Blessed Are the Poor . . . But Why?
Scripture: Matthew 5
Code: BQ101811

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

Ptochos (**poor**) is from a verb meaning “to shrink, cower, or cringe,” as beggars often did in that day. Classical Greek used the word to refer to a person reduced to total destitution, who crouched in a corner begging. As he held out one hand for alms he often hid his face with the other hand, because he was ashamed of being recognized. The term did not mean simply poor, but begging poor. It is used in Luke 16:20 to describe the beggar Lazarus.

The word commonly used for ordinary poverty was *penichros*, and is used of the widow Jesus saw giving an offering in the Temple. She had very little, but she did have “two small copper coins” (Luke 21:2). She was poor but not a beggar. One who is *penichros* poor has at least some meager resources. One who is *ptochos* poor, however, is completely dependent on others for sustenance. He has absolutely no means of self-support.

Because of a similar statement in Luke 6:20-“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”-some interpreters have maintained that the beatitude of Matthew 5:3 teaches material poverty. But sound hermeneutics (the interpretation of Scripture) requires that, when two or more passages are similar but not exactly alike, the clearer one explains the others, the more explicit clarifies the less explicit. By comparing Scripture with Scripture we see that the Matthew account is the more explicit. Jesus is speaking of a spiritual poverty that corresponds to the material poverty of one who is *ptochos*.

If Jesus were here advocating material poverty He would have contradicted many other parts of His Word-including the Sermon on the Mount itself (5:42)-that teach us to give financial help to the poor. If Jesus was teaching the innate blessedness of material poverty, then the task of Christians would be to help make everyone, including themselves, penniless. Jesus did not teach that material poverty is the path to spiritual prosperity.

Those who are materially poor *do* have some advantages in spiritual matters by not having certain distractions and temptations; and the materially rich have some disadvantage by *having* certain distractions and temptations. But material possessions have no necessary relationship to spiritual blessings. Matthew makes clear that Jesus is here talking about the condition of the **spirit**, not of the wallet.

After He began His public ministry, Jesus often had “nowhere to lay His head” (Matt. 8:20), but He and His disciples were not destitute and never begged for bread. Paul was beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked, stoned, and often economically hard pressed; but neither did he ever beg for bread. It was, in fact, a badge of honor for him that he worked in order to pay his own expenses in the ministry (Acts 20:34; 1 Cor. 9:6–18). The Lord and the apostles were accused of being ignorant, troublemakers, irreligious, and even mad; but they were never charged with being indigent or beggars.

On the other hand, no New Testament believer is condemned for being rich. Nicodemus, the Roman centurion of Luke 7, Joseph of Arimathea, and Philemon were all wealthy and faithful. That “not many mighty, not many noble” are called (1 Cor. 1:26) is not because they are rejected due to their positions or possessions but because so many of them trust only in those things (1 Tim. 6:6–17).

To be **poor is spirit** is to recognize one’s spiritual poverty apart from God. It is to see oneself as one really is: lost, hopeless, helpless. Apart from Jesus Christ every person is spiritually destitute, no matter what his education, wealth, social status, accomplishments, or religious knowledge.

That is the point of the first beatitude. The **poor in spirit** are those who recognize their total spiritual destitution and their complete dependence on God. They perceive that there are no saving resources in themselves and that they can only beg for mercy and grace. They know they have no spiritual merit, and they know they can earn no spiritual reward. Their pride is gone, their self-assurance is gone, and they stand empty-handed before God.

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