
1 PUTTING OUR TRUST IN GOD

Matthew 5:3; Revelation 3:17-22

He only who is reduced to nothing in himself, and relies on the mercy of God, is poor in spirit. (JOHN CALVIN)

Everybody who has ever heard of Jesus of Nazareth and knows anything at all of his teaching must surely be familiar with the “beatitudes” with which the Sermon on the Mount begins. The beatitudes set forth the balanced and variegated character of Christian people. They are Christ’s own specification of what every Christian ought to be. Each quality is commended, inasmuch as each person who exhibits it is pronounced “blessed.” Just as the eight qualities describe every Christian (at least in the ideal), so the eight blessings are given to every Christian. The first deals with something that doesn’t sound much like a blessing to our ears: be “poor in spirit.”

Open

- What are some good things about being poor?

Study

■ Right at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contradicted all human judgments and all nationalistic expectations of the kingdom of God. The kingdom is given to the poor, not the rich; the feeble, not the mighty; to little children humble enough to accept it, not to soldiers who boast that they can obtain it by their own prowess.

Now when he saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them, saying:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
(Matthew 5:1-3)

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1. What do verses 1 and 2 tell us about the context of this message and Jesus’ listeners?

What do these verses tell us about Jesus?

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2. How does Jesus’ statement in verse 3 contradict our usual idea of blessedness?

Some have translated Jesus’ opening words “Happy are . . .” Though the Greek can and does mean “happy,” it is seriously misleading to render it

“happy” in this case. Happiness is a subjective state, whereas Jesus is making an objective judgment about these people. He is declaring not what they may feel like (“happy”), but what God thinks of them and what on that account they are: they are “blessed.”

3. The Old Testament supplies the necessary background against which to interpret this beatitude. At first to be “poor” meant to be in literal, material need. But gradually, because the needy had no refuge but God, “poverty” came to have spiritual overtones. What do you think it means to be “poor in spirit”?

4. Identify some circumstances or insights which have helped you realize that you were “poor in spirit.”

5. In your own life how have you been blessed by acknowledging your spiritual poverty?

6. In what senses do we miss God’s kingdom if we do not acknowledge our spiritual poverty?

Summary: To be “poor in spirit” is to acknowledge our spiritual bankruptcy

before God. For we are sinners, under the holy wrath of God, and deserving nothing but his judgment. We have nothing to offer, nothing to plead, nothing with which to buy the favor of heaven.

The “poor man” in the Old Testament is one who is both afflicted and unable to save himself, and who therefore looks to God for salvation, while recognizing that he has no claim upon God. This kind of spiritual poverty is specially commended in the book of Isaiah.

Perhaps the best example of the way riches can keep us from crying out to God is the nominal church of Laodicea to whom John was directed to send a letter from the glorified Christ. *Read Revelation 3:17-22* for John’s assessment of Laodicea.

7. How does this assessment of the Laodiceans contradict their own image of themselves (v. 17)?

8. It is apparent that the Laodiceans were materially wealthy (v. 17). What other kinds of “wealth” might they have assumed they had accumulated?

This visible church, for all its Christian profession, was not truly Christian at all. Self-satisfied and superficial, it was composed (according to Jesus) of blind and naked beggars. But the tragedy was that they would not admit it. They were rich, not poor, in spirit.

9. What sort of spiritual “wealth” do churches today imagine they have accumulated?

10. What remedy did Christ offer the Laodiceans (vv. 18-20)?

11. Verse 20 is often quoted as an invitation for non-Christians to believe in Jesus. But the words were originally spoken to a church. How would Christ's invitation apply to Christians?

12. What did Christ promise as a result of accepting his offer (vv. 21-22)?

13. How do Christ's offer and promise still apply to Christians today?

Summary: The indispensable condition of receiving the kingdom of God is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty. To the poor in spirit, and only to the poor in spirit, the kingdom of God is given. For God's rule which brings salvation is a gift as absolutely free as it is utterly undeserved.

Apply

■ Sometimes we remain sharply aware of our own failings and dependence on the Lord. In what areas do you readily acknowledge your need of God?

Other times we are like the Laodiceans, oblivious to our own poverty. In what areas do you have trouble acknowledging your neediness?

Pray

■ To the Laodiceans Jesus said, "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent." Let Jesus speak those words directly to you, and respond to his voice. Pray for a fresh awareness of your spiritual poverty and his generosity. Thank him for making you part of his kingdom.