

## Poor in Spirit Matthew 5:1-3

As we begin a new year, we also begin a new series of messages. In this year I want to focus on what the Bible has to say about spiritual growth. We read in the Psalms to love the Lord and to love His Word and that means to take it and practice it.

Peter urges us to **“grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.” (II Peter 3:18)**

He also encourages us to be like newborn babies and crave pure spiritual milk so that by it we may grow up in our salvation (**I Peter 2:2**).

The writer of Hebrews tells us to **“leave the elementary teaching about Christ and go on to maturity.” (Hebrews 6:1)**

Likewise, Paul in writing to churches urges believers to grow in their knowledge of Christ so that they won't be tossed about and deceived by every wind of doctrine (**Ephesians 4:14**).

Every journey has a destination, an end point of your trip. Whether it's going to the grocery store or a vacation spot, you have a point from which you begin and a point where you end. Ours is a spiritual journey and no matter where you are on the journey our destination is to be like Christ in character.

**I John 3:2-3 “Dear friends, now are we the children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when He appears, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. Everyone who has this hope in Him purifies Himself, just as He is pure.”**

**Psalm 17:15** is a great verse to challenge us on our journey. **“As for me, I will behold Your face in righteousness; I will be satisfied, when I awake, with Your likeness.”**

To begin our journey, I would like to start with looking at the Beatitudes. Turn to **Matthew 5**. Let's begin by way of introduction.

### I. BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION – v. 1

In **Matt. 4** we read that following His temptation in the wilderness Jesus left Nazareth and moved to a town called Capernaum in the region of Galilee. It was situated on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee also known as the Sea of Tiberias. Matthew quotes from a Messianic prophecy found in **Isaiah 9:1-2** speaking about the Messiah living in a place by the sea along the Jordan River in Galilee where people lived in spiritual darkness. In other words, they lived in unbelief. The prophecy pointed to the Messiah who would provide spiritual light to those living in unbelief.

Matthew is pointing to Jesus as the fulfillment of this Messianic prophecy being the light to open spiritually darkened eyes. He then says that Jesus had a singular message from the onset of His ministry: **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.” (Matthew 4:17)** The chapter concludes by telling us that Jesus began to select the disciples who would accompany Him throughout His ministry. They watched Him heal all kinds of diseases and free people from demon-possession. When word got around about this miracle worker, Matthew notes that large crowds followed Him from the extended region, which brings us to the opening verse of **chapter 5 “Now when He saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down...”**

In **Luke 6** we find the same event but from a little different perspective. Some think this is a separate event with similar content to what Jesus preached in Matthew. Others who may believe it's the same event, also believe that they contradict each other. Where Matthew says He went up to the mountain, Luke says He went to a mountain to pray for the night and when morning came, He called all His disciples and chose the 12 from among those who followed Him. **Verse 17** adds that He then went down with His disciples and stood on a level place.

Some scholars refer to Luke's account as the Sermon on the Plain, while Matthew's account is referred to as the Sermon on the Mount. They are not two separate sermons given at two different times to two different crowds. Where Matthew says

Jesus went up to a mountain most likely means that he didn't include all the detail that Luke adds who noted going up to pray, choosing the 12 and then coming down he stopped on a level area to teach. There is no contradiction.

There is also some speculation about the location of this mountain, but the fact is no one really knows except that it was somewhere in the vicinity of Capernaum, where He was living. When we think of mountain, we may have in mind something like the Rocky's or the Alps, when it could have just been a large hill. [Growing up, there was a ski place in Mio called Mio Mountain, but was actually just a very large hill.](#)

That is an introduction to what is commonly called the Sermon on the Mount found in [Matthew 5-7](#). Our focus is on [Matthew 5:1-12](#), looking at one Beatitude each week.

By way of introduction, we have looked at the setting. Now by way of instruction let's consider why Jesus taught these beatitudes.

## II. BY WAY OF INSTRUCTION – vv. 1-3

**“Now when He saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him, and He began to teach them.”**

Generally speaking, a disciple is a learner or follower of someone who is a teacher. From the broad meaning of the word disciple, you would be considered disciples or learners. You come to hear teaching and to learn from it.

Based on how Matthew words it, J. Vernon McGee suggests that Jesus was teaching the disciples about the needs of the crowd who had gathered. However, Luke's account indicates that many people came from the surrounding region to be healed and to hear Him teach. It is my belief that this message was for everyone not just the 12 disciples.

**What then did Jesus teach them?** When we consider from [4:17](#) that Jesus taught that the kingdom of heaven was near He now lays out over the next three chapters characteristics of a person who is a

part of God's Kingdom. In other words, He is going to teach how a kingdom man or woman acts. How a kingdom person acts will be evident to others. In the middle of this chapter, Jesus tells us that a kingdom person is the light of the world, pointing others to how they too can become part of this kingdom. This sermon is a good measuring stick to determine how eternally kingdom minded we are. Simply put, they reflect attitudes on the inside that are exhibited on the outside. Jesus later taught that how we act comes from the outflow of what's in the heart.

One author described this sermon as earthly principles with eternal promises. In each of these eight lessons, Jesus will tell us how we should behave in attitude and action and then adds a reward given for that attitude or action.

The Jews wanted to know if they were eligible for the kingdom of heaven. They wanted to know if they were righteous enough by obeying the law.

On the other hand, the religious leaders were concerned about their appearance, about external qualities. Jesus was concerned about what was in the heart. They were concerned about conduct and neglected character while Jesus taught that conduct flows from character.

While Jesus taught repentance because the kingdom of heaven was near, let's be clear that what Jesus is teaching here isn't how a person gets saved, but how a person lives after being saved. Taken as a whole, the Sermon on Mount shows man's inadequacy when it comes to being a part of the kingdom of heaven.

These kingdom blessings are promises that belong to people who live a repentant life. They are promises both for the present and the future. Essentially, they teach us how kingdom people live. And so, in the customary fashion of a teacher, Jesus sat. **So what was it He taught?** Let's consider first an attitude to pursue.

### A. An Attitude To Pursue

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

We call this section the Beatitudes. The dictionary defines beatitude as supreme blessing. It comes from a Latin word meaning blessedness. In the first beatitude, Jesus says we are to be poor in spirit. Here's what being poor in spirit does not mean.

Being poor in spirit does not mean financial or material poverty. Some believe that Jesus is teaching that to become part of the kingdom of heaven required physical poverty, so they sold everything and lived as meager a life as possible to demonstrate their devotion to God through poverty. They support this way of life with passages like **Luke 16:20** where the same word is used to describe how poor Lazarus was when he died. But that's not what Jesus meant.

Neither does being poor in spirit mean a lack of the Holy Spirit's presence or even a lack of spiritual awareness or maturity.

Being poor in spirit requires a response on our part.

### 1. Our response – poor in spirit

Jesus did not say the poor are blessed. He wasn't referring to people who are poor in regard to material goods or even a lack of spiritual maturity. He said blessed are the poor in spirit. He is referring to something that is spiritual.

There were two words in the Greek for poor. Jesus used the more common word when He spoke of the poverty of the widow who gave all she had in the offering at the Temple. But in this passage, Jesus uses another word for poor that refers to someone who is completely dependent on others for help. They have no means of supporting themselves.

*When I served as hospice chaplain, I visited a couple taking care of their adult son. By age he was the size of a man. But mentally he was only a baby. Everything had to be done for him from feeding to changing him to caring for him. He was 100% dependent on his parents.*

The word Jesus uses here means to shrink, to cower or to cringe. Classical Greek used the word to talk about a person who wasn't just poor, but who was

reduced to total destitution. Cowering in a corner somewhere, he would hold out one hand begging for anything, while he would use his other hand to cover his face too ashamed to look the person in the eye afraid he might be recognized.

When Jesus speaks of being poor in spirit, He is speaking of someone who is in spiritual poverty. In other words, this person recognizes that he or she is spiritually destitute apart from God. They are utterly dependent on Him, spiritually speaking. To put it another way, without being poor in spirit, we can never be a part of the kingdom of heaven because only God can make that happen for us. We can do nothing ourselves to earn kingdom. So when Paul says we are saved by grace through faith and not by anything we can do so we can't boast because salvation is a gift of God, (**Ephesians 2:8-9**) that's another way of saying that to receive the kingdom of heaven, we must completely and consciously depend on God.

In **Luke 18** Jesus told about two men who went into the Temple to pray. One was a Pharisee who boasted about his religious piety but looked with contempt on the other. The other was a tax collector who Jesus said couldn't even go in the Temple all the way, but stood at a distance. He didn't even look up to heaven when he prayed. He cried out "**be merciful to me a sinner.**" Jesus said that man went home justified before God. In other words, he exhibited what it's like to be poor in spirit.

Being poor in spirit means that we recognize we are spiritually bankrupt. Jesus lists this first, because it is foundational to all the other beatitudes.

Being poor in spirit is the opposite of being spiritually proud and self-sufficient. At one time in his life that was the Apostle Paul. He catalogued all the reasons he thought he was already part of God's kingdom. He was a Jew.

He was trained by the best Rabbinical teachers. He was a Pharisee and considered that there wasn't another Pharisee who topped him in zeal. Like the Pharisee in Jesus' parable, he considered himself without fault when it came to the law. If anyone had religious pride in his own

accomplishments, it was Paul.

But one day on the road to Damascus, he had an encounter with the living Jesus and all his self-righteous pride was stripped away. In that moment he recognized that he was spiritually bankrupt. Everything he thought he was moved from the asset side of the ledger to the deficit side as he acknowledged being totally dependent on God. His self-sufficiency fell like a house of cards. He had an artificial self-righteousness, and Jesus showed him and taught him what true righteousness is. You must be poor in spirit.

Some use another word to refer to what it means to be poor in spirit. It's the word humility. Humility having a right estimation of yourself.

**Romans 12:3 “For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.”**

The world says “knock yourself out asserting yourself. Praise yourself. You don't need anyone but yourself.”

Spiritual humility, if I can use that term in exchange for being poor in spirit, recognizes that apart from God, I will never receive the kingdom of heaven. They recognize they have no spiritual assets. They confess their lost state and repent, relying solely on God's grace.

Philosophers in that day didn't consider humility a moral virtue something to aspire. It had no redeeming value. But Christ put it first.

Matthew Henry describes being poor in spirit or genuine humility as the foundation of all Christian graces. We learn from Scripture that God exalts the humble, but humbles the exalted.

In his Confessions, Augustine admitted that pride was his biggest barrier to the gospel, until one day he recognized he was spiritually bankrupt before God.

Like the Apostle Paul, Martin Luther admitted that all his religious rituals were of no eternal value.

John MacArthur writes: “Being poor in spirit is the first beatitude because humility must precede everything else. No one can receive the kingdom until he recognizes that he is unworthy of the kingdom... Those who refuse to recognize that they are lost and helpless are like the blind Roman slave girl who insisted that she was not blind but that the world was permanently dark.”

D. Martin Lloyd-Jones puts it this way: “What our Lord is concerned about here is the spirit; it is poverty of spirit. In other words, it is ultimately a man's attitude towards himself. That is the thing that matters, not whether he is wealthy or poor.” Spiritual pride keeps a person from being poor in spirit.

Charles Wesley wrote a hymn with lyrics that puts our poverty of spirit in proper perspective:  
Just and holy is Thy name,  
I am all unrighteousness;  
Vile and full of sin I am,  
Thou are full of truth and grace.

That is the attitude by which we must come to God, admitting that in our present condition, we are vile and full of sin and that God in His holiness offers our remedy through His grace.

Martin Lloyd-Jones goes on to say that being poor in spirit means complete absence of pride and self-assurance. It recognizes that we are nothing in the presence of God and there is nothing that we can produce in ourselves to stand there otherwise. “It is just this tremendous awareness of our utter nothingness as we come face-to-face with God. That is poor in spirit.”

It echoes the admission of Isaiah who said “**Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips... and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Isaiah 6:5)**

After performing a miracle, Peter told Jesus to get away, because he was a sinner. (**Luke 5:8**)

One day many will pompously stand before the Lord and wave their accomplishments at Jesus and tell Him to look at all they did or who they were or

how piously they lived, but Jesus will tell them to depart because they never had an attitude of being poor in spirit.

The hymn writer echoes what it means to be poor in spirit with these lyrics:

Nothing in my hand I bring,  
Simply to the cross I cling.  
Yea, all I need, in Thee to find,  
O Lamb of God, I come.

**What is your response?** Jesus says the attitude to pursue is to be poor in spirit. **If that is in fact our attitude, what is our result?**

## 2. Our result – we are blessed

Your translation might read happy are the poor in spirit. But the word has a stronger meaning than just having a pleasant or joyful demeanor. Happiness is an emotion that is contingent on circumstances. I'm happy if my team wins. I'm happy if my child eats all his vegetables. I'm happy if I get a raise.

Homer used it to describe a wealthy man.  
Plato used it of someone who was successful in business.  
In fact, that's essentially how the world defines being blessed: measured by accomplishments.

But Jesus has something entirely different in mind. In our verse, it means the ultimate well-being and distinctive spiritual joy of those who share in the salvation of the kingdom of heaven. Someone else defined it as divine joy. In other words, this kind of blessing is not something we can manufacture ourselves; it can only come from God.

Warren Wiersbe offers this definition: **“‘Blessed’ implies an inner satisfaction and sufficiency that does not depend on outward circumstances for happiness. This is what the Lord offers those who trust Him.”**

Blessedness is a characteristic of God and can only be a characteristic we experience as we share His nature. To experience this kind of blessing we must have a personal relationship with Him through His Son.

John MacArthur notes: **“It is not a superficial feeling of well-being based on circumstances, but a deep supernatural experience of contentedness based on the fact that one's life is right with God.”**

Becoming poor in spirit by admitting our total dependence on God results in being blessed. Jesus says there is a reward for being poor in spirit.

## 3. Our reward – the kingdom of heaven

This kingdom is not something we can earn. It is both something present and future and in both it is a place where God rules.

Tony Evans says **“If you are poor in spirit, you will see God's heavenly rule in your earthly life. Only by being desperately dependent on God, can you become what He created you to be.”**

Later in this gospel, Matthew will record something Jesus said about the kingdom of heaven. In **13:44** the kingdom of heaven is described as a valuable hidden treasure, worth more than all we own. Then in **verses 45-46** the kingdom of heaven is described as something we should search for as a merchant searching for a pearl of great price.

The kingdom of heaven is where God rules, both in our heart as we, through humility and faith, allow Him to rule our lives, direct our will, and guide our steps. The kingdom of heaven is also that place where the person who is poor in spirit, who has trusted Christ will reside forever. Referring to eternal life, Jesus said it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

The reward for being poor in spirit, for utter depending on God for our spiritual well-being, is His rule in our heart and an eternal home in His presence, where He also rules forever.  
If we desire to be part of the kingdom of heaven, then we must respond by being poor in spirit. That is the attitude we must pursue. Let me close with an application to ponder.

## B. An Application To Ponder

Being poor in spirit is more than just an initial

response of humility where we admit our utter spiritual bankruptcy in order to receive eternal life by depending completely on God for salvation. Being poor in spirit is an everyday attitude.

Looking at all the beatitudes, Tony Evans writes: “We call the Beatitudes antibiotics from God’s pharmacy that can aid life and transformation. Each one includes a blessing, which is the God-given capacity to enjoy His goodness in your life and to extend that goodness to others.”

In other words, while it’s a benefit to us to pursue these beatitudes, our practice of them also benefits others as we demonstrate Christ-like character. Genuine humility is required each day. The world wants us to puff ourselves up and strut around like we’re the big man on campus. When we consider ourselves in light of who God is, we will humble ourselves. That was Isaiah’s response.

Being poor in spirit means we take our eyes off self and look to God. When we study His Word, earnestly seek Him in prayer, and genuinely desire to draw near to Him and please Him, we move toward being poor in spirit, being truly humble.

When we desire to be poor in spirit, we will starve the flesh by removing those things that feed pride. For over 20 years our neighbor coached the Grand Blanc boys and girls soccer teams. He had one player who was outstanding and maybe the best player he had ever coached, but he was full of himself. So the coach benched him until he could learn humility. It’s okay to accept praise, but don’t let it go to your head. Nip pride in the bud by removing those things that feed it.

Ask God for humility. After all, it is a divine characteristic.

### **Philippians 2:3-8**

Humility is not something we can develop ourselves apart from the work of God’s Spirit in us. It should never be said of us that we authored the book Humility and How I Attained It. In his confession, David wrote “**Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me.**” (Psalm 51:10) Ask God to give you the same attitude as

Christ who humbled Himself.

### **So how do we know if we are poor in spirit?**

When we have lost pre-occupation with self.

**Psalm 131:2 “But I have stilled and quieted my soul; like a weaned child with its mother, like a weaned child is my soul within me.”**

**Romans 12:1-2** says that we are to die to self and transform our minds through the Word of God so that we won’t be conformed to the ways of the world. When we think about His Word more, we will think less of ourselves.

Remember as Paul also tells us in **Galatians 2:20** that we are crucified with Christ, meaning that our old nature with all its pride has died and it is Christ who lives in us, giving us the ability to die to self.

As we die to self, **II Corinthians 2:18** says we are being transformed into the likeness of Christ, just like we saw in **Psalm 17:15**, we’ll be satisfied with His likeness.

Being poor in spirit can help us better see the value, virtues and strengths of others, and at the same time help us see our own weaknesses and sins.

Being poor in spirit helps us spend more time in prayer because we utterly dependent on God.

Being poor in spirit helps us pursue Christ rather than pursue after our own desires. We won’t change His Word and will to fit our will and ways.

Being poor in spirit helps us be more thankful for God and all He does for us.

Our only hope of receiving true blessing is by being poor in spirit. In that way, we experience true joy, peace, and contentment and our life then becomes a light for and means of witnessing to others.

May this year be one of spiritual growth for each of us and it begins with being poor in spirit.