

The Poor in Spirit

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[0 : 00] Psalm 40, my help and my deliverer. I waited patiently for the Lord.

! He inclined to me and heard my cry.! He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog. He set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure.

He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord.

Blessed is the man who makes the Lord his trust, who does not turn to the proud, to those who go astray after a lie.

You have multiplied, O Lord my God, your wondrous deeds and your thoughts towards us, toward us. None can compare with you. I will proclaim and tell of them, yet they are more than can be told.

[1 : 10] In sacrifice and offering, you have not delighted. But you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required.

Then I said, Behold, I have come. In the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God.

Your law is within my heart. I have told the glad news of deliverance in the great congregation. Behold, I have not restrained my lips, as you know, O Lord.

I have not hidden your deliverance within my heart. I have spoken of your faithfulness and your salvation. I have not concealed your steadfast love and your faithfulness from the congregation.

As for you, O Lord, you will not restrain your mercy from me. Your steadfast love and your faithfulness will ever preserve me.

[2 : 20] For evils have encompassed me beyond number. My iniquities have overtaken me, and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head.

My heart fails me. Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me. O Lord, make haste to help me. Let those be put to shame and disappointed altogether who seek to snatch away my life.

Let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who delight in my hurt. Let those be appalled because of their shame who say to me, Aha, aha.

But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you. May those who love your salvation say continually, Great is the Lord.

As for me, I am poor and needy. But the Lord takes thought for me. You are my help and my deliverer.

[3 : 23] Do not delay. O my God. And then Matthew chapter 5, verses 1 to 3. Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain.

And when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Thank you very much, Faye. Like many of you, I enjoy a great story. I always admire great storytellers.

And I have a deceased uncle who is a great storyteller. He's my father's eldest brother. And I remember one Sunday afternoon, Alexei and I ran by to visit him.

And he told us this story about this time his father, my grandfather, was beating him. And for our non-Behamean friends, when we say beating, that's really just using a belt or something similar to discipline a child.

[4 : 43] Now, here at Kingdom Life, we don't encourage that. We encourage instead using the Board of Education on the seat of understanding, which is a paddle, in other words.

But he was being beaten this particular day. And he said, every time my grandfather would hit him with a cut of the belt, he would say, you're going to hearken?

And my uncle, he didn't know the meaning of hearken, but he thought it was a bad word, and he had done it. So every time Granddaddy would hit him a cut, he'd say, you're going to hearken?

He'd say, no, sir. And he would hit him again. So you're going to hearken? No, sir. And this went on, back and forth. And finally, he said he just got angry.

He was confused. And Granddaddy hit him again. He said, you're going to hearken? He said, yes, yes. And Granddaddy said, okay, go on. I think, maybe, Alexa remembers that.

[5 : 54] We laughed that day because of that particular story. Words are important. And it's important that we know what they mean. And a lot of times we encounter words, we don't know what they mean.

And sometimes we encounter those words in God's word. And sometimes it's not so much that we don't know the words, but we just don't understand how those words are being used.

And this morning, as we continue our sermon series in the Sermon on the Mount, we come to the first of eight statements that Jesus made, beginning with this word, blessed.

And these statements have come to be known as the Beatitudes. And the reason for that is the word Beatitude comes from the Latin word Beatus, which means blessed or happy or fortunate.

And so the Beatitudes express a condition of blessedness. And in this first Beatitude that we find in Matthew 5, verse 3, we find three familiar words used in an unfamiliar way.

[7 : 11] These three familiar words, poor in spirit, but they're used in an unfamiliar way. And it is important for us to be able to understand them.

If we don't understand them, we'll be very much like my uncle. And we got in trouble because we just aren't able to understand the words that we come face to face with.

Jesus said, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. These three words, poor in spirit, they're familiar to all of us.

But what does Jesus mean by poor in spirit? And again, the answer to this is very important because here we have Jesus beginning not only the Beatitudes, but also beginning the Sermon on the Mount.

And brothers and sisters, if we don't understand what Jesus is saying in this first Beatitude, we are not in a good position to understand the other Beatitudes. We're not in a good position to understand the Sermon on the Mount because what Jesus is saying, these are not just random words or random sayings that he is stringing together.

[8 : 29] Jesus is carefully and thoughtfully addressing us about foundational teachings of the kingdom of God. And so we want to get the foundation right.

We want to understand what it is that Jesus is saying in these opening words to the Beatitudes and these opening words to the Sermon on the Mount.

So let me pray for us and ask the Lord to help us to understand these words this morning. Father, we bow our hearts this morning. Thank you for bringing us to this place.

Thank you for your work in our lives and in our hearts. Lord, you know where each one of us is and you know what each one of us needs. Would you speak to us, Lord, from your word?

Would you grant us illumination as we hear your word proclaimed this morning? Lord, I ask that you would grant me grace to care for these who are gathered this morning and those who may be watching or listening online.

[9 : 38] Would you come by the power and presence of your spirit? Would you help us? We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. So this morning, I want to help us to understand and apply the first Beatitude by asking two questions.

And the first question is, what is the meaning of being poor in spirit? And the second question is, what is the blessing of being poor in spirit?

So first, let's consider the meaning of being poor in spirit. Matthew 5, 2, we find these words.

And he opened his mouth and taught them saying. It's quite an unusual statement that Matthew writes. Because if you think about it, how else could he teach them unless he opens his mouth?

But Matthew is saying more than that. Matthew is using a way of speaking or a rhetorical formula that we find throughout Scripture.

[10 : 55] It's these words, he opened his mouth. It means more than just to utter words. It means to utter words that are solemn, words that are significant, words that are substantial.

And what Matthew is doing is he is cluing us in to the fact that Jesus is now going to pour out of his being, out of his heart, out of his mouth, something that is solemn, something that is significant, something that is substantial, not just idle talk.

He's calling us to pay attention to this foundational sermon that Jesus is going to proclaim about the kingdom of God, this new society that he has come to bring.

Now, some people take the term poor in spirit to refer to those who are materially poor, those who lack the resources to meet their daily needs.

But that view is not correct. And the most obvious reason is that being materially poor, as we can all attest, is not a blessing.

[12 : 13] Material poverty is part of the fall. It's part of the curse. It is the result of sin entering into the world because of Adam's disobedience. And except for people who take a vow of poverty, poverty is an involuntary condition that people find themselves in and given the opportunity, they will quickly try to get out of it.

It's really an insult to say to the poor, you are blessed because you are poor, because you are destitute, because you don't have what you need. And anyone who is not poor and who tells the poor is blessed to be poor should change positions with the poor.

And we don't think that is likely to happen. So where did this idea come from that those who are materially poor are blessed?

Well, it actually comes from how some people have interpreted the words of Jesus recorded in Luke 6, verse 20, when Jesus said, Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

Some people have taken that to mean that Jesus was saying, Blessed are you who are materially poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. And if you take Jesus to be saying that, then what you are doing is you are causing Jesus to say two contradictory things.

[13 : 44] You're causing Jesus to contradict himself between what he says in Matthew 5, 3 and what he says in Luke 6, 20. We know the scripture does not contradict itself. So what is Jesus saying when he says, Blessed are the poor?

I think, first of all, it's important to remember that the Old Testament is the context for both the Beatitudes and for the Sermon on the Mount as a whole.

And in the Old Testament, although the word poor initially meant materially poor, it initially meant to be destitute and to be needy of the resources that one needed to live, over time, this word poor took on a spiritual meaning because the poor and the needy had no refuge but God.

They had no one to whom they could look ultimately for their needs and for their sustenance. And so this word poor came to also mean humble dependence upon God.

Not just to be materially poor. And we see this in the Old Testament. For example, in Psalm 40 that we just read this morning, in verse 17, David, the rich, powerful, prosperous king of Israel says, as for me, I am poor and needy.

[15 : 20] But the Lord takes thought for me. Clearly he wasn't talking about materially poor. He was talking about his utter dependence upon God. And so in this Psalm, in Psalm 40, David says, for evil, starting in verse 12, for evil has encompassed me beyond number.

My iniquities have overtaken me and I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head. My heart fails me. Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me. O Lord, make haste to help me.

Let those be put to shame and disappointed altogether who seek my, to snatch away my life. Let those be turned back and brought to dishonor who delight in my hurt.

Those are powerful words from this powerful king. David was facing a situation, we don't know the exact circumstances, but there were circumstances that only God could help him with.

Only God could deliver him from. And David is pouring his heart out to God and saying, God, deliver me, help me. He is communicating his utter dependence upon God.

[16 : 34] That is what it means to be poor and to be needy in the case that David is expressing. And so, the Old Testament is the place where we get this understanding of the poor person being one who could do nothing for himself and who was utterly dependent upon God.

So, we think of that in light of what Jesus says, to be poor in spirit is to recognize one's spiritual poverty and one's neediness before God.

It is to recognize that before God, we possess nothing of spiritual value or worth. We're all spiritually bankrupt when it comes to standing before God and having anything of spiritual value or worth in God's sight.

I think we've all seen either pictures or video footage of people, in particular children, who are in areas where there have been extended famines or there have been wars and they lack the amount of food they need and we see them and they are emaciated, their eyes are sunk into their heads, their skin clings to their bones, their stomachs are protruding, and their material poverty is obvious.

Spiritual poverty is not obvious. Our spiritual poverty is not obvious. And left to ourselves we would never see it.

[18 : 25] Left to ourselves we would never accept that we are spiritually poor before God. Left to ourselves we would never see that there's nothing good in us.

We sang the song this morning have mercy on me oh God have mercy on me. It is only when God helps us to see our sin that we are able to sing with conviction those words.

Because even our best works of righteousness are filthy rags and blood sin. In his earthly ministry Jesus told a parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

and in Jesus' day the Pharisees were the best example of this blindness to spiritual poverty. They thought that they were all together.

Jesus at the beginning of his ministry declared that he had come to be a physician to those who were sick. The Pharisees didn't see a need for Jesus because they didn't see themselves as being spiritually sick.

[19 : 41] And so Jesus tells this parable in Luke chapter 18. Let's turn there and I want to read verses 9 to 14 which is the parable.

Luke chapter 18 verses 9 to 14. Luke writes he also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

Two men went up to the temple to pray one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee standing off by himself prayed thus God I thank you that I am not like other men extortioners unjust adulterers and even like this tax collector.

I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all that I get. The tax collector standing far off would not even lift up his eyes to heaven but beat his breast saying God be merciful to me a sinner.

And Jesus concludes by saying this I tell I tell you this man referring to the tax collector went down to his house justified rather than the other that everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

[21 : 18] Notice again the reason that Jesus told this parable. We're told in verse 9. He told it to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and treated others with contempt.

In other words Jesus told the parable to those who did not see their spiritual poverty. The Pharisee boasted that he was not an extortioner. He was not unjust.

He didn't commit adultery. He fasted twice per week and he gave tithes everything. And on the other hand the tax collector recognizing his spiritual poverty stood afar off wouldn't even lift his eyes up to heaven and simply said God be merciful to me a sinner.

And Jesus says it was not the self righteous Pharisee who saw who could see no sin in himself who went to his home justified. It was the tax collector.

brothers and sisters the truth is that every human being without exception is spiritually destitute and bankrupt before a holy God.

[22 : 33] Every one of us. The best of us. This is true whether you are religious like the Pharisee and you are conforming to God's law as best you are able to.

And it's certainly true of the irreligious like the tax collector. But the poor in spirit though all of us are bankrupt before God the poor in spirit are those who recognize and accept their spiritual bankruptcy before God.

Those are the poor in spirit. they see their spiritual poverty they're not filled with pride they don't look down on other people they can be honest about their sins and their failings and the honesty is quite the opposite of boasting and spiritual pride that is so prevalent in the world in which we live.

The world does not value humility the world does not value honesty about our sin and about our failings instead the world values pretense values pride in the world we encourage to have self esteem and to show self confidence to be self reliant but such values are foreign to the man or the woman the boy or the girl who has come to realize and recognize that before God they're spiritually bankrupt that before God their best works of righteousness is riddled with sin so let me ask you this morning have you come to the reality that you in and of yourself are spiritually poor and destitute and needy before God you come to the reality that in every way in and of yourself you're spiritually bankrupt and cannot do anything of value and good in

God's sight one of the reasons that we tend not to be aware of our spiritual bankruptcy our spiritual destitution is we all have this tendency to compare ourselves to other people like the Pharisee did comparing himself to all manner of sinners brothers and sisters we will never see our bankruptcy we will never see our spiritual depravity unless and until we come to see the holiness of God unless and until we come to see ourselves in light of God's holiness and the prophet Isaiah had such an experience the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah chapter 6 had an experience where he came face to face with the holiness of God let's turn there and look at that in Isaiah chapter 6

[25 : 51] Isaiah chapter 6 Isaiah who had been functioning as a prophet to the nation of Israel he has this experience which he dates as being in the year that King Uzziah died he said I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne high and lifted up and the train of his robes filled the temple above him stood the seraphim each had six wings with two he covered his face and with two he covered his feet and with two he flew and one said to another and one called to another and said holy holy holy is the Lord of hosts the whole earth is full of his glory and the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called and the house was filled with smoke and I said woe is me for I am lost for I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips for my eyes have seen the king the

Lord of hosts friends we will only see how sinful we are in light of the holiness of the thrice holy God the prophet Isaiah who by human standards would have been among the holiest men of his day very confronted with a vision of God's holiness saw how sinful he was and he said woe is me his sins were before him he saw the uncleanness of his lips he was mindful of the sinful people that he lived among and so brothers and sisters even when we live more lives even when we are conforming the best we know how to God's word and to his way an awareness of God's holiness will help us to see our spiritual poverty and the reason again that our righteous acts are not perfect is we are not perfect and the

Bible says in Isaiah 64 verse 6 all of our acts of righteousness are like filthy rags in God's sight yet Jesus said there's a blessedness to this there's a blessedness to this condition there's a blessedness to recognize that we are not all that on our best day Augustus top lady was a British pastor and hymn writer in the 1700s he's the author of the hymn rock of age is cleft for me and verse three of that hymn captures very well what it means to be poor in spirit here's what he writes verse three of rock of ages cleft for me nothing in my hands I bring simply to the 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 Augustus top lady was not writing a hymn that was foreign to himself and talking about other people no he as a priest he as one who served the Lord recognized himself in these words that we bring nothing to God of value of spiritual value that we can only do what we sang about this morning cling to the cross cling to the cross where mercy and grace abounds for us recognize our nakedness that we need to be clothed in the righteousness of Jesus Christ and they were helpless and we need to look to

God for grace and so we run to his fountain and we say wash me savior or I die that is a vivid description of what it means to be poor in spirit it is to recognize that before God we are personally bankrupt of anything good or righteous in and of ourselves now why is this bankruptcy this spiritual bankruptcy this spiritual wretchedness a blessed condition to be in why does Jesus pronounce a blessing on such people or to put it another way what is the blessing of being poor in spirit well this brings me to my second and final point the blessing of being poor in spirit why are the poor in spirit blessed blessed they are blessed because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them the kingdom of heaven belongs to these ones who have come to grips with the reality that in and of themselves they have nothing in in

[31 : 49] Matthew 4 we're told that when Jesus heard that John the Baptist was put in prison he then began to preach and that was because John was the forerunner of Jesus and John was to prepare the way and so when John was put in prison his ministry had ceased and Jesus then knew that the time had come for him to begin his ministry and Matthew records that the first words out of Jesus mouth were repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand Jesus was declaring that the kingdom of God had come in his person and he began to proclaim to people that they could enter the kingdom of God through repentance he began to proclaim to people that they could become citizens of the kingdom of God who would submit their lives to the lordship of King Jesus and so

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who have come to acknowledge their spiritual poverty before God they are the blessed ones they are the ones who are blessed beyond description they are the ones who are blessed beyond anything we could imagine in this life even though they see their depravity even though they see their bankruptcy even though they see they're naked of anything of worth they are the blessed ones because the kingdom of heaven belongs to them belongs to them now in part and will belong to them in fullness in the future and that is why they are blessed but how how does these persons who are bankrupt who have nothing nothing of value how do they come to own the kingdom of God how does the kingdom come to belong to them comes to belong to them for one reason they became objects of the grace of God

I want you to please hear me on this point Jesus is not saying blessed are the poor in spirit and they'll be rewarded with the kingdom of heaven he's not he's not saying that so much as to cause us to think that we could bring ourselves in a particular spiritual state and when we do that then we can get this reward of the kingdom again left to ourselves none of us would acknowledge our spiritual neediness before God we see this beginning from Adam and Eve when Adam and Eve sinned when they disobeyed God the first thing they did was they ran to hide their nakedness and tried to cover themselves with fig leaves God is the one who sought them out God is the one who went after them when they were refusing to acknowledge their sin and in mercy he covered them with something more permanent than the fig leaves that they had and in mercy he gave the promise that one day the seed of the woman will crush the head of the serpent he gave them that gospel promise and the

Bible tells us that because of Adam's sin spiritual death came into the whole world every person is born into the world spiritually dead and has no interest in God and no interest in the things of God and so the question really is how do people born dead into the world no interest in the things of God how do they even come to a place to recognize their sin and recognize their falling short of God's standards and God's glory I think you would agree with me that the average person walking around today is not interested in that that's not on the front of their minds they're not mindful that they are objects of the wrath of God they're not mindful that their life is an offense to God and so how does someone come to the place where they recognize their spiritual poverty they recognize their bankruptcy how do they come to the place where they can join with

Augustus top lady and say nothing in my hand I bring simply to the 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 how does a person come to that then when you think back to the parable of the tax collector and the pharisee it's a parable this is not an exact true story but think of it as a true story why would that tax collector among all the tax collectors on that day be in the temple why wouldn't he be like all the other tax collectors and do whatever they did the only thing that would have stirred a tax collector to go to the temple is God working on his heart is God moving by his spirit moving by his grace opening his eyes helping him to see a sinful condition to cause him to say God be merciful to me a sinner friends we don't wake up one morning and just decide to change our lives we don't wake up one morning and decide that a life of sin doesn't make sense that only happens because

[38 : 12] God has mercy that only happens because God opens blinded eyes and God changes hardened hearts God makes the spiritually dead those born into this world spiritually dead he makes them alive he regenerates them he gives them new birth by his spirit he grants them the gift of repentance and the gift of faith in Jesus Christ and so in short the poor in spirit only see their spiritual neediness by the grace of God by the grace of God and this is not to see it in its fullness I can guarantee you that none of us sees our sin to the full extent that we should but by the grace of God we see our sin by the grace of God we recognize that we we fall short with our best efforts our best discipline we fall short and it is only by the grace of

God that we're able to see that and we're able to acknowledge that God graciously opens the eyes of those who are poor in spirit and the kingdom of heaven belongs to them they're the ones who are living in the kingdom of heaven and the reality is that we're citizens of this nation or other nations those of us who have had our eyes open those of us who have come to Christ those of us who recognize our wretchedness in and of ourselves we live in that kingdom where Jesus Christ is Lord where grace and mercy reigns over our lives and we get to call God our father and that only happens because God was merciful to us and so if you're here this morning and you are aware that you see your need and you see your poverty before the

Lord spiritually there's much to thank God for there's much to rejoice about God has been merciful to you and the kingdom of heaven belongs to you belongs to you now in part and one day it will belong to you in fullness yes but if you here this morning and you you don't see a spiritual need you think you're okay you're proud in spirit you see yourself as adequate before a holy God you see yourself as sufficient before a holy God and even though you may never verbalize that that is the way you see yourself no need no running to the Lord it is only when we see our need that we will run to Jesus and it's only when he helps us to see how needy we are that we will truly run to him and so my prayer for you this morning is that you will see your need for Christ you will see that you will not stand on that day of judgment and be able to pass it in and of yourself and your own righteousness only those who are clothed in the righteousness of Jesus

Christ that garment that he gives us by grace they're the only ones who will stand that judgment on that day this morning we're going to close with an old hymn it's the hymn Amazing Grace it was written in the 1700s by a man who was formerly a slave trader his name is John Newton and from a young boy John Newton had the reputation of living a sinful and a rebellious life he became a slave trader and was known to be one of the most cruel and vicious men but God saved John Newton God opened his eyes a man who had lived an entrenched life of sin saw nothing wrong with it one day

God opened his eyes he saw his sin he saw his need for Christ and the Lord called him into the gospel ministry it is said that in the latter years of his life when his health was failing on one occasion while preaching John Newton proclaimed in a loud voice these words my memory is nearly gone but I remember two things that I am a great sinner and that Christ is a great savior brothers and sisters it is in remembering that we are great sinners and that Christ is a great savior that enables us to one recognize our spiritual poverty but to savor and see the blessedness of it because it is only when we see ourselves as a great sinner that we can see

[44 : 07] Christ as a great savior and as we sing amazing grace this morning let's remember that with John Newton we're all great sinners and those of us who have put our trust in Christ he is our great savior as the name comes let's pray oh father would you help us to see the blessedness of recognizing that in and of ourselves we are spiritually bankrupt and Lord may we cling to Christ may we cling to the cross and may we rejoice that he has given us a righteousness that is perfect in your sight God I pray for those who do not know the Savior this morning

God open their eyes help them to see their sin their neediness that without you they are utterly lost and depraved God work in all of our hearts this morning we pray in Jesus name Amen