

## **Blessed are the Poor in Spirit (Matthew 5:3)**

**Introduction:** *Two Kinds of Poverty*

The word *poor* in 2 Cor 9:9 means someone who's living hand to mouth. But the word here means "utterly and completely destitute, one who lives ... by the free gifts of other people ... a 'beggar'" (see Luke 16:2, Cairns, *Throned in Highest Bliss*, p. 46).

### **1. What does it mean to be "poor in spirit?"**

"To be 'poor in spirit' is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty, indeed our spiritual bankruptcy, before God. For we are sinners, under the holy wrath of God, and deserving nothing but the judgment of God. We have nothing to offer, nothing with which to buy the favor of heaven" (Stott, *BST - Sermon on the Mount*, p. 39; see Luke 15:21, Ps 34:6).

### **2. How NOT to be "poor in spirit"**

"One sometimes encounters... a style of humility that seems suspiciously like its opposite: 'I'm deeply humbled, Lord, that you have chosen so unworthy a vessel to accomplish such great things for your kingdom' (James Neuchterlein, *First Things*, Oct. 2001, p. 8). Humility does not come by telling people who unworthy, weak, and unprofitable we are. Nor does it come by thinking low thoughts about ourselves.

### **3. How to be "poor in spirit"**

True poverty of spirit, the true mortification of pride in our hearts, is nothing less than a genuine other-centeredness, by giving up any sense that we are deserving. Believing yourself an unworthy sinner is only the first step. When we allow ourselves to think about and practice humility too privately, we start fooling ourselves that we are humble when we are not. It is possible to talk a good humility, very possible, and Christians are adept at this self-deception. This is why Jesus always added to the negative practice of humility the positive practice of humility: the service of others (see Matt 20:26-28). "Everybody wants to be a servant, until they're treated like one" (compare Phil 2:1-11).

## **Practical Lessons**

### **1. This is the very first lesson in the Kingdom of Heaven**

Augustine: "Should you ask me what is the first thing in religion? I should reply: the first, second, and third thing therein is humility." This is absolutely essential: "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" (Isa 57:15)

### **2. People who have come to Christ this way will exalt God's free grace**

"Poverty of spirit is the salt and seasoning, the sauce which makes Christ ... sweet to the soul" (Watson, p. 43). Jesus constantly preaches things like, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44). And I am astonished that people always try to explain away those verses as though they don't really mean that. What Christian could possibly disagree that he or she has absolutely no hope unless the Father draws him?

### **3. People who are poor in Spirit are God's most effective and most used servants.**

Compare Moses (Exod 3:11), Gideon (Judg 6:15), Isaiah (6:5), Jeremiah (1:5-6), Peter (Luke 5:8).

**Conclusion:** *Let us look to Jesus*

## **Quotes about having a poor, contrite, and humble spirit**

"My Dear Wormwood,

The most alarming thing in your last account of the patient is that he is making none of those confident resolutions that marked his original conversions. No more lavish promises of perpetual virtue, I gather; not even the expectation of an endowment of 'grace' for life, but only a hope for the daily and hourly pittance to meet the daily and hourly temptation! This is very bad!

I see only one thing to do at the moment. Our patient has become humble; have you drawn his attention to the fact? All virtues are less formidable to us once the man is aware that he has them, but this is specially true of humility. Catch him at the moment when he is really poor in spirit and smuggle into his mind the gratifying reflection, 'By Golly! I'm being humble,' and almost immediately pride – pride at his own humility – will appear. If he awakes to the danger and tries to smother this new form of pride, make him proud of his attempt – and so on, through as many stages as you please....

You must...conceal from the patient the true end of Humility. Let him think of it not as self-forgetfulness but as a certain kind of opinion (namely, a low opinion) of his own talents and character.... To anticipate the Enemy's strategy, we must consider his aims. The Enemy wants to bring the man to a state of mind in which he could design the best cathedral in the world, and know it to be the best, and rejoice in the fact, without being any more (or less) or otherwise glad at having done it than he would be if it had been done by another" (C. S. Lewis, *Screwtape Letters*, #14)

"Do not imagine that if you meet a really humble man he will be what most people call 'humble' nowadays: he will not be a sort of greasy, smarmy person, who is always telling you that, of course, he is nobody. Probably all you will think about him is that he seemed a cheerful, intelligent chap who took a real interest in what you said to him.... He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all" (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 114).

"We actually are, at present, creatures whose character must be, in some respects, a horror to God, as it is, when we really see it, a horror to ourselves. This I believe to be a fact: and I notice that the holier a man is, the more fully he is aware of that fact" (C. S. Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, p. 67).

"A man is never so proud as when striking an attitude of humility" (C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections*, p. 14).

If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud. And a biggish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it. If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed" (C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 114).

"I am always very glad that my slanderers tell a trifling lie about me rather than the whole terrible truth" (Teresa of Avila, cited in Alexander Whyte, *Thomas Shepard*, p. 123).