

Poor In Spirit

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[0 : 00] Our text today is the first sentence of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. This first sentence sets the tone of the whole sermon.

Miss this sentence, and the rest of the sermon gets terribly twisted, either into frustrating idealism or oppressive legalism.

I think it is a good discipline. Whenever we are reading any of the verses of the Sermon on the Mount, to read this sentence before and after those other verses.

Our text today is Matthew 5, 3, wherein Jesus announces the first of his eight Beatitudes. Since, as I argued last Sunday, the eight Beatitudes are interrelated and inseparable, it is important to read the first with the other seven.

Let us therefore read Matthew 5, verses 3 through 12. If you are able, will you please stand for the reading of the Gospel? I will read the clauses that began blessed.

[1 : 08] Would you please read the clauses that began with the word for? Blessed are the poor in spirit. For there is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn. Blessed are the meek. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.

Blessed are the merciful. Blessed are the pure in heart. Blessed are the peacemakers. Blessed are the people who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.

Blessed are you when people cast insults against you and say all manner of evil against you falsely on account of me. Rejoice and be glad.

For your great Lord of your heavenly heaven. For it's only a persecuted cross who were broken for you. Caught you on that last one, didn't I? Spirit of the living God, these are very familiar words to us.

[2 : 22] Perhaps too familiar at times. We pray now in your mercy and grace that you would take these words off the page, off the screen, and work them deep into our minds and hearts and spirits and wills.

For we pray this in Jesus' name and for his glory. Amen. Please be seated. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Note the position of the pronoun theirs. It stands at the beginning of the second clause for emphasis.

Theirs is the kingdom. Literally, of them is the kingdom. The implication being theirs and only theirs, of them and only of them.

And note the verb is. Not will be, but is. Present. Now. Already. I am so glad that Jesus began his great manifesto on this note.

[3 : 39] Let's say the words together again. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Again, please. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Once more, please. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. What does Jesus mean by poor in spirit?

There are two words in the Greek language that are translated poor in our English translations. One describes people who have to work all the time because they have no property.

The other describes people who are so destitute they are forced to beg from others. The first refers to those who at least have the bare essentials.

The second refer to those who have nothing, absolutely nothing, and know it. It is that second word that Jesus uses in the first beatitude.

[4 : 45] Blessed are the destitute in spirit. Blessed are the beggarly poor in spirit. Beggars come with empty hands, empty pockets, empty wallets.

They have nothing to offer in return for food. Congratulations, says the king. Right on, says the Lord of the universe. Right up are those who approach the living God with empty hands.

Right side up are those who come with empty pockets. The poor in spirit are those who know they have nothing with which to buy the kingdom of God.

The poor in spirit are those who are totally at the mercy of the kingdom giver. Surprised! It is those who are poor before God whom God makes rich. You lucky bums, yours is the kingdom of heaven. Now, in Luke's version of the sermon, Jesus says, Blessed are the poor. Period. Has Matthew spiritualized Luke by adding the phrase in spirit?

[5 : 58] Or has Luke socialized Matthew by taking away the phrase in spirit? I think they are essentially saying the same thing.

Let me explain. Throughout the Bible, we meet a God who is the champion of the powerless. The champion of the powerless. There clearly is in Scripture a divine preferential option for the powerless.

For widows and orphans and aliens and prisoners and the poor. A divine preferential option for the poor. Yet nowhere in Scripture is material poverty held out as the ideal human condition.

Nowhere in Scripture is the living God happy when people are poor materially. It is wrong to take Jesus' words in Luke to mean it is good to be poor and that therefore only the materially poor inherit the kingdom.

Although Luke, more than the other three gospel writers, stresses Jesus' teaching of the poor, Luke never romanticizes. Luke never celebrates material poverty as such.

[7 : 13] Why then are the poor blessed and congratulated in Luke's version of the saying? Because of the resultant attitude. The poor know that they need God.

The poor therefore live in dependence upon God. The poor have only one hope. Their whole existence hangs on God and God alone.

which is why Mother Teresa enjoys working with the poor. Which is why Jesus pronounces right up on the poor. In the Bible, the opposite of poor is not rich.

Did you know that? The opposite of poor is violent. Taking one's own life into one's own hands. In Luke's gospel, Jesus pronounces a woe upon the rich.

And he pronounces that woe not because they are rich, but because of the resultant attitude the wealth produces. The attitude of not needing God.

[8 : 20] The attitude of independence from God. The rich, and most of us in this room fall into that category, have or think we're bound for hope than the living God.

Until an earthquake shakes the foundations. Or until it rains too many days. Have you ever noticed that the poor are not shaken by such tragedies?

That's because they do not live with the illusion the rich do. They are not deceived into thinking there are other bounds of security than the living God. The poor are not given the kingdom simply because they are poor.

That would be a perversion of the gospel. That would be salvation by social class. The poor who receive the kingdom are poor in spirit who stand before God in utter helplessness.

Robert Gulick in his excellent work on the Sermon on the Mount summarizes the biblical data best. He writes, The poor in Judaism refer to those in desperate need socioeconomic element whose helplessness drives them to a dependent relationship with God the religious element for the supplying of their needs and vindication.

[9 : 41] For Matthew then the poor in spirit are those who find themselves waiting empty handed upon God alone for their hope and deliverance. And surprise, surprise, surprise, surprise.

Jesus switched all the price tags. It is the powerless. It is the spiritually bankrupt. It is the spiritually inadequate who get the prize.

Theirs and only theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Thus Dale Bruner can say, The Sermon on the Mount is spiritually speaking actually the sermon from the valley.

It starts low. It starts with those who feel very unlike mountains. Right on, says Jesus. Right on, for theirs are the glorious benefits of the reign of God.

Now, as a matter of fact, all human beings are, apart from Jesus Christ, spiritually poor. We are all spiritually bankrupt.

[10 : 44] No one has anything with which to buy the kingdom. However, not every human being acknowledges this universal spiritual poverty. Therefore, the poor in spirit that Jesus blesses are

those who recognize and admit this poverty, this bankruptcy.

The beggarly poor have laid aside all pretense. The beggarly poor have stopped playing the denial game. The beggarly poor know that they are fundamentally helpless, and they admit it.

And they, and only they, hear Jesus blessed right up. Now, as I argued last Sunday, the qualities Jesus blesses or congratulates in the Beatitudes are not natural human qualities.

Rather, they are the result of having been grabbed by his gospel. people. Jesus did not come into the world looking for Beatitude people to whom he could give the kingdom.

Rather, he comes into the world, he first calls people to himself, and then as a result of that encounter, and as a result of that ongoing relationship, these qualities begin to emerge in people.

[11:58] In the Beatitudes, Jesus is painting a portrait of gospelized people. The question is then, why is poverty of spirit a mark of the gospelized?

And why is it the first mark? I'm not sure I can adequately explain what I want to explain, but let me try. When we encounter Jesus beyond our inadequate images of him, when we encounter Jesus as he is in all of his glory and holiness, full of grace and truth, when we encounter Jesus as he really is, we see ourselves as we really are.

Loved by him, yes. Infinitely beloved by him, yes. But also falling woefully short of who we were created to be. Am I right? Am I right?

When the light of his in-breaking kingdom finally dawns upon us, when the glory of his new world order is revealed to us, we become as never before aware of how far we have fallen from the glory of God.

Right? As Jesus said just before going to the cross, if I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have sinned. If I had not come and done among them what no one else did, they would not have sinned.

[13:32] It is his presence among us that makes us aware of how poor we are in the things of God. We see him as he is and we see ourselves as we are.

And like the tax collector in Jesus' parable, we cry out, have mercy on me, O Lord. The Pharisee in that parable could go on and on and on about his spiritual achievements because he was only comparing himself to other people.

As long as we do that, we can always find someone worse off than we. We can always find someone who is prouder than we are. And although we may be very proud, we can pat ourselves on the back of being relatively humble.

We can always find someone who has greater fits of temper than we do. And even though we have a temper, we can pat ourselves on the back saying that we are relatively patient. But when we encounter Jesus in all of his purity and compassion and loveliness and tenderness and integrity and peace, the illusion goes away.

And like Peter, we fall at Jesus' feet and cry out, depart from me for I am a sinful man, O Lord. Peter there is not suffering from a poor self-image.

[15:02] It's just that he has simply been arrested by the infinite quality difference between who he is and who he was made to be as reflected in Jesus. It was while meditating upon Thomas Akempis' imitation of Christ that John Newton, the author of Amazing Grace, came to the blessedness of knowing his spiritual poverty.

Before that encounter with Jesus, John Newton was the skipper of an English slave-trading ship. Newton thought of himself as quite a decent chap, thank you.

And then the light broke through. And then the kingdom dawned in his soul. And his hymn is his personal testimony.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. A wretch. It is his own self-designation.

No one called John Newton that. No one needed to. In the presence of Jesus Christ, what else would a slave trader call himself? He did not have a self-esteem problem there.

[16:18] It's just that he saw how far short of the glory of God he had fallen. I once was lost, although at the time he did not think of himself as lost.

I once was lost, but now I'm found, was blind, but now I see. Now I see that before the living God I am spiritually poor. That's why he goes on to sing in the second verse, t'was grace that taught my heart to fear.

Grace teaches a heart to fear? Yes, because grace first makes us see ourselves as we are apart from grace.

The gospel of God's new order first caused John Newton to see how wretched his place in the old order was. But then he made the greatest discovery of his life.

He discovered that the new order, the kingdom of heaven, is given to those who recognize how wretchedly poor they are before God and so he goes on to sing and grace relieved my fears relieved.

[17 : 29] I am so glad that Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount the way he did. Every time I went back to that first sentence, every time I listened to Jesus preach this sermon, I have to cry out, Lord, you're going to have to have mercy on me.

I hear him say, whoever is angry with his brother shall be liable to the court. I hear him say, whoever says to his brother, you fool, shall be liable enough to go into the fires of hell. I hear him say, whoever looks at a woman to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart. I hear him say, no one can serve two masters. I hear him say, do not be anxious about your life.

Do not be anxious about tomorrow. I hear him say, you are not to judge lest you be judged. And why do you bother about the speck in your neighbor's eye when you don't notice a log in your own eye? And I have to shake my head.

I hear him say, let your yes be yes and your no be no. Anything beyond that is of the evil one. I hear him say, do not resist the one who is evil. But if he slaps you on your right you, I hear him say, not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does, the will of my father who is in heaven.

[18 : 50] And I have to cry out, oh Lord, I do not have what it takes. I do not have what it takes. I do not have what it takes to be and do what you call me to be and do. And then I hear, blessed, congratulations, right on.

Right side up are those who know they fall short. Right side up are who know that they could never get it together on their own for theirs is the kingdom. The gospel eyes can echo the words of that old hymn Rock of Ages.

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. Brennan Manning spent most of his life as a Roman Catholic priest before the light dawned on him, before the light of the kingdom dawned on him.

And he suggests that the poor in spirit are like survivors of a shipwreck. Out at sea, all the things they used to rely on, past achievement, accumulated treasures, titles, and degrees simply do not matter.

[20 : 09] Out at sea, they do not matter. All that matters now is that plank to which they cling for life. Manning writes, the shipwrecked have stood at the still point of the turning world and discovered that the human heart was made for Jesus Christ and cannot really be content with less.

They cannot take seriously the demands that the world makes on them. We were made for Christ and nothing less will ever satisfy us. The shipwrecked have little in common with the landlocked. The landlocked have their own security systems, a home base, credentials, and barns, their self-interest, and investments intact. They never find themselves because they never really feel themselves lost.

The shipwrecked, on the contrary, reach out for that passing plank with the desperation of the drowning, adrift on an angry sea, in a state of utter helplessness and vulnerability.

The shipwrecked never asked what they could do to merit the plank. They never asked what they could do to inherit the kingdom of dry land. They knew that there was absolutely nothing any of them could do.

[21 : 19] And then Manning writes this, like little children, they simply receive the plank as a gift. And little children are precisely those who haven't done anything.

Unless you become like a little child, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven, says Jesus. Jesus is not suggesting that heaven is a vast playground for infants. Children are our model because they have no claim on heaven.

If they are close to God, Simon Tugwell says, it's not because they're innocent, but because they're incompetent. Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs.

Theirs. Theirs is the kingdom. How do you respond to this first sentence of the sermon on the mount today?

It's a kind of death, isn't it? Kind of death? It is a death. death. It's a death to self-sufficiency.

[22 : 29] It's a death to self-saviorship. But because self-sufficiency and self-saviorship are illusions, this death is a birth.

Anyone who is in a 12-step program can tell us that it was when they embraced the first step, when we embraced the first step, we are powerless before our trouble, that we began to live.

The poor in spirit are those who know that they do not have it all together. The poor in spirit are those who know that they cannot get it all together on their own. They are therefore ready to receive.

They are therefore willing to receive. You can't sit there with your arms crossed. That's not poor in spirit.

this is poor in spirit. Will there ever be a time when we will be rich in spirit?

[23 : 39] Yes. When? Every time we own up to being poor in spirit. Every time we do, the Lord of life says to us, yours is the kingdom.

Yours. Only yours is the kingdom. All of it. Everything that is entailed in God's new world order, it's all for you.

All for you. I don't know where to go right now.

But I think what I'd like to do is I am ready to receive more of the kingdom. I'm ready to say I don't have it together.

goodness knows I've tried. I'm ready to receive more of the kingdom. So I'm going to kneel here and if you'd like to join me, feel free.

[24 : 54] And I'm just going to ask for more. We're going to sing Amazing Grace and as we do, if you'd like to join me or you can do that right where you are, let's just open ourselves up for the mercy, grace, truth, holiness, healing, power, guidance, whatever it is that's in the kingdom, it's given to those who have given up.

Come. Amen.