

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit ...

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.” (MT 5:3)

Matthew’s Gospel has the words “in spirit,” whereas Luke’s version of this beatitude merely says “you who are poor.” Both reflect Jesus’ teaching that upends the “accepted wisdom” of wealth being a sign of divine favor, and poverty a sign of divine displeasure. (There was no “middle class” at that time – only the wealthy few and the many poor.) The Good News is that God not only cares about the poor in this life, He welcomes them into the eternal joy of His heavenly Kingdom.

Matthew’s addition of “in spirit” may have been his way of extending this beatitude beyond the materially poor to those who have wealth, if their attitude can become like a poor person’s. It was not meant to exclude the truly poor from this blessing.

To be poor is to be in need, to be dependent. A financially poor person needs material things – food, clothing, shelter – but isn’t sure that he’ll get enough each day to sustain him. He may depend on the willingness of an employer to hire him and pay him fairly, or on the generosity of a benefactor who acts charitably towards him. A poor person turns readily to God, knowing how much he depends on divine support to survive each day, and even more so to find meaning and happiness in his life.

Acknowledging dependence on God, believing in His goodness, trusting in His Word, living in utter reliance on His promises – this is the attitude of one who is poor in spirit, whatever his material condition.

This Beatitude doesn’t mean that *only* the poor will inherit the Kingdom, but that *even* the poor will do so. It implicitly rebukes the Pharisees, who considered themselves better than others, and gives hope to those who might otherwise despair.

Where does the poor person find lasting happiness? Only in the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus proclaims this to be their heritage. This contradicts the view that the wealthy – so obviously favored now – are the expected beneficiaries of life hereafter. In several parables, Jesus talks instead about how difficult it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom.

The Kingdom is not about how much someone knows or how holy someone seems. The Kingdom of Heaven is about a strong dedication to the Lord, a trust and confidence in the Lord, a desire to strengthen one’s faith in God. We grow in the Kingdom as we realize that – whatever our possessions – we need the Lord and we trust Him to fill our need. Poor in spirit, we are rich in God’s love.

The Kingdom of Heaven begins with prayer. As Christians, we pray because we believe in God’s great love for us. Prayer helps us to become loved persons, living in the spirit of our God. Prayer guides us to realizing who God is and who we are.

God is love – a love shown in Christ’s life, death and resurrection. God gifts us with faith, a faith in this God who loves us so much. Recognizing God’s gift, we will always realize God’s love and support and concern for us. Even if we are materially poor, we are enriched by God’s love and His promise of eternal life in His Kingdom.