

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT

Matthew 5:3

With this lesson, we will begin a series of studies on the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes, as you know, is the Lord's description of what a Christian should be in his character. If you want to know what are the spiritual qualities that God expects of a Christian, meditate on the Beatitudes. I am sure that you have heard and read a lot of material on the Beatitudes. But this part of the Lord's teaching is so important that I think we should never cease to reflect on it again and again.

So today, we will examine Matthew 5:3, a verse which the Lord Jesus addressed to His disciples in the presence of a great multitude. He begins the Sermon on the Mount with these words.

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

Preaching the gospel to the poor

Before these words were said, the Lord Jesus preached in a synagogue in Nazareth. We can read the details of this incident in Luke 4:18. There, He quotes the words of Isaiah 61 and He reads this.

Luke 4:18. The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, 19 to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me to preach the gospel to the poor, to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.’ The favorable year is also called the year of Jubilee. It took place once every 50 years in Israel. It is the acceptable year, a year when once in a lifetime, once in 50 years, if anyone owed any debt to any person, all debts were remitted. The poor who were under the oppression of these debts were automatically set free. Those who could not pay their debts and had to sell themselves into slavery, all these slaves were released on that year. It is a time of healing for the broken hearted. You can imagine the joy that this could bring to the poor on that year. This year of Jubilee symbolizes the coming of the kingdom of God when the poor will be set free.

So the year of Jubilee is particularly precious for who? It is precious for the poor of course. The rich have no debt and they are not in danger of becoming slaves. They don't find the year of Jubilee very desirable because they would have to set their slaves free, and they would lose all the money that people owed them. So it is not a year of Jubilee, a year of rejoicing for the rich, but it is a year of rejoicing for the poor. It is good news for the poor.

And it is in that light that we are to approach Matthew 5:3, *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* What this means is precisely what we want to study.

Rejected in his own country

If you continue to read in Luke 4, you will find that Jesus, having read this passage in Isaiah, closed the book and gave it to the attendant. Jesus read the Bible in a synagogue in Nazareth, His hometown. Then He said to the people who were with Him, *Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing* (Luke 4:21). ‘You have heard this scriptural passage in Isaiah 61 fulfilled in your hearing. These messianic words relating to the promise of the coming King who would proclaim the year of Jubilee, they are now fulfilled in Me.’

What was the response of the people? In the end, as we read in vv. 28-29, *...when they heard these things, (they) were filled with wrath, and rose up and thrust Him out of the city...* His own people, the people of Nazareth, did not accept Him. In another passage, in Matthew 13:57, the Lord Jesus said, *A prophet is not without honor except in his own country and in his own house.* In both places, people were asking, *Is this not Joseph’s son? Is not His mother called Mary?* ‘We know Him from His childhood. How can this carpenter be the Messiah?’

You see, the carnally minded person looks at people purely from the human point of view. He reduces everything to his own level. He cannot think spiritually. He cannot think that God was manifest in the flesh and could come into the world as a human being, as a carpenter. ‘Since it is someone that I know, how can He be the Son of God?’ That was their reasoning.

‘A prophet,’ the Lord Jesus said, ‘is not without honor in God’s eyes.’ But in his own time, in his own country, he has no honor. That’s what happened to the OT prophets. Who likes to be told, ‘If you do not repent, you will perish?’ Who likes to be told, ‘You are sinners that God is about to punish?’ The prophets had no glory in their generation.

When the Lord Jesus preached, it was no different. They hated Him, especially the religious leaders of Israel. They hated Him so much that they finally nailed Him to the cross. *A prophet is not without honor except in his own country.* They would not hear. The only kind of people who would hear, who would rejoice at the year of Jubilee, at the coming of the kingdom, are the poor. These are the only people who are spiritually open. The rich, the self-righteous, they are the ones who have everything to lose. And therefore they do not welcome the gospel.

So the Lord Jesus begins His Sermon on the Mount by saying, *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* There are three parts in this passage, and we need to look at them one by one. First, ‘blessed are’; second, ‘the poor in spirit’; third, ‘the kingdom of heaven’. What do these mean? What does it mean to be blessed? What does it mean to be poor in spirit? What is the kingdom of heaven?

Blessed are you

First, ‘blessed are’. In my opinion, the best synonym for ‘blessed’ in English would be the word ‘happy’. The word ‘blessed’ simply means ‘happy’. Happy is the man. In fact, this is how Psalm 1 begins.

*Psalm 1:1. Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
2 But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in His law he meditates day and night.*

The first thing we need to notice about being happy is that throughout the Scriptures, spiritual happiness is promised to a certain kind of man. The word 'blessed' is used almost exclusively in reference to a person, to a particular kind of person. What kind of man is happy? The man is happy who does not walk in wickedness but walks in righteousness. Happy is the man who delights in God and in His law, and thinks about God's Word day and night.

In the same way, in the Beatitudes, spiritual happiness is promised to a particular kind of person. In Matthew 5:3, it is promised to those who are poor in spirit. This kind of person is happy because he is approved by God. When God blesses a person, it means that God is approving that person. And this brings joy to the person. But let me repeat again, God's blessing is promised to a certain kind of man, with a specific spiritual quality.

Poor in spirit

This takes us to the second point. Who are these people who God blesses, whose blessing brings joy into their lives? *Blessed are the poor*. That is the exact reverse of what the world thinks. The world's motto is 'blessed are the rich.' In the world, if you are rich, you are blessed because you have the approval of man. The Lord Jesus says, "No, no. Blessed are the poor." You see, the moment you enter into the kingdom of God, you experience a fundamental change in your sense of values. All the values of this world are turned upside down. There is a reversal of order. That is a fundamental principle of the kingdom of God.

Let us now consider what this poverty is. In the gospel of Matthew, we have *Blessed are the poor in spirit*. The parallel passage to this Beatitude is in Luke 6:20 where we have, *Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*. So Luke simply has 'poor', with no qualifying phrase at all. It is simply the poor who have the kingdom of God. And we saw that when the Lord Jesus quoted the words of Isaiah 61, He quoted these words, *The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me ... to preach the gospel to the poor*. Again, we find the word poor, with no qualification 'in spirit'. So what does that mean? Does that mean that I have to be financially poor in order to enter the kingdom of God? Does God bless only those who are financially poor? Of course not. Just being financially poor is not a qualification for spiritual blessing. Financial poverty in itself is not a ticket to heaven.

In the following verse in Luke's version of the Beatitudes, we find this statement: *Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be filled*. Does that mean that you are blessed by God if you starve yourself? Of course not. Matthew has, *Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled*. When Luke says that we are to hunger, he doesn't mean that we are to hunger for physical food, but that we are to hunger for righteousness. So you see that Luke's vocabulary appears to be more physical but in substance, it has the same spiritual meaning than Matthew.

A matter of humility

When we look at the use of this word 'poor' in the Hebrew language, we discover that 'poor', even without the words 'in spirit', means humility, or meekness. In Isaiah 66:2, God said, *To this man I will look, to him who is humble (i.e. poor) and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word. I will look to him who is humble, who is poor*. It is the same word. Notice how that poverty and contrition of the heart are put side by side. And it is to these people that the Lord Jesus is proclaiming the good news of salvation. When our Lord quotes Isaiah 61 and says, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me to preach the good news to the poor', He is referring to those who are humble, who are contrite of spirit, because these are the people who will respond to the gospel.

In the OT, the poor are often described as the defenseless, the people who are oppressed by the rich and the powerful. And they have to look to God as their shield and their defender. The rich, the self-righteous, think that they have it all. They think they can defend themselves. They don't feel the

need for God to defend them. But the poor are the people without hope in this world. For them, the future is not very bright. They have no hope as far as this world is concerned. But when this material deprivation translates into spiritual sensitivity and humility, often we see a powerful response to God's message of hope. God becomes their hope. And they learn to turn to God, to depend on God day by day.

So you see, the word 'poor' is not to be defined in financial terms. That is not the point. The emphasis is on humility, on a spiritual humility that leads a person in need to turn to God for help. It is the person who feels his poverty, and realizes that he is helpless without God, and so cries out to heaven. This Beatitude can be rightly paraphrased in this way: 'Blessed are those who feel genuinely their spiritual failure before God.'

Let us notice one more thing here. To whom is the kingdom of God given? To the poor in spirit. Here is an important point about the Lord's teaching on salvation. You are not going to be saved simply because you believe the right Christian doctrines. You are not going to be saved because you are doing the right works. Salvation belongs to a certain kind of person, namely the poor in spirit. It is not just what you believe, it is not just what you do, but it is first and foremost what you are that counts.

Please, get this thing very clear in your mind. Don't make the mistake to think that you are saved just because you agree with the statement of faith of your church, or that you never miss church on Sundays, or that you faithfully have your quiet time every day. No, no. Though these things are important in the Christian's life, it is what you are that matters the most. And in the Lord's teaching, it is the poor in spirit who are saved.

Expressing contrition

How then do we become poor in spirit? The only kind of person who can be poor in spirit becomes so through repentance and through becoming a new creation. If you want to become this kind of person and you ask how you can become poor in spirit, you have to start with Psalm 51. Salvation is already taught in the OT and this is what we read in Psalm 51.

*Psalm 51:1. Have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the multitude of Your tender mercies, blot out my transgressions.
2 Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.*

This is the language of someone who is poor in spirit. You become poor in spirit when you acknowledge your spiritual bankruptcy before God, when you recognize that you are a sinner, under the wrath of God, deserving nothing but His judgment. And you say, 'Have mercy on me, O God. According to the greatness of Your compassion, please, blot out my transgressions.'

Becoming a new person

That is repentance. It is the initial step that leads to the kingdom of heaven. The next part is this: becoming a new person. Let's go to verse 10 of Psalm 51.

Psalm 51:10. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

The psalmist is here talking about a new creation. 'Put a new heart, put a new spirit within me.' You need to repent and you need to let God recreate you, to make a new person out of you. When you are recreated, you become a new kind of person, a regenerated person as the Bible calls it. And this cannot happen unless one is poor in spirit. So this being poor in spirit is simply the means by which God has made us to be a new person.

There is no other way you can inherit the kingdom of God except by becoming a new person. In John 3:5, Jesus says, *Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.* A man must be born of water and of the Spirit before he can enter the kingdom of God. It is the same teaching, but put in different words. The kingdom of God is for those who have become a new creation, who are born of the water and of the Spirit. So to believe in God means to believe in poverty of spirit, which allows God to put a new spirit within us, to recreate us, to make us to be born again of water and of the Spirit.

The kingdom of heaven is given to the poor

If you continue to read in John 3, you will reach the well-known John 3:16, *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life.* Remember that in verse 5, the Lord Jesus was talking about entering the kingdom of heaven through a new birth. Now, in verse 16, He is talking about having eternal life. So in John 3, the kingdom of God is equated to eternal life. *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* To the poor in spirit, God will give them the kingdom, i.e. God will give them eternal life. You see, the kingdom is nothing without the king. If you are going to receive the kingdom, you have to receive the king. And it is in receiving Jesus as King in your life that you receive eternal life, the life that comes from God. Eternal life is simply the consequence of having Jesus as King in your life.

But remember, it is the poor in spirit who accepts Jesus as King. It is the humble, the meek, the contrite in heart, the person who acknowledges his sinfulness and cries out to God for his salvation. To such people, God will give them His kingdom. And in doing so, He will bring eternal life into their soul.

What a promise! No wonder, happy are you who are poor in spirit. You are now a citizen of the kingdom of God.