

“Poor in Spirit”

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” This verse is the key that unlocks the Beatitudes – these blessings that Jesus announces here in His sermon on the mount.

We hear what Jesus is teaching, and naturally we ask ourselves – “Am I blessed?” Well, are you “poor in spirit”? We’ll get to what that means in just a bit – but before we do – I want to explain why it is the key to the rest of the beatitudes.

Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit” – and then He says, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Notice, He says IS – present tense – the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are poor in spirit, already now!

The rest of the beatitudes use the future tense – “they SHALL be comforted ... they SHALL inherit the earth,” etc. Only when we get to the last beatitude do we return to this present tense language – “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of things against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward IS great in heaven ...” The reward IS yours, already now, even if it is kept for you in heaven.

So back to this “poor in spirit” language. What does this mean? On the surface, we don’t like how that sounds – after all, being “poor” is not something we desire to be. Simply put, “poor in spirit” means to be poor with regards to spiritual things – bankrupt when it comes to God the Holy Spirit.

This is who we are according to our fallen nature. Because of Adam’s sin (which all mankind has inherited) – and because of our own sins – we are by nature spiritually dead, blind, and enemies of God. When it comes to the things of God – to His kingdom – to the things of the Spirit – we are poor, in and of ourselves.

The Scriptures speak of our condition before God rescues us, saves us – converts us from unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ.

St. Paul, writing to the Christians in Ephesus, says: “And you WERE dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience ...” (Ephesians 2:1-2)

To the Corinthian Christians he writes: “The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2:14). All people are, by nature, blinded to the things of the Spirit of God.

And to the Christians in Rome the apostle says: “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by His life” (Rom. 5:10).

This is what it means to be “poor in spirit” – to not have God the Holy Spirit, His work, and all the gifts He bestows. To be “poor in spirit” is to stand before God with nothing to show, nothing to give, nothing deserving of His kindness and favor.

That is who all people are by nature – but Jesus teaches that – those who are “poor in spirit” are also “blessed” – “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

If one is poor – dead, blind and an enemy of God – then only God can change that. God must go to work – and He does – through the person and work of His Son, and the Holy Spirit. God raises the spiritually dead by forgiving all their sin – and thereby, taking away their death.

God, by His Holy Word, reveals His love for us, His grace and mercy toward us – so that the blind can see God for who He truly is – so that they may believe that God’s grace conquers their unworthiness.

And as we heard St. Paul say – while we were enemies of God, He reconciled us to Himself through His Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Dearly beloved, that’s why Holy Baptism is such a great treasure! It is God at work to convert the sinner from unbelief to faith in Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit works through this water and the Word – revealing our spiritual poverty – and creating and sustaining a faith that trusts in Christ, not ourselves. God at work, resurrecting the sinner from death to life – enabling the blind to see the things of the Holy Spirit – reconciling the rebellious child to his Father in heaven.

Blessed are you Benjamin – for yours IS the kingdom of heaven! The Holy Spirit working faith in him – a faith that believes, in and of himself, he is poor – but also trusts that in Christ he is rich!. And blessed are all of you who trust in Jesus Christ alone – for all the treasures of Christ, and His kingdom, are yours!

Because Christ and His kingdom belong to you – even as you mourn – you “shall be comforted” – for Christ has conquered death and gives you eternal life. And so also all the others blessings (the beatitudes) that come to those who are united to Christ by faith – who are poor in self, but rich in Christ.

The earth is yours to be used for your good, and the benefit of others – Christ’s righteousness satisfies you – you receive mercy – you shall see God. Even persecutions are a blessing – a reminder that you are in Christ, you live in His kingdom – and so the devil, the world, and your sinful nature fight against you – but they cannot overcome Christ and His kingdom.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs IS the kingdom of heaven.” Blessed are YOU, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.