

The Power of a Poor Spirit

By Tom Cole



Jesus begins the Beatitudes with the promise, “Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” We can see immediately that Jesus was not saying that the poor are rich, prosperous, blessed and full of unending joy at this very moment. I believe that the promised blessings of the eight beatitudes do have some fulfillment in this life, although the greatest fulfillment will be in the Kingdom to come—when Jesus will return and rule on this earth as King of kings and Lord of lords.

The word that Jesus chose for “poor” in the Sermon on the Mount was one of two words in the Greek language used to describe the poor. The first is *penes*, which refers to the laboring poor. This people worked for their daily bread. They had nothing left over after they bought their meager meals to save and hope for a better future. This is a type of poverty that is difficult for people in developed countries to imagine or contemplate. Even the wealthiest of the people whom Christ addressed in His day did not have running water, electricity, toilets or relatively safe water to drink and food to eat, and the *penes* poor had even less; they could barely afford to buy bread and drink for their family on a daily basis.

True Poverty

But Jesus did not use this word. Instead, he chose the Greek word *ptochos*. This word means to crouch, bend down under a burden, to beg or to be absolutely destitute. *Ptochos* implies a person who has no hope, let alone their daily bread. This person was at the complete mercy of those to whom they bowed low, begging for a scrap in order to survive. The *ptochos* poor knew hunger intimately; they lived in a constant state of starvation and need.

This is whom Jesus wants us to become like. I believe that this Beatitude did give hope to those who physically were the poorest of the poor, but it is exhorting each of us to be in a place of spiritual poverty. We must come to the Father with absolutely nothing—with empty hands. We cannot think that we have anything to offer Him. We must bow low before God and receive from Him that which He desires to give us.

The Eastern Orthodox Church offers the Jesus Prayer to those who don’t know how or what to pray. The prayer is this: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” This prayer is taken from Luke 18, in which Jesus tells a story about grace: a Pharisee stands in the house of prayer and thanks God he is not a sinner like the tax collector he sees bowing down in the temple. The tax collector beats his chest and bows low, unable to look up at God, and says, “Lord, be

merciful unto me, a sinner.” Jesus says that only the tax collector went away justified, because he understood his true condition in relation to God.

A rabbi once said to his students, “In olden days, there were men who saw the face of God.”

“Why don’t they any more?” a young student asked.

“Because, nowadays no one stoops so low,” he replied.

Going Low

One way in which we can bow low so that we might see the face of God is through admitting our need. For many of us, need represents that which is weak and detestable. We want to be strong and independent. The mantra of Western society is that we can overcome anything; whatever we strive for, we can have. To be aware of our weaknesses, vulnerabilities and needs is not considered a virtue in the Western world or in the Western Church. God has a different view. When He created the world and everything in it, He proclaimed “It is good.” But when he created Adam, he saw that Adam was alone and said, “It is not good that man be alone.” Although Adam had perfect fellowship with God and walked in the garden with Him, having only God’s companionship wasn’t enough. God created us for Him and for one another. So God created Eve—someone who would share life, work and pleasure with Adam. God created man to be in relationship with Him and with others. This legitimate need lies within each of us. This need is both what causes us to seek God, even when we don’t have a full revelation of who He is and what causes us to reach out to others for relationship. We have two basic needs: to know and be known; to love and be loved. Adam and Eve were each created with this basic need in their hearts. God’s design was that they would find their needs met in right relationship with Him and with each other.

Sin Enters In

Unfortunately, sin entered into the picture. When Adam and Eve rebelled against God, sin entered their hearts. They would still have the same fundamental need, but they would seek to fill it outside of God’s design. We see this immediately after Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They suddenly knew that they were naked and they were ashamed. They had a true need, one that could only be met by their Maker. Instead of going to the One who created them, Adam and Eve hid from God and covered their nakedness with clothes made from fig leaves. They met their legitimate needs in illegitimate ways.

Meeting their needs through their brokenness had consequences. What few people realize is that fig leaves contain oils that cause skin to be exceptionally sensitive and irritated. The resulting rash is extremely painful. I'll let you do the math. Just think about where they put those leaves.

We do much the same thing as Adam and Eve. We have a legitimate need, but all too often we meet that need through sinful and addictive ways. We reach out to alcohol, drugs, food, unhealthy relationships, broken forms of sexuality (heterosexual as well as homosexual) and countless other ways. The resulting consequences cause pain in our lives.

Acknowledging Our Sin

The result of Adam and Eve's sin could only find resolution in the Creator Himself. Acknowledging our sin, our illegitimate ways of meeting our needs, is not something that comes naturally to our fallen natures. Most of us keep our sin a secret. The enemy of our souls, the accuser of the brethren (Revelation 12:10), longs for us to keep our sin to ourselves. Society, and often the Church, leads us to believe that exposing our weaknesses is not something particularly virtuous.

Men are more acutely affected by the inability to expose their weaknesses. It is anathema for men to truly reveal who they are on the inside. The advertising world knows well that strength sells and weakness does not. A good example is one campaign for Marlboro. Their cigarettes were primarily a woman's cigarette, but they wanted to expand their market to men. They devised an ad campaign that showed a tough cowboy smoking this brand. Today, this brand is known as a man's cigarette and their advertisement is focused on strong, hyper-masculine men. The message to men is that any sign of weakness is unmanly.

Women can often allow their weakness to define their identity in the process of relating to others. Because women are by nature more relational, their weakness will often be in the area of relationship with others. For example, God created woman to come alongside of man. The fall caused her natural desire to become broken in her relating. When outsiders look at the relationship between an abusive husband and his wife, they wonder why she doesn't leave him. They don't understand that through the fall, the woman will find her identity in her relationships. She can't see any other option. She must "stand by her man." Women can also express the brokenness through broken relating with other women. If a woman has been wounded by men and a woman in her life shows understanding, compassion and love to her, the relationship can begin become unhealthy, even to the extent of falling into a sexual relationship.

In later chapters, we will discuss the dynamics of true femininity and true masculinity and the ways in which the Fall has distorted God's intent for man and woman.

Bringing Our Need to God

We must come to recognize our need as legitimate. We must bring that need to God and to trusted others. God is inviting us

to bring our weaknesses into the light and find that, in our weakness, God is strong. We do not have to be ashamed of our need. We are all destitute and without hope outside of the grace of God, but He enables us to "come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in our time of need" (Hebrews 4:16).

Paul the apostle learned this lesson well. God allowed Paul to experience incredible visions and even allowed him to go to Heaven. In order for Paul to remain humble, God allowed a weakness to plague Paul's life. Paul prayed three times that this weakness might be removed. But God did not remove it. Instead He told Paul, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). What a statement! What a seeming contradiction! Only in God's economy could this make any sense. God is glorified in our weaknesses because it is an opportunity for Him to display His strength through us. That is why Paul could say, "Therefore most gladly will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). We must allow ourselves to become poor in spirit if we are ever going to be strong.

Receiving the Kingdom of the Heavens

Jesus promises those who are poor (those who are destitute, needy and bowed low) that "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The literal translation, one that many scholars agree is the correct one, is "for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens" (Young's Literal Translation). It's a plural word with greater promise: Jesus is speaking of the Kingdom ruling in our hearts now and the Kingdom that will one day come in fullness. As we acknowledge our need and are faithful to Him in the face of adversity, poverty of spirit, and even poverty of life, He will bring His Kingdom rule of peace, joy, hope and love into our hearts and lives. His Kingdom rule will not end with this life. So ask the Lord to cause you to bow low, to make you poor in spirit, so that you might have a great reward in the Kingdom to come and a free heart today!

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3)

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