



**“Poor in Spirit”**  
**Scripture – Matthew 5:1-12**  
**Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones**  
**Sunday, February 2, 2020**

You probably did not realize it when you came to worship this morning, but today is “Help the pastor with his sermon day!” Together, I would like for us to ponder some of the *blessings* of our lives. Think for a moment. What are some of the things for which you are very grateful? Someone name one of the blessings of your life. [Good health, grandchildren, a good job, not having financial worries, a loving church family, faith, involvement in a just cause...]

Today’s scripture reading comes from the Gospel of Matthew and it reveals nine blessings that Jesus named. He went up a beautiful hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee, sat down – the position rabbis took when they taught – and addressed a crowd of mostly poor people.

Listen carefully to the spiritual wisdom of Jesus. [Passage is read]

His list seems a tad different than ours, doesn’t it? Some of his are beautiful, but on close examination some seem questionable. Arguable.

A friend in Virginia texted Camilla a few days ago. Her husband began feeling dizzy and became nauseated. His condition worsened and she called 911. He protested, but when the EMTs arrived and assessed his condition, they scooped him up and rushed him to a hospital emergency room. In short order it was discovered that he had suffered a complex stroke.

As his vital signs plummeted, he fell unconscious and prospects grew dim. His wife sat beside him in the ICU along with a nurse who stayed in the room monitoring his vital signs throughout the night.

Another CT scan revealed more bleeding and swelling. The doctor said to his wife, “This is the time for family and friends to visit him. We hope he will get better, but...”

Some of you have lived this nightmare. You are partly in shock over the terrifying turn of events. You are frightened that you will lose your loved one and plead for a miracle.

I suspect that if the hospital chaplain drops in to visit our friend and begins to read the Beatitudes, she might protest. “Wait! ‘Blessed are those who mourn? Blessed are those who *mourn*?’ My husband is so ill. I can assure you THIS IS NO BLESSING!”

Some of the beatitudes are intuitive. “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” Most people extend kindness to people who are compassionate. And when we witness an act of mercy, we recognize it as something virtuous and, in some cases, exceptional. We certainly expect God to be merciful to people who show mercy to others. We are with you on this one Jesus.

In addition, Jesus strums a logical chord with “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” Surely those who are free of guile and dishonesty are more likely to perceive God’s activity in their lives.

However, some of the blessings sound – well, frankly ludicrous. In addition to “Blessed are those who mourn,” Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek.” Does God encourages us to be spineless? “Blessed are the persecuted?” Raise your hand if you relish being tormented.

And what about the very first blessing Jesus names. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” Most of the people who came out to hear Jesus had very little in the way of material wealth. They lived on the edge and had only the bare essentials. No doubt Jesus intended to give them an emotional and spiritual lift. He wanted to affirm their worth and convince them that they occupied a special place in God’s heart. However, that does not mean that 21<sup>st</sup> century North Americans who have multiples more than the essentials of life should hear these words of Jesus as shaming us for being over-indulged. The beatitudes are not designed to condemn.

The first beatitude – Blessed are the poor in spirit—is not focused on material wealth; it’s driving at something else – something that is difficult for most to grasp because it is counterintuitive. Jesus is speaking of a particular mindset that defies conventional thinking.

We spend a good deal of effort bolstering our confidence and projecting to the world that we have it all together. We pump up our self esteem in a variety of ways – by mastering a skill, by increasing our knowledge, by accomplishing something noteworthy. Such efforts help us in our work lives. You do not become upper management by exposing your weaknesses and fears. However, Jesus says that faith begins with an awareness of our need. Faith begins with an honest recognition that something is missing and no amount of confidence will hide it.

When life is going well and things slide into place, it is easy to forget that God makes it all possible. It is easy to overlook the fact that we did not create ourselves and that we depend on God for every breath we take. It is easy to think that our lives are going smoothly simply because we are so clever and have made brilliant decisions.

Yet even when life is going well and there is enough income to do something exciting, some recognize an emptiness within themselves. Some describe it as a worry that surfaces from time to time. Others convince themselves that all is well, yet are blind to the fact that they have a cynical edge. Some become increasingly callous to the pain around them. Many confess to being unhappy but cannot figure out why. Some experience a vague discontent, an unsatisfied longing, a feeling that something is lacking.<sup>1</sup>

What does Jesus mean by “poor in spirit?” He is talking about an attitude, a stance in life. The Greek word for poor paints an image for us. It “literally means ‘the empty ones, those who are crouching.’ They are bent-over beggars who are not full of themselves in any way.”<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is saying, “Joy is yours because you are free of the lie that the road to happiness runs through possessions, power, and prestige. He is helping us grasp the spiritual wisdom that when you are too full of yourself, there is no room for God. He is saying “Blessed are you who are free of the myth that all you need is YOU.” It is not until you acknowledge that you are spiritually poor that you will genuinely thirst for God. Sadly, some do not recognize how much they need God until the floor caves in and heartache bangs at the door.

Janet carries a memory of her father when she was a child. On a bitter December day when she was five, she suddenly became ill. Her mother called her dad home from work to take her to the hospital. She thought of herself as ‘too big’ to be carried, but she was so sick she was unable to walk. Her parents bundled her up and laid her down in the back seat of the family station wagon. When they reached the hospital, her father lifted her again in his strong arms and cut across the frozen grass to the emergency room entrance. Even as sick as she was, she can remember the protest in her heart, “I’m too big to be carried!” Nevertheless, she gave in because she knew she was safe in his arms.

Janet is now a pastor and offered that image in a sermon, drawing a parallel about the way God carries us when we are too drained to move forward under our own strength. Her dad was sitting in the pew that morning, and was a little embarrassed. Following the sermon, he said to her, “Janet, that’s just what a dad does.”<sup>3</sup>

If you catch a glimmer of your poverty of spirit, do not try to convince yourself that you are fine and in need of nothing. Instead, seek the One—the only One—who can quench the deep thirst of your soul. And in moments when you feel helpless because life is more treacherous than you can handle, reach out to God. When we are too ill, too sad, too broken to make it on our own – and if we are not too stubborn – God can comfort us and carry us.

Blessed are those who grasp this truth.

#### NOTES

1. William Barclay, *Daily Devotions with William Barclay: 365 Meditations on the Heart of the New Testament*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), p. 20.
2. Richard Rohr, “Blessed are the Poor in Spirit,” Richard Rohr’s Daily Meditations, January 30, 2018.
3. Janet H. Hunt, “Just What a Dad Does,” *dancingwiththeword.com*.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson**

God of Blessing – In days of old, You called Father Abraham, saying: “I will bless you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So began a story of blessing – a story of a God who is faithful to us, who desires faithfulness from us, who stirs faith within us, who has faith in us. In every age You, O God, have chosen *us* – imperfect people with imperfect faith – to bear your blessing to the world.

At our best we have loved you with heart, soul and might. At our best we have held up a light to the nations, so that the ends of the earth might see your salvation. But – too often – we have forgotten your commandments and broken your covenant. Too often, we have failed to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with you. God, we have pretended your blessing is only for our benefit, rather than beckoning *all* to the Table of Grace.

Still, you have been faithful to us. You gave us the Law, so we might know the blessing of a life lived with and for you. When we strayed from right paths, You raised up Covenant Keepers to point us toward the blessing you set before us, to urge us to choose ways that lead to life. In the fullness of time, You sent the Child of Blessing, who would teach us to look for your blessing in surprising places: in the meek and the mourning, in lowly laborers and long-suffering lepers, on a hillside where one bread basket somehow fed the masses, among children whom the disciples were quick to dismiss, in a Roman cross and a garden tomb. And now you summon us to the Table of Blessing, where we are nourished, sustained, renewed, and sent to bear your blessing to the world.

How blessed are we, O God, that Christ calls us to this table, where there is room for everyone and plenty for all! As we gather to share this holy food, send your Spirit upon us and upon these gifts of bread and cup, that the bread we break and the cup we bless might unite us with Christ and with all who share his feast.

Sustaining God, we come to this table with hands – outstretched and empty – ready to receive the Bread of Life. Open our hearts, as well, that we may be filled with this bread, this cup, and – especially – with the grace they signify. As we rise from this table, send us to places that yearn for your blessing and empower us to embody your grace through compassionate care and self-giving service so that, through our words and deeds, our lives will proclaim the legacy of your promise: “I will bless you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor are yours eternal God, now and forever. Hear us now as we offer the prayer Christ taught us: **Our Father ...**