

## Blessed Bankruptcy

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SERIES: THE LIFE GOD BLESSES

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When Jesus begins the Beatitudes saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," we think he's talking nonsense. We live in a society where leadership, success and fulfillment have nothing to do with being poor in spirit.

Consider our recent election. Both candidates promised that if they were elected the next four years would be better than the last four. If we just give them enough time, they will lift our economy, bring on world peace, solve our health care crisis, and improve education for our kids. Smart political candidates are optimistic and confident, not poor in spirit.

We don't raise our children to be poor in spirit either. On the soccer field we yell from the sidelines, "You can do it! Believe in yourself!" We don't want our kids to cower in the face of life's challenges; we don't want them poor in spirit; we want them to have confidence.

We live in a world that believes true success and fulfillment are found in believing in yourself. The song, *Amazing Grace*, has become a part of our popular culture. Everybody seems to know at least the first verse, including those who don't consider themselves religious. I love to watch people when they sing that song. It starts out so well, "Amazing grace! How sweet the sound..." Everybody loves that. It's so positive! But then I notice how so many stumble over the second line, "...that saved a wretch like me..." People sort of choke over that line. "Wait a minute! I don't believe that! I'm not a wretch!"

Our culture says, "Blessed are the people who have it all together, who are confident, independent and think well of themselves. So when Jesus introduces the Sermon on the Mount by proclaiming that the poor in spirit are blessed we don't really believe that's true. How can it be true that the poor in spirit are really blessed? In order to answer this question, we must understand what it means to be poor in spirit.

### I. What does it mean to be poor in spirit?

**A. What it does NOT mean:** We can begin to understand what Jesus meant by this by explaining what he was NOT saying. It does not mean to be materially or financially poor. Living in a slum doesn't merit favor with God. You can be materially poor and proud as a peacock.

You can be rich in the world's goods and poor in spirit. It may be harder, but it's possible.

Nor does it mean to be poor-spirited. Jesus is not saying the wimps of the world are blessed. He's not promoting passivity of spirit or a certain cowering kind of personality. Remember Daniel? Daniel did not just sit back and let life happen to him; he was not poor-spirited but he was poor in spirit.

Nor does it mean to be poor in spiritual awareness. Jesus is not pronouncing a blessing on those who have no interest in spiritual things; who go through life without a second thought of God.

Finally, to be poor in spirit does not mean to be modest. It's not the Academy Award winner who says, "Aw shucks, I couldn't have done it without my supporting cast." That may be a nice way to handle an award; we all appreciate modesty over conceit, but you can be modest in your manner yet proud in your spirit.

**B. What it DOES mean:** Being poor in spirit has to do with our relationship with God. In the Greek language there are two words for "poor." One word describes those who struggle to make it. We might say they live with just the bare necessities from paycheck to paycheck. That's NOT the word used here. The other word, the one used here, means abject poverty. Literally it means to cower or crouch like a beggar. It describes a person who has nothing at all. Jesus is saying, "Blessed are the beggars in spirit." Blessed are those who, when it comes to God, know they have nothing to offer and can do nothing but beg.

This word has its roots in the OT. At first it meant to be materially destitute and as a result afflicted and oppressed. But it soon came to mean those who, as a result of being afflicted, as a result of having no influence on earth, look to God and God alone for help. The poor man in the OT was absolutely dependent on God and cried to him for help. Ps. 34:6 says, "**The poor man cried, and the Lord heard him, and saved him out of all his troubles.**"

In Luke 18:9-14 Jesus told a story about two men who went to church (Temple) to pray. One was a Pharisee and the other a tax-collector. The Pharisee

stood before God and thanked him. It seems like that's a good place to start. He thanks God that he is not like other people. He is not a liar and a cheat in business, he doesn't sleep around, and he doesn't rip people off like this tax collector. He mentions that he fasts on a regular basis and he gives a tenth of his income to God. What he was saying was true; he probably lived an upright life. This is the kind of guy every church wants. This is the kind of guy other people look at and think, "If only I could get it together like him. I'll bet his family doesn't fight on the way to church. He's so disciplined; so spiritual."

The tax collector couldn't have been more different. Tax collectors were the scoundrels of the ancient world. They were Jews who bought franchises from the Roman government which gave them the right to collect taxes in a certain area. Besides being traitors to Rome, they got rich by extortion. Rome had no standardized tax rates, so the tax collector could charge what he wanted, and skim whatever he could off the top. They were the scum of society. Today, the closest thing we have to a tax collector is a high flying pimp or drug dealer. So when this man prayed, he didn't have a whole lot to say. He didn't even dare raise his eyes to heaven. He beat his breast and cried out, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." We say, "Well, he ought to be praying that! If anyone needs mercy, he does!"

By anyone's measure, the Pharisee was better than the tax collector. If I had to choose to give the hand of my daughter to one of these men in marriage, I'd choose the Pharisee. If she brought the tax collector home, I'd say, "Good night! Are you that hard up?" If they were both running for election, we would vote for the Pharisee. But Jesus closes the story with a statement that must have sounded like nonsense. He said the tax collector, not the Pharisee, went back to his house justified, right with God.

What's going on in this story? We might say that the Pharisee's problem was conceit. He really WAS a better man, he just needed to be more modest. Which one of you would stand up in your small group and say, "Thank you Lord that I'm not like these other guys. I rarely miss church. I tithe. I witness to my neighbors." But his problem was not conceit, it was pride. Luke said something important to introduce this story. He said, "Jesus told this story to those who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and looked down on everybody else." This tells me two things:

First, the difference between pride and poverty has to do with who you trust. The Pharisee didn't trust in God; he trusted in himself. He didn't really need God for anything. He wasn't a beggar before God, he was confident in himself. But the tax collector came begging, empty-handed, trusting in God. We might say, "Well, he

had an advantage. He really was a loser!" But he could have practiced his own form of pride. He could have said, "Lord, thank you I'm not like this proud Pharisee. I may be a sinner, but at least I'm open and honest about it. At least I'm not a hypocrite." But he didn't say that. Instead he saw his moral poverty and trusted God, not himself.

Second, the difference between pride and poverty depends on where you look. The Pharisee was proud because he measured himself manward. That's why it says, "He looked down on everyone else." He didn't measure himself Godward; he didn't measure himself by God's holiness; he found a guy who would make him look good. That's why we love to put others down; it makes us feel better about ourselves. The tax collector looked Godward and saw that he was spiritually bankrupt. The tax-collector was not just being modest but, having measured himself Godward, he recognized his spiritual bankruptcy and begged for mercy.

Some of us are not poor in spirit because we really haven't looked Godward and identified the sin in our lives as sin. We've rationalized it and trivialized it. I have a friend who pastors a church in Canada. He grew up in a Christian home. From an early age his parents drilled it into him that a sexual relationship was to be reserved for marriage. He accepted that and when he got married he was a virgin. But when he was about 12 years old he was exposed to a pornographic magazine. He knew it was wrong, but he also felt it wasn't as bad as going out and having sex like all his peers were doing. Over time he got hooked and he carried that addiction right into his marriage and his pastorate. When I spoke with him a few weeks ago he said to me, "For years I rationalized it. As long as I only slipped a couple of times a month I felt okay, but when I came to see it for what it was in God's eyes, and tried to cut it out of my life completely, I knew I was in a war. I never knew how sinful I was until I tried to stop." My friend is gaining victory over that sin, but he knows how bankrupt he is and he spends a lot of time crying out to God for mercy and strength. You see, we avoid being poor in spirit by rationalizing our sin, looking manward instead of Godward.

What does it mean to be poor in spirit? It means to look Godward and come to grips with our absolute moral bankruptcy in his sight; it means to see our desperate need for him. But it equally means to come to him out of that need; to cry out to him for mercy and to trust that he can and will supply what we need.

Jesus says the poor in spirit are blessed; they are to be congratulated. We know what that means to be poor in spirit, but is it really true they are blessed? What are the benefits of being poor in spirit? How is it that they are blessed of God?

## II. Why are the poor in spirit blessed?

Jesus says, "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." This is the same thing as saying that the tax collector went down to his house justified. To be part of the kingdom of heaven is to be in right relationship with God. It's to recognize Jesus as king and live under his rule. The kingdom of heaven is grace and glory. Grace now, glory later. We can't have either unless we first become poor in spirit. We can't know the riches of his kingdom unless we first see the poverty of our own spirit. *Unless we first become empty of our self, God will not fill us with himself.*

You see, there is this thing about God. He wants people to recognize his glory. He wants people to give him the glory he deserves; as a matter of fact, he wants to get all the glory, not because he needs it, not because he's insecure, but because he knows we need to give it to him to be all we were meant to be. God wants to be our "all in all" and he can't be that unless we come to him empty of ourselves. One writer said, "We shall bring our Lord much glory if we get from him much grace." If I am drowning and you rescue me, the more helpless I am to save myself, the more glory you get. When we are helpless, when we are empty of ourselves, God gets all the glory.

That's why "poor in spirit" is the very first of the Beatitudes. Unless we start here, we can have nothing of God. Spurgeon wrote: "The first link between my soul and Christ is not my goodness but my badness; not my merit but my misery; not my standing but my falling." Let me tell you: there is no one in the kingdom of God who has not first become poor in spirit. No one has ever entered the kingdom on the basis of pride. The door

Having gotten in, we must stay low to grow in him and be useful. It's always been that way. Moses had to spend 40 years tending sheep in the wilderness, becoming empty of himself, before God called him. And when he did Moses said, "Who am I?" When God came to Gideon to call him to do a great thing Gideon said, "There must be some mistake. I'm the lowest guy in the lowest family of the lowest tribe in all Israel!" David was poor in spirit when he said, "Who am I, and what is my house, that you have brought me this far?" The apostle Peter, who was aggressive and assertive and self-confident, had to become poor in spirit. When he truly saw the glory of Jesus he bowed and said, "Depart from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man." And Paul, a man of immense moral discipline and intellect, a Pharisee of Pharisees, had to come to that point where he said, "Wretched man that I am. Who will save me from this body of death?" *Unless you become empty of yourself, God will not fill you with himself.*

There is a fascinating contrast right here in the Gospel of Matthew. Both have to do with judgment day. In chapter 7 Jesus says that on that day some will say to him, "Lord, look at all we did in your name. We prophesied and cast out demons and performed miracles." But Jesus says to them, "Depart from me. I never knew you." Skip forward to chapter 25 and we see another scene from judgment day. Jesus is separating the sheep and the goats and he says to the sheep on his right, "Come you who are blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the earth. I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you took me in. I was sick and you visited me. I was in prison and you came to see me." But then the righteous sheep said to Jesus something very telling. They said, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you..." The thing that strikes me about that is that these people were not even aware of the good deeds they had done. They didn't come with their hands full, like the others, saying, "Look at all we've done for you." They came empty-handed; even on judgment day, they are poor in spirit. *Because they were empty of themselves, Jesus had filled them with himself.*

## III. How do we become poor in spirit?

It's one thing to talk about being poor in spirit, it's quite another to live it. One of the problems is that as soon as we think we are poor in spirit and that God is now pleased with us because of that, we have fallen into pride. Pride will feed even on humility if you let it. If you are really poor in spirit, it has probably never occurred to you that you are.

Most of us in this room will confess we are sinners in need of grace, but we're just being modest. We really don't live with an awareness of the depth of our own sin. We might have started out being poor in spirit, but somewhere along the line we've grown out of it. How can we maintain a sense of our own bankruptcy? Let me suggest three things that might help.

First, keep looking Godward instead of manward. You can always find someone worse than you are, and what a delight they are to us! As long as you look at others, you will find reason to say, "I'm not really all that bad. I haven't murdered anyone. I haven't committed adultery. I'm not a thief. I go to church more than most. I give more than the average American." But as soon as you start looking to God, as soon as you catch a vision of his holiness and how he views even the "smallest" sin, you will be humbled of all pride.

Second, keep looking inside rather than outside. Our tendency is to justify ourselves because we have become good at managing the externals of religion. We boil righteousness down to what is humanly manageable. We

have a list of things to do and as long as we keep the list we feel okay about ourselves. But God looks not at the list but at the heart. This was a major point later in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said, "The law says not to commit adultery. You think you can check that off your list. Try this: you look at a woman with lust in your heart and you are guilty of adultery. The law says not to murder. Try this: you get angry at your friend and say something mean to him and you are guilty of murder." Do you want to become poor in spirit? Take a hard look on the inside rather than outside.

Third, look at your individual sins rather than your sins en masse. Charles Colson talks about this in his book, *Loving God*. He says when we look at our sins en masse, they don't seem to bother us. It's like knowing we have a national debt of one trillion dollars. That doesn't bother us much. But we worry more if we owe five thousand dollars to a friend. Somehow we need to make our sins more personal. If we could just put one of our sins under a microscope, we might be more prone to see how wicked our hearts really are and how desperate we are.

My Uncle Reno married in his forties and he and his wife never had children. As a result, he treated my mother like a daughter and my brother and I like grandsons. When he got older, his wife was in convalescent hospital and he stayed in his home. Before he died, he shared with me that his home was in joint tenancy, and if he died first his wife would become the sole owner and her plan was to leave the home to some of her own relatives. But if she died first, my uncle would leave the house to my brother and I, along with four other cousins. I remember the day he called me to tell me that his wife had died. Despite the fact they never had a great relationship, he was full of grief and remorse. My first thought was not to grieve over the loss of my aunt, but to rejoice over the fact that now I would inherit one-sixth of the house. There is a sense in which in my spirit I could have killed her for the money. My uncle died just a few days later, but in that experience I saw how ugly and dark my heart really is.

What happens when we truly see our hearts and lives for what they are? We can try to deny what we see, or cover it up, or explain it away, or find someone worse. When we do that we stay in our sins. Or we can come to God as a beggar, throw ourselves at his feet and cry out for mercy. It's then, and only then, that we will know his blessing. When we are empty of our self that he will fill us with himself.

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