

# The Sermon on the Mount: A Reformed Exposition

## Chapter 2: Introduction to the Beatitudes and the Poor in Spirit

**Brian Schwertley**

And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God. Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you” (Mt. 5:1-12).

And he came down with them, and stood in the plain, and the company of his disciples, and a great multitude of people out of all Judaea and Jerusalem, and from the sea coast of Tyre and Sidon, which came to hear him, and to be healed of their diseases; and they that were vexed with unclean spirits: and they were healed. And the whole multitude sought to touch him: for there went virtue out of him, and healed them all. And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said, “Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled. Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh. Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets. But woe unto you that are rich! For ye have received your consolation. Woe unto you that are full! For ye shall hunger. Woe unto you that laugh now! For ye shall mourn and weep. Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! For so did their fathers to the false prophets” (Lk. 6:17-26).

Before we examine each of the beatitudes in detail, there are a number of things that need to be noted regarding the beatitudes as a whole.

First, each beatitude has three elements: (1) Each sentence begins with the word “blessed” (*makarioi*). (2) There is a description of the person to whom this blessing applies. (3) The beatitude ends with the reason or ground why the person is blessed. The ground, reason or kind of blessing is not arbitrary, but often corresponds to the character or state described (e.g., mourn/comforted; hunger/filled; weep/laugh; merciful/obtain mercy). The final beatitude in Matthew's gospel (5:11-12) is difficult and more personal in that the second person plural (“blessed are you”) is used instead of the third person. (Luke uses the second person plural throughout his account.) It is also much longer with a “whenever” clause inserted before the final reason why these people are blessed. Matthew's account has nine beatitudes, while Luke has four beatitudes (6:20-22) followed by a rejoice statement (6:23) and then four statements of “woe.”

The “woe” statements are structured identically to the blessing statements, but “woe” replaces “blessed.”

Second, there is clearly an element of surprise or shock in the beatitudes. “The people listening to Jesus that day must have been spellbound from the very beginning. They must have been enthralled by the very opening sentence, for Jesus was telling them things which on the surface seem absurd. He was actually saying that not the rich, the gay [i.e. the happy], the well-fed, and unoppressed were to be accounted well-off, but rather the poor, the mourners, the hungry and thirsty, and the persecuted ones.”<sup>1</sup> Obviously, these descriptions, properly understood, are concerned primarily with spiritual and not material conditions. However, the fact remains that Christ was proclaiming the exact opposite of what most people would expect to hear. Those who follow the Redeemer must be willing to have their worldview, priorities and even life be completely turned upside down.

Third, it is wrong to interpret the beatitudes as if certain beatitudes were meant to apply to only certain disciples. In other words, some believers are called to be meek, while others are to be merciful, and still others are to be poor in spirit. No. All the qualities that our Lord sets forth are expected of each and every Christian; there are no exceptions. Just as Paul’s list of the nine-fold fruit of the Spirit reveals God’s requirement for Christian character, the Savior’s nine beatitudes describe our Lord’s concept for every citizen of His kingdom. Therefore, all of us are responsible to study them, learn what they mean and apply them to our lives.

Fourth, the form of the beatitudes, or at least something very similar, is found in the Old Testament. “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly” (Ps. 1:1). “Blessed are all those who put their trust in Him” (Ps. 2:12). “Blessed are those who keep justice...” (Ps. 106:3). “Blessed is he whose sin is forgiven... Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity” (Ps. 32:1, 2). “Blessed are the undefiled in the way, who walk in the law of the LORD! Blessed are those who keep His testimonies” (Ps. 119:1-2). “Blessed are all those who wait for Him” (Is. 30:18).

Such beatitudes are also quite common in the New Testament. “And blessed are your eyes for they see, and your ears for they hear” (Mt. 13:16). “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven” (Mt. 16:17). “Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing” (Mt. 24:46; cf. Lk. 1:42, 45; 11:27-28; 12:37-38; 14:14-15; 23:29; Jn. 13:17; 20:29; Rom. 14:22b; Jas. 1:12; Rev. 1:3; 14:13; 16:15; 19:9; 20:6; 22:7, 14). An examination of both the Old and New Testament passages that speak of blessedness demonstrates that the blessedness described is virtually always connected to genuine faith, salvation or the obedience which is a fruit of faith. Christ’s salvation, in both its narrow (justification) and broad definition (regeneration, justification, sanctification, etc.), is the source of all blessedness.

Fifth, it is important that we recognize that the characteristics in the beatitudes are the result of God’s grace alone. These descriptions, properly understood, are not possible for unregenerate men. They can only be produced by the power of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and the continued work of God’s Spirit in sanctification. “We must not for a moment suppose that the mere fact of being poor, and hungry, and sorrowful, and hated by man, will entitle anyone to lay claim to an interest in Christ’s blessing. The poverty spoken of is a poverty accompanied by grace. The want is a want entailed by faithful adherence to Jesus. The afflictions are the afflictions of the Gospel. The persecution is persecution for the Son of Man’s sake. Such

---

<sup>1</sup> William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 264.

want, and poverty, and affliction, and persecution, were the inevitable consequences of faith in Christ, at the beginning of Christianity.”<sup>2</sup>

This point is very important because the beatitudes are often applied by modernists, political liberals, leftists, secular humanists and other ignorant persons to unbelievers. For example, statist and socialists who are religious frequently argue that “God is on the side of the poor.” This phrase was popularized by the neo-evangelical socialist writer Ronald Sider: “I want to argue that one of the central biblical doctrines is that God is on the side of the poor.”<sup>3</sup> People who handle Scripture in this manner are dishonest, irresponsible and end up advocating behavior that is sinful and stupid (e.g., subsidizing the wicked, lazy, unbelieving poor with taxpayer dollars).

It is also important that the beatitudes are not applied to persons that are unbelievers who, in an outward, superficial manner, exhibit certain characteristics found in the beatitudes. Modernists will point to people such as Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Ghandi, or Mother Teresa as wonderful illustrations of the beatitudes. Some people will point to a friend or relative who was exceptionally patient, kind, honest, and charitable. Yet, the beatitudes are not talking about such people; for true holiness that is pleasing to God is a disposition produced by grace, *not by self-effort*. Further, the only behavior that is pleasing to God is a behavior sanctified by the blood of Christ and done specifically to glorify the Redeemer.

Sixth, the beatitudes, properly understood, reveal to us the fundamental difference between what a true believer and unbeliever is. The beatitudes are not a set of rules; but, rather, are descriptions of what Christians are supposed to be. They are descriptions of a life of daily repentance, of sacrificial living, of taking up one’s cross and following Jesus. In our day when the church and the world have so often been blurred by syncretism, the beatitudes are exceedingly important. They reveal a very clear cut distinction between believers and unbelievers. The Christian has a completely different outlook than the current world spirit. The very things that men of this world aspire to are condemned by the beatitudes. And the very things that our Lord expects us to admire, seek and long for are things that the world regards as weak, foolish and a waste of time. “[T]he life which is lived by the Christian must be an essentially different life from that of the man who is not a Christian.”<sup>4</sup> The unbeliever really lives for this world; his desire is to glorify himself and enjoy life to the fullest. The Christian is the man who has had a change of mind regarding God, Christ, the Bible, sin and self and now lives to glorify God. The believer sees himself as a stranger in a strange land and thus buffets his body and prepares for the world to come. The beatitudes reveal what repentance toward God looks like in the life of the Christian.

Seventh, the beatitudes are words of comfort and encouragement to believers who are about to suffer severe persecution. Although the beatitudes are for all Christians throughout history, they especially apply to a persecuted church. Both Matthew and Luke conclude the beatitudes with a great blessing for suffering persecution (Mt. 5:10-12; Lk. 6:22-23), for being hated because of the faith. Therefore, it makes sense to interpret things like being hungry, sorrowful and hated at least partially as things suffered for being faithful to Christ and true to the gospel. When viewed in this light, the beatitudes are words of encouragement and hope that are designed not merely to show the true from the false but also to spur believers on to greater

---

<sup>2</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1858] 1986), 1:177.

<sup>3</sup> Ronald J. Sider, *The Christian Century*, March 19, 1980, 314, as quoted by David Chilton, *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators* (Tyler, TX: Institute for Christian Economics, 1982), 95.

<sup>4</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 1:38.

faithfulness in times of severe testing. Also, the beatitudes must not be read legalistically in a wooden fashion (e.g., You are not blessed until you perfectly exhibit these beatitudes in every aspect of life). The woes of Luke's account are for people who place personal peace and affluence above Jesus Christ. When persecutions arise, they will be more concerned about being well spoken of than in pleasing the Savior. If we understand the context of persecution; that our Lord is promising great blessings for faithfulness; that our Mediator will wipe away every tear, then we will not think of the beatitudes as some unattainable, unrealistic utopianism.

Eighth, since every beatitude begins with the word *makarioi* translated "blessed" (KJV, NKJV, ASV, NASB, RSV, Moffat, Berkeley) or "happy" (Young's Literal Translation, JB, A. T. Robertson), we need to spend some time coming to a precise definition of this term. Although some excellent scholars favor the word "happy" over "blessed," there are a number of reasons why the word "blessed" is a better translation.

The term "happy" denotes a subjective emotion or state, while the word "blessed" refers to an objective judgment, status, situation or condition. That an objective judgment or condition is meant is rather obvious when we examine the second beatitude in Matthew. If we use the word happy the verse would read "happy are they that mourn [i.e. that are sad]." Our Lord is not saying that mourners are subjectively happy, but that they are blessed because God favors them and has given them salvation in Christ.

The blessedness of which Jesus speaks is a present possession and a present reality. Even when sad, poor, hated and persecuted, the Christian is blessed. The believer already has God's favor upon him. Obviously, not every believer in mourning, or poverty, or persecution is subjectively happy. This point is confirmed by the statement regarding those who mourn: "for they will be comforted" (i.e. in the future).

At the end of the beatitudes in Matthew, Christians are commanded to "rejoice and be exceedingly glad" on account of the blessedness that they already possess. In other words, their objective condition of favor with God through Christ ought to lead them to subjective feelings of joy, peace and happiness. Interestingly, in Luke's account, those who laugh now (i.e. they are happy and rejoicing in the present) will mourn and weep in the future (6:25).

In the Bible there are many examples of men blessing God, as well as God blessing men. Obviously, when men bless God, they are not saying that God is happy or joyful; but, that God is worthy of praise or approval. However, when God blesses men He does so because of the work of Christ, resulting in justification and sanctification. When blessing is connected with obedience, God is approving of good works done by the power of the Holy Spirit to the glory of God. Thus, the beatitudes are not a brief discourse on psychology and personal happiness; but, rather are great encouragements that presuppose the grace of God and the work of Christ. As we understand the blessings we possess, we should be full of joy and happiness *as a consequence* of this marvelous objective blessing.

Ninth, in both Matthew and Luke's account the beatitudes are bracketed with the promise of the same reward "theirs [Lk. 'yours'] is the kingdom of heaven [Lk. 'God']" (Mt. 5:3, 10). Luke's final promise of blessing is, "your reward is great in heaven" (6:23). "To begin and end with the same expression is a stylistic device called an 'inclusion.' This means that everything bracketed between the two can really be included under the one theme..."<sup>5</sup> Thus, ultimately all the promised blessings of the beatitudes are fulfilled in our participation in the Redeemer's kingdom, which He obtained for us by shedding His precious blood and obeying the law in

---

<sup>5</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1978), 16.

exhaustive detail. The beatitudes could be titled the blessings of membership in the kingdom of heaven.

## The Poor in Spirit

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (Mt. 5:3).

Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God (Lk. 6:20).

The first beatitude says “blessed are the poor in spirit” (Mt. 5:3) or, as Luke puts it, “Blessed are you poor” (Lk. 6:20). What does it mean to be poor in spirit? The meaning of this phrase is the key to understanding this beatitude and all those that follow. This beatitude is placed first because poverty of spirit is the fundamental characteristic of the Christian. In fact, all the Christian characteristics that are described in the beatitudes that follow are in a sense the result of this one.

Before we deal with the biblical definition of the “poor in spirit” we need to point out what the phrase does not mean. It certainly does not mean that the economically poor are specially favored by God. Although this interpretation is very popular among Roman Catholics, neo-evangelicals, modernists and socialists there are a number of reasons why it must be rejected.

### An Erroneous Definition

First, God repeatedly condemns people who are poor as a result of laziness and excess frivolity (cf. Pr. 6:6-11; 28:19). While economic blessings are promised to the diligent (Pr. 13:4), the lazy will go hungry (Pr. 19:15). Those who refuse correction will receive poverty and shame (Pr. 13:18). Those who refuse to work are lazy, wicked and useless (Pr. 21:25-26). Obviously, there are many people who are poor as a direct result of immoral behavior (cf. Pr. 20:13; 24:30-34). God teaches that such people deserve their poverty.

Second, the Bible only praises the poor who are *righteous* or the *godly* that are unjustly oppressed. This point is presupposed in such passages as Exodus 22:27, where the poor who are oppressed *who pray to Jehovah* are delivered: “When he cries to Me, I will hear, for I am gracious” (Ex. 22:27). God clearly condemns the wicked poor: “Therefore the LORD will have no joy in their young men; not have mercy on their fatherless and widows; for everyone is a hypocrite and an evildoer, and every mouth speaks folly. For all this His anger is not turned back” (Is. 9:17). When the Psalmist writes about the oppressed that God favors, he emphasizes their faith or trust in God. “The LORD also will be refuge for the oppressed, a refuge in times of trouble. And those who know Your name will put their trust in You; for You, LORD, have not forsaken those who seek You” (Ps. 9:9-10).

Third, King David, who was a very wealthy man that lived in a huge palace, under divine inspiration, repeatedly referred to himself as poor and needy. “But I am poor and needy; yet the LORD thinks upon me” (Ps. 40:17). “Bow down Your ear, O LORD, hear me; for I am poor and needy” (Ps. 86:1). “Because Your mercy is good, deliver me. For I am poor and needy and my heart is wounded within me” (Ps. 109:21-22). Obviously “poor” in these passages is metaphorical and consistent with the poverty of spirit in Matthew 5:3.

Fourth, in Luke's account the "fact that 'poor' is not qualified by 'now,' as hungry and weep are in the next beatitudes, also indicates that 'poor' does not refer to an economic status that will change but to a permanent religious character."<sup>6</sup> The Christian will always be poor in the sense of this beatitude because he will always admit his sin and guilt, his utter helplessness and his complete unworthiness before God. He will count all things as refuse and cling to Christ.

There is no virtue in being poor economically. The unregenerate poor are no closer to God than are the unsaved rich. There is no spiritual advantage of living in economic poverty. If poverty guaranteed spirituality, the poorest sections of cities and the large third world slums would be the safest places to live. However, everyone knows they are by far the most dangerous.

The Roman Catholic interpretation of this passage has led to the totally unbiblical idea of taking a vow of poverty; that is, purposely living a life of economic destitution. "Their patron saint is Frances of Assisi and they regard him and his type as those who alone conform to the statement of this beatitude."<sup>7</sup> Thus a whole order of beggars and leeches were born who wandered from city to city doing nothing productive whatsoever.

While the passage is not speaking about everyone who is economically poor, nevertheless the Old Testament does speak of the pious poor who look to and depend on God. "Have all the workers of iniquity no knowledge, who eat up my people as they eat bread, and do not call on the LORD? There they are in great fear, for God is with the righteous. You shame the counsel of the poor, but the LORD is his refuge" (Ps. 14:6). "This poor man cried out, and the LORD heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles" (Ps. 34:6). Moreover, throughout the whole Old Testament we find passages where God promises to deliver and protect the righteous poor who are oppressed (Ex. 22:25-27; Dt. 15:7-11; 2 Sam. 22:28; Ps. 72:2, 4, 12; Is. 3:14-15; 10:2; Jer. 22:16; Ez. 16:49; 18:12; Amos 8:4; Zech. 7:10). Further, people are often warned not to abuse the poor (e.g., "Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. Let none of you plan evil in his heart against his brother" [Zech. 7:10]). In fact, according to Scripture, God's people can, to an extent, measure their own piety before God by examining how they treat the weak, poor and helpless of the land (e.g., the poverty stricken, the widow, the orphan, the alien or foreigner).

If all these passages are carefully studied one does *not* see that God is exalting economic poverty. But rather, God is looking out for *believers* who are weak and vulnerable because it is the weak (the poor, homeless, widows, orphans, sojourners, etc.) that are most often exploited and treated unjustly. That was true during the Old Covenant administration, in Jesus' own day, and it is still true today. These passages do not teach that God thinks economic poverty is wonderful or that Jehovah favors socialism, which is based on theft and statism, but that God will defend and avenge the righteous poor who are oppressed.

## The Correct Meaning

Having dealt with most common misconceptions regarding this beatitude, let us turn our attention to the true meaning or intent of our Lord in this passage. The expression "poor in spirit" is related to biblical humility, where a man sees himself as the Word of God views him. Such a man understands that he is guilty and polluted before God; that with regard to his own life record and heart or character he has absolutely nothing to be proud of. There is not one thing that he has done, or can do, to impress God or bring him into God's favor. "He knows himself to be an

---

<sup>6</sup> Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 200.

<sup>7</sup> D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, 44.

entirely dependent being; he knows that ‘in him, that is in his flesh, dwells no good thing’ [Rom. 7:18]; he knows that he has, that he can have, no hope, but in the sovereign mercy of God...”<sup>8</sup> “It is the opposite of that haughty, self-assertive and self-sufficient disposition which the world so much admires and praises.”<sup>9</sup> The unregenerate man loves “the pride of life” (1 Jn. 2:16) and relishes a life of arrogant defiance against God’s throne. God is not in his thoughts and, thus, any idea of acknowledging his own sin and guilt or bowing the knee to Christ is totally out of the question. With Pharaoh he says, “Who is the LORD, that I should obey His voice...?” (Ex. 5:2).

The teaching that the poor in spirit are those who understand and acknowledge their spiritual bankruptcy before God is taught in Scripture a number of ways.

First, as we noted with David’s inspired petitions, “poor and needy” (Ps. 40:17; 86:1; 109:21-22) refers to David’s acknowledgement that he is a helpless sinner and is completely dependent upon God’s grace and mercy for deliverance. Even though David was materially rich and powerful, he exhibited a complete absence of pride, self-assurance, self-reliance and, instead, focused his faith on God.

Second, there are some Hebrew words that can be legitimately translated as lowly, humble or *poor*. For example in Proverbs 16:19 (“Better to be of a humble spirit with the lowly, than to divide the spoil with the proud.”), the word translated “lowly” can also be rendered “poor.” The expression “the poor” then would be the antithetical counterpart to “the proud.” In the broader context of Scripture, spiritual pride and self-reliance is the very opposite of a repentant, contrite heart. Thus, the first beatitude really functions as a foundation for the others that follow. The person who is of a poor spirit will mourn, will be meek, will be merciful, etc..

Third, the Bible contains numerous historical examples of godly men acknowledging their spiritual poverty. When Isaiah had a vision and saw God on a throne, high and lifted up he cried out, “Woe is me for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips” (Is. 6:5). After this acknowledgement his iniquity was taken away and his sin was purged (Is. 6:5). When King David came to his senses and repented, he acknowledged his spiritual poverty. “Have mercy on me, O God...For I acknowledge my transgressions, and my sin is always before me...Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me...Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities” (Ps. 51:1, 3, 5, 9). When Peter, who was by nature, proud, boastful and self-confident, understood who Jesus really was for the first time he said to the Savior, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord” (Lk. 5:8)! A beautiful example of being poor in spirit is found in the prayer of the tax collector. “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’” (Lk. 18:13). Our Lord’s commentary on this man’s prayer tells us quite explicitly that biblical humility goes hand in hand with poverty of spirit. “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other [the proud Pharisee]; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk. 18:14). The tax collector did not depend on himself or his own works or character one iota, but instead admitted his sin and cast himself upon the mercy of God.

Paul expressed this same thought when he said, “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 and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith” (Phil. 3:8-9). After establishing the fact that if anyone had reason to boast about their religious heritage and personal

---

<sup>8</sup> John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1850, 52] 1967), 1:117.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1950, 53] 1982), 16-17.

accomplishments he was second to none, Paul acknowledges that all his personal achievements are worthless. Thus, the poor in spirit are those that the Holy Spirit has brought to the realization that, in and of themselves, they are completely destitute morally and spiritually and thus are in need of the salvation that Christ has provided. The one who is poor in spirit is nothing in his own eyes, and understands that his proper place is in the dust before God begging for mercy. “He feels himself ‘dust and ashes,’ guilty dust and ashes. A saved sinner, a sinner saved by grace, is the highest character he can lay claim to.”<sup>10</sup>

It is important to recognize that when the Bible speaks of the poor in spirit it never does so in isolation from faith in God. Poverty of spirit is not simply an expression of humility or having a low opinion of oneself, for the heathen can do that. The poor in spirit are *only* those whom the Holy Spirit has regenerated and enabled to see themselves in light of God’s infinite holiness and the perfection of God’s holy law. The poor in spirit have hearts of flesh, not stone, and eyes that see. Thus, they take the place of a beggar before God and flee to Christ. All believers, then, are poor in spirit (even those who are materially rich) because the Word of God attended by the power of the Holy Spirit has shown them their utter worthlessness and caused them to receive the spiritual riches merited by Jesus Christ. Therefore, when the expression “poor in spirit” is understood in the broad context of Scripture, we can say that the beatitudes and the whole Sermon on the Mount opens with a statement regarding the total necessity of repentance and salvation in Christ. Consequently, the common teaching that the Sermon on the Mount contains nothing about salvation or the need for Christ’s sacrificial death is fallacious. A man cannot have a biblical attitude toward himself in isolation from his view of God and Jesus. A man cannot truly forsake his self-reliance, self-confidence, and commitment to human autonomy in epistemology, ontology and ethics without simultaneously relying on Jesus Christ. In other words, a person who forsakes believing in himself and his own works-righteousness cannot embrace the void, nothingness or neutrality. Rather, he replaces self-confidence, assurance and self-righteousness with the Savior’s righteousness—the righteousness of God. Thus, all the blessings that we receive, we receive as a consequence of Jesus’ person and work.

The man who is poor in spirit acknowledges the righteousness, holiness and goodness of God. He acknowledges that we are sinful, wicked, depraved and utterly undone, but that Jesus is holy, perfect, separate from sinners and absolutely righteous. He places all his hope in the righteousness of Christ because he understands that “we are nothing, less than nothing, worse than nothing.”<sup>11</sup> He abandons his own righteousness, strength and confidence in the flesh for the merit of Christ. Do you see yourself as poor and destitute before God? Do you understand that all your supposed good deeds are nothing but filthy rags before the Lord? Do you approach God from a position of total abasement? Do you boast in your abilities or do you have a humble and contrite spirit? Do you understand that Jesus is your only hope and trust in Him alone for salvation? We must regard ourselves as poor because we are always in need of God’s grace. We must always be clinging to the bloody cross.

Jesus places poverty of spirit first among the Christian graces. The Greek and Roman philosophers did not place humility among their moral virtues. The Nazis saw poverty of spirit as the great defect of Christianity. The natural man sees poverty of spirit as a great weakness, a negative character flaw. Even many preachers today reject poverty of spirit for the gospel of self-esteem, self-praise and self-exaltation. Many modern churches, in their desire for success, numbers, huge facilities, programs, and the praise of men, have forsaken a crucial element of

---

<sup>10</sup> John Brown, *Discourses and Sayings of Our Lord*, 1:117.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 5:49.

Christianity. They would do well to heed the words of Christ given to the church of Laodicea: “Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see” (Rev. 3:17-18). We must always keep before our minds the truth that poverty of spirit, Christian humility and self-denial is the first beatitude; the first thing to be learned in the school of Christ. The seed of the gospel will only grow in hearts where the Holy Spirit has removed the rocky soil of pride and self-exaltation. Once this occurs all the saving graces will grow and prosper. God in His compassion reduces us to nothing so that we would rely on His mercy and prostrate ourselves before His dear Son.

By way of application note how this beatitude runs completely counter to the world’s way of thinking. In America people think, “Blessed are the rich, the famous, the beautiful, the powerful.” Yet true blessedness does not come from fame or power or possessions. There are multitudes of such people whose lives are full of torment and misery. Moreover, like a flower, fame lasts only for a season. Riches and power cannot go beyond one’s death. After experiencing wealth, power and fame unsurpassed in the world Solomon declared, “All is vanity” (Ec. 12:8). Further, riches, power and fame apart from Christ and true spiritual poverty are nothing but a snare. These things fill a man with pride, self-assurance and many diverse lusts. In ancient Israel, it was usually the rich and powerful that compromised with the surrounding Canaanite heathenism and later with the Greek and Roman paganism. Jesus said that “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” (Lk. 18:25). Perhaps that is why when Paul described the members of Christ’s church he said that not many wise with human wisdom, or mighty, or noble are called (1 Cor. 1:26). Clearly pride is a great hindrance in coming to the Savior. Those who think that great blessing is only found in riches, fame, power or pleasures need to listen to our Lord’s words on the cost of discipleship: “Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?” (Mk. 8:34-36). Are you willing to turn your whole life over to Christ? Are you willing to give up all for Him? Are you willing to become poor that you may be rich in Him?

## The Poor’s Possession

Jesus says that those who are poor in spirit possess the kingdom of heaven. Our Lord uses the present tense (*estis*) rather than the future tense because in this passage possessing the kingdom of heaven is the equivalent of possessing eternal life. Although the kingdom of God is used in different ways in the gospels, the Sermon on the Mount uses it in a narrow sense for the possession of salvation (Mt. 5:3, 10; 7:21).

Therefore, the first beatitude assumes that all those who have been convinced of their own spiritual poverty before God have placed their faith in Jesus Christ and His work; and, thus have received the gift of eternal life. Our Lord said, “Whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:16); “He who believes in Him is not condemned” (Jn. 3:18); “he who believes...has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life” (Jn. 5:24). The verb “has passed” (*metabebeken*) indicates that a person who believes in Christ has passed from one state (that of spiritual death) into another (eternal life); and that

person *remains* in that new state of spiritual life forever. Paul says something very similar when he says to Christians that “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phil. 3:20); that God “has blessed us with every spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3).

The poor in spirit are blessed because their sins are not imputed to them. “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man to whom the LORD does not impute iniquity” (Ps. 32:1-2). They are blessed because God took all of their sin, guilt and liability of punishment and placed it on Christ on the cross. “Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us” (Gal. 3:13). “And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Col. 2:13-14). Jesus endured hell in order to bless us with heaven.

The poor in spirit are blessed because God has covenanted with them. God said, “I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be My people” (Jer. 31:33). “Happy are the people whose God is the LORD” (Ps. 144:15). “They who are in covenant with God are favourites of heaven. ‘Abraham my friend’ (Isaiah 41:8). It is counted a subject’s happiness to be in favour with his prince, though he may live a while from court. How happy must he needs be who is God’s favorite!”<sup>12</sup>

They are blessed because through Christ they have been adopted into God’s own family. “You received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). “I will be a Father to you. And you shall be My sons and daughters says the LORD Almighty” (2 Cor. 6:18). Because of what the Savior has accomplished we are not enemies, or even unloved slaves, but sons.

The poor in spirit are blessed because they have received the gift of the Holy Spirit and all that that gift entails: regeneration, Spirit baptism, progressive sanctification, the seal of the Spirit (2 Cor. 1:22) and glorification. Their eyes are opened. Their hearts are made to love Jesus and are drawn to Him. Their minds are enlightened to the truth. The power of sin is broken and they are enabled more and more to put off sin and practice works of righteousness. Because of this blessing, the poor in spirit become a great blessing to others, for their hearts are overflowing with living water.

Those who are convinced of their spiritual poverty are blessed with the great intercessory work of Christ (Heb. 7:25) and His sovereign care over them. Thus, the saints are promised “that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

This message of blessedness from the lips of our Lord is not only a strong encouragement for everyone to believe in Christ and trust in Him for salvation, but also is a great comfort to all those who make sacrifices and suffer for the faith. The sufferings, self-denial and afflictions of this world cannot compare to the blessings we have in Christ. The beatitudes focus our attention on Christ and His salvation and thus give us the biblical perspective needed to endure the suffering, hardships and temptations of this world. As Luther notes, “The sea of God’s mercy, overflowing in spiritual blessings, should drown all the sufferings of this life.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1660] 1971), 36.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther as quoted in Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes*, 58.