused, God-centered, and God-oriented. The moment Adam and Eve rebelled, however, God withdrew His Spirit from them, and instead of being temples of the Holy Ghost they became the synagogues of Satan. When God withdrew Himself, they became poor in spirit, for that which once fulfilled their lives and gave them purpose was now absent.

Thus, Adam and Eve did not merely lose paradise and eternal life when they fell—they lost God Himself. Having been created to find our purpose and fulfillment in the God who created us, we lost everything when we fell in Adam. We lost God Himself! Our spiritual bankruptcy is thus defined by the fact that we are naturally devoid of the Spirit of God. As fallen sinners, our lives are empty, being void of God.

Reader, if God is not yet your portion, your life is empty. You may think otherwise, because as human beings we do everything we can to fill that void with something other than God. Yet, since our hearts were created to be filled with God, nothing can ultimately satisfy us but God Himself. If, therefore, God is not your heavenly Father in Christ, your life is void of true

meaning, and everything you enjoy in this life is but an empty substitute for what really ought to fill your heart.

In this opening beatitude, Jesus says that the blessed are those who become experientially aware of that reality. Blessed are they who have become conscious of that profoundly troubling truth—who begin to understand their spiritual poverty and what it means to be a sinner. Blessed are they who are illuminated by the Spirit to discover that they are without God and therefore without hope in the world (Eph. 2:12).

### *The Blessedness of the Poor in Spirit*

This initial, growing, and continued awareness of our spiritual bankruptcy is the pathway whereby the Holy Spirit leads us to experience the unsearchable riches found in Christ. Jesus teaches us in this opening beatitude that the abiding awareness of our radical spiritual poverty is foundational to the Christian life. Without that experiential awareness of one's spiritual bankruptcy, a person cannot be a citizen of God's kingdom. Without that awareness, we will never desire the salvation that God has provided in His only begotten Son; we will never yearn for the Lord Jesus Christ; we will never hunger and thirst after Him and His righteousness; we will see no beauty in Jesus that we should desire Him (Isa. 53:2).

Unbelievers continue to live daily without Christ, for they neither see nor feel their need of Him as a savior from sin. If you are one who continues to be oblivious to that reality, you are wretched indeed, for you do not see your need for Christ. As long as you do not see your need of Him, and thus do not believe in Him, you are hell-bound. Jesus teaches that very plainly, for by pronouncing the poor in spirit to be blessed, He implies that all who are still oblivious of their spiritual poverty are accursed of God.

The Holy Spirit's work, however, is to make room in our hearts for Christ by confronting us with our spiritual bankruptcy, teaching us that we are radically poor and that there is nothing in us that can render us acceptable to God. What a painful discovery that is! That discovery caused the publican to stay in the back of the temple. He was painfully aware of his spiritual poverty, and groaned, "God be merciful to me a sinner." In the front of the temple stood a Pharisee, boasting of who he was and thanking God that he was not like that publican. Sadly, this proud man was ignorant of his spiritual poverty.

Let me emphasize again what has been stated earlier: the awareness of one's spiritual poverty is not something a person experiences only at the beginning of his spiritual life. The Beatitudes are in the present tense, and Jesus is thereby saying that these traits are always characteristic of the citizens of His kingdom. The people of God will always be a people who are experientially and painfully aware that they are poor in spirit.

Thus, an unmistakable trait of true spirituality will be humility, for nothing is as humbling as being aware of who we really are before God. When the Spirit of God opens our eyes, we begin to see ourselves as God sees us. The difference between the publican and the Pharisee is that the Pharisee compared himself to others. When he did so, he came out on top. But the publican saw himself as God sees us, causing him to bow his head and smite his breast, saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner."

As long as the Christian lives, he will never get beyond that painful awareness of his spiritual poverty. In fact, that awareness will increase, because in order to grow in grace, we must also grow in the experiential knowledge of our radical bankruptcy. The more we realize how deeply destitute we are, the more precious Jesus will become to us and the more we will trust in Him alone. We will then increasingly understand what Paul meant when he said, "Christ is all, and in

all” (Col. 3:11). And so it is! Christ will be all and in all only for a people who have nothing at all. Blessed indeed are the poor in spirit, for they will continually look outside of themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ and His finished work.

How painful it is for believers when they think they are making some progress in the way of holiness and sanctification, only to be confronted again with the radical nature of their remaining and indwelling sin. God, in His fatherly wisdom, will at times even permit them to stumble to remind them who they remain in themselves. In this foundational beatitude, Jesus says that it is a blessing when that happens—when once again we fall flat on our faces, so to speak. It is a blessing when we realize afresh how spiritually poor we are and remain, for it will prompt us to look outside of ourselves to Christ and boast in Him alone.

The apostle Paul never got beyond this. Although he was a man who knew more of Christ than any man has ever known, he could only say of himself, “For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not. . . . O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?” (Rom. 7:18, 24).

However, it was precisely that painful and experiential awareness that also caused him to cry out with holy joy, “I thank God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” He knew that in Christ there was deliverance even for a wretched man, as he knew himself to be. Thus, Jesus says that they who discover—and continue to discover—their spiritual poverty are happy and blessed indeed! The experiential realization of one’s sinfulness is the pathway to true happiness and joy, for it is the pathway that leads us to Christ, in whom alone we can find salvation and reconciliation with God.

To men and women of the world it seems absurd to say, “Happy are the poor in spirit, happy are they that mourn, and happy are the meek.” This is totally contrary to the world’s thinking. It seems like such a paradox, for Jesus is saying that they who become and remain supremely unhappy with themselves are actually supremely blessed.

In the song of Hannah, recorded in 1 Samuel 2, Hannah makes a remarkable observation, saying, “The LORD maketh poor, and maketh rich: he bringeth low, and lifteth up” (v. 7). In other words, He does both! In Psalm 68:10, we read, “Thou, O God, hast prepared of thy goodness for the poor,” and in Psalm 132:15, “I will abundantly bless her provision: I will satisfy her poor with bread.” This is a reference to the Bread of Life, the Lord Jesus Christ. To put it simply, if you have never experienced how bankrupt you are before God, you also will not know the Lord Jesus Christ experientially. Christ is telling us plainly that knowing one’s spiritual bankruptcy is the foundation of all true experience. All other graces are built on that foundation. Salvation will never be experienced without the experiential knowledge of one’s spiritual poverty.

By continually making us aware of our spiritual bankruptcy, the Spirit of God teaches us that being fruitful believers means not only initially and repeatedly taking refuge to Christ but abiding in Him. In John 15:5, Jesus says, “I am the vine, ye are the branches: He that abideth in me, and I in him, the same bringeth forth much fruit: for without me ye can do nothing.” In other words, without Him and apart from abiding in Him, one cannot be spiritually fruitful.

The ongoing ministry of God’s Spirit is needed to make us realize that we cannot progress in the Christian life apart from Christ—without fleeing to Him, trusting in Him, leaning on Him, and abiding in Him. That experiential awareness, as painful as it may be, will be profitable to our souls, for it will lead us to Christ. The Spirit will always lead us to Christ, for it is His great work to glorify Christ by leading poor and bankrupt sinners to embrace Him by faith.

Blessed are they who see themselves as God sees them—who are so conscious of their spiritual poverty that they lose all hope in themselves and of contributing anything to their salvation! How blessed are they indeed who come to that realization and trust in Christ alone!

That such poor and bankrupt sinners are called blessed is such an astonishing and humbling truth for believers who understand experientially that they were deserving of being accursed of God because of their sin! What does it mean to be accursed? It means that the execution of God's wrath due to our sin is inescapable. As long as God's curse rests on us, we cannot escape the execution of His wrath. And the Bible says, "Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them" (Gal. 3:10). In other words, if we transgress God's law, even only one commandment, we are subject to the inescapable curse of the law.

How can Jesus say that such spiritually bankrupt sinners are blessed? The cross of Calvary, and the Savior nailed to that cross, provides us with the answer. Jesus died neither by the sword nor by beheading; rather, He was crucified because He, as the divinely appointed Substitute, was made a curse in our place. Paul tells us in Galatians 3:13, "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us." Christ, the Lawgiver, willingly subjected Himself to the curse of His own law—not only identifying Himself with that curse but becoming the embodiment of it! In so doing, He merited an everlasting blessing—the blessing of Abraham—for fallen sons and daughters of Adam worthy of God's everlasting curse.

What a glorious truth indeed! Because Jesus was made a curse, God can now bless the poor in spirit—guilty, bankrupt, and wretched sinners! Jesus knew that when He uttered the words on the cross, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), the only way such sinners could be called blessed was by Him being made a curse for them on the cross of Calvary. He knew this was the only way in which these beatitudes could become a blessed reality in the lives of the spiritual citizens of His kingdom.

### *The Citizenship of the Poor in Spirit*

Christ concludes this beatitude with an extraordinary statement: the kingdom of heaven belongs to these poor, needy sinners whom He declares blessed! Life doesn't get better than that, because to be part of that kingdom is everything. It means that we belong to God's people, who will receive all the blessings of that kingdom—both now and forever. The citizens of that kingdom enjoy the favor of the King of kings.

However, without the experiential recognition of one's spiritual poverty, one will never be a true believer in Christ—nor a citizen of Christ's kingdom. The citizens of that spiritual kingdom, the poor in spirit, shall willingly surrender themselves to the kingship of Jesus. This is precisely what you and I refuse to do by nature. As sinners by birth and by practice, we live in rebellion toward God and are not citizens of His moral kingdom. Dear reader, are you still an unbeliever today? Are you still not earnestly seeking after God? Then you are still living a life of rebellion toward God.

The only way that will change is when you become experientially aware of who you are in God's sight. That awareness will humble you greatly. The discovery and recognition of our profound spiritual poverty cannot but produce the fruit of humility. Thus, in this opening beatitude, Christ posits that such Spirit-wrought humility is an entrance requirement into God's kingdom.

By nature we do not believe we are poor in spirit—we think we are rich and have no need of anything. As Revelation 3:17 clarifies, "Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with

goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked.”

Like the Pharisees, we think highly of ourselves, even though we may talk like a poor sinner. Let me illustrate. A woman once came to her pastor, wanting to impress him with her humility and spirituality. Seeking to portray a very humble demeanor, she said, “Oh pastor, I am such an awful sinner.” He immediately replied, “Yes, that’s what I have heard about you.” She then rose up in anger and said, “What did they tell you about me?” Her angry response revealed that her humility was obviously not genuine. Even though she talked as one poor in spirit, in reality she thought very highly of herself. Had she truly been poor in spirit, she would have responded that matters were worse than her pastor suspected.

Being poor in spirit will therefore never be the natural disposition of fallen sinners. Pride is the natural bent of our fallen natures. It is the worship of self—the wretched inclination of sinners who still believe Satan’s original lie that we shall be as God. Our sinful pride therefore needs to be broken, and the Spirit of God knows how to break that pride. As a result of His supernatural and transforming work, He will cause us to acknowledge before God who we really are in His sight. That will humble us greatly!

Therefore, we know that David was a regenerated man by his response to Nathan’s convicting message that he was guilty of fornication, deceit, and murder. If there had been no grace in David’s heart, Nathan would have died on the spot. But David knew himself to be a poor sinner, and he bowed his head and humbled himself before God. We need to understand that one cannot be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven with a proud spirit. Only those who experientially know themselves to be poor in spirit, and who seek salvation outside of themselves in Christ, will prove themselves to be genuine citizens of the kingdom of God.

The spiritual key of the gospel opens the kingdom to those who believe and trust in Christ. Only sinners who are experientially poor in spirit will, by faith, flee to Him and trust in Him. The world would say, “In order to be part of a kingdom, to be part of an elite club, you need to have qualifying credentials.” Jesus, however, says that the one essential credential for being a citizen of His kingdom is that you must be poor in spirit—then the kingdom of heaven is yours. Note that He doesn’t say “shall be yours” but rather “is yours.” If, by the grace of God, we have truly acknowledged and endorsed our spiritual poverty, Christ is saying, reverently speaking, “Sinner, I can now welcome you into my kingdom. There is room in my kingdom for the poor in spirit.”

How rich is the promise Jesus attaches to His pronouncement that the poor in spirit are blessed! When He says that yours is the kingdom of heaven, He is saying that this is a privilege that will never be revoked. It will endure forever. In her song, Hannah says, “He raiseth up the poor out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them among princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory” (1 Sam. 2:8). Notice how the first beatitude is rooted in the Old Testament. This passage was Hannah’s way of saying “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” She calls them the poor and the beggar from the dunghill who will be set among princes and inherit the throne of glory.

And so, dear reader, do you belong to the poor in spirit? Is that a proper description of who you are? Do the words of the first beatitude resonate with you? Can you identify with them? Have you been taught by God’s Spirit how spiritually bankrupt and sinful you are? Do you perceive experientially how corrupt, vile, and unworthy you are? Has that caused you to look outside of yourself to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is such a profoundly suitable savior for such a sinner as you are?

The Puritan Thomas Watson makes the following remarkable observation in his famous sermons on the Beatitudes: “This is the difference between a hypocrite and a child of God: the hypocrite is ever telling what he has. A child of God complains of what he lacks.”<sup>1</sup> Watson is simply saying that the counterfeit believer will view himself as an accomplished Christian, whereas the genuine believer will readily admit how deficient he is and remains, and that he has but a small beginning of new obedience in Christ.

Reader, if you have not become experientially aware that you are poor in spirit, you are cursed rather than blessed. As stated earlier, every beatitude also implies a curse. Thus, cursed are those who are not poor in spirit, who do not mourn, who are not meek, who do not hunger and thirst after righteousness. We are either believers or unbelievers; we are either citizens of God’s kingdom or we are not. What is your identity?

But thanks be to God, in the gospel Christ sets before you an open door into His everlasting kingdom. He is saying, “I am the door: by me if any man enter in, he shall be saved” (John 10:9). Therefore, if you are compelled to confess that you are not yet a citizen of that kingdom, cast yourself at the feet of Jesus, who is a complete savior for completely lost sinners. Only in Him will you find the righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees—a righteousness offered freely to poor, bankrupt, corrupt, guilty, and hell-worthy sinners. We have the precious promise of His Word that such sinners who come to Him shall in no wise be cast out (John 6:37).

And dear believer, even though the reoccurring awareness of your spiritual poverty can be so painful and unsettling, Jesus says to you, “Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). One day you will discover as never before what it means to be in Christ, and you will then hear out of His mouth, “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matt. 25:34).

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, (Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 46