

THE BEATITUDES: JESUS' CALL TO HAPPINESS

Matthew 4:17-5:12

“Blessed are the Poor in Spirit...”

Matthew 5:3

The first beatitude, which becomes the first words of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, is, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom (dominion) of heaven.”* Remember, in the context of the Beatitudes, blessed is best understood as happy. The Beatitudes are Jesus' call to happiness. Happy are the poor in spirit. What does Jesus mean by “poor in spirit?” Who are the “poor in spirit?”

Let's begin our journey of understanding the meaning of “poor in spirit” by considering the word poor. When a person is defined as poor what is meant? When we say a country is poor what are we referring to? Or, if we say that land is poor for growing seed what do we mean? There is a common denominator when the word poor is used; that denominator is needy. If people are poor they are needy. If a country is poor it is in need. The land that will not grow crops is in need of minerals and fertilization. *“Blessed (Happy) are the needy in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

Blessed are those who have a needy spirit. Blessed are those who realize their spirit is in need. Blessed are those who have come to understand that life is more than the physical. Blessed are those who are willing to care for their spirit. Blessed are those who pay attention to their spiritual life. Blessed are those who understand that they are not human beings having a spiritual experience; but rather, that they are spiritual beings having a human experience. Blessed are those who realize that they are in need of God.

The poor in spirit have an honest awareness of self and their need of God. Let me repeat, the poor in spirit have an honest awareness of self and their need of God. I believe that to truly understand what Jesus is referring to when he says, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit,”* we must recall and understand the heart of Jesus message—**repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near**

Repentance is a word that makes some of us cringe. Why? Because unfortunately, repentance is one of those words that has been hijacked by religious fundamentalists. Friends, there is far more depth and meaning to

repentance than confessing what a terrible horrible sinner and person one is. There is far more to repentance than saying, “O what a wretch I am.”

As I read and understand scripture, repentance involves a change of one’s mind and life for the better. When Jesus calls on his followers to repent he is calling on them to live life differently than they have been living. Jesus is calling them to live more authentically—to use an evangelical concept from John’s gospel, Jesus is calling them to new birth—to be born again. Repentance speaks to one’s identity; to one’s way of being, to one’s way of thinking about oneself and how that self is related and connected with and to God.

I believe that Jesus’ call to repentance, the concept of rebirth, and being poor in spirit are all interrelated—if not the same thing. The poor in spirit are those who are willing to honestly face themselves. To honestly look at themselves; and in the process, do what must be done to change their minds and lives for the better. Why? Because in the course of self-examination the poor in spirit have realized two things; first, that they are more than physical beings, that they are spiritual beings; and second, that they are in need of God.

The poor in spirit are in the process of internally redefining themselves. And, they are becoming more and more conscious of their relationship with God. Notice I said relationship with God. Jesus’ call to repentance, to being born again, is about relationship. It is not about rules and ritual. It is not about doctrine and creed. Jesus is not concerned with what one knows about God but rather that one knows God.

Being poor in spirit is not about feeling poorly about oneself, it is understanding oneself better in light of one’s relationship with God through Jesus life and teachings. Frederick Buechner has said, “*We {too often} live our lives from the outside in rather than from the inside out.*” We feel okay or not okay about ourselves to the extent that we measure up to the messages from the outside. We focus on appearance, achievement and affluence. Friends, I think that Jesus’ message of repentance, his call to happiness, being born again, being poor in spirit are about learning to live our lives from the inside out. To be in touch with the spirit of God within. To be in touch with our true selves; with our true inner potential. To tap our internal spiritual resources that can lead us to love and compassion instead conquest and selfishness.

“*Blessed are the poor (the needy) in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*” Notice, for those who are the poor in spirit the kingdom is no longer at hand, nearby, it **is** theirs. They already are experiencing it—kingdom life with God is not just future—the poor in spirit already have it.

So what is it that they already have? The best way to understand the phrase 'kingdom of heaven' is to think relationship with God. Happy are the needy in spirit for they are in relationship with God!

Parker Palmer, a contemporary Quaker scholar, records the story of a three year-old girl. She was the firstborn and only child in her family, but now her mother is pregnant again, and the little girl is very excited about having a new brother or sister. Within a few hours of the parents bringing a new baby boy home from the hospital, the girl makes a request: she wants to be alone with her new brother in his room with the door shut. Her insistence about being alone with the baby with the door shut makes her parents a bit uneasy, but then they remember that they have installed an intercom system in anticipation of the baby's arrival, so they realize that they can let their daughter do this, and if they hear the slightest indication that anything strange is happening, they can be in the baby's room in an instant.

So they permit the little girl to go into the baby's room, shut the door; and then, they race to the intercom. They hear their daughter's footsteps moving across the room, they imagine her standing over the baby's crib, and then they hear her saying to her three-day-old brother, "Tell me about God—I've almost forgotten."

This story is both haunting and stirring, for it suggests that we come from God, and that when we are very young, we still remember this, we still know this. But the process of growing up, of feeling more and more self-conscious and dependent upon self, is a process of also feeling more and more separated from God.

Friends, Jesus' call to repentance, is a call to reconnect with God. Jesus' call to change our minds and lives for the better is a call to reconnect with God. Jesus' call to new birth, to be born again, is a call to reconnect with God. Jesus' call to recognize our neediness, to be poor in spirit, is a call to reconnect with God. And friends, the reconnection occurs in this life—for ours **is** the kingdom of heaven.

Happy are those who realize they need God. Happy are those who reconnect with God. Happy are those who no longer feel exiled and estranged from God. "*Happy are the **poor in spirit** for they are in relationship with God.*"