

## ***“The Poor in Spirit” Matt. 5:3***

Grace, mercy, and peace to you as we continue the sixth leg of our Lenten journey on the road from **“Dust to Glory”**. Our text is from Jesus' words in **Matt. 5:3**—*“Blessed are **the poor in spirit**, for theirs is **the kingdom of heaven**.”*

Back when I lived in a town outside **Chicago**, a fellow pastor in my circuit told me about his two teenage **sons** who asked if they could go **camping** for a week...on **Lower Wacker Drive** in Chicago! They wanted to spend a week living with the **homeless**, having gotten the idea from a book they'd read recently about being **“a radical Christian”**. It seems the author of the book wanted to identify with the **poor**, so he moved out of his house and lived with the **homeless**. For **safety's** sake the Chicago pastor was less than enthusiastic about his sons' request and responded, *“If you want to help the **homeless**, get a **job** and donate your money to a Christian organization that **works** with the poor and the homeless”*...to which the teens just rolled their eyes at him.

He appreciated that they wanted to **do** something for the poor but was afraid they had a **romanticized** concept of poverty, viewing it almost as a good thing for Christians to **aspire** to! Probably like **most** of us here, he felt that poverty wasn't the **wisest** of career choices. But then, what are we to make of Jesus' opening statement in the Sermon on the Mount where He seems to say there's a special **blessing** in poverty? *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for **theirs** is the kingdom of heaven.”*

It kind of reminds me of the fortune-teller who was studying the hand of a young man and told him, *“You will be **poor** and **very unhappy**...**UNTIL** you are 37-years-old.”* The young man asked, *“Well, after **that** what will happen? Does that mean I'll then be rich & **happy**?”* The fortune-teller responded, *“No, you'll still be **poor**...but you'll be **used** to it by then.”*

Being raised in the proverbial **“land of opportunity,”** poverty doesn't seem like something we should be **required** to get used to, but believe it or **not**—in the **SPIRITUAL** realm—there's a kind of poverty that God not only **seeks** in us but that also opens up opportunities for God's **BLESSING** on us at the **same time!**

Here in **Matthew 5:3**, Jesus tells us that when it comes to the Kingdom of **Heaven**, **less is more** (more or **less**). To those of us who've lived most of our lives in relative **prosperity**—at least, in comparison with most of the **rest** of the world—this is **strange math**...just as it was in **Jesus'** day, as **well**—especially to the **Pharisees** who considered wealth a sign of God's **approval** and **poverty** a sign not merely of **fiscal** failure but **moral** failure, as **well!** So, before we ask what Jesus **means** by this first of His beatitudes, let's take a moment to consider what the Bible has to say in **general** about **the poor**.

To put it **simply**, God has great concern and **compassion** for the poor. In fact, in the **Old Testament** serving the **poor** was a point of **LAW!** **Deut. 15:7** commanded: *“If there is a **poor man** among your brothers in any of the towns of the land that the **LORD** your God is giving you, do not be **hardhearted** or **tightfisted** toward your poor brother. Rather be **openhanded** and freely **lend** him whatever he **needs**.”* God's concern was so **great** that ignoring the plight of the **poor** was grounds for **divine judgment!** So also, **St. Paul** reminds the **Galatian** Christians in **Gal. 2:10** to *“remember **the poor**.”* In fact, the Bible pronounces a **blessing** on those who *“remember the poor”* in **Acts 20:35**, where Paul quotes Jesus Himself Who said, *“It is more blessed to **give** than to receive.”*

But in **this** beatitude, Jesus is talking about something completely **different**, because Jesus pronounces a **blessing**, not on those who **remember** the poor, but on the **poor themselves!** **Matt. 5:1–3**, *“Now when He saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples*

came to Him, and He began to teach them, saying: **‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’**” These words are as astonishing **today** as they must have been when they were **initially** spoken because, **first of all...**

### 1. In the kingdom of heaven, less is **MORE** when it compels us to see our **OWN** need.

At the outset of His Sermon on the **Mount**, Jesus linked two **seemingly** incompatible things: **poverty** and **blessing**. Most of us have heard some version of this particular beatitude **before**, so the shock probably has worn **off** for us. We may even think that what Jesus says here is kind of **sweet**. But make no mistake about it: what Jesus says here would have been **completely disorienting** to His listeners back **then**, because He’s suddenly “turned on its head” the way you and I tend to look at the world!

One of Jesus’ **goals** in this sermon is to **contrast** the governing principles of the world as we **know** it with those of the **kingdom of God**. And so, for a minute try to hear these words the way Jesus’ original **audience** would have heard them. How would this statement have sounded to someone whose **only possessions** were the clothes on his **back**?

**“Blessed are the poor?”** What would it have meant to the mother who didn’t know where her child’s **next meal** was going to come from? How would these words fall upon the ears of the **beggar** whose survival was dependent on the handout of some **stranger**? I’m amazed that Jesus wasn’t laughed off the mountain **already** at this point. But remember that Jesus didn’t say this because he’d read a book about the **poor** or even lived with the **homeless** for a week. According to **Matt. 8:20**, Jesus told a would-be follower: *“Foxes have **holes** and birds of the air have **nests**, but the Son of Man has **no place** to lay His **head**.”* Like Tennessee Williams’ Blanche DuBois, Jesus depended on **“the kindness of strangers”** (and friends and followers). And when He died on the **cross** for us, the only possessions He owned were the clothes on His **back**. That’s why people didn’t **laugh** as He **uttered** this beatitude.

But what does Jesus really **mean**? Is He saying the poor are more receptive to the **gospel** than others? I’m in no way convinced that the **financially impoverished** are necessarily more open to the gospel simply because they’re **poor**. In fact, I think that we who **AREN’T** poor may have **romanticized** poverty because of what Jesus says here. If the poor have an advantage over the rich, why does **Prov. 30:8–9** say, *“Give me neither poverty **nor** riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have **too much** and **disown** You and say, ‘Who is the **LORD**?’ **Or** I may become poor and **steal**, and so **dishonor** the Name of my God.”* The poor and the rich each have their **own** unique temptations—**one** not necessarily providing any spiritual advantage over the **other**!

So then, what exactly **is** the benefit of being poor, because Jesus clearly says there seems to be some kind of a **blessing** here?

Well, the Greek term translated here as **“poor”** can help us **clarify** the point Jesus is making. The term comes from a verbal root that means **“to cower and cringe like a beggar.”** In New Testament Greek it denotes a poverty so **deep** that the person must obtain his living by **begging**, completely dependent on the giving of **others** and unable **survive** without outside help. So, the **“blessing”** of this kind of poverty simply is in the deep **awareness** of one’s absolute **neediness**. The “benefit” of poverty **ISN’T** in **not having** things (including the necessities of life). The benefit is in **KNOWING** that you’re **absolutely destitute**! Jesus is saying the first prerequisite to God’s **blessing** is an awareness of your **NEED** for it—something our **self-righteous nature** often has trouble **admitting**. And so, the first principle is to recognize that when it comes to God and His **grace**, we can’t survive **without** outside assistance—and in **this** case—**divine** intervention.

Johann Sebastian **Bach** was once standing outside an **inn** in the city of Lüneburg, Germany. A **student** at the time, Bach had just returned from a long trip. He was **hungry** but too poor to pay for food or lodging, which is why, when someone threw a couple of fish heads into the **trash heap**, Bach decided to **retrieve** them. As he examined them to see if any part was still **edible**, Bach was

surprised to see a glint of **gold**. Perhaps aware of the young composer's **need**, someone had placed a **gold coin** in each head. In a way, that's what Jesus has done for **us** when He says, "**Blessed are the poor.**" He shines the light of His **truth** on the refuse heap of our lives. Suddenly, we see a glint of *gold* in it. What we thought was **loss** proves to be **gain**. What we counted as *worthless*, Jesus says has great **value**. Jesus shows us that where the economy of His **Kingdom** is concerned, **less** is **more**...that the blessing Christ offers is reserved for those who recognize, in the **first place**, that they **need ...that there is no place for "the self-made man" when it comes to entering God's kingdom!** But there is an important and necessary **corollary** to this truth: poverty is a **blessing** only if it prompts us to then **gratefully** respond to God's **grace**. And so, **secondly**...

## 2. In the kingdom of heaven, less is more when it prompts us to call upon Christ.

I **also** should note that this blessing is associated with a particular **TYPE** of poverty. Jesus isn't talking about poverty in **general** but **SPIRITUAL** poverty. In v. 3, Jesus says, "*Blessed are the poor in SPIRIT.*"

In **Luke 18:10–12**, Jesus tells the story of two men who went up to the temple to **pray**. One was a **Pharisee**, a religious **leader**. The other was a **tax collector**, a notorious **sinner**. According to Jesus, "The Pharisee stood up and prayed about **himself**: '*God, I thank You that I'm not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like that tax collector over there. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.*' But the **tax collector** stood at a **distance**. He wouldn't even look **up** to heaven, but beat his breast and said, '*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*'" According to Jesus, it was the **tax collector**, not the **Pharisee**, who went home **forgiven**. However, Jesus wasn't teaching the poor to pray their **own** arrogant version of the Pharisee's prayer saying, "*God, I thank You that I'm not like other men—the wealthy or bourgeois middle class.*"

Not only that, but without this clarifying phrase, "...**poor IN SPIRIT**," we might actually miss the personal application Jesus wants us to **grasp!** You see, my sinful **nature** kind of **likes** the thought that the poor are blessed simply because they're poor. It relieves me of the **guilt** I feel over **not** being poor! I no longer have to feel so bad about having so **much**, because I can comfort myself with the thought that Jesus also has a blessing for those who **don't** have so much. But Jesus didn't pronounce this blessing to make the poor feel better about the fact that they have no **money**. Neither did He pronounce it so that I could feel better about being in the **middle class**. Jesus is serving notice that when it comes to the economy of God's **kingdom**, the rich and the poor enter on the **same basis**, because "*there is neither Greek nor Jew, slave nor free man, male nor female, rich nor poor.*" In the economy of the Kingdom, **less** is **more**. The only ones who **enter** it are the ones who know what they **don't** have—the power, privilege or possessions to deserve even one square **foot** of the kingdom of heaven.

When buying **insurance**, did your insurance agent ever ask you to sit down and first estimate your **assets**, your net **worth** that you'd need to replace in case of loss? It usually doesn't take very long. I calculate how much I have in my checking and **savings** accounts. I look at my **retirement** account, and I try to figure out how much I could get for my house if I tried to **sell** it. I take the cushions off the sofa and reach down to see how much **change** has fallen out of my pockets. I try to estimate how much I could get for all that junk stored out in the garage if I sold it on e-Bay. Yet, no matter what the **amount**, it's never quite **enough**. I always wish I had just a **little more**.

But believe it or **not**, that's how Jesus actually **WANTS** us to feel when it comes to the kingdom of **God**. It's no accident that Jesus begins His description of the "**blessed**" life with a **negative**: "*Blessed are those who know where they're lacking.*" He wants us to calculate our natural resources when it comes to our own **righteousness** and recognize that as much as we may **think** we have, it isn't ever **enough**. In fact, by **Kingdom** standards when it comes to our own righteousness, we're completely **bankrupt...DESTITUTE!** Once again, when we come up against the strange math of the kingdom of God, **less** is **more**. Acknowledgment our spiritual **bankruptcy** actually is a sign of spiritual **riches!**

**Filing for spiritual bankruptcy** is the **prerequisite** to **blessing**, because Jesus Christ only offers His **grace** to those who know they have nothing to **add** to it...the ones who turn to Christ and say, "God, be *merciful* to me, a **sinner**." We recognize that we have a debt before God with no personal resources to make **good** on that debt. But we **also** humbly recognize that Jesus Christ cancelled our debt **completely** when He died on the cross.

So, the **THIRD** thing about "less is more" is that...

**3. In the kingdom of heaven, LESS is MORE when it helps us to focus on our true inheritance.**

As a **child**, I read a lot and simply enjoyed **words**. Sometimes I'd just pick up my World Book, two-volume **dictionary** and start reading it instead of a regular **book**. Back **then**, there was a word in it that at the **time** was the longest **non-technical** word in the English language. It's "**floci-naucinihili-pilification**." It meant "*to value something as worthless*". On the **other** hand, we live in a world that thinks **more** is **more**, where the great temptation is to overvalue that which is of **little** value and to think we have **much** when we actually have **little**.

St. Paul once warned about "*thinking more **highly** of ourselves than we **ought***." That includes any egotistical assumptions about being able to save **ourselves**...even in **part**! That may be one reason so many of us get nervous about following **Christ**. We're worried about what we might have to **give up** in the process. Frankly, Jesus doesn't say you must give up "this or that" to be His disciple. He says you must give up **EVERYTHING!!!** But in this beatitude Jesus looks at it from a different **angle**, emphasizing what is **gained**—an entire **kingdom**!

What does Jesus mean when He says the kingdom of heaven belongs to the **poor in spirit**? After being questioned by the Pharisees about when the kingdom of God was **coming**, Jesus said in **Luke 17:20–21**, "*The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is **WITHIN** you.*" The kingdom of heaven is "***the reign of Christ over your heart***." So then, what is the **treasure** Jesus speaks of in this verse? Is it gates of **pearl** and streets of **gold**? Is it a mansion just over the **hilltop**? The ultimate treasure of the kingdom is **Jesus Himself** ruling your heart. It's the person and presence of **Christ** in your life. And note that He doesn't merely say they'll **SEE** the kingdom. Jesus speaks in terms of **possessing** it!

Many adults today have fond childhood memories of going every summer to a cottage or condo on the beach or up in the mountains for a week of vacation. You knew the place was a **rental**, but after a **while**, you enjoyed it so much that you kind of thought of it as **your own place**, even though you knew you were just **visitors** and would eventually have to leave. There's a big difference between being a **visitor** and being a **resident**. Those who are "***poor in spirit***" may not always have much while residents in **this** life, but they do have **this**: They possess the **kingdom**! They have an **eternal inheritance** that can't even be **calculated** in comparison to mere **earthly** wealth.

A reporter once asked J. D. Rockefeller—then the richest man in the world—"How much money is **enough**?" He answered, "*Just a **little bit more***." But when it comes to the Kingdom of **God**, the answer is **different**. In the economy of the **kingdom**, **LESS** is more. And so, blessed are "***the poor in spirit***"—the ones who humbly **recognize** and willfully **acknowledge** that by **nature** they are **spiritual paupers** in the eyes of a holy yet gracious God...a God Who has freely **GIVEN** them all the **riches of eternal life through Christ Jesus**—for theirs truly **IS** the Kingdom of Heaven.

In Jesus' Name, Amen.