

+++ In the Name of Jesus ++

+ Date: 1 Feb 2026 (4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany, series

A) Title: “Blessed Are The Poor In Spirit”

Text: Matt 5:1-12 (esp. 3)

<sup>1</sup> Now when Jesus saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him, <sup>2</sup> and He began to teach them. He said:

<sup>3</sup> “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

<sup>7</sup> Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.

<sup>8</sup> Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

<sup>9</sup> Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

<sup>10</sup> Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup> “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

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If you’ve been here over the last couple of weeks, you might have noticed a pattern in our readings and sermons. Two weeks ago, we heard how Jesus started to collect his first disciples in the Gospel of John. Last week, we heard how Matthew describes that same disciple-making process in a little different way. Today, we pick up right where that story left off, again in Matthew, with all of those “first disciples” now in place. In fact, they’re literally right there in the front row, as Jesus “**opens his mouth**” for the first time here in Matthew’s Gospel, and says: “**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**” (3)

As we heard, Jesus goes on to deliver a bunch of other blessings too, but this is the one that catches our attention, because it’s so obviously aimed *at* those brand-new disciples sitting right there in the front row. “**Blessed are the poor in spirit**”—well, look at who these guys are, who Jesus is talking to! They had just *left everything* to “**come and follow him**” (nets, boats, fish, and families)! If anybody there that day felt “**poor**,” it was them.

Which raises the question: Is there any room for *you and me* in this blessing too? Are we “poor enough” to *qualify* for “**the kingdom of heaven**”?

It depends what kind of poverty we’re talking about. Many of us *feel* poorer these days than we used to. It’s true, the price of some things (like gas) has been dropping, but other things (like groceries) have been going up like crazy. Food prices here in Canada as a whole have gone up by 6.2% in the last year... meat has gone up 13.6%... beef, 16.8%. If you have a small appetite, or a small family, or if you choose not to eat a lot of meat—maybe those particular changes haven’t affected you very much. But *some* of us, at least, *feel* like we can at least *start* to identify with *a bit* of the concern that Jesus so clearly expresses for “**the poor**,” here in this blessing.

But here’s the thing. It’s only when we compare our situation right now with what we enjoyed a few years ago, that *most* of us have *any* basis at all *for* considering ourselves to be poor. In fact, our

challenge is to realize how incredibly *rich* we are, compared to the *real* poverty that Jesus mentions so often in the Gospels.

- Think about that widow he saw in the Temple, putting her last penny into the offering-plate.
- Or the woman he talks about in a parable, who loses a coin and tears her whole house apart looking for it.
- Or the unemployed men who hang around the marketplace all day (in another parable), waiting for someone to hire them.
- Or the tenant-farmers we hear about (in several parables), who've lost control of their land and rely on the whim of a distant land-owner to let them go on farming, even as sharecroppers.

I doubt that any of us here today live with our hands *that* close to our mouths. Maybe a few of us are *close*, sometimes—but for the most part, both the *scope* and the *scale* of *our* poverty are hard to compare with the desperation that so many people had to deal with, day in and day out, in Jesus's time. Yes, of course: as Jesus himself put it, “**the poor will always be with us.**” (Matt 26:11) But *they* (the truly poor) are *not*, for the most part, *us* (21<sup>st</sup> century Canadians). When we compare *our* situation with the situation those original disciples found themselves in, as they were hearing Jesus speak these words (especially after they had left their homes and jobs to “**come and follow him**”)—well, most of us have very little either to worry about or complain about. We have more in common with “the richest of the rich,” in our Saviour's day, than “the physically poor” of his time.

This, though, that this is where the *nuance* of this blessing comes in. The *parallel* version of this blessing in the Gospel of Luke is two words shorter than what we're hearing here in Matthew. Over there in Luke, Jesus says, “**Blessed are the poor.**” (Luke 6:20) Here in Matthew, he says, “**Blessed are the poor in spirit.**” Those two extra words make a huge difference! What they tell us is that the people Jesus *really* considers blessed (more than that: the people Jesus actually *causes* to be blessed, as he speaks this blessing onto them)—well, those blessed-ones are the people who are not *only* poor in a physical sense, but also *keenly aware* of their poverty. They *suffer* their poverty deeply, *in their spirit*.

There's a difference, isn't there, between *being* poor and *suffering* from poverty. Do you know what I mean? I think about some of the students I taught in Cambodia, in this respect. They were probably the poorest people I've ever met. Many of them lived in thatched houses and got around (most of the time) on bicycles. They could not take clean water for granted, and their diet was pretty limited. *And yet*—as poor as they were, by any objective standard, very few of those people seemed (to me) to be really *suffering* all that much, in their poverty. No, they didn't have much, but (somehow) what they had was *enough*.

Don't misunderstand me, please—I'm trying to be careful in the way I say this! If any of those students *could* have gotten more, absolutely they would have! They were not poor on purpose. Nor did they enjoy the fact that they were poor. But their attitude was pretty much exactly what Paul describes in one of his letters, when he says that “**godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of the world. So, if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.**” (1 Tim 6:6-8)

Someone who is “**poor in spirit,**” on the other hand, truly does *suffer* in their poverty. They *feel* its weight, pressing down on them like a burden, sapping their energy and crushing them. The problem is not only what they don't have, but what that lack-of-having *does* to them. And *in that sense*, you see, even those of us who are relatively “un-poor” *can* also suffer from a really-quite-

devastating “**poverty of spirit.**” The suffering such a person endures *on the inside* is totally real, even though it hardly seems to be related at all to the outer, physical circumstances of their life.

Consider, for instance, the tax collector Jesus describes in one of his parables. When this man went up to the temple to pray, the only thing he manages to blurt out is, “**God, have mercy on me, a sinner.**” (Luke 18:13) Was he physically poor? No! Tax collectors were notorious for squeezing more money out of their fellow-citizens than the Romans required them to remit. So, unless this guy was an *incompetent* tax collector, it’s highly unlikely that he was *physically* poor. And yet the poverty of his spirit “cries out” all the way through this story—as he hardly even dares to come all the way into the temple, but “**stands at a distance,**” and “**will not look up to heaven,**” but “**beats his breast**” as he pleads for a mercy *he knows* he has no right at all to claim. In every last bit of this guy’s spirit, he knows he is a beggar who depends on his Lord for everything.

And this, at last, is where you and I come in. For we too know, and feel, and suffer from, *our* “poverty-of-spirit” before the Lord. Remember how Paul describes this poverty, in Romans chapter 7? “**We know,**” Paul says, “**that God’s Law is spiritual—but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. For I do not understand what I am doing. I do not do what I want—instead, I do what I hate!... [In that sense,] it is no longer [even] I who does it, but the sin that lives in me. For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.... What a wretched person I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?**” (Rom 7:14-15, 17-18, 24)

There are many ways that same “poverty-of-spirit” shows up in our lives too. Aren’t there?

- Sometimes sin *rules* over us, too, exactly the way Paul describes—rising up within us, to the point that it controls us. We feel like its *victims*, even though we also know (on another level) that we are the ones who are doing it! Whether or not we *formally* think of our struggle as an addiction, what they say in AA hits the nail right on the head: “**We admit that we are powerless over alcohol [or whatever this particular sin is, that plagues us]; our lives have become unmanageable.**”
- Other times, our poverty-of-spirit hits us when sin “weasels its way in” between us and the people we love, *driving* us to do and say things we want to take back, later on, but can’t. How miserable we are, when that happens. How painfully we feel our powerlessness.
- Or maybe it’s sickness and death that show us how *utterly* impoverished we are. Maybe we can indeed muster the strength to fight off this or that disease, or patch up this or that part of our body. Modern medicine is a miracle we should all be so thankful for! But at the end of the day, *something* is still going to get us. The wages of sin *will* be paid. Nobody has any ability at all to dodge that reality.

But it is precisely *IN* our “poverty-of-spirit”—not in spite of it!—that Jesus blesses us. “**Blessed are the poor in spirit,**” he says, “**for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**” The reason this is the first of the nine blessings in this list, is because it summarizes and encapsulates all the others. When it comes to God’s Law, there’s a parallel sense that the First Commandment is really the only one we need: If we could only just “**have no other gods**” besides the one true God, none of the other commandments would be necessary. That’s kind of how it is here too, when it comes to the Gospel. When Jesus blesses us in our “**poverty-of-spirit,**” he is also blessing us in *all of our other kinds of need* as well—in our “**mourning,**” and “**meekness,**” and “**hungering-and-thirsting for righteousness,**” and all the way down to the bottom of that list. In fact, Jesus is blessing us *here* in a

way that anticipates *all* the other needs that he knows are going to come up, when he goes on (in the rest of the “Sermon on the Mount”) to *show* us how far we fall short of the standard of perfection God requires. We’re going to be hearing *one* little bit of that “raw law” next week, before we get to Transfiguration Sunday the week after that. Which, again, is why it’s so vitally important for you and me to *receive* this blessing Jesus pronounces on us here, and *cling* to it as a treasure that can never be taken away from us, no matter how poor we are in every other way. “**Blessed are the poor in spirit,**” Jesus says—That is, “**blessed are we, when we are poor in spirit.**” No matter how deep our spiritual poverty ever gets, “**the kingdom of heaven is ours.**”

What a difference it makes, when we take this blessing to heart. Sometimes we think of blessings as if they are little more than a pious wish—you know, as if Jesus was simply saying here, “Gee, I sure *hope* the kingdom of heaven *might* be yours some day!” But that’s not at all what’s going on here, for two reasons. The first is simply grammatical: Jesus uses a present-tense indicative form of the verb “to be,” to point to something that already exists. “**The kingdom of heaven is yours**” he says. He doesn’t say it “could” be ours, or “might” be ours: it “is” ours! And the reason Jesus says it that way is because of who he is. He is the Lord, and what he says, goes.

- At the start of the service, when Jesus says (through the pastor) that our sins are forgiven—they *are* forgiven on the strength of *his* word.
- In the Words of Institution that we hear before holy communion, when our Saviour says “**this is my body, this is my blood**”—again, that’s what that bread and wine *become* (not on the strength of our belief, but because of *his* say-so).
- At the end of the service too, when the Lord blesses us, one more time before we leave this holy place, we can be sure that he *does indeed* “**bless us—and will keep us, and make his face shine upon us, and be gracious to us, and look upon us with his favour, and give us his peace.**”

Absolutely—*how* poor we are in our spirit, because of all the ways sin wears us down! There is nothing at all that you and I can do to lift ourselves out of that poverty. (Pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps is just as impossible before God, as it is in any other part of life.) It’s the *blessing* that God pronounces upon us, *in* our poverty, that *gives* us everything we really need.

Martin Luther once said that “**wealth is the smallest thing on earth, the least gift that God has bestowed on humanity.**” That’s pretty much what Jesus is telling us, here in this blessing too. It is the poor, *especially* those who “**suffer-in-spirit**” *in* their poverty (in the world or before God)—it is to them that the kingdom of heaven belongs.

Thanks be to God. Amen.