

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

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If you are, by nature, spiritual, if you relish religious thoughts and like nothing better than being at church and sitting through a sermon, focusing upon higher matters, which is to say, if you are rich in spirit, then Jesus' first beatitude has nothing to say to you. Move on to the next beatitude.

If you know where your next meal is coming from, if you are appreciated in your job, content with life, full of enthusiasm for your daily work, with kids who are chaste and obedient, sorry, there's nothing here for you.

If by chance you are a loser in the world's eyes, frustrated, addicted, oppressed, hungry, ill-housed, and ill-futured, if you try hard to pay attention during the sermon but get nothing out of it, here's some good news: Jesus begins his best sermon by blessing the poor in spirit, congratulating the spiritually impoverished, rejoicing with the pneumatically challenged.

In my years embedded in the university, I met few honest-to-God atheists. Most of those who shunned my ministrations and fled religious services were best described as spiritually tone deaf rather than thoughtfully atheistic. They just didn't get it. They listened to my sermons and looked upon our rites with that same blank stare with which I regard baseball. In the first beatitude, Jesus blesses the spiritually tone deaf; that is, he blesses the poor in spirit.

The first beatitude says that the kingdom of heaven "is theirs." "Theirs" is a genitive of possession. By placing "theirs," in the Greek, at the beginning of the subordinate clause, surely the preacher means to emphasize that the kingdom of heaven is for them, the poor in spirit rather than for the spiritually rich. Tell me if I'm wrong in sensing a note of exclusion in this great announcement of kingdom inclusion. Jesus never promised forgiveness except for sinners, did not promise laughter except for the tearful, and offered his kingdom as a gift to the spiritually impoverished.

In this beatitude Jesus confronts the difference between the fake world where riches and spiritual abundance are considered to be a mark of blessing and flips it on its head to the real world (i.e. the Kingdom of Heaven) where the poor are blessed. In his first beatitude, Jesus draws a sharp distinction between our kingdoms and God's kingdom. Here Jesus offers a portrayal of the true shape of the real world. As Bonhoeffer said, in this sermon, reality is defined by "the word of the very one who is Lord and law reality."¹

The poor, who are so often either forgotten or stand at the end of the line, are mentioned first. Jesus' sermon is pure proclamation, announcement of the good news/bad news that the day of the vindication of the poor has begun and is fast approaching. Get ready for a great reversal. In Christ, the last get to be first, the first end up last. Welcome to the topsy-turvy realm of the crucified Messiah, the One who makes the poor to be rich and divests the rich of our stuff. His prodigal grace makes beggars of us all. These who are forgotten by the world are the first to be remembered by God. Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus leaps to mind (Luke 16:19-31).

Though a beatitude is first of all a depiction of God, there are implications for

the contemporary church:

1. At the divinity school where I teach, we require our students to be in Spiritual Formation groups in order that these budding preachers may beef up their spirituality and become more competent in working the Holy Spirit to their personal advantage. In his first beatitude, Jesus blesses none of that and goes on record as opposing all attempts at spiritual aggrandizement.

Practices of spiritual enrichment, like our Spiritual Formation Groups, are made suspect by the first beatitude. William James said that self-aggrandizing ambition takes many forms: material (money grubbing), social (honor and acclaim), and spiritual. James suspects spiritual self-seeking to be the most deceitful. Spiritual upward mobility is often compensation for failing at other types of ambition, says James, and therefore liable to breed invidious comparison: “God I thank thee that I am not like other people” (Lk 18:11).²

Sharing James’s suspicion of spiritual self-seeking, I mistrust the *au courant* enthusiasm for “Christian practices,” the latest iteration of our history of eager beaver spiritual self-promotion. Even as Sabbath-keeping, contemplative prayer, and spiritual centering promise to purge our self-seeking, in these “spiritual practices” there’s more than a whiff of Barth’s despised “religion”—works of righteous asceticism designed for self-salvation, a cunning human attempt to avoid having to stand before God as the empty-handed beggars we are.

Let none forget that Paul’s confession, “the good that I would do I cannot....who will deliver me from this bondage to sin?” (Rom 7:20), was made after his Damascus Road vocation. By implication, to be able to confess to our own spiritual ineptitude, to look upon our spiritual accomplishments as “the filthy rags of righteousness” (Luther), is the beginning of spiritual wisdom. As Luther preached from his deathbed, “We are all beggars; this is true.”

2. Another implication of the first beatitude for someone like me, who makes a good living running errands for the spiritually enriched, is the implied judgement in the first beatitude. Good news for one group (the spiritually poor) is, by implication, bad news for another (the spiritually full). That’s the edge Luke put on this beatitude in his account of Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain. The flip side of blessing the poor is cursing the rich (Lk 6:27-36).

The deeply poor tend to be desperate. The poor are those who know that they are helpless without God’s help. They are losers in a world that values only the winners. They’ve got no hope if the Son of God is not the one who preached the Sermon. If, as you preach the first beatitude, there are those in your congregation who hear curse rather than blessing, this beatitude as judgment rather than beatitude, it’s probably a sign that your church hasn’t done a good enough job of evangelization. It’s the wretched of the earth who are able to hear this sermon gladly. If there are no desperate in your congregation, then a great deal will be missed about the Beatitudes, and I am not a good enough biblical interpreter to make them credible. It’s hard to see how the poor can be blessed without judgment upon the rich.

The preacher of The Sermon was full of spirit yet for us and our salvation poured out his spirit. The One who was conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matt 1:18), prompted to preach in the power of the Holy Spirit (Lk 4), for our sakes became kenotically emptied in spirit (Phil 2:6-11), crying out “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Mk 15:34), blesses the spiritually deficient. Nobody will ever be as poor as

crucified Jesus, and yet all those who are poor may cling to his impoverishment as their hope. The poor find a place close to Jesus because he bypassed the rich and has come and stood with them in his poverty.

Sadly, most of my ministry has been among the spiritually rich, spending much of my time around people who are good at being church, who eagerly lap up all things spiritual, and who pay the bills for me to lead them in their spiritual self-aggrandizement. But Jesus blesses the spiritually inept. “For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9).

3. By implication, the church does not honor the rich or owe them our respect, because in this sermon we have learned the truth about who God is and what God is up to in the world. As Stanley Hauerwas says, “The sermon, therefore, is not a list of requirements, but rather a description of the life of the people gathered by and around Jesus. To be saved is to be so gathered.”³ Most of us don’t want to be poor in spirit or anything else, much less to have to put up with them at the Lord’s Table, realizing that the world appears to be run by and to reward winners rather than losers.

In one of his sermons on the Sermon on the Mount, Luther said that this first beatitude slams “the greatest and most universal belief or religion on earth”—the world’s honoring of those who are great and successful.

A former student, who now serves a little church in the mountains of North Carolina, noted the ravages of the materialism of some of his church members, the ceaseless treadmill of getting and grabbing for more stuff, even in his modestly affluent blue collar congregation, the way in which everything in the Trump Years teaches them that a high income is a sign of divine blessedness. “You are old,” he said to me, rather uncharitably. “Tell me, was there a time when the church questioned if material success is true success?”

“I think that America elected Franklin Roosevelt in spite of his money. Alas, many voted for and defended Donald Trump because of his money.” No better time to begin a sermon with “Blessed are the poor in spirit, the kingdom of God is theirs.” Whoever the God of Donald Trump is (Stephen E. Strang, *God and Donald Trump*⁴), that God can’t be the one who self-revealed in the Sermon on the Mount.

4. The Christian faith is not spiritual, that is, not a technique for getting ourselves close to God, not a religion among other pathways up to God. The faith in and of the preacher of the Sermon is about allowing ourselves to be loved by the God we didn’t ask for, much less love, the God who blesses the poor in spirit. That’s why I regularly reread the novels of Dostoevsky in which some smart young thing is gradually, loss upon loss, brought down until he is sniveling like a baby, empty handed, pleading for divine mercy. I’m not saying that Jesus takes nobody except the broken, but sometimes it sure seems that way. And often, the next thing Jesus does is authorize the broken and empty to be the means of someone else’s salvation, Jesus doing some of his best work through those whom the world considers to be stupid, inept, refuse (1 Cor 1:27).

5. The beatitudes are blessings by Jesus, portrayals of what God is up to in the world, not prescriptions for human behavior or exhortations for us to obey. Thus the beatitudes are a challenge for church people who have been conditioned to think that the purpose of a sermon is to talk about them rather than to talk about God. The beatitudes depict who God is (the one who blesses the spiritually poor) and what God

is up to in the world (preaching blessed good news to the poor).

Yet the first beatitude implies that those of us who profit from the world's abundance and who are trying to be Jesus' disciples have a responsibility to the poor. If as the baptized, we presume to hitch on to what God is up to in the world, then we'll have to connect with what God says to the poor. We cannot close our hearts to the poor and worship a Savior who begins his longest and best sermon by blessing the poor in spirit.

At Duke, I colluded with an addictions psychiatrist who had a theory that people who suffer from addictions, particularly addiction to alcohol, tended to be "spiritually deficient." He even developed, with another doctor, some sort of instrument to measure their spiritual quotient, asking questions like "How often do you pray?" and "Do you consider yourself to be religious?" He claimed to have found a strong correlation between addiction to alcohol and low spirituality.

He and I sponsored a conference on "Spirituality and Addiction" that drew over a hundred doctors, nurses, and health care workers who heartily agreed with the thesis that there's a connection between addiction and poverty of spirit. The psychiatrist theorized that people with a low spiritual quotient are unconsciously attempting to solve their spirit problem by imbibing spirits. They vainly try to gain access to the spiritual through chemical means.

While I've got reservations, mostly theological, about the psychiatrist's thesis, I did recall some of the alcoholics I've had in my churches. Many of the recovering alcoholics enjoyed an odd sort of respect and admiration by members of the congregation. A woman in one of my churches was assaulted in the middle of the morning in her own backyard. I got her to a therapist who specializes in working with victims of sexual violence. A few weeks into her recovery, she told me, "As part of my recovery, my therapist wants me to tell my story to someone who is not a member of the family."

I immediately began thinking of women in the congregation to whom she might tell the terrible thing that had happened to her.

"I want to tell Harry Jones," she said, naming a sometimes recovering, often not recovering, alcoholic in the congregation who had been in and out of a half dozen jobs while I had been his pastor.

"Harry Jones!" I exclaimed. "I thought you would pick another women to tell. Why Harry?"

"Because he knows what it's like to go to hell, to have been robbed of the little dignity you have. Harry's got nothing, just like me, so I think he can help me."

Only among a community which answers to the one who opened a sermon with "Oh how fortunate, how lucky, how blessed are the poor in spirit!" could a loser like Harry be a blessing to someone in great need.

I trusted my congregation! They conned me into believing that they were progressive, enlightened people who were making moral progress. They told me that they were sure and certain in their faith, that they were getting their act together, that they were getting a handle on their drinking problems and their high cholesterol. And then one November, they snuck into a booth, and when nobody was looking, they voted for an adulterous, casino owning prevaricator to be president! I don't think I'll ever be able to trust them again to be truly well-formed, dedicated, theologically astute disciples. Don't tell me they don't need a God who begins a sermon with "I've got

good news for you spiritual losers!”

What a challenging word is this beatitude to those of us who think that the purpose of preaching is to spiritually enrich the congregation, to correct their errors, to give them better biblical information, to provide good answers to their deepest questions, or (in “progressive” churches) to suggest deeper, more honest questions whereby they can stump God. If Jesus is in the business of blessing the spiritually poor, then perhaps the best sermons are those that mess up our questions and answers, befuddle us in our spiritual conceit, and leave us empty handed, spiritually speaking, naked before God.

Luther said that Jesus didn’t intend for anybody actually to follow the dictates of the Sermon on the Mount like offering the other cheek to be slapped, forgiving and praying for our enemies. The function of Jesus’ call to perfection, theorized Luther, is to raise the spiritual bar so high that nobody could chin up to Jesus’ righteousness. We would learn the futility of our “filthy rags of righteousness” and thereby be driven, empty handed, into the arms of a merciful God.⁵

Though I disagree with Luther’s characterization of the ethics commended in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, Luther makes a good point. If you happen to be feeling rather fat and fit, spiritually speaking, at the beginning of the Sermon, by the time Jesus gets to the end with his calls to forgive enemies and not to refuse those who beg from you, everybody looks spiritually poor.

In this beatitude Jesus blesses those who fail to match what is needed to stand before God, those who know their failure. Those who are sure that they are righteous and spiritually full are the real sinners (Lk 18: 13). The dispirited are blessed, and the inspired find themselves distant from who God really is (Matt 7:21-23). The poor before God are made rich in Christ; those who think they’re rich miss the kingdom. As Stanley Hauerwas says, “To be poor does not in itself make one a follower of Jesus, but it can put you in the vicinity of what it might mean to discover the kind of poverty that frees those who follow Jesus from enslavement to the world.”⁶

The highlight of worship in the thousand Sundays I led worship in Duke Chapel was communion, the Eucharist, when the congregation came forward and held out their empty hands to receive the mystery of the Body and the Blood of Christ. Open, receptive, empty hands do not come naturally, particularly in this culture. What comes naturally is the tight-fisted grip, holding on to what you’ve got, zealously clinging to what you’ve accumulated as insurance against the incursions of God. That’s why the church must teach us how to be spiritually inept, open handed, and empty.

I would whisper to my flock, as they came forward to receive the elements of the Eucharist, “I know you have your Master’s. You have an impressive list of achievements in your life, but in this moment, when you hold out your empty hands, you look needy, hungry, like a dependent little child, like you just can’t go on without being given a gift that you can’t earn, like you need a God who blesses the spiritually inept.”

Church as good as it gets, the blessedness of spiritual impoverishment.

Notes

1 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, translated by Reinhard Krause, Charles C West, and Douglas W Stott (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2005), 231.

2 William James, *Psychology*, Briefer Course (New York: Collier, 1962), 123.

3 Stanley M. Hauerwas, *Matthew*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press), 61.

4 Stephen E. Strang, *God and Donald Trump* (Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma Media, 2017).

5 Thus, Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew 1-12: The Christ Book, A Historical/theological Commentary*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2007), 137, says “I believe it is the purpose of every command in the Sermon on the Mount to drive us back to the first beatitude.”

6 Hauerwas, *Matthew*, 64.