

This passage is called '*The Beatitudes*.' Beatitudes means 'blessed' or 'happy.' The people described in this passage are truly the happiest and most blessed or fulfilled people in all the world. These are the people who are best off in this world: those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who are merciful and pure in heart...

Who are the people Jesus describes here, the people that He blesses? He is talking here about every true disciple, every true follower of Jesus. You can see that in verse 11: **Blessed are you when they... say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.** Jesus is talking here about everyone who belongs to Jesus and lives for His sake.

A disciple of Jesus is every person who *hears* His message and *believes* in Him. Just before the beatitudes we read that **Jesus went throughout all Galilee...proclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom.** (Matthew 4:23) A true follower of Christ – a true *Christian* – is one who believes the Gospel of the Kingdom of God and, by believing, enters the kingdom of heaven. When you believe in Him you become part of His kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, even while you live here on earth.

God's kingdom is the saving power of Jesus Christ living within you, setting you free from the power of sin, the power of Satan, the power of darkness, the power of idols – setting you free from *yourself!* – and changing you from the inside out to live for the glory of God. So when you hear these beatitudes which describe a true follower of Jesus you realize that these characteristics – such as being poor in spirit – are not normal and natural. They are supernatural. They are the gift of God which Jesus freely gives to everyone who believes. If you see these marks in yourself, you may know that you belong to a kingdom that is not of this world. You belong to Christ's kingdom. His kingdom has invaded your life and lives in you. It makes you a new person.

### **1. The Meaning of Spiritual Poverty**

**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.** The true follower of Jesus is poor in spirit. What does that mean?

1. **Poor** = bent over, down on the ground like a beggar, powerless and helpless, totally dependent on the gifts of others.
2. **spirit** = your inward life, your heart and soul, the center of your life, the place where you carry out your relationship with God.

Jesus is not describing *material* poverty (having no money, food or clothing), but spiritual poverty. Some believe that Jesus always takes the side of the poor people, against the rich. They view poverty as a higher spiritual condition than wealth. But that is not true. Sure, there is a great temptation for the wealthy to put their trust in their wealth to keep them safe. But the poor also have a great temptation to crave wealth! A person might be very rich in material goods and yet be poor in spirit (think of Abraham and Zaccheus). A person might be very poor in material goods and yet very proud and hardhearted – not poor in spirit at all. Paul says in I Corinthians 13 that you can give away all your money and all your possession to the poor and still be proud and full of yourself!

Nor is Jesus describing *emotional* poverty. *Poor in spirit* does not mean you're depressed or have low self-esteem. You can be depressed and still very full of yourself. On the other hand, you can be a very happy, confident person and still be poor in spirit. So it does not refer to your emotional condition.

Jesus blesses those who are poor *in spirit*. He is referring to a person who lives in *spiritual* poverty. To be poor in spirit means that in your relationship with God you are a *beggar*. You know and believe that because you are a sinner *you have nothing to offer Him and everything to receive from Him*.

- Yes, as Christians we love to offer our lives to Him to thank him for all He has done and is doing for us, but we know that the good works we offer to our Saviour contribute nothing to our salvation.
- True faith means that we come to God as bankrupt sinners trusting in Him to supply fully everything we need. We sing: *Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling. Naked, come to Thee for dress; helpless, look to Thee for grace. Foul, I tot the fountain fly. Wash me Savior, or I die.* (Psalter Hymnal 388, Rock of Ages).
- A true spiritual awareness that there is nothing in you or in your achievements that can make you something before Him. **You owe Him a debt of righteousness you cannot pay.** You come to know that you are guilty from head to toe (see Romans 3:10-19 – from the *tongue* that practices deceit to the *feet* which are swift to shed innocent blood).

This is how the apostle Paul described his life when God saved him. God gave Him the special gift of spiritual poverty. As a Pharisee trusting in his own Jewish background and carefully followed religious traditions, Paul thought highly of all that he had to contribute to God. He put a lot of confidence in himself. But then the Holy Spirit began to show him how foul and full of sin he really was, and that all the things that he found in himself were nothing but rubbish in the sight of God. He saw the real truth of the matter: needed

to rest completely in the salvation God provided for sinners in Christ Jesus. So Paul entered into spiritual poverty as he relates in Philippians 3: <sup>8</sup> **Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ <sup>9</sup> and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith...**

Jesus, by living a perfect life for us and offering his life as a perfect payment for sin, provides for a sinner everything that we need to stand before God, everything we need to enter into and stay in a right relationship with God. We have nothing to give to God. God gives us everything we need in Jesus. *Faith is the act of your own inner spirit giving up on yourself and trusting in God's work alone to save you.*

This is the spirit of the prodigal son who left his father proudly, self-assured in his share of the inheritance. But when he was bankrupt, **he came to his senses** (Luke 15:17). Emptied of all his pride, he came home to his father, empty-handed, no longer full of himself but looking only for whatever his father might be pleased to give his unworthy child. (Sinclair Ferguson) That is true spiritual poverty. Only God can give you this kind of spirit.

It doesn't matter whether we have just become Christians, or have been Christians all our lives: true believers always stand before God as beggars. True believers always look to Christ alone for all their worthiness, acceptance, and salvation.

When parents who believed in Jesus brought their nursing babies to Jesus, Jesus took the babies in his arms and blessed them, He said: **"Let the children come to me, and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it."** (Luke 18:16-17) When you see a helpless little baby being baptized (a baby can only receive, he cannot give, you have to do everything for him: feed him, change him, wash him, put him to bed; he cries and you give), Jesus is telling you that is what he requires of each of us in order to enter His kingdom. He requires each of us to see that we are helpless before God and can only receive.

This is the meaning of spiritual poverty. Do you know what this means, personally, in your own life? Do you know what it means to be emptied of yourself, and look for your life and meaning and happiness and worthiness in God alone? Pray for this supernatural gift of God. Pray that God's kingdom may invade your life, rescue you from the idol of self-confidence, and humble you before God.

## **2. The Power of Spiritual Poverty**

*Spiritual poverty* is not valued by this world as a virtue. In fact, it is despised by this world as worthless, or worse, even dangerous and destructive. You will never get ahead in this world if you have this attitude, many people say. There is no power in it. In order to get anywhere in this life and be successful, you need to believe in yourself and think highly of yourself. You need to assert yourself and lift yourself up. You need to better yourself, improve yourself, have more of yourself, not less! You must believe you are worthy of the best, and entitled to everything. That's the only way to have a life. This is what our culture believes, whether we are materially rich or poor.

A man once said to the Welsh preacher, David Martyn-Lloyd Jones: "I can't accept this teaching as Christian. I can't accept that hymn of Charles Wesley (*Jesus, Lover of my Soul*) which says: *Just and holy is Thy name, I am all unrighteousness. False and full of sin I am; Thou art full of truth and grace.* That's not Christianity! That's never going to get you a job or any promotion in life!" And he scorned the very idea of spiritual poverty as having anything to do with real Christianity!

In fact, it is the first mark of true Christian character. You see how radically different the kingdom of God is when compared to the kingdoms of this world. You see how other-worldly the followers of Jesus are as they live in this world. True Christians form a counter-culture in this world, a culture of *faith* that runs against the grain of the culture of *unbelief*. Jesus came to save us from our sins, but also to form a new society in this world – a society that is in the world, but not of the world.

When we come to Jesus, He changes our character and lives. He plants the seed of regeneration (new life) deep into the core of our being – in our *spirits*. And that's where the change begins. We see that our value, power and glory are not in ourselves (in our looks, our money, our jobs, our achievements, our education) but only in God through Christ. Our aim is not to have *more* of ourselves, but *less*, and to have more of Christ. So we say with the apostle Paul in Galatians 2:20: **I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me.**

This spiritual poverty changes our lives completely – how we view God, ourselves, others, and this whole world.

It shouldn't come as a surprise, then, when Jesus says right after the beatitudes –right after describing the character of the people whom he has saved – **You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.** (Matthew 5:13,14) There's a tight connection between the beatitudes and the salt/light passage. The qualities of Christ-followers make you so different from the world that your presence becomes very powerful. Or, maybe we should say it this way: Christ's presence in you makes you very powerful, powerful like salt (which fights corruption) and light (which shatters darkness).

So, if you bring Matthew 5 verses 5 and 13 together it reads like this: ***Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world.*** Being poor in spirit does not make you a powerless person who cannot succeed. The opposite is true: spiritual poverty gives you a very important position and calling in this world. By being poor in spirit you clearly show others how to put their hope in God, not themselves. It is a powerful tool of witness and evangelism. In a dark world of self-centered *bragging*, spiritual poverty shines the bright light of Christ-centred *trusting*. When we present in this world as poor and needy before God we show the world how to flee the emptiness of self and find refuge in the fullness of Christ.

Christ Jesus went to the cross to pay for sin and He rose to give us righteousness with God and eternal life. If you want to be rich and possess an eternal, glorious kingdom with God, you must first lose all – including yourself and your self-centredness – and become poor in spirit. Then God will bless you with true happiness and fullness of life. (Ferguson)

The Bible clearly shows how God views being poor in spirit:

**One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor.** (Proverbs 29:23)

**But this is the one I will esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word.** (Isaiah 66:2)

**The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.** (Psalm 34:18)

**The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.** (Psalm 51:17)

### **3) The Blessing of Spiritual Poverty**

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. What tremendous blessing Jesus pronounces on the poor in spirit. Here in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is revealing Himself as the Greater Moses. Remember how Moses proclaimed the blessings of the covenant on all those who put their faith and hope in God? And also the curses the covenant on those who rejected God and would not commit their way to Him? Jesus fulfills those blessings and curses. All those who trust in Him will be blessed. In other passages Jesus pronounces woes (curses) on those who will not believe in Him. (see Luke 6:24-26)

If you are a follower of Christ, you will receive no less than the kingdom of heaven! What does this mean?

Think of the thief hanging on the cross beside Jesus. He humbled himself as a needy sinner before Jesus. He pleaded with Jesus: **Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom,** and Jesus said: **Today you will be with me in Paradise.** (Luke 23:42-43) Jesus' kingdom is Paradise, the Paradise of God! The kingdom of heaven is all the riches and treasures of God, and to receive the kingdom as your inheritance is to enjoy all the riches and treasures of God forever.

Imagine inheriting the estate of a billionaire father – you receive as a son or daughter all his money, all his property, all his houses and cottages, all his cars, and the list goes on. It's all yours. You just walked into a life of wealth! Now, all these earthly things of the billionaire estate will perish. But it is infinitely greater to receive the estate of God, or wealth untold that will never perish.

But the greatest gift of all in the kingdom is God Himself – as Paul says of the children of God: **You are heirs of God, and co-heirs with Christ.** (Romans 8:17) Heirs of God Himself! The greatest blessing is yours – God says, **I will be with you.** This is the picture of the new heavens and new earth, the Paradise of God in Revelation 21 – "**Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.**"

It is just like the Father said to his Son in the Parable of the prodigal Son – **I am always with you, and all I have is yours.** (Luke 15: 31) Here is the 2-fold blessing of the kingdom of heaven – first, you get to have God Himself, and secondly, you get to enjoy all His gifts and treasures, above all, the treasure of eternal life.

And this blessing of the kingdom we get to enjoy already now as the poor in spirit who look away from ourselves and believe in Jesus for our righteousness and fulfillment and joy. Already now we are the children of God. Already now He is our Father. Already now we have eternal life, even though the best is yet to come. Already now we get to live and serve Him as His witnesses and ambassadors! Already now our citizenship is in heaven! Philippians 3:20-21 says: **For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself.**

What a rich life we get to enjoy already now.

Far from giving you a sad and powerless life, being poor in spirit is the happiest, most influential life there is on earth. In fact, any other kind of life is a waste of time and gifts. It is living for your own kingdom which will perish and your life will perish with it. But this is living for a kingdom that will never perish! You want this gift of spiritual poverty! You want this character! And you want to grow in it more and more, for none of us has perfect spiritual poverty. We keep having to fight that arrogant monster of self-love and self-reliance every day.

### **Conclusion**

Henry: Poor in spirit is to come off from all confidence in our own righteousness and strength, that we may depend only upon the merit of Christ for our justification, and the spirit and grace of Christ for our sanctification. That *broken and contrite spirit* with which the tax collector cried for mercy to a poor sinner, is that poverty of spirit. We must call ourselves poor, because we are always in need of God's grace, always begging at God's door, always hanging on in his house.

Being poor in spirit also involves the recognition that we are often not as poor in spirit as we should be. Too often, the sin of pride rises up within us as we want to glory in ourselves. And then we realize again how empty we really are and in need of God's kingdom of grace to overtake us. *Poor in spirit does not put confidence in how poor in spirit we are but in how rich God's mercy is for sinners!*

Let this light shine from your life – directing people not to yourself, “How Great I Am!” but “How Great Thou art!”