

Joy in the Wealth of Poverty, Part 1

Luke 6:20

It's been years since sociologist Christian Smith published his book called "*Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers*." The book came out in 2005, and it did not reveal a pretty picture. And it revealed the spiritual condition of America's evangelical youth. Smith and his team of researchers coined a term that has become a very apt description of their theological beliefs. It's the term, moralistic therapeutic deism. Moralistic therapeutic deism. That's how many of today's young people believe.

Moralistic therapeutic deism: It's moralistic in the sense that it's moralizing, high-minded, not in any biblical sense. They take their cues from the culture. They're high-minded and moralizing about their set of standards and values, moralizing about political hot-button issues like social justice, poverty issues, the need to make reparations for all the injustices done against the marginalized people in our society. Climate issues

and all the rest. They're moralistic in that sense, not in any biblical sense.

It's therapeutic because for them religion is all about feeling good about themselves. Terms like sin, repentance, righteousness, all those are too judgmental. They're more into things like healing, brokenness, woundedness, finding out how Jesus is the balm that salves our broken hearts. He's the life-coach who buoys up their self-esteem.

Finally, it's called moralistic therapeutic deism because they're not atheists, after all. They believe there is a God, they just don't see God as being actively involved in their lives. He's remote. The God they acknowledge is remote and uninvolved, kind of like many of their parents were. It's a God who is benign, nonjudgmental, passive. And they feel no sense of accountability to him, see no need to submit to any standards.

This God asks nothing of them, but merely exists to bless them. He merely exists to give them unconditional love and healing their wounds and taking them into heaven. Christian

Smith and his team came up with a creed for moralistic therapeutic deism, which described, pretty accurately, how many of today's younger evangelicals think.

Listen to this creed of moralistic therapeutic deism:

"Number one, a God exists who created and orders a world and watched over human life on earth. Number two, God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. Number three, the central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. Number four, God does not need to be particularly in one's life, except when God is needed to resolve a problem. Number five, good people go to heaven when they die."

That may be the description of how some believe, but that is not biblical Christianity, is it? Today's young people, though, are fluent in religious language, Christian language, using words like, God, Bible, and heaven, but divorced from any Christian meaning. They use God-talk, but they're not actually talking about the God of Scripture. Frankly, they're really not into that God. They refer to the Bible, but they've learned to read the Bible through the grid of what they like to think is

its main message: "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions."

So every verse become further affirmation of what they already think. They want to go to heaven, but heaven for them is the culmination of their therapy. It's a place of wholeness and healing. It's a place where they become their best selves, and for all of eternity, they'll be with the God who helped them along in realizing their fullest potential. It's a very far cry from Christianity, isn't it?

But we need to stop and realize before we condemn these generations for their moralistic therapeutic deism. We need to stop and realize the vast, vast number of the 3,000 young people interviewed by Christian Smith and his team of researchers, they came, many of them came from evangelical homes. I've met some of these who subscribe to, even though they don't say it, they subscribe to this moralistic therapeutic deism. They don't call it that. Do you know what they call their religion? Christianity. They attend evangelical churches.

They think that they are Christians. Why would they think that? What would give them that impression? Because their parents, their educators, their Sunday school teachers and sadly, their pastors, all were complicit in contributing to their sense of self-assurance, self-affirmation, and self-deception. They never taught them true Christianity, or if they taught them, it was only by rote. They never showed them how to live a radically ordinary Christianity, the kind that Jesus describes here in the Sermon on the Mount.

And, beloved, it's time for you and I, to repent. It's time for us to take responsibility for what we see out there, to not cast aspersions and blame on all that terrible millennial generation, but to take responsibility for where they are. And say, You know what; it's on us to go back and relearn these words of Jesus. It's on us. We need to rediscover what true Christianity looks like and return to this pro-poverty Gospel. Not only is it not a prosperity gospel, it's a pro-poverty gospel. The kind that Jesus is announcing here with the opening line of the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are you who are poor,

for yours is the kingdom of God.” That is the Gospel, folks.
There is no other Gospel.

Take a look then, again, at that first section in verses 20-23. “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, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.”

The thesis verse for that section is verse 20, “Blessed are the poor,” and all that follows is just further elaboration of the same theme; the hungry, the weeping, the hated, excluded, reviled and spurned; they are the poor. They are those who have forsaken this world, which they can’t hold onto forever, and they’ve forsaken this world in exchange for the Son of Man, who will always hold onto them forever and he’ll never let them go.

This is the gateway into the entire sermon. It's through this, right here, that we enter into the rest of the teaching. Without this, none of it makes sense. But when we understand this, everything makes sense. The word here, poor, the word is *ptochos*, a beggar, referring to absolute destitution. And when Jesus spoke of this *ptochos* this kind of person, he's using this poor destitute beggar as a metaphor for all of those who put no confidence in wealth, no confidence in anything they find in this world, including the self. Being a *ptochos* person, as I said it's not necessarily about a financial condition. This is a spiritual condition.

And when Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor," he's using the poor, the *ptochos*, a very vivid, graphic word that brought to mind in every one of his hearers then, brought to mind a crippled, destitute, probably sore-covered beggar, whose very survival from day to day depended on the pity and the charity of his fellow man. So when Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor," he wanted to evoke that image in the minds of all his hearers. He wanted them to understand that that kind of poverty, as a spiritual condition, is the condition that they must have before a Holy God.

This is the person who puts no confidence in himself, no confidence in money, no confidence in prosperity. He possesses no self-reliance whatsoever, no reliance on any material or financial advantage. Everything is stripped away in the heart and he finds no ultimate joy or satisfaction in this life, no contentment, no fulfillment ultimately in this life in anything material, physical or temporal.

We also need to be quick to point out here that for many of Jesus' first century followers, following Christ actually did mean financial ruin. True poverty resulted from following Christ. They were excommunicated from the synagogues. Do you know what that meant? It meant expulsion from society, expulsion from the community. If you were excommunicated from the synagogue, you became a veritable social pariah. No one wanted to risk association with you, and that made buying and selling extremely difficult, which meant the actual financial condition of being poor literally having no money, could be the result of identifying with Jesus Christ.

Turn for a moment to the Book of Hebrews. Hebrews 10:32, he says to encourage them again, "But recall the former days when, after you were enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward.

"For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God you may receive what is promised. For, 'Yet a little while, and the coming one will come and will not delay; but my righteous one shall live by faith, and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him.' But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls."

What's the writer doing there? Do you know what he's doing? He's encouraging them to endure in the face of persecution. He's encouraging them to endure the suffering that Jesus himself

promised in the opening beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount. You can turn back there. Hebrew Christians had suffered loss, but they needed to remember they're possessors of an eternal kingdom. They are the *ptochos*, poor, but they are blessed, because their hearts have been stripped away of all affection for this world, its wealth, its treasures, and pleasures.

The commentator J.C. Ryle said it very well. He said, quote, "The poverty spoken about here is a poverty accompanied by grace. The afflictions are the afflictions of the Gospel. Such poverty and persecutions were the inevitable consequences of faith in Christ at the beginning of Christianity. Thousands had to give up everything in this world because of their religion."

Jesus desires to give these people, and all who suffer like them for the Gospel's sake, special comfort and consolation. Indeed he knows my name. He knows my every thought. He knows my breaking heart. He knows when we suffer. The question is, are we willing to join them who've suffered the loss of all things for the sake of Christ? Are we willing to join them and never turn back?

As many in the first century who put their faith in Jesus Christ and they had their goods, their livelihoods, their families, friends completely ripped away from them, because they were the poor already, already detached from the treasures and the pleasures of the world, it hurt. It did. They remembered. Wait a minute. I am the possessor of the greatest treasure and pleasure of all, God and his eternal kingdom. That's the *ptochos*.

How in the world can a person like that be described as blessed? Why would Jesus ascribe the state of blessedness to such a destitute beggar? Because for those who come to God that way, like a destitute beggar, stripped of all pride, confidence in self, confidence in wealth, God is pleased to give them, in a word, himself. He is pleased to give them an eternal kingdom. And in giving them himself an eternal kingdom, do you know what he's given them? Everything! Everything!

It's precisely because all earthly wealth, every treasure and pleasure has been stripped away from the heart, we find all of our trust, all of our hope, all of our joy, our satisfaction, all of our contentment are bound up in God and God alone. That's what makes this *ptochos* person blessed because the world is dead to him and he to the world. He loves not the world, neither the things of the world because he knows that in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the boastful pride of life. He counts all of that as deadness, as distraction, as poisonous. Why? Because it clouds his vision of the only one he has come to long for, the eternal God of heaven.

So beloved if that describes you, if that describes your affections, and if your outward actions are lining up with that profession, those internal affections, then blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God, present possession, continuous state of being. And if yours is the kingdom of God, then yours also is God himself. You possess him. He is yours and you are his. That's what makes you abundantly, infinitely and eternally blessed. God is your reward.

So let's ask a question about ourselves; How do we live this way? How do we find joy in the wealth of this non-prosperity gospel? How do we find joy in the wealth of this poverty gospel? We can make sure we enjoy the wealth of this poverty gospel, which is what Jesus has announced here in the Sermon on the Mount. We, we need to begin by making sure that we are numbered among those poor. We need to make sure we're numbered among the poor, because if we are, yours is the kingdom of God.

You will be filled; you will be laughing; you will be rejoicing even in persecution because great is your reward in heaven. If you're not so numbered, woe to you. There is a series of four woes written to you who are rich, written to you whose affections are tied to this world, written to you whose every ambition is to have yourself filled and satisfied, at ease and in comfort now.

The poor, though, are those who count themselves beggars before God, having nothing at all to commend themselves to God. They're destitute physically, spiritually in all ways. They simply hold out the beggar's hand seeking God's mercy. They sing

the verse of that hymn, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to thy cross I cling; the naked, come to thee for dress; helpless, look to thee for grace, foul, to the fountain ply; wash me, Savior, or I die."

They're that serious about this. They're that serious. To these poor beggars, God is pleased to give them first of all, a Savior, Jesus Christ, who for their sakes became poor so that they might become rich. "God made him who knew no sin to be sin on their behalf, so that they might become in him the righteousness of God."

The poor are those who hunger in this world, not only finding nothing to satisfy, but knowing that only God can satisfy him. They refuse to look to this world for satisfaction. They long for God, contented only in him, and they hate any junk food offered instead of him. The poor are those who are sorrowing in this world. As James says for the poor, "their laughter has been turned to mourning, their joy to gloom."

What they see on this earth, what they see in people's lives breaks their hearts. They see a sin-ravaged earth. They see people who are hurting, torn apart by sin, and so they go weeping into heaven, not laughing. They aren't dancing around on this earth. They're crawling into heaven, mourning and sorrowful, sad over sin first in themselves and then in the other people that they know, sad about sin and its effects. They hate it. And because of all this, because they won't chase the world's ambition, they don't feast at the world's banquets and they don't dance the world's dances.

And when they won't celebrate with the world, do you know what happens? They offend the world. The poor are a convicting presence in this world like Jesus was. Do you know what they did to him? Stand by. Because of the convicting presence that they bear, in the testimony they bear in the world, the world rejects them. The world casts them out. The world sees in the poor what they saw in the Son of Man. They want nothing to do with him. They want the off the earth, out of their presence.

But for people like that, for these poor, they count it all as rubbish to be cast away anyway. Riches, food, laughter,

acceptance in this world, they forsake it all that their hands might be emptied of all in order that they might more tightly embrace Jesus Christ. For them, God is their only treasure and their very great reward. In fact, he's their present reward because Jesus said, "For yours is," not, will be, but "is the kingdom of God." The rule of God, the will of God, done on earth as it is in heaven. That is what the poor live for now.

So to make sure we're truly numbered among the poor, and to make sure that we will find joy in the wealth of this gospel of poverty, let's get just a little more specific. When Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor," "Blessed are you who are hungry now," "Blessed are you who weep now," "Blessed are you when people hate you, exclude, revile, spurn your name as evil on account of the Son of Man." When Jesus pronounced those sayings, they seem because they're concentrated in one place, they seem like they stand out quite a bit to us, but you know what? He's using biblical language.

And he's speaking in a form that was actually quite familiar to his audience, a prophetic announcement of weal and woe, of blessing and cursing, very common. In fact, Jesus' own

mother spoke her own beatitude before his birth in what we call the Magnificat. Luke 1:46, listen to this language, beautiful, beautiful language from this young virgin girl Mary, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me." What? "blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

"He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever."

Absolutely beautiful. And if you go back to the Sermon on the Mount, you'll find the same themes that feature in her song of praise, raising up the poor who fear God, bringing down the proud, filling the hungry with good, sending away the rich

empty, those same themes show up in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, don't they?

If you're going to go back to the Old Testament and trace this concept of blessedness, it provides a very interesting picture; clarifies, helps us identify, the poor who are the blessed, why it is they are blessed and how it is they are blessed. Jesus, as I said, is speaking in biblical language in this sermon, here, in the opening the section, we know as the Beatitudes.

Keep in mind, this is how you can know that you are numbered among those whom Jesus identifies as the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the rejected. These and these alone are the blessed, and to these and these alone belong the kingdom of God. They'll be filled. They'll be laughing. They'll be rejoicing in great reward. So if you're numbered among the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the rejected, then you are blessed, for you can be sure of this, yours is the kingdom of God. That is a reality of present possession enjoyed now, but most fully when the Son of Man returns.

Jesus told his questioning disciples in Mark Chapter 10 verses 29-30, he said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel," that's the poor, hungry, weeping, rejected, same group. There is none of those who've done that for my sake, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, lands, oh, by the way, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life.

The poor are blessed because they fear God. This is from the Old Testament. Oh, I'm not saying anything new. The poor are blessed because they rejoice in God. The poor are blessed because they obey God. So they're blessed because they fear God, they rejoice in God, and they obey God. It's about what you might expect, right? That is how you know you're numbered among those poor, and that is how you practice this poverty gospel. That is how you practice this Christian life, and you find a hundredfold blessing right now, with persecutions.