

On The Way

The Beatitudes: Poor in Spirit

The first Beatitude is a shock to the system: *Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.* This would have struck the first hearers as both absurd and consoling. Absurd, because the wealthy and strong, the influential and powerful, the Pharisees and Sadducees – weren't *they* the blessed ones? But also consoling, because his words meant that Christ's own blessedness was possible for the rustic, simple Galilean crowd.

It's a shock to our system as well, or it ought to be. Wealth, power, influence, education, credentials, popularity – all those things we value – mean *nothing*. The first step in the life of the blessed is to acknowledge and accept our own nothingness, our complete poverty. This is the first beatitude of detachment – detachment from one's own will, from any sense of sufficiency.

We could more directly convey this beatitude's shocking meaning by phrasing it differently: *You're short of breath, and that's a good thing.* The Greek word for "spirit" also means "breath." Thus, *poor in spirit* could be understood as *short of breath*. We lack what is most necessary for life, gasping and panting for air. Instead of turning to the one Whose breath gives life, we exhaust and discourage ourselves by trying to breathe on our own.

For we don't attain the kingdom of heaven by worldly power or credentials. Instead, we *receive* the kingdom when we acknowledge our nothingness and thus open space for his grace to work. Without that acknowledgement, we remain closed to his grace. Blessed are we when we realize, accept, and live our poverty.

But it's tough to do. Even after his conversion, the Apostle Paul had to learn that his impressive pedigree, accomplishments, and *curriculum vitae* meant nothing. Writing to the Philippians, he gives a list of his achievements and then concludes, "I consider them so much rubbish [the original Greek is stronger: *dung*], that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having any righteousness of my own" (Phil 3:8-9). Until and unless he saw all else as dung, he couldn't gain Christ or be found in him.

Like Paul, we still want a righteousness of our own, a blessedness based on our own accomplishments. But if we're attached to our own works and efforts, we will never participate in Christ's blessedness. To be poor in spirit means to forego any claims on accomplishments. It means to recognize our nothingness and to rejoice that Christ is everything.

This poverty of spirit is the first step in prayer, "for we do not know how to pray as we ought" (Rom 8:26). If we approach God as people full of talent, wisdom, and power, then our prayers find no hearing. He has no time for such people. Only when we begin prayer with the honest acknowledgement of our poverty – *He is the One who is...I am the one who is not* – only then does the conversation really begin. When we acknowledge our spiritual poverty, then the Holy Spirit finds room to enrich us and to pray within us.

Saint Augustine associates this Beatitude with Fear of the Lord. That Gift of the Holy Spirit prompts in us the proper reverence for God as well as the healthy trepidation of being separated from him. By Fear of the Lord, we recognize that we are indeed short of breath and that we must at every moment cling to the one who breathes life into us.

— Fr. Scalia