

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

Matthew 5:3

Dr. Michael Helms

February 5, 2017

Years ago, I led a mission team to Liberia. Our mission was to restore the water supply at Ricks institute, a Baptist school located 16 miles outside the capital of Monrovia. After 15 years of having no running water at the school, we wanted the children to be able to use indoor toilets instead of lining up and going to the bathroom in the bushes each day.

I took two licensed plumbers with me who knew how to finish running the PVC line from the water tower into the Baptist school and set the new toilets.

The quality of our material was poor and we didn't have enough of the right sized PVC fittings.

As we thought about our dilemma, an illiterate Liberian with some uncommon sense took some glue and coated the inside of the fitting and set it on fire. It got hot enough that it became pliable and then he molded the fitting over the pipe. When it cooled down, the pieces were sealed. My two highly educated plumbers looked at each other like, "Well, it wouldn't pass code in the States, but here in Liberia, you have to use some uncommon sense." They were very impressed.

Had they read how to do this in some instruction manual, they might have laughed at the idea. However, we were in a different context. We were in Liberia, a place in 2007 where we couldn't run down to the hardware store and purchase the right sized fittings. So the idea was genius.

Jesus is a relationship genius. He came from heaven to show us how to establish the will of God on earth as it is in heaven. But his relationship methods were uncommon. They still are.

Jesus' building blocks for relationships are called the beatitudes. These beatitudes teach us a lot about our relationship with God and with each other. But when we hear what he says, we thing about the same thing about him as my plumbers did when that Liberian set that PVC pipe on fire. "What is this man talking about?"

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

4 "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

5 "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

6 "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

8 "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

9 "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

10 "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. 12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you"

(Matthew 5:3-12 NRSV).

This first beatitude tells us something fundamental about our relationship with God: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3).

What we immediately notice is that this an uncommon grouping of words. It puts the words “blessing” and “poverty” together. These words don’t seem to fit. Like oil and water, they want to resist each other.

Jesus has an uncommon way of looking at relationships. So, we are forced to dig deeper.

In doing so we discover the word for “blessed” in Greek is a word that means happy. That doesn’t seem to help because if you are poor in anything, why would that make you happy?

How can you be blessed or happy if you are poor in the Spirit?

I suppose we need to understand what it means to be poor in the Spirit.

To help us make sense out of this, let’s turn to one of Jesus’ stories.

10 “Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.’ 13 But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ 14 I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.” Luke 18:10-14 (NRSV)

This story contrasts a man poor in the spirit with one that was not.

The common sense of the day was that all tax collectors were rich in material things but they were poor in Spirit, meaning they didn’t come close to doing anything that pleased God.

People hated them. They took money from everyone and gave it to the Romans. They could keep the extra they collected for themselves.

People had no choice but to pay what they demanded. They were outcasts among the common people.

Since tax collectors didn’t associate with the common people, they didn’t attend synagogue, give alms to the temple, and it’s doubtful they fasted or prayed. So they had a poverty of Spirit. They were devoid of godly things.

The Pharisee was just the opposite. People loved and respected the Pharisees. They were examples of what a man could become if he worked hard at keeping the Law. Pharisees did all the proper things like fasting, tithing, and obeying Sabbath Laws. People looked at them as being rich in the Spirit.

Now which one would you expect Jesus to praise? You would expect Jesus to praise the Pharisee. You would expect Jesus to praise someone rich in the Spirit, someone that's going to church, attending committee meetings, giving an offering, saying prayers at meals, and throwing a God-talk into his or her conversations.

Notice the one Jesus praised? Jesus praised the tax collector, the one who was poor in Spirit. Why?

It certainly has nothing to do with the way the tax collector was living his life. Nothing about the way the tax collector was living his life was pleasing to God.

It has to do with the way Jesus defined poverty of Spirit.

Please note that the tax collector came to realize that his money couldn't save him. He came to realize that life apart from God had put him in a state of spiritual poverty. He realized that he could not do anything to save himself. He realized who he was. He realized the condition of his heart. He approached God from that position. He came to God from his poverty of Spirit.

The tax collector realized the condition of his heart. So, he humbled himself and threw himself upon the mercy of God. He acknowledged that he was totally dependent on God for his life and strength.

This was the opposite of the attitude of the Pharisee who did a lot of good religious things, but he came to believe so much in his own goodness that he had ceased to honor God with his religion. However, the richness of his Spirit was only superficial. It was mostly an outward display that did not reflect an inward change.

He was arrogant and prideful, and he believed in his own goodness rather than depending on God's mercy.

This was going to cause him to miss the kingdom of heaven.

Remember the phrase the Apostle Paul later wrote: "not of works, lest any man should boast." This Pharisee is a posterchild for this phrase.

A poverty of Spirit, then, is the realization that all our righteousness is as filthy rags.

Our happiness or blessedness doesn't hinge on our goodness or our good works but rather on the acknowledgement that all good things come from above and apart from God we can do nothing.

Having a poverty of Spirit is coming to realize that we have a dependency on God for everything from the breath we breathe, to the food we eat, to the income we generate, to the intelligence we use, to the abilities we possess, to the potential we have to help others and this world become a better place to live

No matter how rich or how poor you might be in this life, admitting that you need God is the foundation for having God in your life in the life to come.

In a twelve-step program, you cannot move to step two until you've admitted that you are powerless over whatever your addiction may be.

Only after you have stated you are not in control can you move to step two, which is believing that a Power greater than yourself can restore you to sanity.

Only after you admit that you are powerless over your addicted substance can you move to step three, which is to turn your will of your life over to the care of God.

Many of us are addicted to the thought that we control our destiny. We are addicted to the idea that because we are a good person that God will reward us with a pass to heaven. We are addicted to the comforts of life and the ability to create happiness through our credit cards, shopping, and physical pleasures. We are addicted to social status and the ability to earn a living and create a life of success in the eyes of those around us.

All of us like to believe that we are in control of our lives. That Pharisee believed he was the captain of his soul, guiding his path through his goodness. He thought that justified him. He thought that made him right in the eyes of God.

He was doing a lot of great things but Jesus said he forgot step one— admit that you are a sinner and that you need the Lord to forgive you daily of your sins. Without mercy and grace you cannot be made right in the eyes of God.

We cannot enter the kingdom of heaven unless we become like little children and give up our pride. Children are humble. Children are moldable. They are shapeable.

Prideful people not admit fault or errors. They think they know what's right so they don't need God.

Having a poverty of spirit is admitting that you have a spiritual deficit that you need the grace of God to fill. So, we come to worship not for others to see that we are a good person, but to express to God that without him, we would be lost and our lives would be like a ship drifting without a sail and rudder.

When we come to the Lord with a heart of contrition, Jesus promises that we will be blessed. This is the place where happiness begins.

As we sing our concluding hymn to the Lord, will you pray the prayer of the tax collector, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner!?"

© Copyright 2017 by John Michael Helms