

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

Matthew 5:3

INTRODUCTION

Our study brings us to the Beatitudes or beautiful attitudes of the Kingdom of God.

The first four beatitudes focus on our relationship to God.

The second four are centered on our relationship to man.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE “BLESSED”

Contrary to popular opinion, blessed doesn't just mean “happy” in the *subjective* sense in which it is often translated.

To be blessed means to be “approved of” by God or to be given divine favor. Matthew 5:3 might be better translated: Approved of by God are the poor in spirit.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE POOR IN SPIRIT

1. Poor in spirit doesn't mean that a person has to be materially poor as a requisite for entering the Kingdom.

If Luke's account (6:20) was all that we had, it could possibly be interpreted as material poverty. Luke says, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of heaven.” If Matthew 5:3 refers to material poverty, then it would be an unchristian thing for a Christian or any other person to seek to alleviate the burdens of the needy and destitute. We know that that isn't the case, because Jesus commends giving and serving the needs of others. It is interesting to note that God doesn't sanction material poverty in any passage of the Bible. Jesus did warn those with material wealth, but he never condemned it.

And Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Matthew 19:23–24

2. It is not the conviction that one is of no value at all. It doesn't mean the absence of self-worth.
3. It does not mean shyness.
4. It does not refer to a showy or false humility.

Self-righteousness or moral pride will damn the soul. Jesus made this clear in the account of the tax collector and the Pharisee:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But 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!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. Luke 18:10–14

5. It doesn't mean to be retiring (monastic), weak, or lacking courage.

HOW SHOULD WE UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE POOR IN SPIRIT

The Greek word has the idea of cowering and cringing like a beggar. It is the picture of a person who crouches about, wretchedly begging. Such a person is fully dependent on the giving of others and cannot survive apart from outside help. Thus an excellent translation is that of "beggarly poor". We could translate our passage so far: Approved of by God are the beggarly poor in spirit... or approved by God are those who are so desperately poor in their spiritual resources that they realize they must have help from outside sources.

1. To be poor in spirit is the opposite of being rich in pride.

Poverty of spirit is the absence of pride, self-assurance, and self-reliance.

2. To be poor in spirit means to understand that you are spiritually bankrupt before God.

It is the mental state of a man who has recognized something of the righteousness and holiness of God, who has seen his sin and corruption of his own heart, and has acknowledged his inability to please God. It is an awareness and admission that without the moral virtues to commend us to God. John Wesley once said, "[The poor in spirit have] deep sense of the loathsome leprosy of sin which he brought with him from his mother's womb, which overspreads his whole soul, and totally corrupts every power and faculty thereof."

It's interesting to note that the first beatitude is one of the strongest statements in the Bible concerning the doctrine of Justification by faith in Christ alone because it shows a person's complete inability to please God by any human effort.

3. Poverty of spirit is an indispensable sign of grace.

No one can truly know Christ without being poor in spirit. There are most likely scores of "evangelicals" in our own community, prominent "Christians," who do not know Christ. They

have never come to a place of spiritual bankruptcy. They have never confessed, "There is nothing in me to commend me to God"; and as a result are lost.

HOW DO YOU BECOME POOR IN SPIRIT

How does one become poor in spirit? The answer is that you do not look at yourself or begin by trying to do things yourself. The way to become poor in spirit is to look at God! You cannot truly look at Him without feeling your absolute poverty, and emptiness. Martin Lloyd Jones said, "If a man feels anything in the presence of God other than utter poverty of Spirit, it ultimately means that he has never faced him." Poverty of spirit comes as a result of humble repentance and faith.

1. In order to fulfill the requirements of the Beatitudes a person must have a new nature.

Jesus teaches that the Sermon on the Mount is only for those who know that they cannot live by it. This is the same as the Law in the Old Testament. It was given to drive men to God for God's mercy. Ill: Moses was on Mt. Sinai receiving the law while Israel was in the valley doing the very things that God was forbidding. Preaching the standards of the Sermon on the Mount to an unbeliever is like trying to tell a wolf not to eat a sheep. Unless the wolf has a new nature, the sheep is dinner with wool on.

2. There must be an emptying of our lives before there can be a filling.

We must become poor in spirit before we can become rich in God's blessings. In Luke 2:34 Simeon said to Mary concerning her Son, "Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel." Spiritually, there must be a falling before there is a rising, and emptying before a filling, and humble repentance before conversion. There is no one in the Kingdom who is not poor in spirit. It is the fundamental characteristic of the Christian and of the citizen of the Kingdom of heaven. All of the other Beatitudes are a result of being poor in spirit.

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 mountain fly;
Wash me, Saviour, or I die.

CHRISTIAN GROWTH REQUIRES AN ONGOING POVERTY OF SPIRIT

Poverty of spirit is essential for spiritual growth. Just as no one can come to Christ without being poor in spirit, no one can continue to grow apart from an ongoing poverty of spirit. We don't come to Christ confessing our spiritual bankruptcy and then begin to think that we are less needy of His sustaining grace and mercy after the fact. A perpetual sense of our spiritual insufficiency is what brings us under the waterfall of God's blessing. We never outgrow being poor in spirit.

THE WORLD AND THE POOR IN SPIRIT

You will never find a greater antithesis to the worldly spirit and outlook as you do in this verse. The world emphasizes self-reliance, self-confidence, self-expression, believe in yourself, realize your potential...Poverty of spirit is the opposite of the proud selfishness and self-sufficiency that we see in the world today. The world has its own ideas of blessedness. Blessed is the man who is always right...Blessed is the man who is strong... Blessed is the man who rules... Blessed is the man who is satisfied with himself...Blessed is the man that is rich...Blessed is the man who is popular... Blessed is the man with the achievements...

HELPFUL INTERPRETATION OF MATTHEW 5:3

Approved by God (pleasing to God) are the beggarly poor in spirit, who understand that they have nothing in themselves to commend themselves to God and look to Him alone for grace, for theirs (and theirs only) is the Kingdom of heaven.

NEXT WEEK'S STUDY: Blessed are those that mourn, for they shall be comforted. Matthew 5:4