

“The Blessings of Poverty?”
Matthew 5:3 – February 14, 2016

INTRO: “The Beatitudes focus on qualities Jesus valued and embodied. These qualities are the essence of what it means to live (in the way of Jesus). They are not simply goals for behavior, but represent the outgrowth of the new heart God promises us.” (Mary Lou Redding) The Beatitudes aren’t like a quiz that we have to finish in an allotted time, nor are they a check-off list where we accomplish one and move on to the next. “If we pick out a single Beatitude, forgetting the (rest that go with it), it would be like pulling out a loose thread, forgetting that each thread is woven into a larger cloth. (We might say) the Beatitudes are like a ladder or a staircase—they build on each other. (James Howell) Over the next six weeks, we will be turning to the Beatitudes for our sermon texts. Sometimes we will just center on one of them, and later on a couple will be grouped together. It is good to remember they are all a part of a larger whole. So today—the first of the many “blesseds.”

I recently read that “Global poverty has fallen faster during the past 20 years than at any time in history—a great achievement. Many of us believe that developing countries by and large remain hopelessly mired in poverty. Yet the reality is quite different, affecting the lives of hundreds of millions of people in nearly every corner of the world. In 1993, almost 2 billion people around the world lived on less than \$1.90 a day. But by 2012, that number had decreased to 1 billion a day living on that small amount. And by best estimates, the number was down to 700 million in 2015, and falling. Besides China and India, the decline in the number of extreme poor is seen in more than 60 developing countries around the world including: Indonesia, Mozambique, Ghana, Brazil, El Salvador, and Mongolia.” (*The Christian Science Monitor*, 2-8-16)

Now obviously poverty hasn’t been eradicated, and there are places in the world where we find people without the resources they need. But these new figures are the kinds of statistics we like to hear, because nobody wants to hear that more people are poor, or that there is anything positive about people being poor.

So, what do we do with this first confusing beatitude, the statement Jesus makes about people being blessed, being fortunate when he said: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.”

There are many ways to define being poor and it basically means “lacking the coin of the realm—whatever ‘realm’ we’re operating in.” (M.L. Redding)

And, yes, being poor, may mean you don’t have money, the coin of the financial world. It is said that “the overwhelming majority of people who saw and heard Jesus were poor. To people who had no hope, who were never in on anything, Jesus was a breath of the freshest air. Jesus didn’t glamorize poverty, and neither should we.” (James Howell)

“Being poor in spirit means letting go of the myth that the more I possess the happier I’ll be.” (Jim Forest)

As I put clothes into Goodwill bags, I question just how many souvenir sweatshirts and T-shirts do I really need to keep for the rest of my life. One person said, “I like to go to Marshall Field’s in Chicago just to see how many things there are in the world that I do not want.” (Mother Mary Madeleva, CSC)

There are other coins though, which we either have or don’t have: “In athletics, the coin of the realm is coordination, speed, agility, competitive spirit. In academics, it is ability to memorize, to recall facts, to write and take tests well. And in the spiritual life, we may think of the coin of the realm as knowledge of the Bible, the ability to pray, the desire to read about spiritual matters. But the good news is, this is not the model or standard Jesus talks about in this beatitude. Jesus says that the kingdom of God belongs to those who have little or nothing spiritually. Have you ever felt spiritually inadequate? Have you ever said, ‘God there’s no way I can do this’? Then, Jesus is saying, you’re just the kind of people I can work with.” (M.L. Redding)

This Beatitude tells us that we need to be much less independent and much more God dependent.

“Poverty of spirit depends on God for everything. When we recognize and acknowledge our absolute inability to meet even our smallest needs without God’s help, we begin to move toward being poor in Spirit.” (M.L. Redding)

Everything we have, even the raw materials, come from God. There is a story about “someone coming to God with various complaints about human beings, claiming they could make a better, more efficient model. God agrees to a person-building contest, and the two prepare to begin. But as the challenger reaches for a handful of earth, God says, ‘Oh, no—you have to provide your own dirt.’” (M.L. Redding)

“We find in Scripture that when all is said and done spiritual poverty has absolutely nothing to do with material poverty—and absolutely everything to do with it. Poverty of spirit, as Jesus learned, as the psalmists wrote, and as the rabbis taught, is not a rejection of things per se but a repudiation of the power they have to control our lives, to dictate who we are. Spiritual poverty means I stand empty before God with absolutely nothing to either commend or condemn me.” (Erik Kolbell)

It has been said: “A full hand helps a person to forget an empty heart.” (Percy Ainsworth)

When we believe we are complete in ourselves, when we believe we have all the stuff we need, then our hands are full and we forget we are really dependent on God. We forget our hearts and souls also need to be filled, something only God can do.

The Buddhist teacher Ram Dass, a former professor of psychology at Harvard, tells the story of a vision he once had. He was still on Harvard’s faculty, and still went by his given name, Richard Alpert. He was looking into a mirror when, although dressed in suit and tie, he saw himself in his academic robe. “Ah, yes, Richard Alpert, professor,” he mused, “haven’t you accomplished much in your few years on earth,” only to have the image melt before his eyes. “Well,” he thought, “it’s a nice identity, but I suppose I could live without it if I had to.” He looked again, and this time he saw himself on his sailboat in Boston Harbor. “Why there’s Richard Alpert, bon vivant,” he said to himself, only to have that image melt as well. “That’s a good one too, but I suppose if I really had to I could do without that as well.” Alpert looked a third time and this time saw himself surrounded by his family of birth. “There I am as the son of my parents,” he thought, and when that image melted away he said, “Richard Alpert, son. Now that’s a tough one to let go of. But I suppose I could.” Finally he saw himself as he was, only to have that image melt away and leave nothing there. “Well, this is it, isn’t it,” he thought. “To give up Richard Alpert. To be totally empty. To have nothing. Can I do that?” As Ram Dass he has been asking himself that question ever since. (Erik Kolbell)

It has been said that every human being contains a God-shaped void or hole that only God can fill. We are not complete in and of ourselves. ‘There is a radical resourcelessness in human life,’ spiritually speaking. We are not self-made. Our very identity and purpose is rooted in God, not in ourselves. (The Way of Blessedness)

Fred Craddock who spent his life as a pastor, went to see a woman from his church who was in the hospital facing surgery. She had never been hospitalized before and now was there for major surgery. He walked in and saw that she was a nervous wreck, and she started to cry. She wanted Fred to pray with her, which he did. By her bed was a stack of magazines: *True Love*, *Mirror*, *Hollywood Today*, stuff about Elizabeth Taylor and other movie stars. (The kind of magazines you might find right by the grocery check-out counter.) That was her reading material and she was a wreck. It occurred to Fred that “there’s not a calorie in the whole stack of magazines to help her through her experience.” She had no place to dip down into a reservoir and come up with something --a word, a phrase, a thought, a person. Just empty. (Craddock Stories)

People who know their need for God, who know God is the real source of their strength, might have a different kind of reservoir, which could help provide for them, even in difficult times.

We are often perceived as independent, self-made people. We don’t want to be overly dependent on anyone. When it comes to our relationship with God though, Jesus is clearly saying God is the one to whom we need to be incredibly dependent, the only one that can fill that hole in our souls. I believe that’s a healthy dependency. Remember: “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you, there is more of God and God’s rule.”

--Sue Burwell