

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Happy Are the Poor in Spirit

by Dan Trygg

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, because theirs is the Kingdom of the heavens.”

Matthew 5:3

We saw last time that **there were very clear parallels between the establishment of the nation of Israel in the OT, and Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount.** Moses “went up the mountain” to meet with God on behalf of the nation. God came down to him, and spoke the ten commandments, and the other conditions and instructions of the Law. These were the conditions and expectations that God required of those who would choose to become His people. In similar fashion, Jesus “went up the mountain”. Instead of meeting with God on behalf of the people, He *Himself* sat down and spoke out the promises and expectations of His Kingdom. **Instead of ten commandments, He began His manifesto of the Kingdom with ten declarations of happiness:** “Blessed are...”, or “Fortunate are...”. These are not *conditions* for joining His Kingdom. Rather, they are *promises* spoken to those who would join His Kingdom. The focus is *not* on the *performance*, but upon the *outcome*. **Each beatitude, or “declaration of happiness”, extends an invitation to those who would have thought there was no hope for them to be part of the special “people of God”.** Instead of being high achievers or faultless performers, *Jesus blessed those who were broken, powerless, and disenfranchised.* While extending this wide open door, He also *raised the standard of righteousness* to an even *higher level* than was the case under the Mosaic Law. **He challenged His disciples to move beyond actions to the innermost thoughts of the heart. This would be impossible, except Jesus was initiating a new covenant, and was calling out a new people for His name’s sake.** The *old* rules and dynamics don’t apply. **There is something deeper and more powerful to be had for those who choose to follow Jesus.**

“Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of the heavens.” **What does “poor in spirit” mean?** The word translated as “**poor**” means *more than simply “being in lack or need”*. The Greek word has a wide range of meaning. It was used to convey a feeling of being frightened, or feeling inadequate, of cowering, slinking away from or avoiding others. **It sometimes described the emotional state of person who was depressed or oppressed, ...someone feeling defeated or beat down by life. Another usage of the word referred to those who were beggars,** people who were in need, and had no other means of survival except to ask others for help. Before this usage by Jesus in this message, the term almost always had a negative, undesirable connotation.

Being “poor in spirit” intensifies or focuses the area of need as an inner emptiness. The opposite would be someone who is “mighty in spirit”, referring to someone who is robust, confident, and strong. The person Jesus is describing is the exact opposite, ...deflated, empty, powerless. Here, however, **Jesus says that the oppressed, depressed, helpless, discouraged, inadequate-feeling people can have reason to be happy. Why? “Because theirs is the Kingdom of heaven”.** What does He *mean*? Well, the word, “theirs” literally means “*of them*”. **Jesus is either saying that the Kingdom belongs to them, ...or, more likely, that the Kingdom is comprised of people like them.** In other words, this “happy declaration” is meant to be a word of hope, encouragement and promise to the empty and discouraged that God’s Kingdom is *not* beyond their reach. In fact, His Kingdom is populated by such people.

There are plenty of precedents in the OT for this teaching. For example, “Yahweh is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit” (Psa. 34:18). Again, in Psa. 51:17, “The sacrifices of God are a broken (shattered; smashed in pieces) spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.” In both of these passages, it would seem that **a crushed or shattered spirit refers to someone who is without energy or vitality because of heartbreak, sadness or defeat. God is a comforter to those in need.** He is drawn by His compassion to them, and will not reject a person who is sincerely humbled and seeking Him. **God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble (Jas. 4:6), so He has grace and comfort for those who are beat down and deflated by life.** “It is good to be lowly of spirit with the poor (unfortunate; overwhelmed) than to divide the spoil with the haughty” (Prov. 16:19). Or, again, “A man’s pride will bring him low, but a humble spirit will obtain honor” (Prov. 29:23). These two verses take this principle a bit further. In Proverbs 16, the message is that **it is beneficial to have a lowly, humble spirit like those who have been overwhelmed or broken by life.** The implication is that **you can choose to identify with the poor and unfortunate enough to realize that your life also is tenuous and fragile.** You have nothing to be haughty or arrogant about. **If this humility of spirit keeps you from taking advantage of others and acting in opposition to God, then it truly is a beneficial thing.** Proverbs 29 is a reminder that arrogance and pride bring opposition from God, but humility will bring God’s grace, provision and blessing. **Ultimately, the humble will be honored and blessed, because of God’s assistance.** “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’”(Isa. 57:15). **God chooses to dwell with the lowly of spirit, and purposes to rejuvenate them.** If it is God’s desire to revive those who are humble and of low self-importance, then this is indeed a good mental/emotional state to be in. God is motivated to recharge you with His power and vitality. This sounds very similar to Isaiah 66:1,2, “Thus says Yahweh, ‘Heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool. Where then is a house you could build for Me? And where is a place that I may rest?’ ² For My hand made all these things, thus all these things came into being,’ declares Yahweh. ‘But *to this one I will look*, to him who is *humble and contrite* (smitten, stricken) *of spirit*, and who trembles at My word.’” **God is watching for those who are humble, broken, and empty, ...and who tremble at His word.** It is not enough to be smitten or broken in spirit. One must also highly regard and reverence God. *Someone who has those qualifications will find God ready and willing to take up residence within that person’s life, and fill them with new life and energy from above.* This is very reminiscent of II Chronicles 16:9, “For the eyes of Yahweh move to and fro throughout the earth that He may empower those whose heart is completely His.” **God is watching for people of a humble heart and spirit, who are looking to Him in faith.** Finally, “The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because Yahweh has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted (poor); He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and freedom to prisoners; to proclaim the favorable year of Yahweh” (Isa. 61:1). Jesus referred to this last passage several times in the gospels (e.g., Lk. 4:18; 7:22). Interestingly, in the Greek Septuagint version of this verse, the word translated as “afflicted” is the exact same word as “poor” in Matthew 5:3. **The scripture version that most of Jesus’ hearers would have been familiar with would have said, “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, on account of which He anointed me to proclaim-good-news to the poor...”** Happy are the poor in spirit, because *the good news* will be preached *to them*.

How does this work? **How is it that the weakest, the most broken and disheartened, the most empty and powerless, can hope to have and enjoy the Kingdom of heaven in their lives? The key to understanding this is to remember that the Kingdom of heaven is not about human strength, it is about God’s provision of grace** for human inadequacy. **Who would know human inadequacy better than the “poor in spirit”?** Does this mean that *all* those who are “poor in spirit” will walk in the Kingdom? No. **They must cry out for and accept God’s grace, and walk in it.** If they respond to His promise, they will be “blessed”, for their powerlessness will be lifted by His strength.

There is another nuance of the word translated as “poor” in this verse. More than simply feeling empty, deflated, or humble, **it also refers to calling out for help. The poor in spirit are the “beggary in spirit”.** As a beggar would ask for alms, *the one who is beggarly in spirit is one who deeply, intensely knows his or her neediness and emptiness, and cries out to God to be filled.* This is what *differentiates* the suffering, pathetic groaning of broken, shattered, empty souls who find *no* relief, and those who find salvation and life in Jesus. **Those who find help from God are those who cry out to Him.** They are like *relentless* beggars, ones who *keep asking* until they receive what they need. God will answer them speedily (Lk. 18:1-8). Those who are “beggary-in-spirit” will be received and answered.

There is one final aspect of this verse, which is not generally rendered in most translations. There is a “the” in the original language that is usually not translated into English. The passage actually says, “Fortunate are the beggarly in *the* Spirit, for the Kingdom of the Heavens is theirs.” **If this “the” is given its due weight, then Jesus meant that those who know how needy they are of the Spirit’s power and vitality in their lives, ...those who are “beggary” for Him, ...who cry out to their Father day and night for more of the Spirit, ...these people will be heard by God, and they will obtain access to the very Kingdom of the heavens** here on the earth, and on into eternity. Jesus’ first teaching on importunity in prayer was about this very matter. Importunity means “shameless persistence”. In Luke 11, **Jesus’ disciples asked Him to teach them to pray.** He taught them an abbreviated version of the Lord’s prayer, then told a parable about praying with persistence. **In summary, He said, “And I say to you, be-asking, and it shall be given to you; be-seeking, and you shall find; be-knocking, and it shall be opened to you. For everyone asking, receives; and the one seeking, finds; and to the one knocking, it shall be opened.** Now suppose one of you fathers is asked by his son for a fish; he will not give him a snake instead of a fish, will he? Or if he is asked for an egg, he will not give him a scorpion, will he? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, **how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?”**

Jesus said, “Fortunate are the beggarly in the Spirit, for theirs (lit., of them) is the Kingdom of the heavens.” This could be taken in two different ways. **Either Jesus is saying that the Kingdom is available to them, or He is saying that the Kingdom is populated with people like them.** Both options are true. **The Kingdom is available and populated by those who know their spiritual poverty and cry out to God to be filled with His life.** If you feel empty, deflated, don’t be discouraged. This is a *good* place to be. There are *no illusions*. *You need God!*