

THE NORMAL CHRISTIAN LIFE

Studies in the Sermon on the Mount

Part Three

“Poor In Spirit”

Introduction

What we have before us is the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-6-7; the greatest sermon ever preached by the greatest Preacher who ever lived.

It is a perfect picture of the “normal” Christian life; the standard by which we measure ourselves.

It begins with the 8 Beatitudes.

And tonight we come to the *first verse* in the Sermon on the Mount, which also happens to be *the most important verse* in the Sermon on the Mount! If this is ours, we will have all the rest. If we don't have this first thing, nothing else matters. It is the doorway to everything that follows.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew 5:3

Tonight we will look at:

1. Why it comes first.
2. What it means.
3. How we can grow in its grace

I. Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

A. Why it Comes First

1. Down through Christian history, some of the greatest theologians and Pastors have recognized that this verse as the foundation for all that follows:

“To be poor in spirit is, of necessity, the one which must come at the beginning because there is no entry into the Kingdom of God apart from it. To be poor in spirit is the fundamental characteristic of the Christian life. All the rest of the characteristics are the result of this one.”

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones

a. The Pulpit Commentary, one of the most trusted Bible authorities says:

The first Beatitude is the sum and substance of the whole sermon. Poverty of spirit standing in contrast to self-sufficiency.

The Pulpit Commentary

b. Thomas Watson, England’s great 17th century Puritan pastor and author:

Christ begins with His sermon with this, and we must begin here if ever we are to be saved. Poverty of spirit is the foundation stone on which God lays the superstructure of glory.

Thomas Watson

c. England’s Matthew Henry, perhaps the greatest of the Puritan Bible scholars, whose commentary was admired by George Whitfield, Charles Spurgeon and John Wesley, said...

This poverty in spirit is put first among the Christian graces. Christ puts it first (as) the first lesson to be learned in his school. The foundation of all other graces is laid in humility. Those who would be built high must begin low.

Matthew Henry

2. One of my most dramatic encounters with the presence of God involved this verse of scripture.

It happened over 30 years ago. We were in a hotel in Little Rock, Arkansas where I was scheduled to be a guest speaker at a convention of the Full Gospel Businessmen’s International. We had a beautiful room and Elizabeth was sound asleep. But I was up all night with a scratchy throat. I had my message all prepared, but I began to feel like the Lord wanted me to speak on something else. I remember pacing the floor, praying and asking God what He wanted me to do. I

was miserable. I kept crying out, “Lord, what is the most important thing I can say to all these people?” Finally there was a breakthrough. Like a thunderbolt it hit me. I felt like the Lord said to preach about **“Blessed are the poor in spirit”**. And in the next instant, just as I began to wonder what that meant, He gave me a flash of revelation. He actually took me back to relive the moment of my conversion to Christ 3 years earlier. I re-experienced it: I felt again my desperation for help; a deep sense of how sinful and selfish I was; but most of all, the Lord reconnected me with how I felt so utterly helpless. And then He said, “*That* is what it means to be ‘poor in spirit’”! And that’s what I preached.

a. When I was in Little Rock last year for a funeral, an old friend told me he had never forgotten that message on poor in spirit I had preached 30 years ago!

3. To this day, if you ask the #1 thing that God values in a person’s life, many would say, “If they have faith” or “If they walk in love?” But I would say He asks, “Are they poor in spirit?”

4. To this day, if you ask me the #1 thing I look for in a person to know whether I can help them or not, it is this: “Are they poor in spirit?”

5. When I meet someone who is poor in spirit, I know the other Beatitudes will be present in his life; if I meet someone who doesn’t have this one, I don’t expect the rest either.

You may as well expect fruit to grow without a root, as the other graces without this; till a man be poor *in spirit* he cannot *mourn*. Till we are poor in spirit we are not capable of receiving grace. God first empties a man of himself, before He pours in the wine of His grace. Only the poor in spirit are within Christ’s commission.

The Biblical Illustrator

6. That is why it’s important. That is why it comes first!

II. What Does it *Mean* to be Poor in Spirit?

“Poverty of spirit is, ultimately, a man’s attitude towards himself.”

David Martyn-Lloyd Jones

It means that when we examine ourselves, we feel our spiritual need and admit it.

“One poor in spirit is deeply sensible of his spiritual poverty and wretchedness. Such a one Christ pronounces happy, because there is but a step between them and the Kingdom of God which is here promised.”

Adam Clarke’s Commentary

- Notice that this not something we *do*; it is something we *have within us*
 - It is not a “Do-attitude”; it is a “Be-attitude
 - First of all, it means we have a sense of being spiritually needy

A. Spiritual Neediness

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE “POOR IN SPIRIT?”

#1 A sense of spiritual neediness

1. Jesus uses the term “poor in spirit” because we know what it means:

“poor”

Lacking possessions; having little or no means to support oneself; lacking abundance; without resources; the opposite of rich or wealthy

a. Unfortunately, down through Christian history, some have taken what Jesus said in Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Mount, **(Luke 6:20), where Jesus said “Blessed are you who are poor”**, and taught that He meant self-inflicted poverty brings a blessing:

b. Their patron saint is St. Francis of Assisi, the Catholic priest who turned his back on wealth and riches to minister to the poor.

c. But that is not what He meant!

“The Bible nowhere teaches that poverty as such is a good thing. The poor man is no closer to the Kingdom of heaven than the rich man. There is no merit or advantage to being poor. Poverty does not guarantee spirituality.

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones

2. Jesus says blessed and happy are the “poor IN SPIRIT”; that the true believer always has a sense of spiritual neediness or spiritual poverty.

a. **In the same way a poor person feels the need for more money, so the believer feels the need for more of God!**

3. We might say it is the opposite of being “rich in spirit”

a. A rich person has no urgent sense of need; he is not dependent upon others; he has enough.

A PERSON WHO IS “RICH IN SPIRIT” FEELS NO NEED FOR GOD!

4. Study the ministry of Jesus. He could help no one who didn’t feel they needed help!

a. Jesus was ministering with great effect among the sinners and tax collectors and the self-righteous religious crowd was critical.

They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Mark 2:17

b. This was a subtle slap in the face to the self-righteous; Jesus knew they were *all* spiritually sick; they were *all* sinners who needed to repent; but they felt no *need* for it. He might have said...

They who think they are healthy don’t feel the need of a Doctor; those who think they are righteous will never repent! If you have no sense of need, I cannot help you!

c. He said the same thing after the resurrection to the backslidden church in Laodicea:

I will vomit you out of My mouth. 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 —

Revelation 3:16-17 NKJV

d. This church was “rich” in spirit; they had lost their sense of being “poor in spirit”; and they were in danger of losing everything.

*The great St. Thomas Aquinas was a Priest in the backslidden Catholic Church of the 13th century. The story goes that as the Bishop was counting out the coins in the treasury said, “It seems the church no longer can say ‘silver and gold have I none’”. Thomas replied, “And neither can she say ‘In the name of Jesus rise and walk’”!

5. If a church, or an individual believer loses their deep sense of a need for more of God, more dependence on God, they have lost the very cornerstone of the Christian life!

B. Second: Poor in Spirit is an Emptiness With a Desire to be Filled

1. The greatest mistake of the modern church is offering a filling without an emptying! Even God cannot fill a vessel already full.

“To be poor in spirit really means an emptying...we cannot be filled until we are first empty. There are always two sides to the Gospel; there is a pulling down before there is a rising up.”

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones

a. Remember Mary’s words in the Magnificat, prophesying over her unborn child:

He has scattered *those who were* proud in the thoughts of their heart. "He has brought down rulers from *their* thrones, and has exalted those who were humble. "He has filled the hungry with good things and sent away the rich empty-handed.

Luke 1:51-53

b. Remember when Joseph and Mary brought the baby Jesus to the Temple to be dedicated, and the old man Simeon prophesied over Him...

And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set *for the fall and rising again of many* in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.

Luke 2:34-35

2. That’s it! There must be a certain kind of death before there can be a resurrection!

“Conviction always comes before conversion. The Gospel condemns before it releases.”

David Martyn Lloyd-Jones

3. Oh, what a mistake we make when we offer Christ without a Cross! When we offer resurrection life without a death to the self-life!

a. Our evangelism today offers a filling without an emptying; we offer salvation to those who do not feel desperately in need of it!

b. **This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer once called “cheap grace”, the deadly enemy of the church;** don’t worry if you don’t feel anything; it’s easy; come to the front, pray the prayer; get your “get out of hell free” card; then we wonder why our people live no different from the world!

4. But Jesus says No! The Kingdom of Heaven is only for the poor in spirit!

a. No one truly comes to Christ until they come to the end of themselves.

“Ultimately, it is only the man who feels quite helpless about himself who really trusts God.”

David Martyn-Lloyd Jones

b. My personal testimony:

I remember the moment of my own conversion. I have relived it so many times, especially in the light of this verse. Before there was a blessing, there was a death. It was not something I *did* as much as it was *a place the grace of God brought me to*. All I could feel was an overwhelming sense of my sin and of my *desperate need* for God. In that moment I experienced the utter poverty of my soul; my total need for God. Only *then* did peace come. Only *then* did I sense I was going to be OK. I might ask you: Have you ever had a moment like that?

c. There are so many counterfeit conversions! So many resting in a false assurance because no one ever told them that God must take you apart before He can put you back together again!

Till we are poor in spirit we cannot go to heaven. The great cable cannot go through the eye of the needle, but let it be untwisted and made into small threads, then it may. Poverty of spirit untwists the great cable; Makes a man little in his own eyes, and now an entrance shall be made for him.

Thomas Watson

5. But hear this clearly! Being poor in spirit is more than a one-time experience! Even after I was born again, and to this day, I have never lost a sense of being poor in spirit. Many times emptied; many times filled; sometimes at the same time!

“The great mystery of the Kingdom is how to be full and empty at the same time.”

Bill Johnson

6. So to be poor in spirit means a sense of neediness and includes an emptying; then last but not least...an abiding sense of humility.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE “POOR IN SPIRIT?”

#1 A sense of spiritual need

#2 An emptiness we desire to be filled

#3 An abiding sense of humility before God

C. An Abiding Sense of Humility

1. Again we see how the Christian life is always the opposite of what the world admires and desires. Early American Pastor Albert Barnes...

It is remarkable that Jesus began his ministry so unlike all those who taught that happiness was to be found in honor, or riches, or splendor, or sensual pleasure. Jesus overlooked all those things, and fixed his eye on the poor in spirit and the humble.

Barnes' Notes

a. We live in a world that admires the loud and the proud; the go-getter who presses their way to the top.

2. But the mark of the poor in spirit is a heartfelt humility before God.

“We have a tendency to fail to appreciate what the Bible regards as the greatest virtue of all, which is humility.”

David Martyn Lloyd Jones

3. You can't find any single Bible hero that didn't have it:

a. Moses: **“Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh? (Exodus 3:11)**

The Bible says he was the most humble man in all the earth! (Numbers 12:3)

b. When God called Gideon to deliver the nation: “How shall I save Israel? My family is poor and I am the least in my father’s house.” (Judges 6:15)

c. Isaiah when he saw the Lord: **“Woe is me! I am undone. For I am a man of unclean lips, dwelling in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the Lord.” (Isaiah 6:5)**

d. Simon Peter had fished all night and caught nothing. But he humbled himself to listen to the advice of a carpenter and let the net down one more time. When Jesus filled his boat with fishes: **“Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” (Luke 5:8)**

This is always our response when we live humility; when we really behold God’s goodness, we are reminded of our sinfulness.

e. And what about the greatest minister of the Gospel in the New Testament, the Apostle Paul? If anyone had a right to be proud about his ministry it was he. But he wrote to the Corinthians: **“I came to you in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling.” (1 Corinthians 2:3)**

4. All the Bible heroes were “poor in spirit”, the sign of a heart that truly knows God; these 3...

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III. Conclusion

A. Do You Have It?

1. So is this in you? When you examine yourself spiritually, do you feel “poor in spirit”? Do you live with a consistent sense of needing more of God? Are you humbled to know that God has saved you and loves you in spite of your sin? That means you are normal!

a. Jesus says you are blessed; you can be happy because Jesus says “yours is the Kingdom of Heaven”!

2. *But what if you're not?* What if you could not honestly tell me this is your testimony? What if you cannot say that you feel spiritually needy every day? Or have never felt so empty that you knew only God could help you? To you I ask one thing...

DO YOU WANT IT?

WHAT MUST I DO TO BE SAVED?

a. Are you sick of yourself? Are you beginning to hate your sin? Are you feeling really, really lost? Do you want a new life? Or do you feel rich enough to where you don't need it?

3. Let me give you the Gospel: all you need is your emptiness/then God can fill you. All you need is your brokenness/then God can repair you. All you need is your lost-ness/then God can save you.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.”

Matthew 5:3

“This self-emptying conviction, that 'before God we are void of everything,' lies at the foundation of all spiritual excellence...the access to all the riches of Christ.”

CLOSING PRAYER