

The Poor in Spirit

Jonathan K. Dodson | Matthew 5:3 | April 17, 2015

We are looking at the most famous, least understood sermon in history, Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. We're doing this is to cultivate true Christian character and a sense of the greatness of God. In his new book, *The Road to Character*, NY Times columnist David Brooks describes a person of character: "*They radiate a sort of moral joy. They answer softly when challenged harshly. They are silent when unfairly abused. They are dignified when others try to humiliate them, restrained when others try to provoke them. But they get things done. They are not thinking about what impressive work they are doing. They are not thinking about themselves at all...These are the people of strong inner character.*" Do you want to be this kind of person? I do. Jesus shows us how in the first of eight Beatitudes. Latin for "blessed," the Beatitudes show us eight ways to live the truly good life, a life of character, but *more* a life lived under the *favor of God*. In verse 3, we find the gateway beatitude: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*" If we don't get this one, we'll miss all the others. Let's take these 3 phrases: poor in spirit, kingdom of heaven, blessed.

Poor in Spirit

What does it mean to be "poor in spirit?" Luke's version of this Beatitude, "blessed are the *poor*." Latin American theologians often cite this text in support of Jesus focus on the economically poor, interpreting this quite **literally** as, "God favors the poor." There's a special place for them in the kingdom. Later on, a wealthy man asks Jesus how to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus responds by telling him to sell all his possessions and give them to the poor. Is that what he's saying to us? *He might be. But before we enthrone poverty, we have to consider the fact that many of Jesus teachings are aimed at relieving poverty.* Becoming poor doesn't align with his mission. You've probably met people who are actually proud in their poverty. How is this blessed? I think of a homeless man I got to know quite well, who once joined us for Thanksgiving. Instead of expressing gratitude, he became quite bossy telling me to get him a bus ticket and to do this and that for him. He felt a sense of entitlement in his poverty. He was poor but he was also proud. Another **attitudinal** interpretation says Jesus intends for us to take on "an attitude of poverty." We're to acknowledge we have nothing to contribute to God, that we're destitute before God. Some Christians obsess over their brokenness. But we have to be careful here, not to exult in our brokenness. Jesus does not say, as Dallas Willard pointed out, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit because they are poor in spirit.*" I've heard too many Calvinists say to impress, "I'm the worst of sinners," when in fact they have no idea how sinful they are. It's like they are competing with St. Paul. Pride in their poverty of spirit. To say that God's blessing is exclusively for the literally and attitudinally poor is to play to pride. C. S. Lewis says the "great sin" isn't sexual immorality but pride. Some years back psychologists devised testing to evaluate the percentage of the population thinks they are "above average." 90% of corporate executives view themselves as "above average," better than their managers. How is that possible?! 94% believe they deserve a merit-based raise. Barna Research: Protestant pastors how well they do at shepherding: 82% above average, 0% below average! Preaching 90% pastors think they preach better than the other pastors. Of course, if I took

the test it would have dropped 1%! 25% college entrants ranked themselves in the top 1% above average to get along with others...out of 829,000.¹ Statistical anomaly...our pride is off the charts. **Few think of themselves as poor in spirit and many as rich in merit.** But until we relate to God as sinners we cannot be saints. Augustine: “*My soul was all the more incurable because I did not see myself a sinner.*” What then does it mean to be poor in spirit? Jesus is probably referring to poor of the prophets, the *anawim*, of Isaiah 61: “**The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted.**” The *anawim*, translated poor, means bowed down. Now why are they bowing down? You could say circumstances have forced them down, but that’s an awfully superficial reading. This has to do with their posture, not just in front of circumstances, but before the face of God. Remember, you can be poor in circumstances and proud in spirit. Poor in spirit has everything with *where we look*. Some look out, in comparison to others. Others look up in comparison to God. And there, in comparison to his outstretched greatness, they get it. They are not above average. They are deficient. Looking up, they realize their abject poverty before God. **Not a cent to contribute to the Creator who contributed everything to them.** Their life and their breath; they are in debt before the towering greatness of God. MLJ: “**It is nothing we can produce; it is nothing what we can do in ourselves. It is just this tremendous awareness of our utter nothingness as we come face-to-face with God.**” David Brooks uses a Jewish Rabbi’s concept of Genesis to present two types of people in the world, which put us on two different roads to character. The first is **Adam I**. Adam I is the career oriented, external, resume Adam. He wants to build, create, produce. Adam II is the internal Adam. Adam II wants to embody certain moral qualities [like the person in our opening quotation]. Adam II wants to have serene inner character, a quiet but solid sense of what’s right and wrong—not only to do good but to be good, to sacrifice and serve, to live in obedience to some transcendent truth. You might say Adam I wants to conquer the world while Adam II wants to obey a calling to serve the world. Adam I is Jerry McGuire; Adam II is Oskar Schindler. While Adam I is creative and savors his own accomplishments, Adam II sometimes renounces worldly success and status for the sake of some sacred purpose. There is contradiction between these two Adams: “*The outer, majestic Adam and the inner, humble Adam.*” How do we become Adam II kind of people? We need a plan. You don’t just happen onto virtue. It must be cultivated. **We plan for our careers, we plan for our parties, but do we have a plan for spiritual poverty?** We have plans for success but no plans for failure. Brooks again: “**Success leads to the greatest failure, which is pride. Failure leads to the greatest success, which is humility and learning.**” So what’s your plan for failure, for character, for humility? Jesus plan is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the poor in spirit *for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

Kingdom of Heaven

The kingdom of heaven gives us many insights on how to develop character; I’ll mention two. First, consider the architecture of the kingdom of heaven. It can be hard to conceive. We often think of disembodied existence in clouds or an individual paradise. The kingdom of heaven is neither. This kingdom is a kingdom of people. It teems with life, with people

¹ These statistics demonstrate what psychologists call the “illusory superiority.” Results cited by Gordon Hugenberger: <http://www.parkstreet.org/library/sermons/series/Membership-Series>

from every culture, interacting, learning, and creating, all before the face of God. The KOH is a **communal kingdom**. Back to Isaiah 61, we find the good news breaking across the faces of the poor, the captive, the mourning as they become content, liberated, joyful citizens of Zion. This should sound familiar, like the rest of the Beatitudes. Jesus vision for a new humanity in the SOM fulfills and expands on this prophecy. In fact, all the subjects of the Beatitudes are plural not singular: the poor, those who mourn, the humble, the merciful. Every single subject is plural, which means **Jesus isn't calling singular individuals to the character of the kingdom; he's calling a whole community to be poor in spirit**. This is the first insight of the KOH. **We need one another to become what God has called us to be**. This is by design not flaw. We are meant to change, to become poor in spirit, by absorbing the example of others. (Stephen vs. Os; Sarah Hampton's prayerfulness, and constant encouragement of our City Group or the men who came over and wept and prayed with me when I was going through a difficult trial. I'm sure they had plenty of family and responsibilities, but they broke away and put me first. Why? Poor in spirit. I want to be compassionate and sacrificial like them. Well, Jonathan you have to lose your entitlement and gain poverty. We are changed when we are on the look out for things we admire in others and then, instead of pushing them away through comparison, we take part of them in, becoming like them. It's very hard to absorb the good in others, when you're living an individualistic life. When you're not an active part of KOH. We help you with that through CG, FCs, Men's retreat. *The character of the kingdom is forged in the kingdom community*. The second insight of the KOH comes from what happens there, **learning**, teaching and obeying God's law. It is not as though, upon reaching heaven, we summit our comprehension of God and cease to obey him. As finite creatures, we cannot bear the weight of omniscience (total knowledge). **In fact, any God that can be fully comprehended is an idol. Idols can be mastered but the one, true God masters you**. He exceeds our grasp, inexhaustible but knowable. In descriptions of the KOH you find something very interesting—people continuing to learn (Mic 4:2). If you want to close the gap between where you are and where you want to be, to be truly Christian, **then you need, not just a community, but a learning community**. Now most people use "learning community" to refer to a way to advance your career or hobby, but this is how to advance your character and knowledge of God. For this reason, Christians should be people who are always learning, not in a strict abstract Bible study sense. **Anyone can accumulate more biblical knowledge while acquiring more pride. The knowledge has to go somewhere**; it can go to your ego or it can go to service of the community, the kingdom. This is why Jesus says a little later, **"Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"** (19-20). See the learning community? Not just teaching, *doing*. Learning to obey. Paul says of immature Christians, "they are always learning but never arriving at the truth." You know why? They don't obey. They don't put the learning in service of the church. Are you in a kingdom learning community? Are you opening the Scriptures and applying them as your CG and FC week to week? Or are you showing the world the kingdom of Self, an individual paradise that cherry picks from the church? Do that and you'll remain unchallenged by the community, stuck in the kingdom of

Self. We all need people who challenge us, who are hard to love, who we don't click with, who challenge our preferences and expose our sins. The character of the kingdom isn't forged in isolation or in cliques but learning communities of God.

Blessed

Our final phrase, word, is blessed. This word opens up to us the chief good of the kingdom. Reaching back to Isaiah 61, the blessing is the favorable year of the Lord; its how the kingdom breaks in now—through the Spirit anointed Messiah, Jesus Christ. What do we see him doing there? Bringing good news *and* binding the brokenhearted; proclaiming liberty *and* liberating the bound. Teaching *and* obeying the law, which is absolutely necessary for all who fall short: *If your righteousness doesn't exceed that of the Pharisees, you will not inherit the kingdom of heaven (6:20)*. Jesus is serious about this. Only the poor in spirit inherit the kingdom of God! Be undone. Where's the blessing? Jesus teaches us what its like to possess the character of the kingdom, but he also obeys the law to produce it. Why is this a blessing? Because no man could ever fulfill the law! Jesus' coming into the world, his obedience, death and resurrection, secure God's favor for failures like you and me. His obedience, even to the point of death, unlocks a heavenly storehouse of riches. **To the poor in spirit he hands the riches of righteousness.** He rises from the dead in shimmering glory to put the character of the King in you. Jesus can announce this blessing ahead of time because he has come from the future. He's come back, and in the middle of history, he inaugurated the favorable/blessed year of the Lord. **[JD brokenness: I looked up but not at Christ]** If you're part of his kingdom, if you under his reign, it will show out in poverty of spirit, in humble adoration, in holy hunger for God. Take a good look at this God and sense his favor, and tremble under his grace, and you'll prove his character! See, you have everything you need to become an Adam II, Christlike, kind of people. Where will you look? Look down and you will despair. Look out and you will compare. Look up and you will know the blessing of God *in Christ*. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Amen.