

“Kingdom Character: The Beatitudes” (part 2)

Matthew 5:3

Norman McGowan tells the story in his biography of how Winston Churchill was once asked, “Doesn't it thrill you to know that every time you make a speech, the hall is packed to overflowing?” “It is quite flattering,” replied Sir Winston. “But whenever I feel that way, I always remember that if instead of making a political speech I was being hanged, the crowd would be twice as big.”

His attitude was one of humility, a virtue that is often praised yet seldom possessed.

John Riskin - *“I believe the first test of a truly great man is his humility. I do not mean by humility, doubt of his own power, or hesitation in speaking his opinion. But really great men have a feeling that the greatness is not in them but through them; that they could not do or be anything else than God made them.”*

Andrew Murray - *“The humble man feels no jealousy or envy. He can praise God when others are preferred and blessed before him. He can bear to hear others praised while he is forgotten because ... he has received the spirit of Jesus, who pleased not Himself, and who sought not His own honor. Therefore, in putting on the Lord Jesus Christ he has put on the heart of compassion, kindness, meekness, longsuffering, and humility.”*

M.R. De Haan - *“Humility is something we should constantly pray for, yet never thank God that we have.”*

God not only commends humility when it is shown in the lives of His people, but He also displayed it Himself when He became man and dwelt among us.

Philippians 2:8 - **“And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross.”**

The cross is an eternal symbol of the humility of God's Son, but He also displayed humility throughout His earthly life and ministry.

- He came into the world via a stable in Bethlehem
- He demonstrated it by submitting to earthly parents
- He gave to those who asked of Him
- He washed the dirty feet of His disciples

As His followers, we are to be imitators of Him. We are to emulate the way that He lived out His life here on earth.

Jerry Bridges - *“Humility opens the way to all other godly character traits. It is the soil in which the other traits of the fruit of the Spirit grow.”*

Humility may in fact defy adequate definition, but perhaps no better definition of humility can be found anywhere than in Jesus’ opening words in the Sermon on the Mount.

The first beatitude is found in verse 3 and defines humility for us:

v. 3 - “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Jesus says true happiness is connected to being poor in spirit.

According to Jesus, real happiness begins with a proper estimation of oneself. Instead of putting self on the throne, those who are subjects in Christ’s kingdom possess humble character before God and are poor in spirit.

What does it mean to be poor in spirit?

1. RECOGNITION of one’s spiritual need

We should first clear up any misconceptions about what it means to be poor in spirit.

First, to be poor in spirit has nothing to do with material wealth or possessions. A person can be wealthy yet still be poor in spirit. And equally so, a person can be materially poor but not poor in spirit.

To be poor in spirit is to be poor in the inward person, not necessarily in one’s outward circumstances.

However, Jesus did seem to have to say about the poor and contrasted them with many who were rich. In many ways, the poor were better off because there was much less “stuff” in their lives to distract them from their true spiritual condition.

Matthew 19:23-24 - “Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.”

Jesus didn’t say that it is impossible, but He did say that it is hard. Why? Because those who have much wealth are more prone to be spiritually distracted than those who do not. Wealth

can potentially foster pride and self-sufficiency in one's life. This is not always the case, however.

Paul once observed how most of those in Corinth who became Christians were from the poorer classes of society.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29 - "For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence."

This is even seen in the majority of people who followed Jesus and came to hear Him preach.

Mark 12:37 - "And the common people heard Him gladly."

Craig Blomberg - "...it fits in with the fact that in many periods of world history including our own, the gospel has spread fastest among those who have had the fewest possessions to stand in the way of whole-hearted commitment to God."

Second, to be poor in spirit is not the same thing as being poor-spirited. Someone who is poor-spirited is a person who lacks ambition or passion. It is someone who lacks confidence. This is not what Jesus is referring to.

John MacArthur - "To be poor in spirit is to recognize one's spiritual poverty apart from God. It is to see oneself as one really is: lost, hopeless, helpless. Apart from Jesus Christ every person is spiritually destitute, no matter what his education, wealth, social status, accomplishments, or religious knowledge."

"Poor" - comes from a root word that means to cower and cringe like a beggar; someone who crouches about wretchedly begging

This word speaks of a poverty so deep that the person must obtain his or her living by begging. To be poor in spirit is to be begging on the inside. Poverty of spirit is a personal acknowledgement of one's spiritual bankruptcy. Jesus is describing the attitude of repentance that is essential for one's salvation.

Warren Wiersbe - "To be poor in spirit means to be humble, to have a correct estimate of oneself."

Message - “You are blessed when you are at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and His rule.”

To be poor in spirit is less of me. Less of me is necessary to experience more of Him.

John 3:30 - “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

This is totally opposite of the world’s way of thinking. The world exalts pride and the kind of self-confidence that promotes oneself. If you want to be happy, the world says that you must be king of the mountain in your own estimation.

Consider some of the more popular book titles on the subject:

- “The Confidence Plan: How to Build a Stronger You”
- “Promote Yourself: The New Rules for Career Success”
- “Its Your Time”
- “Become a Better You”
- “Your Best Life Now”
- “Self-Confidence for Dummies”

Strange though it may seem, Jesus says that the way to really be happy and the way to true riches begins with being poor in one’s spirit. Like all gospel truth, this is paradoxical. It does not make sense from the world’s standpoint.

Romans 12:3 - “For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, as God has dealt to each one a measure of faith.”

Before a person can ever be saved, he or she must first recognize their desperate need for a Savior. They must come to the end of their own spiritual resources and realize that they are totally bankrupt in themselves.

2. RELIANCE upon the grace of God

True humility goes a step further than recognizing one’s own spiritual need; real humility turns to God and His grace in the midst of that need. Even if a person acknowledged their own emptiness, yet refused to turn to God, they would still be full of pride.

The beggar is fully dependent upon the giving of others; he cannot survive without help from the outside.

The idea being conveyed is, "Blessed are those who are so desperately poor in spiritual resources that they realize they must have help from outside sources." Being bankrupt of all spiritual resources, they rely upon God's grace and provision on their behalf.

The best illustration of this is the parable that Jesus told of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Luke 18:9-14 - "Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus within himself, 'God, I thank You that I am not like other men--extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.' And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise 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, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

The tax collector was poor in spirit, recognizing his own bankruptcy and relying on God to do for him what he could not do for himself.

Anonymous - "Evangelism is simply one beggar telling another beggar where to find bread."

Ephesians 2:8-9 - "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast."

No one will ever sing their own praise in eternity; we will only sing the praise of the One who provided grace for a bunch of beggars who so desperately needed it.

3. REJECTION of personal pride

Since poverty of spirit means recognition of one's spiritual need and reliance upon God's grace, then naturally it would also involve a rejection of personal pride.

Since poverty of spirit is the personal acknowledgement I make about my own spiritual bankruptcy, it cannot be obtained any other way than rejecting all of my own personal pride.

Pride is perhaps the most dangerous as well as the most subtle sin. It is also the one thing that tops the list of things that God hates most.

Proverbs 6:16-19 - “These six things the Lord hates, yes, seven are an abomination to Him: A proud look, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that are swift in running to evil, a false witness who speaks lies, and one who sows discord among brethren.”

A proud look tops the list because all of the other sins come from a proud heart.

Pride is the anti-God attitude that exalts the self.

Proverbs 16:19 - “Better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud.”

Isaiah 57:15 - “For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones.”

Isaiah 66:1-2 - “Thus says the Lord: Heaven is My throne, and earth is My footstool. Where is the house that You will build Me? And where is the place of My rest? For all those things My hand has made, and all those things exist, says the Lord. But one this one will I look: On him who is poor and of a contrite spirit, and who trembles at My word.”

Those who reject pride and are truly poor in spirit are those who show such an attitude through humility and obedience to God’s Word.

John Wesley - *“He has a deep sense of the loathsome leprosy of sin in which he brought with him from his mother’s womb, which overspreads his whole soul, and totally corrupts every power and faculty thereof.”*

Poverty of spirit is the polar opposite of the proud selfishness and self-sufficiency of today’s world.

Cheryl K. Chumley, The Washington Times (4-16-14) - *“Michael Bloomberg, the former mayor of New York City, said it’s his work for more gun control — along with his anti-smoking and healthy eating campaigns — that have won him God’s favor and a sure spot behind the Pearly Gates. His exact words, made in context of discussing his smoking cessation and anti-obesity pushes, as well as his concerted crackdowns on private gun ownership, to the New York Times were: “I am telling you if there is a God, when I get to heaven I’m not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It’s not even close.”*

What Mr. Bloomberg fails to understand is that without being poor in spirit and turning from his own personal pride and trusting Jesus Christ, he won't make it in. It's not even close.

Proverbs 18:12 - "Before destruction the heart of a man is haughty, and before honor is humility."

Jesus places this beatitude first because humility is foundational to the others. It is a basic element in becoming a follower of Jesus.

Human pride is destroyed at the cross of Jesus. The cross stands diametrically opposed to man's pride and self-righteousness.

Charles Spurgeon - *"How then can we be proud? Stand at the foot of the cross, and count the purple drops by which you have been cleansed; see the thorn-crown; mark His scourged shoulders, still gushing with crimson; see hands and feet given up to the rough iron, and His whole self to mockery and scorn; see the bitterness, and the pangs, and the throes of inward grief, showing themselves in His outward frame. Hear the thrilling shriek, 'My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?' And if you do not lie prostrate on the ground before that cross, you have never seen it: if you are not humbled in the presence of Jesus, you do not know Him. You were so lost that nothing could save you but the sacrifice of God's only begotten. Think of that, and as Jesus stooped for you, bow yourself in lowliness at His feet. A sense of Christ's amazing love to us has a greater tendency to humble us than even a consciousness of our own guilt. May the Lord bring us in contemplation to Calvary, then our position will no longer be that of the pompous man of pride, but we shall take the humble place of one who loves much because much has been forgiven him. Pride cannot live beneath the cross."*

Pride always repels God's Spirit, while humility attracts Him. This is true in individuals, and it is also true in churches. Churches can be full of pride. (See Laodicea in Rev. 3:17)

4. RESULTS in true spiritual wealth

To be poor in spirit means recognizing one's spiritual need, relying upon the grace of God in Jesus Christ, rejecting all pride, which alone results in true spiritual wealth.

In each of the beatitudes, the blessing that is spoken of is contingent upon the condition that is specified.

The idea is that the kingdom of heaven ONLY belongs to those who are poor in spirit. Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for THEIRS is the kingdom of heaven."

The word “theirs” is emphatic, meaning theirs in the sense of theirs alone. This excludes all others who approach God in any other way than being poor in spirit.

This means that such an attitude is essential before a person will ever be saved; no one can ever know Jesus without being poor in spirit.

- As long as you don't see your spiritual poverty, you can't know Him
- As long as you rely on your own supply and not His grace, you can't know Him
- As long as pride controls your attitude, you can't know Him

I can only know Him by first of all being poor in spirit. Like all gospel truth, this is paradoxical truth which says that the way to be rich is to be poor. Empty of self and finding contentment in Jesus is the foundation of all true happiness.

How do we know if we are humble? Here are several points to check:

- Humility is no longer preoccupied with self
- Humility is passionate about Jesus
- Humility does not complain about circumstances
- Humility considers others better than oneself
- Humility spends time before God in prayer
- Humility obeys God's Word
- Humility is marked by gratitude

True blessing and true contentment belongs to those who are poor in spirit, who have come to the end of themselves and find their contentment in God alone.

Psalm 23:1 - “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

Richard Swenson - *“Sometimes contentment comes when we are tired of being wounded by the world, exhausted trying to measure up and keep up and buck up. We limp to the Shepherd with tears in our eyes. We see Him then, not as somebody who wants to force us to do something we don't want to do, but as somebody who has something we desperately need.”*

Happy are those who come to the end of their rope.