

## Kingdom Justice and the Poor

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### Matthew 5:3; 25:31-46

“*How happy are the depressed!*” Well, no. That is not really a plausible reading of “*poor in spirit.*” (Mt 5:3). But it hints at how startling, even absurd, Jesus’ words must have sounded to his listeners--and if we’re honest, to us, too. In Luke’s gospel, the beatitude is expressed, “*Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God,*” (Lk 6:20). But who wants to be poor? Poor at anything, poor in spirit or anything else? The actress Sophie Tucker once said, “*Listen, I’ve been poor, and I’ve been rich. And believe me, rich is better!*”

So we need to get a handle on this. First of all, there is no difference in meaning of the two renderings of this beatitude. The “poor in spirit” are so because they are poor, and are lacking basic help. The OT passages we read speak of God’s concern for the poor. The OT prophets speak again and again of God’s judgment and displeasure on those who are in large part responsible for these people being poor. The poor here are to some real degree victims of those who have socio-economic and political power, and do little to help the poor. Both in the ancient world and today, just one illness, one divorce, one addiction, one job loss can keep you from paying your bills, get you evicted, render you homeless--and you--we--can become “among the poor,” and so also, “poor in spirit” and with good reason.

Yet, here Jesus announces “*blessing*”, God’s/his blessing on the poor, and when he gave his inaugural sermon at Nazareth, the first words out of his mouth--quoting from Isaiah--were, “*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor...to proclaim release to the captives...to let the oppressed go free,*

*to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,"* (Lk 4:18). Now, in Matthew's gospel, this Sermon on the Mount--in a sense--functions the way Jesus' Nazareth sermon does in Luke's gospel. As I said a few weeks ago, it sets out Jesus' Kingdom Agenda--what the kingdom of heaven/God (there is no difference there) he preached and ministered is all about--and therefore what we are to be about as well. The Beatitudes are declarations of God's agenda--God's priorities--as He in Jesus is bringing his kingdom on earth. This beatitude declares the good news that Isaiah's prophetic kingdom vision of God's justice is happening. For Jesus' whole message, while addressed to all, was an especially welcome word to the poor, oppressed, humble, needy, weak, and lowly--the poor and poor in spirit. It is clear that the poor--while not the only--are a primary concern of God and of his Son Jesus.

So, we have Jesus' opening sermon which begins with Beatitude 1 about the poor. Then we also read the last sermon teaching of Jesus in Matthew's gospel, in ch. 25. It is interesting that Jesus more than once castigates those who are judgmental of others. He particularly castigates the religious and upright members of his society for their judgment of others. He frequently calls them out as "hypocrites." But in Jesus' final sermon in this gospel--a bookend 3-chapters, chs. 23-25 to the 3-chapter Sermon on the Mount, chs. 5-7)--the same theme about the poor, oppressed, and disadvantaged comes through. Here is depicted the future final judgment, when the true Judge of all, rightfully sits and judges all: *"All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another..."* (25: 32-33). And what is the basis of his judgment? It is not that people said they believed in Jesus, or that they were "born again." No, it was what they did in terms of the "least of these." That was the true

measure of their lives. They were/are the ones being “rich toward God.” That is how Jesus judges who enters his eternal kingdom and who does not. That’s pretty strong stuff. And it may even sound strange to us.

Now notice that Jesus says here in the beatitude, those who are blessed receive the “kingdom of heaven/God.” And once again, we need reminded of the Christian hope. It is not heaven, it is God’s kingdom on earth and resurrection bodies for living in that kingdom on earth. And when Jesus proclaims the beatitudes, he is speaking of that kingdom--that presence and force of God--that Jesus released into the world by his life, ministry, death and resurrection, and then the Holy Spirit--the Spirit of Jesus--that will empower this followers, his disciples.

Until we are clear in our minds what Jesus’ kingdom agenda is about--for himself and his disciples--we will not be getting what Jesus is about at all. Now, we know the most famous verse in the Bible: “*For God so loved the world....*”; and we know the rest. But many have failed to grasp that very first phrase: “*God so loved the world...*” And he has not come to dispense with the world, but to redeem the world, and those in it, and redeem it and put his followers in it as well. The Beatitudes say “*the poor are blessed,*” and so the kingdom of or from heaven--God’s Rule--is and will be theirs on earth. The phrase “eternal life” that we also have in John 3:16 is a bit misleading in English, if by it we understand that eternal life is life in heaven. The word simply translated “*eternal*” is literally “*the life of the eternal age,*” and that in context means “*on this earth.*” Hence, Jesus’ teaching us to pray, “*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth...*”

This truth is more explicit in the 3d beatitude, “*Blessed are the meek, for they will*

*inherit the earth,*” (vs. 5). Why would he say that, if heaven is the object of salvation? Because it isn’t. See, all the Beatitudes are speaking about the same collective people in God’s kingdom to come on earth--the poor, those who mourn, the meek, the hungry and thirsty for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, and those persecuted for Jesus’ sake. For such are the followers of Jesus, and for such they are concerned. Following Jesus, you see, or discipleship is not about believing the right things in order to escape this world and go to heaven. It’s about doing the right things as part of God’s plan to redeem, to save, the world. Disciples of Jesus live with a grand, glorious vision of the world to come-- the kingdom come--while engaging in the tangible actions of love and service like Jesus their Lord. That is why the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “Being a Christian is less about cautiously avoiding sin than about courageously and actively doing God’s will.” So to say it again, discipleship is not about believing the right things in order to escape the world. It’s about doing the right things as part of God’s plan to redeem the world.

But to come back to Beatitude 1, we need to understand that Jesus was announcing--by his words and ministry--God’s kingdom was beginning to happen on earth. He was the living embodiment of it. He was bringing to fruition what the OT prophets envisioned for God’s People. The OT law (examples which we read; Ex 22:21-23; Dt 15:7-11) made clear that the poor had rights, and those rights were not to be infringed. They were to be able to have an economic base necessary to guarantee them a livelihood and personal liberty. The kings of Israel would be judged according to how they defended the rights of the poor, judging their cause with justice, delivering “*the needy...the poor and him who has no helper,*” (Ps 72:2,4,12). The prophets spoke of

how kings and people dealt with the poor as the true measure of faith. Jeremiah wrote, “[King Josiah] judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord,” (Jer 22:16). Proverbs 19:17 says, “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and will be repaid in full.” Hear these verses from Isaiah 58: “Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them...if you offer your food to the hungry, and satisfy the needs of the afflicted...” (Isa 58:7, 10). Is that not what Jesus addresses in Matthew 25? And then Isaiah follows the words, “then your light shall rise in the darkness...” (vs. 8). And what are Jesus’ first words after the Beatitudes? “You are the light of the world,” (Mt 5:14).

So, what we see Jesus doing is bringing to this world--the world over which He is now Lord--the kingdom of God. And so he announces that with the kingdom, there are reversals of things as they are. So Jesus announces the new realities that belong to those in the kingdom of God, but he also is the model of them as well. He was--as we shall see as we go along--comforting the mourning (even raising the dead!), meek, hungry and thirsty for God’s righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, peacemaker, persecuted for righteousness’ sake, reviled and uttered against falsely. As to this first Beatitude, He “had nowhere to lay his head,” but depended upon God and others for support (Lk 9:58). And likewise, as he was, the disciples were called to learn and to be. And so are we.

So, these first words--this first Beatitude--is certainly not what people expected to hear out of the mouth of this new prophet. But it sets the stage--along with the other Beatitudes, and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount--of the great changes that have come and are coming into the world over which Jesus Christ is Lord. And as it pertains to this

Beatitude, about the poor and poor in spirit--for those reasons we have spoken of--Jesus warns about wealth. In the ancient world, and modern, people--even religious people--often regard wealth as a blessing. Jesus does not. In one place, Jesus tells the disciples to *"sell your possessions, and give to the poor,"* (Lk 12:33). To a would-be disciple who cannot comply, he says, *"How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God,"* (Lk 18:24). *"For where your treasure is, there is your heart also,"* (Mt 6:21).

When Jesus said about the would-be disciple who could not comply with Jesus' command, *"How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God,"* the disciples were shocked, and marveled, *"Who then can be saved?"*--meaning, not going to heaven, but blessed, well-off, whole? And Jesus answered, *"What is impossible for men is possible with God."* You see, even at this point, even the disciples thought that wealth was a sign of God's favor. Jesus did not. He saw it as often very problematic.

Now then, what must we grasp from this Beatitude? First, God's kingdom of salvation is for this world, not heaven. The Kingdom of God or Heaven is for the earth. Two, with the kingdom coming in Jesus, there are reversals of things. The world as it is is not as it ought to be. Therefore, God in his redemption of it through Jesus is putting this world to its rights--the rights of God's Kingdom, God's Rule over all things as they ought to be. Three, with Jesus--his life, ministry, teaching, death, and resurrection--that kingdom is present in power among us and in us by the Spirit of Jesus. Four, our lives are to be aligned with the kingdom priorities and concerns. We are to begin to make real now in so far as we can what will one day be made real completely. Five, this practicing the life of the kingdom is not merely a personal or religious matter. It is that--to be sure.

It is certainly to change our lives personally and religiously. But it is much more than that.

Part of our problem with what Jesus says in both Matthew 5 and Matthew 25 is that we have all too often considered what Jesus says here a matter of implication. If we are Christian, then--we say--we will be inclined to do these things pertaining to the poor and the needy. If our faith is right, we say we will have the right ethic. But Jesus words clearly indicate that they are not merely a matter of implication or added on ethics. They are not just a matter of implication, but integration. They are constitutive of following Jesus. But it's not a matter of doing these things in order to enter the kingdom. It's the reverse. Because we are part of Jesus' kingdom, we cannot help but do these things. We are so much so like our Lord, we are those persons who said at the judgment, "*When did we see you, Lord, hungry, naked, in prison, etc. etc.?*" They were so concerned about others--as was Jesus--they were actually like him. Their lives showed they had learned to love others as themselves. They loved their neighbors as themselves.

But that being said, what we believe and practice in terms of our own faith and lives, and as the church collectively, we are to practice in the larger spheres of the world as well. Our concern for the poor and the needy does not stop at the church door. For the kingdom of God does not stop at the church door. The kingdom of God includes the totality of human existence everywhere. For the kingdom of God is that society upon earth in which God's will is done as it is in heaven. Thus, we must carry our faith's concerns--our Lord's concerns--to every avenue of life as we can. We are to carry them into the larger arena of our society, economics, and politics.

For disciples of Jesus live with a grand, glorious vision--knowing its presence

now and to come--and so must not be satisfied with the status quo. Disciples of Jesus challenge in appropriate ways the powers that be, and work for justice--especially for the poor, the disenfranchised, the destitute, any who are caught between the powers that be. Christians remember that the poor have rights, and those rights were not to be infringed. The poor are to be able to have an economic base necessary to guarantee them a livelihood and personal safety and liberty. Therefore, we must put our politicians to the test. When they make budgets that enlarge our war-making ability but cut food stamps to the needy, what do we think Jesus would have us do? When there are decisions made in the higher echelons of business and banking that throw the poor and others out of their homes, and no one is held responsible, how is that justice? As John Calvin commented, *"A just and well-regulated government will be distinguished for maintaining the rights of the poor and afflicted,"* (on Ps 82).

When do our politicians ever speak of the poor anymore? Republicans don't. Democrats hardly ever. And Jesus didn't say, *"even as you did it unto the middle class, you did unto me"*! You see, we are all accountable at all levels, to greater and lesser degrees for our witness to and action in the name of the Kingdom. So, we must hear Jesus' words, *"Blessed are the poor--poor in spirit--for theirs is the kingdom."* And in his words at the Great Judgment, *"Just as you did it--or didn't--do it to the least of these, you did it--or didn't--do it to me."* The Church--WE--are supposed to show here and now in a provisional way--in so far as we can--what is ultimately coming with the kingdom and its fullness, when all the things Jesus declares are realized in fact and in full for all the world. *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom."* Amen.



