

Emptied (Part 1): Poor in Spirit

Matthew 5:3

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Ames, Iowa

May 7, 2023

When I was in high school, I had a black 1968 short-wheel-based Ford F-100 pickup. It was a pretty nice ride for my first vehicle. It was three-speed on the column, no power steering, and no air conditioner, but it had some big mud tires on the back and a six-cylinder with dual exhaust that made it sound like a small airplane taking off when I pulled onto the road.

At some point, the fuel-sending unit that was in the fuel tank of this fine ride broke, and the fuel gauge on the dash was stuck on "Full." It was pretty misleading because I always thought I had enough gas. Since I didn't fix it, I was reduced to always guessing whether I had enough gas. However, since it always stuck on "Full," it made me feel good about how my chances.

One Friday night, I had a date, and I was going to pick her up. We were going to Tupelo and see a movie. I decided to take the shortcut down Natchez Trace. The Natchez Trace is a Federal Parkway that deliberately avoids going into the cities. In other words, it is a nice road that is way out in the country. However, since I lived in the country, by taking on the Trace to Tupelo meant I was only eight miles from a gas station. Otherwise, I would have to drive further out in the county to pick up my date, then drive back into town and get gas and then drive to Tupelo.

I was pretty sure I could make it to Tupelo because I thought I had put gas in my pickup a couple of days earlier, so I was not worried. You know what's coming, right? I pick up my date and head down the Trace and get halfway to Tupelo, in the middle of nowhere, and I run out of gas. So, there I am, stranded on the side of the road with my date, in the middle of nowhere, and completely embarrassed. There were no cell phones back then and no houses for several miles.

I had been running on fumes. My gas tank was bone dry, although the gas gauge said: "Full." It gave me the illusion that I was okay, but I was really on "Empty."

Now, this is a funny story, but the fact is that many of us live our lives thinking that our spiritual tanks are full because the gauge in our minds says, "I'm good. I'm okay." The reality is most of us are empty because we do not take time to spend with Jesus so that He may refill our hearts with His word and Spirit.

Last Sunday, we looked at the Beatitudes as a whole. I gave you the outline: Empty, Filled, and Poured Out as a way to understand the progression of the Beatitudes. This morning we are going to look at Part 1 of what it means to be spiritually empty.

Before we examine v. 3 of Matthew 5, I want to do a quick review just in case you were not with us last Sunday. What we learned was that a Beatitude has three parts: The state of blessedness, the reason for being blessed, and the reward or the reason for being blessed.

Each Beatitude begins with a State of Blessedness. The Greek word makarios is translated: "Blessed" or "Happy." So, each Beatitude begins by stating that the listener who possesses this characteristic is blessed by God or has been approved by God which. This blessedness is not circumstantial but is based on the approval given by the Lord. The approval of God is a gift to be enjoyed.

Next is the reason for the blessedness. Yet, the reason for the approval of God is counterintuitive. It is a paradox. It is truth upside down or as G. K. Chesterton says:

It is truth standing on its head calling for attention.

The Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12 certainly are that. They are wisdom standing on its head and crying out to be noticed and listened to by all who has ears to hear.

Finally, the Lord follows the reason for being blessed with a reward. The reward is also a gift given by the Lord. So, from beginning to end, the reason for the Beatitude is produced by the Lord Himself.

This morning we are going to look at the first Beatitude in Matthew 5, which says:

Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.

The condition of being poor in spirit lays the foundation for the rest of the Beatitudes. It is the first link in the Golden Chain of Grace. So, we do not want to stumble out of the gate with the Beatitudes.

This morning we are going to take time to drill down into v. 3. The first step we need to take is to define the phrase: poor in spirit. I have four points to help unpack v. 3.

I. What poor in spirit does not mean.

Sometimes to understand what something is, we must define what it is not. First of all, being poor in spirit has nothing to do with financial poverty. If poor in spirit meant it was a blessing to be in financial poverty, then we would never need to help the poor. So, poor in spirit has nothing to do with financial poverty.

However, Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount, which is referred to in Luke 6 as the Sermon on the Plain, does connect spiritual poverty and financial wealth. But what Jesus brings out in this sermon is to teach how financial wealth can lead to pride and a lack of being poor in spirit. In other words, financial success often leads to self-reliance, and therefore wealth often prevents a person from being poor in spirit.

What else does poor in spirit not mean? To be poor in spirit does not mean being shy or reserved. It does not mean you are self-deprecating, so that you are always putting yourself down. It does not mean the person who is always talking about their failures. It does not mean being a pushover so that people just walk all over you. It does not mean people who are easily controlled because they won't speak up for themselves. It does not mean you are a coward. It does not mean having a poor self-image or low self-esteem, or no self-confidence, or that you are weak. It does not mean a person who lacks get-up-and-go and enthusiasm for life. Poor in spirit does not mean any of these things.

II. What poor in spirit does mean?

Jesus uses the financial term "poor" to describe our spiritual condition. The Greek word used for poor means to crouch or beg. It is an intense word that means emaciated, unable to produce anything of value. We can sum it up to mean wretchedly and beggarly poor.

When this word describes our spiritual condition, it means that we are spiritually destitute. To say it in another financial term—we are spiritually bankrupt. The spiritual balance is not simply zero, but it is below zero. It means we are spiritual debtors to the point where we are in such bad spiritual debt that we owe more than we will ever be able to pay. It means our sin has caused us to spend ourselves in spiritual slavery because of our sin, and the penalty of that debt is spiritual death and eternity in hell.

So, to be poor in spirit means you are beggarly poor in your spirit because you are a sinner. You are desperate because you have no spiritual resources with which to redeem yourself. This leads us to our third point.

III. The realization of spiritual poverty.

So, what is the implication of v. 3 when it says: Blessed are the spiritual beggars? The implication is that a person has realized he/she is spiritually bankrupt. To be a spiritual beggar means you have a deep sense of your sin, so that you loathe your sin just as a leper loathes leprosy. Those who are poor in spirit realize they are spiritual beggars.

Here is the deal, we can define spiritual poverty all we want, but if we do not realize our spiritual tanks are on empty, it will not make a difference.

Listen, no one wants to admit they are spiritual beggars. We live in a world that does not value spiritual poverty. It actually rejects the realization of the condition of spiritual poverty.

It's like this; our culture has its own set of Beatitudes so that it does not have to face the reality of its spiritual poverty. Here are our culture's Beatitudes:

- Blessed is the man who is always right.
- Blessed is the man who is strong.
- Blessed is the man who is in charge.
- Blessed is the man who is organized.
- Blessed is the man who is educated and intelligent.
- Blessed is the man who comes out on top.
- Blessed is the man who is satisfied with himself.
- Blessed is the man who is popular.
- Blessed is the man who is wealthy.
- Blessed is the man who trusts in himself.¹

The world's Beatitudes will not save you. They will only put you further in spiritual debt.

Do you realize you are a spiritual beggar, and will you confess it to God? It is the person who is blessedly approved by God who realizes their spiritual poverty and confesses it to Jesus. It is a blessing to have your conscience convicted of your sin of their spiritual misery and need. They have had their spiritual eyes open to their sin that led to the spiritual debt. They acknowledge their spiritual bankruptcy to God, and this leads us to our last point.

IV. The blessed riches of spiritual poverty.

Friends, the realization of our spiritual poverty is a sign of the riches of the grace of God working in our hearts. Bottom line: The riches of our spiritual poverty begin and end with Jesus. Listen to what the Apostle Paul says in 2 Corinthians 8:9:

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake, he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.

We can look at Jesus' riches in two ways. One, He truly was rich when He was in Heaven. He owned it all, and when He came to earth to be our Savior, He gave it all up. Yet, He was also rich in Spirit as the King.

However, Jesus took on human flesh; He took on our spiritual weakness, not our sin but our weakness of being human and the challenge of living by faith alone in God. You see, Jesus limited Himself and lived by faith in God in order to keep all of the law's commands and go to the cross as our sinless Savior. Then on the cross, He was crushed for our sin. His body and spirit were broken for us. In other words, He became poor in spirit so that we may be made rich by His poverty. This is what 2 Corinthians 8:9. This is how He identified with our spiritual poverty, and yet He never sinned.

Now, all who look to Jesus as their Savior show they are approved by God. They are blessed because they realize Jesus became sin for them so that by faith in Jesus alone, they may receive the riches of His grace and righteousness.

Friends, the reward in v. 3 is that the poor in spirit are blessed because they will receive the kingdom of heaven. No one can receive this promised reward without confessing they are spiritually bankrupt, and that is why it is a blessing to realize you are a spiritual beggar.

In Mark's Gospel, he tells us of Jesus' encounter with the rich young man who trusted in physical wealth as if it was his spiritual riches and a substitute for his righteousness. Listen to Mark 10:17-20,

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up, knelt down before him, and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"¹⁸ "Why do you

¹ Adapted: R. Kent Hughes, *The Sermon on the Mount*, 19-20.

call me good?" Jesus asked him. "No one is good except God alone. ¹⁹ You know the commandments: Do not murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not bear false witness; do not defraud; honor your father and mother." ²⁰ He said to him, "Teacher, I have kept all these from my youth." ²¹ Looking at him, Jesus loved him and said to him, "You lack one thing: Go, sell all you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." ²² But he was dismayed by this demand, and he went away grieving because he had many possessions.

It was not just his riches that kept him from following Jesus, but it was also his trust in his self-righteousness. He had his riches and his righteousness confused. He thought his riches were a display of his righteousness, but it really was a display of his spiritual poverty, and sadly he would not admit it.

Friends, the Kingdom of Heaven does not belong to the spiritually rich but to the spiritual beggars. We must cry to Jesus like the Tax Collector in Luke 18:10-14 where Jesus told the story of the Pharisee and the Publican (Tax Collector). Listen to the confession of the man who was spiritually bankrupt before God and yet was saved:

"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Friends, there is no salvation without spiritual poverty. If you see your spiritual bankruptcy evidenced in your sin against God, then call out to Jesus today. Romans 10:13 teaches us that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus for salvation will be saved. Cry to Jesus and live. He is your only hope, for there is no salvation without confessing your spiritual poverty.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, we never outgrow being poor in spirit. Disciples come into the Kingdom of God as spiritual beggars, and we remain spiritually dependent on Jesus. We must always remain dependent on the riches of the Spirit of God to be poured into our hearts.

Even as a church, we must be careful not to think we will outgrow being poor in spirit. That was what happened to the Laodicean church in Revelation 3:17-19:

For you say, 'I'm rich; I have become wealthy and need nothing,' and you don't realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. ¹⁸ I advise you to buy from me gold refined in the fire so that you may be rich, white clothes so that you may be dressed and your shameful nakedness not be exposed, and ointment to spread on your eyes so that you may see. ¹⁹ As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be zealous and repent.

Even a church can become spiritually prideful, self-reliant, and self-serving. Repentance is our path back to Jesus and our spiritual poverty.

Friends, Psalm 34:18 reminds us that God's grace is for those who are broken spiritually:

¹⁸ The Lord is near the brokenhearted;

he saves those crushed in spirit².

When the follower of Jesus is crushed in spirit, he cries to Jesus because Jesus is near the brokenhearted. It is the poor in spirit that know the power of the Holy Spirit to comfort, console, and soothe the broken heart. It is the blessed disciple who cries to Jesus and lives in the fullness of the Spirit of Jesus, even in their brokenness.

Conclusion: Let me close with a story that will help us put being poor in spirit in perspective. It is about one of England's most distinguished judges. He was a believer, and the church he attended helped to plant three mission churches in the slums of London. Once a year, the mission churches would meet with the sending church for a combined Communion service. On many occasions, it was not uncommon to find all kinds of people kneeling and taking communion together side-by-side.

At one particular communion service, the pastor of the church noticed this judge of the High Court of England kneeling and taking communion beside a thief that the judge had sent to prison. The thief served his time, and after his release, he became a Christian and eventually a Christian worker in the slums. It seemed the judge and thief did not recognize one another.

After the communion service, the judge happened to walk out with the pastor and said, "Did you notice who was kneeling beside me at the Communion rail?" The pastor replied, "Yes, but I didn't think that you noticed." The two walked along in silence for a few more moments when the judge declared, "What a miracle of grace." The pastor nodded in agreement and said, "Yes, what a marvelous miracle of grace." The judge asked, "But to whom do you refer?" The pastor responded, "Why, to the convict." "But I was not referring to him. I was thinking of myself," explained the judge. Surprised, the pastor replied, "You were thinking of yourself? I don't understand."

"Yes," the judge went on. "It was natural for the burglar to respond to God's grace when he came out of jail. His life was nothing but a desperate history of crime, and when he saw the Savior, he knew there was salvation and hope and joy for him. He understood how much he needed that help." "But I . . . I was taught from earliest infancy to be a gentleman – that my word was my bond, that I was to say my prayers, go to church, and receive Communion. I went to Oxford, took my degrees, was called to the bar, and eventually ascended to judge. My friend, it was God's grace that drew me; it was God's grace that opened my heart to receive Christ. I'm a great miracle of his grace."³

Friends, we are born spiritual beggars, and we never outgrow being spiritual beggars. We are born spiritually wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. The question is will we own it and cry out to Jesus?

Here is the good news and the main point of this sermon: Jesus takes our disease of spiritual weakness and helplessness and makes it a doorway into the Kingdom of God if we will cry out to Him in faith.

² The crushed spirit is the spiritually bankrupt.

³ Hughes, 23-24.