

Blessed are the Poor, Part 1

Luke 6:20

Let's start by reading Luke 6:20 to 26. "And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven: for so their fathers did to the prophets.

"'But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to our who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you, when all the people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.'" As you can see there, as we read through that, there are four ascriptions or pronouncements of blessedness by our Lord.

And you can see, as we pointed out in one of the introductory messages, the first three are connected, blessed are the poor, those who are hungry now, those who weep now, that's all tied to their condition. Then that last beatitude ties the condition of that poverty and hunger and weeping, ties it to being hated, and that is tied to the identification with the Son of Man, and thus, if you're identified with the Son of Man, and that is why people are hating you, "Blessed are you when people hate you."

The four ascriptions of blessings are followed then by four corresponding pronouncements of woe, all parallel. Again, the first three woes are connected. Woe to you who are rich, you who are full now, you who laugh now, and then the final woe is about one's identification. Again, here, they are not identified with the Son of Man, but with the world. "Woe to you when all people speak well of you." That is to say, "Woe to you when you're liked by the world."

The thesis verse for the section on blessedness is verse 20. The thesis verse for the section on the woes is verse 24, "Blessed are the poor," and "Woe to you who are rich." Of those two thesis verses, it's the beatitude of verse 20 that sets the course for not only the entire section, but it sets the tone for the entire Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." That's what makes Luke 6:20 such an important verse because it contains that seminal concept that divides humanity into those who belong to God and those who do not.

James, the half-brother of our Lord, wrote in James 2:5 that God chose "those are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of this kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him." That's a reference right back to here in Luke 6:20. That's why James 1:9 he says, "The lowly brother," is to, "boast in his exaltation," because he is the blessed. He is identified with Christ. So James says you are to exalt over that.

We realize Christ himself, according to 2 Corinthians 8:9, Christ was rich, and yet, for our sakes he became poor so that we by his poverty might become rich. And if Christ was rich, we

need to understand here the outset of a beatitude pronounced or ascribed to the poor, we need to realize right here at the outset that there is nothing inherently evil about wealth; Christ was wealthy; Abraham was wealthy; David wealthy.

Conversely, there is nothing inherently virtuous about being poor either, *per se*, but there is something about the condition of poverty which allows us to see clearly, which allows us to look at life from a certain perspective and understand what is truly important in life. There is something about poverty that enables us to more quickly, maybe, identify ourselves with Christ unashamedly because he, for our sakes, became poor. We can find ourselves in possession of God's eternal kingdom.

Let's first identify our terms, define our terms. The word Jesus uses for the poor, which we find in both Matthew and Mark, they record this word for this beatitude, it's the word *ptochos*. *Ptochos*. *Ptochoi* is the plural; *ptochos* is the singular. It's a word that is virtually synonymous with a beggar, someone who is utterly and absolutely destitute. The adjective *ptochos* came from a verb that means "to bow down timidly," which referred

then in the culture to someone who is utterly destitute, a mendicant, a beggar. The *ptochos* in Jesus' day were true beggars. These were people who were often crippled in some way, incapacitated, unable to work and thus, they couldn't provide an income for themselves or their family.

So these are truly poverty-stricken people, truly without hope. They had to rely on the charity of other people. Not for, for their bank account, not for their 401k, they had to rely on the charity of other people for their daily bread. That's how *ptochos*, that's how poor they were. If no one gave, they starved. If no one had pity, they died.

That is true destitution of a kind that most of us living in this country here in America have never ever faced. My wife and I, in the early years of our family life, we lived beneath the so-called poverty line. Back in the mid 90's, we discovered that we did our taxes I think it was for 1996 and we discovered our, the income for our family that year, family of four, it was less than \$12,000 for the entire year. We really had no idea how we made it that year. Looking back at that income level, and we didn't even hardly notice.

The federal poverty level for a family of four in 2017, this year, is \$24,600. That's the federal poverty level for a family of four. Then, in 1996, it was \$15,600. So we had been living, not known to us, we'd been living for more than \$3,500 underneath the federally, federal poverty level in that year. As I said, we had no idea how that could be because we never went without a meal. Our kids were well clothed. We paid our rent. We paid all of our bills.

God provided for us. He provided for us not just faithfully, but abundantly, often through the generosity of people around us. But even at that income level, we never truly qualified for what the Bible describes as *ptochos*. We didn't even come close.

But if you want a picture of the *ptochos*, think about the opposite picture of verse 24, the rich, the *plousios*. They are the rich, the wealthy. You can imagine in today's terms the billionaires like Bill Gates or Mark Zuckerberg. You can think of Oprah Winfrey, Jeff Bezos of Amazon. And for all the money

they have, for all the wealth and privilege, all that their money can buy, sense of security, the ability that they have to project power, to increase their wealth, because it takes money to get money, right? The access, the privilege, the ability to buy influence, and even friendship or at least in, interest, buy interesting companionship around you, even if you suspect all those people's friendship because they just want you for your money, all the rest, but imagine them on one end of a spectrum.

Now go to the complete opposite end of the spectrum. Imagine the diametric, polar opposite of all that and you're starting to get close to the idea of *ptochos*. There's no security. There's no power. There's no access. You don't have any influence over anybody. People walk by and dismiss you, or they might pity you, put a coin in your pocket. No influence, no relationships, no friendships. That's *ptochos*.

It's the beggar, Lazarus, in Luke 16:20. He's covered with sores. He's waiting at the gate of the rich man. Why at the gate of the rich man? Because he's got extra. Could he just throw a little my way? Jesus describes that poor wretched soul as longing to be fed with what fell from that rich man's table and

the only relief he had in his horrible suffering was when the dogs, stray dogs, came and licked his sores.

You can think about the poor, the *ptochos* widow of Mark 12:42. She had been stripped penniless by the cruel religious system of Judaism that extracted her last two pennies as she put them in the coffer, all she had to live on. That's *ptochos*. So that's a definition, maybe a description also, of who Jesus has in mind when he says, "Blessed are the poor." They are the absolutely destitute, the beggars with absolutely nothing.

Secondly, let's clarify Jesus' meaning because that's important here. What did Jesus mean by referring to the poor when he said, "Blessed are the poor?" Is he talking about material poverty, financial poverty? Because if that's the case, you know what? All of us are without hope. If "Blessed are the poor," if that's absolute destitution we are talking about, we're all counted out, right?

By the definition I just provided, the truly *ptochos* of this world would be relatively few, very, very few. And you have

to ask, is that what he is saying? That only the crippled beggars, the truly indigent, the financially destitute and desperate are the blessed and them and to them alone belong the kingdom of God? It's clear from the context that financial poverty is not what Jesus means when he describes the blessedness of the poor. He is using the poor in some ways as a picture here of what we're to think about, something we are to think about. We'll get to that concept in a moment.

But look at the corresponding woe. It helps instruct us on what Jesus' meaning is. The rich are those who have their consolation now. They are those who are full. They are those who are satisfied. They are prosperous. They are, they're the ones laughing now. They are the ones at all the parties, going to all the dances, enjoying all the right people and the fine company. They're laughing. They're the ones who pursue comfort and security and happiness in temporal wealth. They've got very little thought, very little concern for eternal wealth, for kingdom concerns. All their interests and their efforts are in this life and this life alone, not in the life to come. Also notice that the explanation Jesus gives for ascribing

blessedness to the poor in verse 20, “For yours is the kingdom of God.”

In contrast to any temporal state of poverty, the true wealth of those described as *ptochos* is the infinite, eternal wealth of the kingdom of God. It doesn't have to do necessarily with what they have or don't have in their bank account. It has to do with where their real wealth is found. There's a lot of confusion, I think, about this concept of poverty, especially today when I find a lot, in evangelicalism, talking about social justice, wanting to eradicate poverty off the earth and taking an interest in the poor.

I'm sure this is your experience, too, but I've met plenty of people who are poor, whether it's due to economic background, their upbringing, maybe unwise choices, maybe personal sin or whatever, but they're poor. And these poor have no interest whatsoever in eternal things. It's hard to say that to them belong the kingdom of God when they have no interest in the kingdom of God. Some so-called poor people are as materialistic and preoccupied with wealth as the rich people of this world. And they add another sin, covetousness. Maybe they're worse.

Contrary to the super rich, they're absolutely consumed with their greed and their longing for what they don't have.

Jesus is not glamorizing poverty here. Poverty is bad. He will one day make all of those who are poor and trust in him. He will make them to be rich. Verse 21, they will be filled with sustenance, satisfied. Also verse 21, they will be laughing. Do you know where they will be laughing first? Around his banquet table. We're not to take this "Blessed are the poor," this issue of poverty. We're not to take this literally and go sell all our possessions and go beg on the streets. That is not what this means.

So, what then did Jesus mean? And whom did Jesus refer to when he said, "Blessed are the poor," if he's not strictly referring to material poverty? If you have in your mind, you don't need to turn there right now, but in Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, we can get a clue to maybe what is the more fundamental concern that Jesus is identifying about those who are *ptochos*.

Remember in Matthew 5:3, Jesus said not just “Blessed are the poor,” but he said “Blessed are the poor,” in what? “In Spirit.” And here we need to stop and ask, what did Jesus actually say on this occasion? Did he say, “blessed are the poor,” or did he say, “Blessed are the poor in spirit?” Did Luke just drop off a couple words at the end there? The answer is, Jesus said both.

Matthew recorded Jesus saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” because that saying that he took from Jesus’ actual sermon pertained to his purpose in writing his gospel. Remember Matthew wrote to his fellow Jews with the intent to unseat the confidence that his fellow Jews tried to find in, get this, the wealth of their spiritual heritage. The Jews believed they were spiritually superior to the Gentiles. Spiritually speaking, the Jews thought they were the wealthy.

The Gentiles and all the other scum of the earth were the poor. They were the offspring of Abraham. They were the recipients of the promises. They were the recipients of the holy law and the Scriptures. The law, the prophets, the writings. They were participants in the covenants, and they were, even

then in Jesus day, being restored to the promise land once again and they were simply waiting around in their spiritual wealth for God to fulfill the rest of his restoration promises to them as a people. So what need did Jews have to repent? That's how they thought of themselves.

So Jesus spoke to the Jews who came that day. If you look back at verse 17, there was "a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem." And he said to those multitudes of Jews, He said, "Blessed are the poor," comma, "in spirit." That is, blessed are those who have no spiritual privilege, who rely on no spiritual advantage.

Blessed are those, basically, who recognize their spiritual bankruptcy, their true spiritual destitution. Blessed are you Jews who basically put yourself, yourselves on the same level as pagan Gentiles before God, simply have their hands up before God. They don't consider themselves as having any merited favor from God, but instead they're beggars like the rest of the earth, looking to God for divine grace.

But in addition to saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," Jesus, there, speaking to the Jews, as he preached the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus also said on the same occasion simply, "Blessed are the poor." He said both phrases. Who was that message for? That was for the Gentiles, right? Because the Gentiles, they already knew they were foreigners and strangers to Israel's Messiah. The Gentiles didn't consider themselves as having any spiritual privilege before God, no spiritual wealth before Israel's God.

But they did tend to, like all of us do, like all of humanity Jew or Gentile, they did tend to put their trust in material prosperity, in temporal wealth. Ignoring the fact that temporal material wealth can never ever ever ever advantage anyone when it comes to final spiritual realities, issues of eternal significance. Jew and Gentile alike, together, like all humanity, they ask the same perplexing questions of worldview. How did I get here? What is my purpose? What's wrong with the world? And how do we fix it? What's wrong with me in particular? Where's everything headed? More specifically, where am I headed? Where will I go when I die?

The Jews, they had a number of those questions already answered, because God had revealed himself to them in the Scripture. All those worldview questions they understood. They just wrongly believed they could be with God when they die simply because they were ethnically related to Abraham. So they needed to hear Jesus' confrontation, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," because they thought of themselves as so spiritually rich and superior.

But the Gentiles; the Gentiles, they needed to hear, "Blessed are the poor," period. And Jesus said that, too, directing that saying, that phrase, to the Gentiles, which is why Luke has recorded this saying for us, for us Gentiles. The Jews tended to rely on riches of spiritual privileges, struggled with coveting material prosperity, but the Gentiles were utterly lost in darkness. Paul describes them in Ephesians 4:17 and following, that they're trapped in the "futility of their minds. They're darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart." Being spiritually callous the Gentiles have given themselves up, given themselves over to sensuality, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.

Boy, we see that all around us, don't we? Get this, though. Gentiles they saw money as the key to their happiness, because money, wealth, riches, that's the means for getting them what their greedy heart's desire; being rich, not being poor, but rich, that's what enables me, as a Gentile, to fulfill all my lusts and desires. And it's the same thing we see today. It's always been that way.

So when Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor," he's confronting the human tendency to rely on material privilege, to look to things to satisfy, to look to material privilege, to look to happiness and joy in stuff. Or in Colorado terms, to find happiness and joy in stuff we do in the mountains, stuff we do outdoors. Basically all that money can buy. Whatever your flavor is, whatever part of the county you're in. All the while, ignoring the looming spiritual reality of the afterlife, of the coming judgment, of accountability to our Creator.

So the poor of whom Jesus speaks, the *ptochos*, it's not a matter of money, how much someone has or doesn't have. The

condition of being a *ptochos* person has to do with the attitude one has toward money. Being a *ptochos* kind of person is not about a financial condition, it's about a spiritual condition. The kind of person is like a beggar. This *ptochos* person, it's one who possesses no self-reliance whatsoever, no reliance on the flesh, no hope in the flesh, no hope in any material or financial advantage whatsoever. Everything is stripped away in the heart. All reliance, all joy, all satisfaction, all contentment are found in God and God alone. That's the *ptochos*.