

FOLLOWERS OF THE WAY: "Blessed is Poverty?"
St. Matthew 5:3

If you desire to be the president of the United States, you need to develop a platform upon which you will build your political agenda. You must provide answers to the biggest problems facing Americans and how you will solve them. Finally, you need to be able to motivate people to vote you into office.

The 'Sermon on the Mount' was not a political statement. Rather, it was Jesus sharing his heart and mind regarding the spiritual problems people were facing in his day. And there was something wrong, a sickness that infected everyone. It poisoned the wealthy and the poor, neighbors and communities.

And, when there is something awry we always look for a scapegoat. In Jesus' day, it was Rome. If the Jews could somehow get out from under the tyranny of the Empire, with its governors and their tax burdens, they would be free at last.

Jesus would not allow his people to play the victim card, however. The problems were not just external but internal too. Their society was a class-based society, and your worth was based on where you were in that system.

So, it is difficult to treat others as you wished to be treated. The concept of equality did not work there or often, here. And, Jesus correctly diagnosed the problem: everyone judged everyone else, and what exacerbated this was the huge gap between the rich and the have-nots.

If we get this, we will be well on the way to understanding why this first beatitude shows Jesus' primary moral concern. The blessing on those in poverty was not because they needed help or welfare, because they did not have an addiction to possessions or money.

I am sometimes curious as to why Jesus centered on children as he did. He used them as an illustration of who could enter the Kingdom of heaven. Perhaps it was because children can admit their need and are unafraid to ask for anything. Current child development literature indicates that, a child's beliefs and values are accepted because of their unquestioned trust in their parents.

It doesn't take much reading in the gospels, to see that there was an enormous difference between the rich and the poor in Palestine then and now. This is why Jesus' first beatitude attacked the obvious sign of inequality in Israel and beyond.

Jesus speaks more about this issue than any other issue of human conduct. More than murder, more than sexual misconduct, more than political corruption. It is, therefore, understandable that Jesus would begin the Beatitudes with a blessing on the poor. He believed that those who were not consumed with the desire for wealth were already blessed. He believed that everyone was of equal worth.

By implication then, the rest of Jesus' blessings become possible when equality is accepted and put into practice. This means that we accept all people as equals not because they have the same income, or are of the same race or social standing, but because it is so.

This is the reason Jesus' attacks our addiction to wealth and 'things.' When one's worth is determined by what one 'possesses,' then the possibility of equality is destroyed. Addiction to drugs is a plague of our nation. Addicts have no self-control and are no longer able to make rational choices.

Addiction to wealth and possessions can be even more destructive to relationships. And, the teaching and values of Jesus, are about what directs our relationship with God and each other. In a society where God rules and shows the way we are to live, it is vital that we know and practice these virtues. The Kingdom of God on earth may be measured by how well "***Followers of the Way***" are living these virtues.

The early church knew this. In 1st Timothy, we read: "***We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But we have food and clothing; we will be content with that. For the love of money is the root of all evil.***"

But, too soon the church traded these teachings for St. Paul's emphasis on God powerfully taking control, and someday in the future coming of the kingdom in the world. This was much easier than owning personal responsibility for our lives, and our relationships with others. To live in the values of Jesus is hard work, but they are the virtues that build Christian community and healthy relationships. It is there that the Kingdom of God is found.

The Pharisees were always testing Jesus like pesky flies. One day they ask him, "**What day will the Kingdom of God arrive?**" Jesus answered, "**The Kingdom doesn't depend on upon you. People won't say it is here or there because the Kingdom of God is within you.**" You see, God must rule in your heart before God can rule in society.

For blessedness to begin, we must cry honestly, "**God help me!**" Those who are poor in spirit portray certain qualities: awe that produces praise and wonder; they understand their need; and are open to what God might have for them. J. B. Phillips marvelously translates today's gospel lesson, "**How happy are the humble-minded, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs!**"

The reverse of humility is pride. The fabulous Baptist preach, Charles Spurgeon, cautioned us never to be proud of 'race, place, or face.' Pride keeps us from all the joy God wants to give us. C.S. Lewis said, "**Pride leads to every other vice: it is the complete anti-God state of mind. Pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or even common sense.**"

It is possible for us to become like Aesop's frog, who longed to be as big as the ox, so he kept puffing himself up until he finally exploded! Throughout Jesus' ministry, he always spoke to humility when he found it. He understood that religious pride was the maximum hindrance to blessedness, in his most loved Israel.

The Jews in this 1st century believed that if they could overthrow the Roman Empire, then the Kingdom of God would arrive. To change this mindset, Jesus needed to get his vision out there so that people could know what he was about.

Again, this all began with the need for equality with all. And this would not happen until 'things' and money ceased to be the power that proclaims who is worthy and who is not. This power would remain, however, until the gap between the rich and the poor is removed. This dichotomy will be there as long as the addiction to money remains.

It is true that inequality before the law cannot be changed, until worthiness is measured not by the color of skin, or family of origin, or political position, or gender, or religious affiliation.

Can we now see the result of our admitting our need to God? Both the power and blessing of God are available to those who demonstrate genuine humility. And, as we practice this in our lives and relationships, we discover the ever increasing power of the Holy Spirit working with our spirit.

Later on in the "Sermon on the Mount" we will hear these clear words of Jesus: ***"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear. . . . But seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given you besides."*** (St. Matthew 5:25, 33)

This is the reason why Jesus begins his litany of blessings with "***Blessed are the poor in spirit.***" So, in this political atmosphere, Jesus has opened his platform with his first plank. To cry with those who cry and to serve others with compassion, we must see them as equals. Those who put this beatitude into practice will receive a blessing. Alleluia. Amen.