

Matthew 5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

And thus begins Jesus’ first recorded sermon – given to His newly chosen 12 disciples and to the multitudes that came to be with Him at the Sea of Galilee – probably given in the spring of A.D. 30.

It is the “Kingdom Constitution” – that is, the essence of what the Kingdom of God constitutes in the hearts and lives of all those who acknowledge Jesus as “King” of their lives. And this is the opening statement of the opening Beatitudes of the opening sermon of Jesus’ ministry. Just in its placement, it is important.

WHAT IT IS and WHAT IT IS NOT

It is critically important because . . .

1. It is the key to all that follows
2. There is the entrance into the Kingdom
3. It is the fundamental Christian characteristic
4. It is the emptying that is required before filling

It is NOT

1. A commendation of poverty, or call to it
2. A nature to cultivate (it is given supernaturally)
3. A humility to assume
4. A personality to be suppressed or call to withdraw

It is in STARK CONTRAST to the teaching of the world

1. IT IS NOT self reliance, self assuredness, or self-effacement
2. IT IS God-reliance, God-assuredness and effacement behind God

SOME BIBLICAL EXAMPLES

1. MOSES

Numbers 12:3 Now the man Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth.

Moses became a leader of millions, and yet he was “poor of spirit.”

This is the man who said to God:

Exodus 3:11 “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?”

And yet, as soon as God told Moses that He would be with him, and assured him that He would meet Him at the mountain in the wilderness (Ex. 3:12):

Exodus 13:13 Then Moses said to God, “Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, ‘The God of your fathers has sent me to you.’”

We observe that his humble reluctance became willing obedience.

2. GIDEON

Judges 6:14 The Lord looked at him and said, “Go in this your strength and deliver Israel from the hand of Midian. Have I not sent you?”

But Gideon demonstrated a “poor in spirit” response:

Judges 6:15 He said to Him, “O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father’s house.”

Like He did to Moses, God makes a promise to Gideon:

Judges 6:16 But the Lord said to him, “Surely I will be with you, and you shall defeat Midian as one man.”

Having been thus assured of God's power undergirding his inadequacy, Gideon asks for a sign, God grants it, and Gideon humbly obeys.

3. ISAIAH

The call of Isaiah is one of the greatest stories of a "poor in spirit" response of service to the Holy, Holy, Holy God.

Isaiah 6:1-8 *In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory.*

And the foundations of the thresholds trembled at the voice of him who called out, while the temple was filling with smoke. Then I said, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a burning coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar with tongs. He touched my mouth with it and said, "Behold, this has touched your lips; and your iniquity is taken away and your sin is forgiven."

Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?"

Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!"

We see Isaiah's sense of emptiness in light of who God is. And yet when God had cleansed and forgiven him he humbly obeys.

3. PETER

Jesus got into Peter's boat and miraculously filled the boat with fish. Peter's response? –

Luke 6:8 *But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, "Go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!"*

Once Peter was confronted with this divine One in his presence, he displayed a "poor in spirit" response.

4. PAUL

Paul had spiritual credentials upon credentials.

Philippians 3:4-6 *If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.*

And yet Paul displayed a "poor in spirit" attitude to all these human qualifications:

Philippians 3:7-8a *But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.*

This also is an example of the necessity of a "poor in spirit" character for more than first time salvation. Paul here is a mature Christian, still showing this key characteristic of a follower of the King of the Kingdom.

In writing to his friend Timothy, Paul again shows this "poor in spirit" characteristic in acknowledging his state as a creature of original sin.

1 Timothy 1:15 *It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all.*

This should be a reminder to every believers that he/she is "the foremost" of sinners, continually needing Christ's grace, mercy and enabling.

5. JESUS

We know that Jesus was not a sinner (Hebrew 4:15), yet He also demonstrated the character of being “poor in spirit” – that is, totally dependent upon God, the Father. Even is this, He led.

Philippians 2:6-8 *[He] although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. Begin found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

And through His life Jesus made it clear that He did nothing apart from the Father’s lead:

John 5:19 *“Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son also does in like manner.”*

And in the Garden of Gethsemane, he demonstrated this character in prayer:

Luke 22:42 *“Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done.”*

JESUS’ ULTIMATE STATEMENT OF OUR DEPENDENCE

Our being “poor in spirit” comes down to our acknowledgement of total dependence upon God. We as citizens of the Kingdom realize that He is God and we are not. He has the power to do all things and we do not. Jesus’ ultimate statement of this truth comes in the upper room in what is called His “upper room discourse.” Here He makes His final “I AM” statement to the disciples.

John 15:5 *I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.*

There is no greater statement of our spiritual poverty than this.

Just like the branch is helpless to be or do anything apart from the vine to which it is attached, so we as followers of Jesus are helpless to accomplish anything of spiritual value apart from God’s inner sustenance. We are powerless without Him. And yet we also learn –

Philippians 4:13 *I can do all things through Him [Christ] who gives me strength.*

Here then is the essential characteristic of the Christian, as expressed in the first Beatitude.

1. Here is the key to all that follows
2. Here is entrance into the Kingdom
3. Here is the emptying that is required before filling
4. Here is that which is the beginning of true blessing

Matthew 5:3 *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God = (equals)*

“Truly blessed and members of the kingdom of God are those who understand and live as those who are utterly nothing in and of themselves, but only worthy by the grace and love of God, revealed in the sacrifice and resurrection of Jesus Christ for them.”

Again, this is counter-intuitive to the way of the world, and only understood by Kingdom citizens. Surrender of self is thought as weakness. Total dependence upon something else is thought of as embracing a crutch. Yielding control is thought of as foolishness. And yet the Christian sees surrender to God, total dependence upon Him and yielding control to His wisdom as the strongest and smartest thing we could ever do.

Rich Warren, in his best-selling book “The Purpose Driven Life” begins his book with these words:

“It’s not about you.”

The “it” is “your life.” The non-Kingdom citizen is taught that his life is about him – making his way in the world, climbing the ladder of success, finding happiness and fulfillment by self-achievement. The Kingdom citizen is the one who is granted by God to realize that one’s life is about worshipping, serving and following God. In that pursuit is our true happiness, or blessedness.

A PRACTICAL LOOK (a “handful” [5] of suggestions)

OK, so we are dependent upon Jesus as our “all in all” (Colossians 3:11). In Him we have been made “complete.” (Colossians 2:10). But how does that translate into our day to day living?

1. Early acknowledgement Sometime early in each day we, His Kingdom citizens, should acknowledge our dependence upon Him that day and sincere desire to follow His lead.

“Early in the morning our song shall rise to Thee” declares the hymn “Holy, Holy, Holy.”

“In the morning you will hear my voice” prays David in Psalm 5:3

2. Turning over our will There must be a regular “yielding of the reins” to our Sovereign.

“I desire to do Your will, my God ...” wrote the Psalmist in Psalm 40:8

“Your kingdom come, Your will be done ...” from the Lord’s Prayer, Matthew 6:10

“Not my will, but Yours be done,” mimicking Jesus in the Garden

3. An emptying and filling before each undertaking Before beginning a job, or a sporting event, or a speech, or a meeting, or any undertaking, breathe a prayer of *“Not to [me], Lord, not to [me] but to your name be the glory.”* (Psalm 115:1) This is an emptying of self, acknowledging dependence on the Lord and a desire to give Him the glory for any achievement. For me, I do this every time I take the pulpit, or lift the baton, or put on my guitar. It is both a reminder of my inadequacy apart from Christ, and a prayer for His filling and enabling. Paul’s reminder to *“be filled with the Spirit”* (Ephesians 5:18) is an acknowledgment of need and filling by the Lord.

4. A continual spirit of thankfulness to God Giving thanks to God is an oft-taught Biblical imperative. Every time we do so we acknowledge both God’s gift of provision and our continual need of His provision.

“Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good” (Psalm 107:1)

“In everything give thanks, for this is God’s will for you ...” (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

5. Making “it” not about you This is humility. This is self-effacement. This is yielding. This is being “poor in spirit” for the sake of others.

“Regard one another as more important than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3)

“You ought to wash one another’s feet” (John 13:14)

These suggestions are all contrary to the way of the world and fly in the face of conventional wisdom of “self-confidence.” Yet they are examples of how the Kingdom citizen conducts himself in light of WHO he is under the control of the King.

And every time such things are done, he/she “bows the knee” to the King and shouts in action that “in Him we live and move and exist” (Acts 17:28).

Blessed indeed are the “poor in spirit” for the Kingdom belongs to such as these.