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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“BECOMING POOR TO BECOME RICH”
Matthew 5:3

▣ Matthew 5:3: **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**

If this teaching doesn't unnerve us at least a little, either we don't get it or we have wrestled long and hard with it and have come out changed.

☹ Some are never ill at ease with **“Blessed are the poor in spirit”** because they over-*spiritualize* it by hearing **“the poor”** as a metaphor instead of economic reality.

They are mistaken. When Messiah talks about **“the poor”** he means people who are financially impoverished.

¶ Consider Luke's parallel beatitude. In Luke 6:20 Jesus leaves out **“in spirit”** altogether, and only says: **“Blessed are you who are poor.”** Not only so, he adds a corresponding woe: **“But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort”** (Luke 6:24).

Many would be more on edge with this text if they did not over-*spiritualize* it.

☹ {Mt 16:24} Others are never ill at ease with **“Blessed are the poor in spirit”** because they over-*materialize* it. They fixate on **“the poor”** to the exclusion of **“in spirit.”**

{Mt 16:26} They are mistaken. Messiah consistently addresses material problems (like poverty) in light of spiritual reality. After all, **“what good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?”**

Some would be less relaxed with this text if they did not over-*materialize* it.

“Blessed are” the economically destitute who remain faithful to God in hunger and nakedness and homelessness, who faithfully trust God to bring mercy and justice his way, in his time.

Are you less comfortable now than you were five minutes ago?

★ Do we feel ill at ease because the Lord defines **“blessed”** differently than we do?

We tend to think of **“blessed”** as a synonym for **“happy.”** In fact, some English-language Bibles translate μακαριος [makarios] as **“happy”** rather than **“blessed”**: **“Happy are the poor in spirit,” “Happy are those who mourn,” “Happy are the meek,”** and so forth.

There are some problems with this.

{McKnight} People think of happiness as a subjective **“good feeling about oneself...and one's situation.”**

Studies show that these **“good feelings”** involve comparing ourselves **“with others who have less, and as long as [we have] more”** – more wealth, health, friends, or what have you – [we feel] **happy.”**

But there is an upper limit beyond which we get less bang for our buck. The data indicates that as we climb higher above the subsistence line, most of us feel less satisfaction in besting the person below us.

Then there is the addiction factor. Devote yourself to the pursuit of happiness, and it will demand more of you. Give in, and you might catch yourself crossing moral boundaries you never thought you

would. You will surely find yourself saying “No” to some things of eternal value.

To further complicate matters, happiness has a genetic component. Research shows that an individual’s natural temperament makes it easier or harder to “[achieve] **this subjective sense of feeling good.**”

In summary the “**good feeling**” of happiness is subjective, comparative (hence competitive), inconstant, potentially addictive and partly genetic.

I like happiness. I enjoy feeling good about myself, my life, and my situation.

But that is not the blessing Christ Jesus promises “**the poor in spirit.**” It just doesn’t fit!

Besides, the gifts God bestows reflect his character and his priorities. Happiness isn’t good enough.

✎ {McKnight} What if blessedness “**is not about feeling good but about *being* good?**” What if it has nothing to do with health, wealth, and happiness in this life and everything to do with loving God, self, and neighbor? What if being blessed is seeing Jesus as he is, sharing in his life, and participating in his mission?

★ “**Blessed are the poor in spirit.**” Do we feel ill at ease because we fear poverty?

It is peculiar to pair the words “**blessed**” and “**poor,**” is it not? It’s outlandish. It’s bizarre.

☑ Let’s do an experiment.

Raise your hand if you *want* to be “**blessed.**”

Raise your hand if you *want* to trust God no matter what happens.

Now raise your hand if you *want* to be literally penniless.

Poor infants and children are more likely to die from treatable diseases. Poor adults have significantly higher rates of hypertension, obesity, diabetes, heart disease, asthma, and kidney problems. Do you want to fit that health profile?

Poor children are more likely to have learning disabilities, attend under-performing schools, and fall behind grade level. More of them drop out of high school and fewer of them earn college degrees. Do you want to fit that educational profile?

Poor adults have a catastrophic unemployment rate. They are among the last hired and the first fired. Most who are employed are in low-paying jobs with slight opportunity for advancement. Do you want to fit that worker profile?

We want to be blessed. We want to be faithful. We just do *not* want to be poor.

It might feel safer to focus on spiritual poverty. Then again, maybe not: don’t we like to think we have something to bring to the table? Don’t we like to think we can stand on our own feet if Jesus gives us a helping hand occasionally? Don’t we like to think that once he forgives our sins we can do the rest ourselves?

Yet it is “**the poor in spirit**” who are “**blessed.**”

¶ What’s really troubling is the implication, merely inferred in Matthew but stated out loud in Luke: “**woe to you who are rich.**” Yes, this can be applied to the spiritually self-sufficient – but it is aimed directly at those who are rich in money and possessions.

We console ourselves with the notion that he is not speaking to us. We aren't rich *by American standards*. Most of us fall somewhere in the *American middle class*. A few of us are hard-up, *by American standards*.

☑ {Global Rich List} By *global standards* we are all rich. A net annual income of \$13,750 U.S. dollars puts you in the top 10% of earners worldwide. Even if you squeak by on \$6,750 you are still in the top 20%!

{Lk 18:25} The bad news is, **“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God.”**

{Mt 8:19-20} We see it in the volunteer who eagerly says **“I will follow you wherever you go”** but then loses interest when Jesus replies, **“Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head”** (“I am homeless”).

{Mt 19:16-22} We see it in the young leader whom Jesus invites to **“sell your possessions and give to the poor... Then come, follow me,”** but who “[goes] away sad, because he [has] great wealth.”

{Lk 16:13-14} We see it in the Pharisees who sneer when Jesus announces **“You cannot serve both God and Money,”** because they “[love] money.”

Material affluence becomes a curse every time the rich reject Jesus and the life he offers. **“Woe to you who are rich, you have already received your comfort”!** The kingdom is not yours.

Well, this is awkward. But hold on!

{Mt 19:23; Lk 18:27} The good news is that while **“Truly... *it is hard* for the rich to enter the**

kingdom,” “What is impossible with human beings is possible with God.”

{2 Co 8:9} It is possible, because **“though” “our Lord Jesus” “was rich, yet for [our] sake he became poor.”**

{Mt 4:18-20} When Jesus says **“Come, follow me”** to Peter and Andrew, it requires them to discard their biggest assets, quit their own business, and walk away from a reliable income. It means becoming poor. **“At once they [leave] their nets and [follow] him.”**

{Mt 4:21-22} It is the same with James and John. **“Jesus [calls] them, and immediately they [leave] their boat and their father and [follow] him.”**

{Mt 9:9} Likewise with Matthew: he is **“sitting at [his] tax collector’s booth,”** getting richer -- if ever there was a lucrative business, this is it – when Jesus says, **“Follow me.”** Matthew leaves his booth, gets up and follows.

Are they so much bolder than us? Are they that much more spiritual from the start? Maybe; but I doubt it.

I believe the disciples are mostly ordinary people. A few are rich. The others range from middle class to dirt poor. Some are greedy; but even those who aren't especially materialistic are occupied with feeding, clothing, and sheltering themselves and their families.

Then these ordinary people meet Jesus.

{Ps 24:1} They do not yet know that “**the earth... and everything in it is**” his, but he became a human of the lower classes *for our sake*.

{Php 2:6-7} They do not yet know that the incalculable wealth of heaven belongs to him, but he exchanged it for economic scarcity *for our sake*.

They do not yet know that “**he [is] rich**” but “**he became poor**” *for our sake*.

{Mt 19:27} Still, they see something so glorious and beautiful that the costliest earthly treasure is worthless junk by comparison. It is of such infinite value that they “[leave] **everything to follow**” – and they are blessed!

They catch a glimpse of life with Jesus in his Kingdom. They realize their absolute need for him, and what only he can give. They become poor in order to become truly rich.

{Mt 6:19-20} Will Messiah call some of us to “**sell [our] possessions and give to the poor**”? I don’t know. That is not a universal requirement of discipleship, though he does call some to it. He most assuredly *is* calling all of us to “**store up... treasures in heaven**” instead of “**on earth.**”

Are we “**blessed**”?

Is “**the kingdom of heaven**” ours?

Are we among “**the poor in spirit**”?