

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

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Introduction.

- A. One of the greatest challenges that we face as Christians is the battle to transform our minds from a fleshly to a spiritual mindset. Nobody has an easy time getting outside of his own perceptions. That's why we have difficulty communicating with people from other cultures: each person takes for granted things that the guy from the different culture doesn't. Learning to move beyond our assumptions is a real challenge.
- B. This is even more of a challenge when we move beyond the realm of earthly cultures altogether. The moral code of the Bible isn't the product of any tribe or nation; it's the product of the mind of God. As a result, the Bible tells us to look at the world in a way that doesn't come naturally to anybody anywhere. When we try to renew our minds, then, we're actually fighting against years or decades of previous experience.
- C. As a consequence, then, it's wise for us to pay the closest attention to things out of the Bible that don't make immediate sense. Those passages that seem counter-intuitive to us actually point us to the areas where our mindset and God's mindset are the most different. They're telling us what we need to work on and change.
- D. We see a wonderful example of this in the section of Scripture called the Beatitudes, in Matthew 5:3-11. In this context, Jesus tells us that people who are poor in spirit, mourning, meek, and persecuted, among other ideas, are the ones who are blessed of God. For most of us, that's not an idea that naturally makes much sense. However, it is an idea that we need to grasp and indeed build our lives around if we want to go to heaven. With this goal in mind, we're going to spend the next several Sunday night sermons studying one Beatitude per evening. Let's begin tonight with Matthew 5:3. It tells us, "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

I. "Poor" in Scripture.

- A. As far as I can see, the first roadblock to understanding what Jesus is saying here is that we don't necessarily grasp the idea of being poor in spirit. For many of us, the word "poor" has a negative connotation. It brings to mind images of the undeserving poor: the panhandler who solicits money in the Wal-Mart parking lot so that he can go off and buy his next hit of heroin, or the welfare queen whose sole means of support is having more kids to increase the size of the check she gets from the government. Those folks aren't Jesus' subject.
- B. Instead, we get a better idea of what Jesus is talking about by looking at the use of the word "poor" in Scripture. A good place to start off is Leviticus 23:22. This verse describes the Israelite equivalent of the welfare system. The way this works is quite telling. First, it's intended to help people who don't have land of their own, which, back in the day, meant that they had no way of supporting themselves. Second, though, it's intended to help people who want to work despite their lack of opportunity. The Israelite landowner here isn't required to drop a bushel of barley off at the poor man's house. Instead, he's required to leave some of his field un-reaped, so that if the poor man is willing to support himself, he can come out and work for his food. It's that kind of materially poor, those who want to help themselves, but can't, that the word "poor" signifies. Those who can help themselves, but won't, the Scripture calls sluggards, and it makes no provision for them. Because of this distinction, the use of the word "poor" in the Bible is overwhelmingly positive.
- C. However, "poor" in Scripture doesn't just refer to the condition of not having material goods. It also refers to the feeling of helplessness that often comes with lack of means. We see an example of this in Psalm 109:21-22. Many of us know what this feels like. We've been in situations before where we wanted to work, but couldn't, wanted to provide for ourselves, but couldn't come up with the money to pay the bills. It's that psychological state, feeling hopeless, like the walls were closing in, that is also part of the Biblical "poor."
- D. However, as stressful and miserable as that helpless state of mind is, it does have one extremely important beneficial effect. If we are doing everything we can to help ourselves, but aren't getting anywhere, it teaches us that we have to rely on someone else. That's why Jesus made such an impact on the Jewish commoners during His ministry, but made few converts from the upper classes. That's why today we often have much more success converting people in crisis than helping rich folks whose lives are just humming along. The rich, contented folks don't think they need anything, so they haven't figured out that they need God. The poor, by contrast, know that they DON'T have the power to direct their own steps. They're poor in spirit too.
- E. This idea, that poverty often creates poverty of spirit, helps us understand some of the stranger uses of the word "poor" in Scripture. For instance, look at Matthew 11:4-5. This is Jesus' reply to messengers from John the Baptist, who are seeking proof of His identity. In response, Jesus rattles off a list of things that have happened. Like the Sesame Street song says, one of these things is not like the other. It makes sense that the blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, and the dead are raised, but how does preaching the gospel to the poor help them? If we're just thinking about this in terms of material poverty, it doesn't make sense, but when we think about poverty of spirit, it does. Jesus here is helping the poor not by

feeding them, but by filling their true and deepest need. Their lives are out of control, but He's pointing them to the One who IS in control. They're needy and brokenhearted now, but God can heal them all.

- F. This also helps explain the statement that James makes in James 2:5. Like much of the rest of James, if we just look at this on the surface, it looks like an incitement to class warfare. God loves poor folks and they're going to go to heaven, but He hates rich folks and they're going to go to hell. In reality, James is talking about the backhanded blessing that can accompany poverty, and indeed, any hard times. If our spirit is crushed enough by the hardships of life, that leads us to trust in Him who can protect us and to obey Him. If we don't go through the hard times first, we may never learn to trust. Thus, it is the poor are often rich in their faith.

II. What We Should Do About It,

- A. Now that we have our minds wrapped around this idea of poverty of spirit, we need to ask what we should do about it. First, we should work at remembering our essential helplessness and need for God. This can be a problem even for Christians, as shown by Revelation 3:17-18. Apparently, at that time, things were going well for the Laodiceans. They were so materially well off that they thought they could get away with trusting in themselves and boasting in themselves. We can fall into the same trap today. We can become so proud of our situation and our accomplishments that we start believing we're in control. In reality, as Jesus points out, that belief is an illusion. None of us are in control. Every one of us is dependent on God for our continued blessings, and indeed our continued life. If God chooses to withhold those blessings from us, with our finances, with our families, or with our health, we will lose them and not be able to get them back. Like the Laodiceans, every one of us is really poor and wretched and miserable. It's appropriate, then, for us to listen to the Lord's advice to them. We need to remember that He is the source of every true blessing.
- B. This humility and recognition of our dependence on God is what will lead us to obey Him. Isaiah emphasizes the importance of this in Isaiah 66:1-2. The point here is that none of us can hope to impress God. We might ooh and aah as we drive by some rich man's mansion, but God doesn't care. He made the whole universe; He's not going to be overawed by a house. What God does care about is not our accomplishments, but our humility. If we want Him to pay attention to us, we can't come strutting up to Him with our heads held high. We can't boast, even to ourselves, about how holy and righteous we are, and how we've got it together.
- C. Instead, Isaiah identifies three essential attitudes that will lead Him to regard us. First, we have to be poor-hearted. We have to acknowledge our own inability to direct our steps. We have to say to Him, "God, You're the one who's in charge of my life, not me." Second, we have to be contrite in spirit. We have to be honest about what we've done with our lives. We may have accomplished a lot in human terms, but in God's terms, on our own merits, all of us are failures at serving Him. We need to acknowledge our failure to God and throw ourselves on His mercy. Finally, we need to tremble at His word. We can't proudly seek our own way or apathetically shrug off His commandments. We need to care, and care deeply, about what He wants us to do. Then, when we learn His wishes, we need to leap to obey, with a heart filled with reverence and awe. Those are the things that God wants to see in us, and if we have those qualities, we will never be forsaken.

III. The Kingdom.

- A. As we read earlier, if we possess this kind of poverty of spirit, we will possess the kingdom of heaven. However, in some ways, the idea of the kingdom of heaven is just as hard to grasp as poverty of spirit is. In times past, a lot of preachers and whatnot have tried to nail down and simplify the idea of the kingdom by saying that it's the same thing as the church. It is true that the church is part of the kingdom, but the idea of the kingdom of heaven is broader than that. A verse that's useful in unraveling the mystery is Luke 17:20-21. Obviously, this can't be talking about the church, because we know that on the day of Pentecost, the church did come with signs to be observed. Instead, it's better to define the kingdom of heaven as anything that is under the dominion or rule of God. That is certainly true of the church, so it's legitimate to speak of the church as part of the kingdom. Likewise, as Jesus is doing here, it's legitimate to speak of the kingdom of God in the human heart. When we have a heart that is filled with selfishness and evil intent, that heart is part of the dominion of Satan. By contrast, the heart that seeks righteousness is part of the kingdom of God. Finally, a third important use of the kingdom is with reference to heaven itself, which is also under God's authority.
- B. So. . . what does all that have to do with the poor in spirit, and why should they care that they get the kingdom of heaven? Actually, it's not that hard to understand. When Jesus says that the poor in spirit will receive the kingdom, He means that in two different senses. First, He means it with reference to our hearts. When we have poverty of spirit, when we acknowledge that God is the One in control, when we desire to do His will and not our own, that's when we establish His kingdom inside ourselves. With our hearts and our lives, we honor His authority rather than doing what we want. Thus, the poor in spirit naturally have the kingdom. However, the poor have the kingdom in another sense, described in Matthew 7:21. Here, in context, Jesus is discussing the day of judgment, and that way that only the obedient will enter heaven. We will not be obedient unless we are poor in spirit first; hence; we must be poor in spirit to go to heaven.

Conclusion. If you want to begin a life of poverty of spirit, repent and return to the Lord tonight.