

# Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



## Prayer of Illumination

Gracious God, give us humble,  
teachable, and obedient hearts,  
that we may receive what you have revealed,  
and do what you have commanded.

Amen.

## Scripture – Matthew 5:3 (NRSVue)

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

*The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.*

## SERMON – Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

In historian Tom Holland's towering book *"Dominion: How the Christian Revolution Remade the World,"* we hear about a time in the 4th century AD when the Christians were raising Roman emperor Julian's ire. The emperor was growing increasingly envious of these followers of Jesus who were turning the Roman world upside down. Three individuals in particular caught Julian's attention: Basil, Gregory, and Macrina.

These subversive siblings were from a family of nine children. And they were doing some very strange things. Basil was steeped in Greek literature, philosophy, and medical studies. He was even able to study in Athens for a time. He was famous for his oratory skills and was a rising star in the Roman empire. But then the most surprising thing happened. Basil gave up a lucrative career as a lawyer to follow Jesus. He poured all of his energy and all of his smarts into the Kingdom of Heaven. In 370 he was elected Bishop of Caesarea. Soon Basil and Emperor Julian were two of the most famous men of the age. But after Julian died in a battle against the Persians, all eyes were on Basil. What would he do?

At this time, the region was experiencing a terrible famine. So Basil began a massive and revolutionary building project outside of Caesarea. He began building what was later called *basileias*. They were not only shelters for the poor, but in effect one of the first hospitals ever created. In Greek, the word *basileia* means "palace" or "kingdom." *Basileia* is the same word Jesus used in the Sermon on the Mount: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the "*basileia*" of heaven, or the kingdom of heaven. Also, you may have noticed the word *basilica* which is another name for "church," like St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Interestingly enough, the name "Basil" is from the same root *basileia*, so his name means "King."

So Basil created a kingdom where the poor and sick were not spurned. Rather he loved them and cared for them. Lepers, who normally were treated with revulsion, were welcomed, embraced, and even kissed by the Bishop Basil himself. The more broken people were, the more Basil saw Christ in them.

He once preached this in a sermon:

*The bread in your cupboard belongs to the hungry,  
the cloak in your closet belongs to the naked,  
the money in your vaults belongs to the destitute.*

Basil's brother Gregory was also influential, eventually becoming the Bishop of Nyssa. One unique focus Gregory had was to bring about the abolition of slavery in the Roman Empire. Gregory was a lone voice in the wilderness on this one, preaching a revolutionary message that had never heard before, that dignity belonged to all—even the slaves. To own a slave was to set one's power above God's power. There was no human existence so wretched, no life so despicable or vulnerable, that was not worthy of being made in God's likeness.

So Gregory preached these words from the pulpit:

that God is *"the helper of the lowliest, the protector of the weak, the shelter of the hopeless, and the savior of the rejected."*

If only the church, if only society listened to Gregory—if only. But seeds were planted.

And then in addition to Basil and Gregory, there was their sister Macrina. Macrina lived her name, which in Greek means "growth." In fact, her name comes from the same Greek word for "blessing" which is "makarios" found in the beatitudes. Macrina was God's blessing personified on earth. Her brother Gregory was so inspired by his sister that he wrote a book about her life.

In Greek, "to bless" means to make something grow, like watering a seed. To bless is not merely to say a nice word over someone, but it is to bring change. To bless is to water something that is small, that will one day sprout and flourish, becoming enlarged and extended by the waters of life. So Macrina rescued abandoned infants. This practice of infanticide was rampant at that time and no one but the Jews and the Christians spoke against them. Deformed infants and often female infants were left to die on mountains and along roadsides. This had become a common sight. Just part of the scenery. And if these infants were "rescued," they were taken advantage of, and they were used and seen as property, to either be put into slavery or into brothels. And this was normal, it was no big deal.

But not to Macrina. This was a problem. It was a big deal. She not only spoke up, but she did something about it. She rescued these helpless infants and adopted them. She knew that the image of God was in these infants as well. She gave them milk, she loved them and raised them. And instead of using them like property, Macrina poured love, life, and purpose into these infants and she lovingly watered and tendered them, like a tender sprout.

*"If you've done it unto the least of these," says Jesus, "you've done it unto me."*

Macrina rescued Jesus, over and over.

Now when we see this first beatitude, notice the present tense of it:

*"Blessed ARE the poor in spirit for theirs IS the kingdom of heaven."*

Not just "will be," but "IS." Good as done. And so, Jesus' blessing of the destitute affirms them, ennobles and empowers the vulnerable to not be stuck in or defined by their condition. He gives the gift of agency. The kingdom belongs to them. So these words of Jesus are revolutionary.

- Imagine that you share with your therapist that you're broken and destitute, and she tells you, *"No, you are on the cusp of greatness."*
- Or you share with your mentor that you feel stupid because of a mistake you made, but he says, *"Actually, you are well along the path of wisdom."*
- Or you find yourself breaking down at the kitchen table and tearfully share with a loved one that you have hit rock bottom, and then they tell you that, *"you just found a golden nugget in the midst of those rocks."*

Being poor in spirit kind of reminds me of AA. The first step is to admit your powerlessness over alcohol and that only a Higher Power will be able to get you through. Victory begins in defeat.

Take Mark, for example. Mark is a Presbyterian elder in Georgia. He's also a retired teacher and wrestling coach. He volunteers in a justice and mercy ministry working with disadvantaged youth. Mark thanks God for hitting rock bottom with his alcohol addiction. Without AA and turning to Christ for strength in his life, Mark wouldn't be where he is and doing what he's doing. Mark is blessed.

This is the good news of the Beatitudes: Jesus' kingdom isn't designed for those who have their act together. It's for those whose physical, spiritual, emotional, and relational resources are totally wiped out. When we're poor in spirit, we're humble. But if we're RICH in spirit, we're proud. Adam fell at the tree because of pride, but Jesus is lifted up on the cross by his humility.

Humility therefore helps us perceive reality and pride blinds us to our need. We remain self-sufficient and not reliant upon God when we're proud. But when we're poor of spirit, when we're humble or we're humbled, we can face reality rather than avoid it or deny it. We can go through it rather than try to go around it. Humility gives us the sobriety to recognize what we have been looking for our whole lives. And so, we find ourselves in that place of brokenness, repentant. We gladly accept God's rule in our lives and therefore we are able to enjoy the benefits of being under his care and leadership. But if you find yourself in your life right now, doing pretty good, maybe you haven't crashed and burned, maybe there's a nice cushion in your bank account, and your health is good, and your family is intact, you still need God. If you're a rugged individualist, if you're a pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps kind of person, you still need God, desperately so. All of our achievements are actually gifts. And if we're really honest, nobody is self-made, not you, not me. The energy you have and each breath you draw is a gift from God. And your gifts and your influence will not last forever.

Here's the thing, we usually see our need for God most clearly when we're against the ropes or we're down for the count. It's hardship that makes us aware of our limits and our humanity and those were there all along. We just weren't noticing them. But it doesn't have to be that way.

Cry out to God when you're in the dumps or  
cry out to God when you're sitting pretty. Just cry out.

Jesus invites us to give him everything: our failures and our successes, our addictions and accolades, our turmoil and our triumphs. He'll exchange our filthy rags and our badges for his spiritual riches, and we'll be paradoxically poor in spirit. It's an act of faith to believe this.

Faith is famously defined in the book of Hebrews as:

*"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*

But this first beatitude—

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

gives us an important lesson in what faith isn't.

Faith is certainly not “the denial of things seen.” Faith helps us face reality. Faith dashes our illusions and fantasies, and we realize we need God. We’re all beggars in God’s sight—all of us.

It’s two sides of the same coin. Faith says, “I’m not cutting it.” Faith also says, “God, only you can do it.” Faith frees us to be truthful with ourselves, with God, and with those around us. And then we realize in that moment that we’re mortal, that we’re going to die someday, that we’re not in control, that we’re not the captain of our own destiny. And all those perks we enjoy. It could be technology, medicine, academic degrees, a great job, a fitness program, vitamins, and plastic surgery, money, hard work, street smarts, they will only get you so far. They’re all nice, but don’t put your faith in them. You’ll be left hanging. The blessed life is not there.

**So who does Jesus say are the blessed?** Does he say in the beatitudes the smart, the wealthy, the popular, the successful, the winners? No, Jesus said: blessed are the poor, the humble, the sorrowful, the hungry, and the persecuted. God blesses the least likely candidates.

**Why are they blessed?** When you’re empty-handed and you’re vulnerable, you can’t fake it anymore in your life. You’ve got nothing to hide. You’re done playing games and conning yourself. Your one and only hope is God.

I like how one church reader board puts it:

“When you’re down to nothing, God is up to something.”

When we allow God to bless our broken places, to admit that we have them, we then are freed to be strong in those broken places. We find ourselves saved from our outdated survival strategies and self-defeating relational patterns that we repeat over and over. Amazing things happen when we surrender these things to God, our superiority and our disdain, our possessiveness and our control, our domination and our manipulation, our resentments and entitlements. Something happens in that blessing. Something changes and it’s miraculous. Resurrection raises us up from crucifixion, life from death. When Christ intervenes and blesses, reality is altered. The insanity stops. Comfort is received, relief given, and you can breathe again.

A seed is planted. God’s new thing begins to emerge. A door opens. A path to healing emerges. Your suffering and predicament may remain, but it now has meaning. There’s a way forward. You find yourself teachable and you’re learning. What can be changed is changed. What cannot is accepted. Joy, not happiness, is promised. Even in your dying, you can feel the life of God coursing through your veins. You’re right on track, even though you’ve been derailed. Even though you’re falling apart, things are coming together. Or as the Apostle Paul puts it,

*“... power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:9).*

You are tapped into divine strength, not merely human strength. You are looking to the eternal, not to the temporal.

Jesus has just handed you the keys to the kingdom. You are poor in spirit. You are blessed.

But it doesn't stop with you. The good news is that God blesses us not only for ourselves, but we are blessed to be a blessing to others. Jesus is tenderhearted to the poor, but he hates poverty. Poor in spirit, we then go to the poor and to the poor in spirit—like Basil and Macrina.

Ironically enough, there is also a "good poverty" that Jesus can create. The compound interest on monetary lack can reap spiritual abundance. I think of the disciples who dropped their fishing nets, literally their "net worth," their livelihood, and followed Jesus.

Today, some take a pass on material wealth to go into ministry or to work at a non-profit. But to be poor in spirit isn't just for the materially poor. Jewish New Testament scholar Amy-Jill Levine defines poor in spirit as:

*"The people who have enough humility that they do not operate from a sense of pride: the poor in spirit are those who recognize that they are both beneficiaries of the help of others and part of a system in which they are to pay it forward and help those whom they can."*

- The poor in spirit can have a healthy bank account... AND they tangibly extend compassion and generosity to those who don't.
- The poor in spirit can have a roof over their head, health care, and a steady job, AND they also see and care about those who are barely scraping by.
- The poor in spirit see their blessedness AND they don't hoard it for themselves or rub it in other people's faces. God's good gifts are gifts that have been received, not seized. They are humble, thankful, prayerful, and caring people.
- The poor in spirit have the courage to speak up: to advocate, not just for themselves, but they advocate for others.
- They are dependent upon God and interdependent with other people. They're filled with grace and gratitude, not entitlement. The poor in spirit are reverent before God's vastness and perceive their own puniness.
- Whether materially rich or poor or somewhere in between, when you're poor in spirit, you're free.
- You know you have freely received all that you have, AND then you freely give what you have already received.
- You don't always have to have the last word when you're poor in spirit, you don't always have to be right, things don't have to go only your way.
- To be poor in spirit is to live with a broken, open heart. Then you live your life empty-handed. You've emptied yourself of yourself. ...

And then finally in that place, finally, room is cleared for God to have some breathing room in your life. A breath of fresh heaven here on earth. And you have that realization and assurance—"I am utterly blessed."

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Sermon on the Mount" by Cosimo Rosselli, 1481-82, Sistine Chapel, Vatican

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