



The Voice Of Truth

A weekly publication of the
Hillcrest church of Christ

1621 Hillcrest Drive
Green Bay, WI 54313
(920) 499-5677

www.hillcrestchurchofchrist.com

April 13th, 2003

1. "Blessed Are The Poor In Spirit"

By David E. Koltenbah

In the introductory article we sought to show the decided need for a study of the Beatitudes and to emphasize their paradoxical nature, which captures our attention and encourages self-examination. We tried to define in a preliminary way "blessedness" as Jesus spoke of it, and we discussed the fact that it is not (1) the state of being worldly wise, as thought the Greeks, or (2) the state of being outwardly religious, as thought the Jews (I Cor. 1:22), or (3) the state of being materially prosperous, as thought both Jews and Greeks and as think moderns. True blessedness is a deep joy of the soul, at once consisting in the peace resulting from righteousness itself and also from Divine rewards for righteousness. What are the various conditions which produce such "blessedness"? In the first place, it is the state of, and reward for, poverty in one's heart: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." (Matt. 5:3)

Who Are The Blessed!

They are the "poor in spirit," but in what sense are they poor? First, they are not those who merely profess to be poor in spirit. This is not that sanctimonious intonation of voice, clasping of hands as though in prayer, and uplifting of mournful eyes through stained glass windows, which may be witnessed in many a pulpit throughout the land! Unhappy indeed is the congregation who think that such characterize the true preacher of the gospel! Such an affected air may charm certain sentimental, unthinking individuals, but it does not please Christ. Let the brethren beware of the stereotyped "pious" personality. It is not the doctor with the most pleasing bedside manner or with the most "professional" air who knows the correct medicine to prescribe, nor is it the worshipper with the most "religious" pew-mannerisms, or the preacher with the most adorable and popular pulpit manners, who knows God's will or who is truly "poor in spirit." The Pharisees were all stamped of the same mold, for they all exhibited the same hypocritical mimicry, enlarging their phylacteries and the hems of their garments (Matt. 23:5), outwardly all appearing alike, so "white" and "beautiful," but inwardly filled with putrefaction (v. 27). Appearing to the ignorant masses as righteous, they received glory and reward of men. (Ch. 6:1-18) However, it is not the opinion of the majority that is proof of true spiritual worth. Well, therefore, might certain of our "prominent" and "outstanding" preaching brethren, lauded educators and writers, and itinerate elders take note! Jesus' instruction that we be "poor in spirit" strikes at the very bowels of the pompous promotionalism and pietism of the modern John Tetzels in the church, who, replete with collection coffers, go drumming over the country, singing out

slogans, hawking their "indulgences." Such is foreign to the methods of Jesus and the apostles.

Second, the "poor in spirit" are, of course, not those who are poor in material circumstances. Often indeed the truly poor in spirit suffer deprivation as a result of persecution and sacrifice (Phil. 4:11-12, etc.), but Jesus does not speak here of material want. We have the poor with us always (Matt. 26:11), but we need to realize that while many are in penury because of misfortune, some want because of their slothfulness. (Prov. 6:10-11) We are not to believe that Jesus meant that slums were a sanctuary. To the contrary, there is no blessing in poverty as such, for poverty breeds physical and moral filth. Hence it is that the Bible teaches that in proportion to their ability and opportunity Christians are "to remember the poor." (Gal. 2:10; 6:10; etc.)

Third, the blessed ones of whom the Master spake are not the poor-spirited, that is, the moral cowards who succumb to temptation or compromise with evil. Some who fail thus to oppose worldliness and error as they ought - whether in word or deed - justify themselves by claiming their refusal is due to their being "poor in spirit." Not so! Jesus Himself and His disciples and apostles most courageously denounced sin, and New Testament examples are too numerous to mention and can be read almost anywhere at random. (See, for example, Matt. ch. 23; Acts 7)

Who then are the "poor in spirit"? They are those (1) who possess a sense of want. This was the spirit of the disciples who recognized in themselves a certain deficiency when once they heard the Master pray, and then requested, "Lord, teach us to pray, even as John also taught his disciples." (Lk 11:1) It is the spirit which sees within oneself a need and then "asks," "seeks," and "knocks." (Matt. 7:7) Conversely, the poor in spirit are those who are devoid of that fatal attitude of self-sufficiency which blandly boasts, "I am rich, and have gotten riches, and have need of nothing," and fails to recognize its own spiritual wretchedness. (Rev. 3:17)

Again, they are those (2) who possess a sense of humbleness. This was the attitude of the publican who could pray, "God, be merciful to me a sinner," and the attitude utterly lacking in his fellow-worshipper, that proud and contemptuous Pharisee. (Lk. 18: 9-14) It is not strange that in the first

Beatitude - Jesus' first description of the Christian life - is emphasized humility, a spirit requisite to approach to God. (Jas. 4:6-10) To say that the poor in spirit are the humble is to say conversely they are devoid of self-esteem. The contrast of the publican and Pharisee at prayer above illustrates this. There is always the danger that a man have a very unrealistic picture of himself, for one of our most difficult tasks is to hold ourselves at arm's length and "try our own selves, whether we are in the faith" (2 Cor. 13:5) and to avoid the immense deceit in thinking ourselves something when we are nothing. (Gal. 6:3)

When a man is poor in material circumstances, there is upon him an impulse of great responsibility toward his needy dependents. Likewise, the poor in spirit are those (3) who possess a sense of obligation. It is not the mere recognition of need which suffices to fulfill that need, but also the constraining consciousness of responsibility to fulfill it. One of the grievous errors among the saints is that many who recognize a need for benevolence, and more especially for evangelism, have no sense of personal, individual obligation toward the needy and lost, but seek to shuffle off responsibility to someone else. Undoubtedly this is one cause for the rise of many practices operating on the principle that a Christian's or a congregation's duty can be discharged by proxy. Some of us who presently oppose institutionalism and the "professional pastor" concept of the gospel preacher's work, must share part of the blame for the prevalence of these practices, for in time past we have been prone to neglect those responsibilities which these innovations would now usurp. The man truly poor in spirit is extremely energetic in Christ's service because he is motivated by his insight into the duty and necessity of denying himself, taking up his cross and following Christ. (Matt. 16:24) This is to say, he is devoid of the sense of self-satisfaction, which paralyzes activity and utterly extinguishes the spirit of service. The rich fool (Lk. 12:13-21) was not condemned because he was wealthy or because he desired to retire from his secular occupation, but because his self-satisfaction deprived him of a sense of obligation toward God and man. is sin was in not being "poor in spirit."

Finally, the poor in spirit are those (4) who have a sense of dependence. As we emphasized in the introductory article, it is not enough merely to admire the words of Jesus: one must penetrate to the spiritual core of His gospel and adore in the heart and execute in the life that which he also admires in the mind. How often have we read His command to "Come unto me . . . Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me . . ." (Matt. 11 :28, 29) and yet have failed to appraise the real meaning of the dependence upon Him therein taught? One should take an entire hour to read that verse which says, "It is not in man that walketh to direct his steps." (Jer. 10:23) Only when one deeply appreciates the fact that he is entirely dependent upon Divine grace does he fully act in obedient faith, for man in no sense earns salvation by his own inherent righteousness. Paul said, "For by grace have ye been saved through faith . . ." (Eph. 2:8-9) Many who say with the lips, "We are unprofitable servants" (Lk. 17:10), in their own hearts aver their inestimable worth! Hundreds admit that we should entirely "follow his steps" (I Peter. 2:21), but few actually do so in whole-soul belief. To do so, one must be completely devoid of self-righteousness and must know indeed that he is not, nor cannot be, self-contained, for apart from divine grace he has not within himself the means toward true happiness in this life or salvation in the life to come. This was the failing of the Jews (Rom. 10:2), and is it not also the failing of some today?

Because of lack of space, we can deal only superficially with the following point:

In What Are They Blessed?

We are told, ". . . theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The word "kingdom" was used by Christ at times to refer to heaven (such was evidently true, for example, in Matt. 13:43), but often he used the expression to refer to the Messianic dominion here on earth, i.e., in the church. As in a literal

kingdom, Christ's realm has certain privileges and blessings, as well as obligations, for its citizens. In this Sermon on the Mount, his Inaugural Address, the King speaks at length of this spiritual monarchy (see Matt. 5:10, 19, 20), discussing its legal basis and the life of its citizens. It is probably with reference to this institution Jesus speaks in the Beatitude, referring to the blessings of the citizens of the Messianic kingdom, so long awaited -- and to grossly misunderstood -- by Israel. It makes no considerable difference, however, whether he refers to the kingdom of heaven presently on earth, or to this kingdom ultimately glorified at its Sovereign's second coming, for the fundamental sense is clear; the Divine blessings in this life, and/or the blessings in the life to come, are enjoyed only by "the poor in spirit." Their blessing consists first in the state of being poor in spirit and in the pure pleasure it gives to the soul, and more especially in Divine rewards, blessings, and privileges received in this life and more abundantly in the life to come.

(Next article: "Blessed Are They That Mourn").

Truth Magazine III:2, pp. 4-5, 14
November 1958

THE CHARACTER OF JESUS	
MERCIFUL AND COMPASSIONATE	STRICT AND COURAGEOUS
Compassionate - Mark 1:40-45; 6:34; Matt. 20:29-34	Anger (He would shame) - Mark 3:5; Luke 13:15; 19:46
Patient (Tolerant of wicked) - Luke 22:24-27; 23:34-37	Strict - Matt. 23:23; Luke 16:10; Matt. 19:9-10
Tender hearted - Matt. 11:28-30; 19:13-15	Controversialist (Tough) - Matt 15:1-9; 21:23-27
Physical (Fed and Healed) - Luke 7:21; Matt. 15:32-38	Spiritual (Inner man) - Matt. 26:11; John 6:25-26,63
Forgiving - John 8:1-11; Luke 7:36-50	Rebuking - Luke 9:51-56; Matt. 16:21-23

