



WORLDVIEW MADE PRACTICAL
Volume 14 Number 4
January 23, 2019

The Beatitudes: Matthew 5:1-12 - The Character of the Kingdom
Part Two: Blessed are the Poor in Spirit - Matthew 5:3

By Tal Davis

Every December the various American television networks present a set of classic movies and TV specials focusing on the Christmas season. Those perennial classics include *White Christmas*, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, *A Christmas Story*, *Miracle on 34th Street*, and others (some of which are pretty lame). Probably the most popular of those Christmas favorites is *It's a Wonderful Life*. You surely know the story of George Bailey, a man who dreamed his whole life of seeing the world and doing great things. However, due to circumstances beyond his control, he is forced to remain in his small hometown of Bedford Falls where he manages a struggling home loan company. When George reaches a point of personal desperation, with the help of his guardian angel Clarence, he learns just how blessed his life really is and what the world would be like without him.

In the first installment of this ten part series on the Beatitudes we introduced the study by looking a bit at the background of the section in Matthew's Gospel best known as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7). We discussed how in the days following His baptism, time of temptation in the wilderness, and recruitment of first disciples (Matt. 3-4:22), Jesus began His teaching and preaching ministry. He attracted great crowds, so He went up on a hill where He sat down and spoke to them.

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on the mountain; and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him. 2 He opened His mouth and began to teach them, saying... (Matthew 5:1-2 NASB)

Jesus then delivered what may be considered the greatest moral and spiritual discourse ever known. He starts with a series of pronouncements on what makes a person's life truly blessed. George Bailey would have benefitted from these principles as can we all if we listen and understand what they actually mean and how we can apply them to our lives. In this second of ten installments, we begin our examination of each of Jesus' nine Beatitudes (blessings). We begin with "the poor in spirit."

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

The term translated as "blessed" or "beatitude," as we indicated in Part One, is the Greek word *makarios*. It can also be rendered as "happy." In this first Beatitude, Jesus says blessed are the "poor in spirit" (*ptochoi to pneumati*). He says theirs is the "kingdom of heaven" (*basileia ton ouranon*).

So what does Jesus mean by this statement? To answer that, let's first look at what He does not mean.

To begin with, He does not mean being poor in the sense of a lack of money or material resources. In my many years (a half-century) as a Christian, I have met many wealthy people who were totally committed to Christ. In many instances, those individuals were among the most generous supporters of Christian ministries and causes. Let's face it, some people just have a knack for making money. They often see their financial ability as a gift from God in order to provide resources for His work.

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I remember two men in particular when I was young in my hometown. One was a successful real estate broker and the other a nationally prominent magazine publisher. Both generously used their wealth to sponsor ministries in the community and for their churches.

Second, "poor in spirit" does not refer to a suppression of one's personality. Humility is not the same as hiding personality traits. Some people are shy, some are introverts, and some are extroverts. Nothing is wrong with any of those personality types. Our personalities are how God made us. That's not to say that personality traits cannot change. We have all known people who were once shy and retiring who grew to be out-going and friendly. Sometimes, God's spirit can supernaturally change a person's personality in positive ways.

Finally, "poor in spirit" is not self-condemnation. The story is told that as a young man the great reformer Martin Luther was so self-condemnatory that he never felt worthy to serve as a Priest. He was actually right, he was not worthy (none of us are). But Luther was wrong to be so self-condemning. Eventually he realized that salvation is entirely by grace through faith alone based on Christ's righteousness and not by our own worthiness. Thus we are part of a holy priesthood based on the worthiness of our High Priest, Jesus Christ.

5 you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:5 NASB).

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of

darkness into His marvelous light, (1 Peter 2:9 NASB).

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession (Hebrews 3:1 NASB).

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One (Jesus) who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:14-15 NASB).

How many times have you heard Christians constantly condemn themselves because of their self-perceived limitations? Some are always saying, "I don't think God loves me," or "I don't think God can use me to do anything." That is not being poor in spirit. That is a negation of Jesus' work of grace in their lives. We are all worthwhile because of Jesus and each of us has a responsibility in His kingdom.

So then, what does Jesus mean by "poor in spirit?" One good way to describe it is as a poverty, not of material elements but of personal pride. Do you ever tell your children, "Have pride in yourself?" Is that good or bad? That surely is a good thing in that it teaches a child to want to do his or her best in his or her endeavors. Nonetheless, the Bible in many places warns against pride ("Pride goes before destruction" - Proverbs 16:18; see also Isa. 28:1-3; Mark 7:22; 1 John 2:16; et. al). That kind of pride (Greek: *hubris*) is self-righteous arrogance. The poor in spirit have pride in self because of God's acceptance in Christ.

Another way to describe "poor in spirit" is the realization that we are spiritually and morally bankrupt. Jesus gave His greatest criticisms to whom? The Pharisees, of course. Why? Because they thought they were the most righteous people in Israel. They kept the laws me-

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ticularly and were proud of their self-righteousness. But Jesus knew that sin was not just what showed without, but what was in the heart. We are all by nature sinners, and being poor in spirit means we realize that we are lost without God's grace. It is characteristic of genuine humility.

Last, but not least, being "poor in spirit" is knowing that we are totally dependent on God for everything. God is omnipotent, omniscient, etc., therefore, whatever we have or accomplish is only by the grace He bestows on us. We are dependent on Him for our sustenance and, most important, for our salvation. For that reason, we have no other option but to bow to Him in humble obedience and love. Consider these Scripture passages which capture the essence of this teaching.

4 'Hear, now, and I will speak; I will ask You, and You instruct me.' 5 "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear; But now my eye sees You; 6 Therefore I retract, And I repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42: 4-6 NASB)

27 The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the defense of my life; Whom shall I dread? (Psalm 27:1 NASB)

23 Nevertheless I am continually with You; You have taken hold of my right hand. 24 With Your counsel You will guide me, And afterward receive me to glory. (Psalm 73:23, 24 NASB)

15 For thus says the high and exalted One Who lives forever, whose name is Holy, I dwell on a high and holy place, and also with the contrite and lowly of spirit in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Isaiah 57:15 NASB)

To summarize this beatitude we must acknowledge two important truths about being "poor in spirit." First, we cannot succeed in life apart from God. Any thought that we are self-sufficient is an illusion and the antithesis of how Jesus tells us to live. Second, we must recognize our sinfulness, weakness, and our utter reliance on God for our salvation and for the power to overcome sin. It is only when we approach life with this kind of humility that we can we know the promise of being poor in spirit: "... theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Thanks anyway Clarence, but we don't need a guardian angel to teach us that lesson!

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