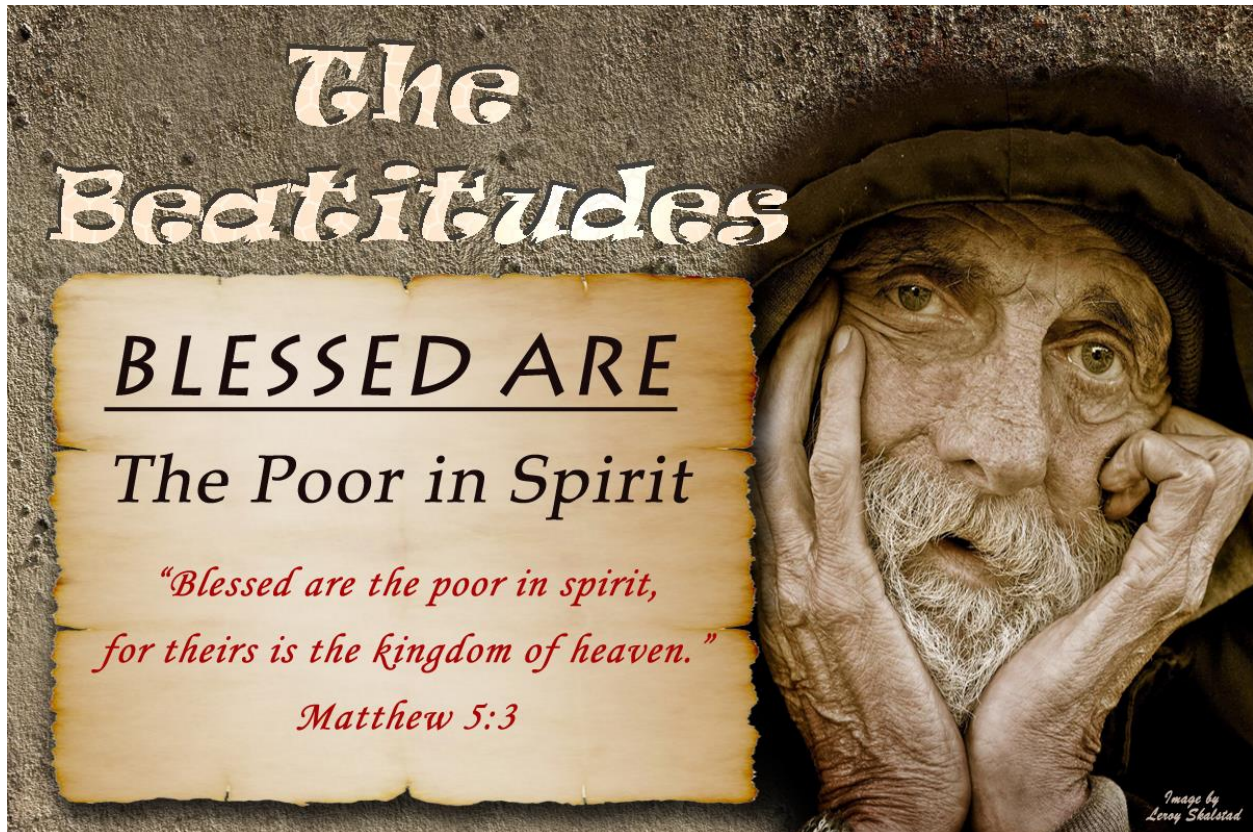


July 3 “Blessed are the Poor in Spirit”

Matthew 5:3

**“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**



Special Music: “Blessed” Vertical Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vYnjFsfhusA>

DANIEL'S DILLEMMA

Daniel sat in the small alcove of his apartment where he kept his paperwork. The bills in front of him far exceeded the money in his depleted bank account. Several of those bills were well past due. A single fixture in the alcove was the only source of light in the apartment as he had been trying to save on his electric bill. The air conditioner was off, leaving him uncomfortable in the muggy heat. Since his wife had passed two months before, the apartment had been eerily silent. He had never been much of a television watcher and didn't want to listen to music. He did not want to be cheered up. He was in mourning and did not want to let go. Between the hospital and funeral expenses, the loss of their savings during COVID, and the closing of the restaurant he managed, his only source of income was Social Security which he had been forced to take early.

Trying to budget what little income was available, he tried to prioritize his bills. Daniel had always paid his bills on time. Now, he didn't know how he was going to come up with enough money to eat for the next few weeks. There was a life insurance policy on his wife, but the insurance company had been very slow in paying. Daniel was not the only one who had lost a loved one during this time and the sheer amount of paperwork and the number of claims had put policy payouts way behind. Daniel had considered bankruptcy but none of the lawyers he had reached out to had called him back.

The way things were going, he would be living out of his car in a few months. At least that was paid for, even if it was on its last legs, just like he was.

He had called and talked with his pastor because he had not been able to enter the church since the funeral and was unable to give his tithe, both of which he knew were excuses. The pastor had not been much help other than to say that he would be praying for Daniel. Daniel didn't want to go to church because he was embarrassed and didn't want anyone to feel sorry for him. In his heart, he knew that was silly, they his fellow believers loved him, and he could really use their support and fellowship to lift his spirits.

That is when he remembered Jessica. Daniel and Jessica really hadn't talked much at church, but they were both on the Financial Oversight committee. Jessica was a young accountant that attended the church and helped to keep the church financial records in order. In her day job, she consulted with people regarding their financial future. She was a licensed financial counselor and retirement expert. While Jessica didn't usually get involved with people in Daniel's situation, he thought that she might have some ideas on how he might get through these difficult times.

He looked in the church directory, found her number, and gave her a call. The call went straight to her voicemail and Daniel glanced up at the clock. It was after midnight! No wonder she didn't pick up. He was embarrassed that he had dialed her number at this time of night. Still, he left her a quick message that he would like to speak to her. His voice was obviously distressed with the weight on his shoulders. As he left his number at the end of the message and hung up the phone, he felt a little better. It had taken a lot of courage to admit that he was in this much trouble and needed help.

Knowing there was little more he could do, he turned the light off and headed for bed. Maybe something would break tomorrow and bring a little relief to his plight. The hall was exceptionally dark and quiet as he made his way to the bedroom.

He had just sat down on the side of the bed to get ready to try and sleep when the phone rang. He immediately thought, "Who could be calling at this time tonight? Where are people's manners?" Then he remembered that he had been just as rude when he had called Jessica without looking at the clock.

He picked up the phone and asked who it was with an exasperated sigh. "Daniel? Daniel? Is that you? Are you okay?" Jessica started talking about how she was worried about him and confused by his phone call. She wanted to know how she could help.

"Jessica," he said, "I am so sorry. I did not know what time it was when I called. I truly apologize."

"Forget about that, Daniel," Jessica answered, "I haven't seen you since your wife passed. I have picked up the phone several times to call and check on you but stopped because I thought I might be intruding. I've missed you at church. How can I help?"

Daniel gave Jessica a brief overview of what was going on and how he was struggling. He was almost in tears as he finished the story. Daniel had not repeated the story out loud and now it seemed almost surreal to him. Jessica listened patiently as Daniel struggled through the chronicle of events.

“Daniel,” Jessica spoke, “I am so very sorry this is happening to you, but here is what you are going to do. You will come to my office tomorrow at 10am with all your paperwork. You do have options. My team of accountants and lawyers will go through everything, and we will figure out the best way to take care of you. Jesus and I love you. Everything is going to be okay. Will you be there?”

Daniel was flabbergasted. He had thoughtlessly called Jessica in the middle of the night, and she had reached back out with such kindness. “I will be there, Jessica. Thank you so very much.”

Jessica then prayed with Daniel on the phone before they said good night. Daniel felt a huge weight come off his shoulders and thanked Jesus for this opportunity. The guilt and dread faded and he was able to rest knowing that God was still in control.

Sometimes, we just have to realize that we are at the end of our rope before we ask for help. When we hit bottom, Jesus is right there to lift us back up.

I love this quote from the book “Leonard Cohen in His Own Words” by Jim Devlin.

“I’m very fond of Jesus Christ. He may be the most beautiful guy who walked the face of this earth. Any guy who says ”Blessed are the poor. Blessed are the meek” has got to be a figure of unparalleled generosity and insight and madness...a man who declared himself to stand among the thieves, the prostitutes and the homeless. His position cannot be comprehended. It is an inhuman generosity. A generosity that would overthrow the world if it was embraced, because nothing would weather that compassion. I’m not trying to alter the Jewish view of Jesus Christ. But to me, in spite of what I know about the history of legal Christianity, the figure of the man has touched me.”

Leonard Cohen

Cohen was a Jew from birth, but he said of his faith, “I am religious in that I know the difference between grace and guilt.” If you don’t recognize the name, Leonard Cohen was the composer who wrote “Hallelujah,” a song that has been covered by so many artists today.

Can we see Jesus through the eyes of Leonard Cohen? Can a Jew actually have an appreciation for Jesus without believing in the deification of Our Lord? Can the human side of Jesus Christ bring a sense of revelation even among non-believers?

Picture this for a moment. Jesus has chosen his twelve Jewish disciples and started going through the countryside healing the sick, forgiving sins, gaining followers, and teaching people about how they should be living their lives and what the law actually means. He did all this while training these twelve men to continue his work when he was gone. The roads are dusty. The crowds are noisy. Some people listen to what Jesus is saying and others are there for the spectacle. He and his disciples are even asked to go away from several places because they seem to be upsetting people.

Jesus is walking along the road and comes to what scholars believe to be Mount Eremos, which lies between Gennesaret and Capernaum. He looks behind him and sees the huge crowd that is following him, trying to hang on his every word. He has struck a chord with these people, and they are driven to hear more. What Jesus has been talking about is so different from what they have been taught in the synagogues for centuries. He is constantly exhibiting radical love and grace to people shunned by society.

Jesus climbs onto the mountainside and watches as the people gather around him eager to hear what he has to say. There is an anticipation of what is to come, and the crowd becomes strangely quiet as Jesus begins to speak to them. The Sermon on the Mount begins with Matthew 5 and continues through Matthew seven. It is filled with teachings, parables, and explanations. But it all begins with what we know as The Beatitudes, statements about the “blessed.” There was a time when memorizing The Beatitudes was an essential part of a

Christian education. Not so much anymore. We've lost something because we do not embrace these teachings like our parents and grandparents did.

As Christians, we identify with the deity of Jesus so easily. We embrace the cross, the resurrection, the miracles. We bathe in the waters of salvation and we enjoy the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. But do we truly embrace the humanity of Christ, the man who stood on the side of a mountain and said,

**“Blessed are the poor in spirit,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”**

What does that even mean? How can we identify with that?

We know what poor means. To us, poor is the opposite of wealth. We can grasp the single dimension of the term “poor” because there is a foundation for poorness that we can all identify with. But rich? ...well rich is somewhat relative. To someone starving with no place to sleep, even someone that we consider at poverty level can seem to be rich.

But what does it mean to be poor in spirit? And why does the Kingdom of Heaven belong to those who are poor in spirit? I always believed that the Kingdom of Heaven belonged, in part, to me; that I was an heir to the Kingdom because I believed in Christ. Color me confused.

I want you to think about the story we started with today. When did Daniel reach out and seek help for his problem? It wasn't until he was at the end of his rope. The bottom of the barrel. That place that is so dark, light cannot seem to

reach in and provide the least bit of comfort. That point where we feel there is no way for us to continue. The dead end. That overwhelming, let me sit in the dark, curl up in a corner, “I don’t want to talk to anyone or be around anyone,” lock me in the closet and throw away the key moment.

I don’t know if you have ever been there. I admit to having been there a few times, myself. I have stared into that darkness begging for a way out. I have known so many people that have been in that moment where they could not think clearly and afraid to call out for help. I knew people who were unable to reach out in an effort to find hope, and it ended badly for them. I have buried friends and family that reached that point and could not find the fortitude to make the call or seek guidance and light, even though an answer was close at hand. That instant is the moment when one realizes that they are at the point of spiritual bankruptcy. Poor in spirit. That point of realization that they cannot save themselves. No matter how many people they help, no matter how much money they give, no matter how much volunteer work they do, they cannot balance the scales without help.

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We have a tendency to think that people create their own messes, and it is true that some do. But that does not relieve us of our responsibility for compassion, grace, and mercy. There are also those people whose world falls in upon them through no fault of their own, Too often our response is that God is

punishing them even though we can't see what they could possibly have done wrong. But there must have done something deplorable there for God to be so angry with them. That is a very Old Testament viewpoint. That's not the way God works. To believe that is the case ignores grace and mercy. I also want to make it perfectly clear that people can be on top of the world financially, physically, mentally, and professionally, and still being spiritually bankrupt.

What is this point of spiritual bankruptcy all about? How can Jesus call that this is a blessing? How can he teach that this is a blessing? Well, that's what this scripture is all about. In truth, spiritual bankruptcy is that moment when we realize that in spite of everything we have going for us, we are still missing something. We have a hole in our soul that we simply cannot fill with earthly things. No amount of money, exercise, education, politics, good looks or any other earthly thing is going to plug that hole in our soul. When we reach that point where we accept that nothing we do on our own can fill that hole, when we realize that there is more to the universe than... well... the universe, when we come to understand that we have crossed the line into spiritual bankruptcy, that moment becomes a point where we can plug into our creator. At that point, our sole desire is to fill that hole. And the only thing that will fill it, is God's love.

But we have to reach out our hand. We have to want to make contact. We have to want to let God fill the hole and make us complete. We have to admit that we are inadequate and need to humble ourselves before our creator, acknowledging that we need his help. The problem with this is that we can be spiritually bankrupt without ever realizing it. There are people who are well off

that believe that they are obviously blessed by God because of all the worldly things that surround them. They think, “I am truly blessed because I have a great job, a nice car, a big house, healthy children, and I get three weeks of vacation every year, and I don’t even pray or go to church.” That is someone who is spiritually bankrupt and oblivious to the fact. But with the right words and the right situation, a light can dawn even within those hearts and help them see what is missing.

Some people refer to that moment as a “Salvation Moment.” However, I prefer to think of as the moment we get plugged into the passion, grace, and mercy of our all-loving God. Jesus died for the sins of all mankind, even those who don’t believe. But the free gift of salvation offered by Jesus Christ has to be accepted for the connection to be made complete. Acceptance of that gift means that we understand we have done nothing to deserve the gift, that we are a sinful and pride driven people. That Jesus died on the cross fully aware of how sinful and prideful we are. When we are able to drop those sins at the foot of the cross, plead for forgiveness, and throw our pride into the flames of sacrifice, a connection is made through Jesus Christ to our Creator who made all things, including us.

Once that connection is established, we are plugged into the power of God, and we are able to be the hands and feet of Jesus. We are able to be like Jessica and return that call in the middle of the night, knowing it is what Jesus expects of us. We find joy in our opportunity to serve.

We all need to tie a couple of things together to truly understand what this is really all about. Leonard Cohen could see value and grace in the teachings of Jesus the man. We, as Christians, can see the value of Jesus as deity, the Messiah, the savior of the world. But it is too easy for a Christians to put Jesus on an unreachable pedestal if we do not appreciate and comprehend what Leonard Cohen was trying to tell us. We cannot disassemble the nature of Christ into two separate entities. Jesus was fully God and fully Man, a joining of the Spirit of God with the mortality of a human being. He could not achieve what he set out to do without being equally both.

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When we reach out to God at the point of our spiritual bankruptcy, it is then that we become heirs to the Kingdom of God as he fills us with his mercy and grace. I ask that you ponder your spirit this week and check your balance. When we gave our lives to Christ, did we realize that he was filling that hole in our soul and making us whole and complete? Do we understand that we are heirs to the Kingdom by the simple act of letting go of the rope and taking his hand? We need to remember that moment every day and in turn share that moment with others. We can and should answer that call in the middle of the night from those struggling with that same spiritual hole we found ourselves in and allow Jesus to use us to bring healing to their soul.

God bless you all! Amen

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