

The answer will surprise you

Matthew 5:1-3

September 16, 2007

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OK ... But what's the question?

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When Jesus saw the crowds, what did he see?

He saw people. He saw the people. Not an audience, but people. When he spoke, he spoke to people. He didn't address an audience. Do you see the difference? Jesus didn't deliver a prepackaged, one-size-fits-all sermon. He saw people, particular people, and he spoke to them.

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he sat down, the people gathered around him and he began to teach them ... Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them.

When Jesus saw the crowds, what did he see?

He saw people who were poor in spirit. Scattered among the crowds, he saw people who were poor in spirit.

And what did he say to them?

He told them, *You are blessed! The kingdom of heaven belongs to you!* The kingdom of heaven that matters more than anything else. The kingdom of heaven that wise people seek before everything else. The kingdom of heaven that is so precious to people that they give away everything else they have just to have it. The kingdom of heaven that means rest and peace, goodness and wholeness and justice, life and freedom and intimacy with God.

That's the question! The question is: To whom does the kingdom of heaven belong? And the answer will surprise you. It belongs to those who are poor in spirit.

You might expect the answer to be: the saints. The kingdom of heaven belongs to the saints, to those who have worked hard for God's reward, to those who have proved themselves worthy of God's blessing, to those who are especially dedicated, those who are especially faithful, those whose faith is especially strong, to those who may be materially poor, but are spiritually rich.

But Jesus says the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who are poor in spirit.

What does it mean to be “poor in spirit?”

Well, what does it mean to be poor? To be poor means having few resources. It means having to make a little go a long way. To be poor means every day is hard, not easy. It means every day is a struggle just to survive. To be poor means feeling left out, overlooked, ignored, unblest.

Being “poor in spirit” means the same things. It means having few spiritual resources. It means having to make a little faith go a long way. It means every day is hard, not easy. It means every day is a struggle just to hold on to your faith. Being “poor in spirit” means feeling left out, overlooked, ignored, unblest.

I call, I cling, I want — and there is no One to answer — no One on Whom I can cling — no, No One. — Alone ... Where is my Faith — even deep down right in there is nothing, but emptiness & darkness — My God — how painful is this unknown pain — I have no Faith — I dare not utter the words & thoughts that crowd in my heart — & make me suffer untold agony.

So many unanswered questions live within me afraid to uncover them — because of the blasphemy — If there be God — please forgive me — When I try to raise my thoughts to Heaven — there is such convicting emptiness that those very thoughts return like sharp knives & hurt my very soul. — I am told God loves me — and yet the reality of darkness & coldness & emptiness is so great that nothing touches my soul.

Darkness is such that I really do not see — neither with my mind nor with my reason — the place of God in my soul is blank — There is no God in me — when the pain of longing is so great — I just long & long for God. ... The torture and pain I can't explain.

That's poor in spirit!

Do you know who wrote those words? Agnes Bojaxhiu, whom we know better as Mother Theresa. And she wrote these words, and others like them, not as a young woman before she began her work tending to the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India, but all the while she did that work, until the end of her life. She served God and she served God by serving the poor, even as she struggled with her experience of God's absence in her own life.

And so Mother Theresa is blessed! The kingdom of heaven belongs to her! Not because of her good works, but because of her poverty of spirit. Not because she proved herself worthy, but because she knew herself to be empty. She knew she was empty -- of faith, of assurance, of the palpable sense of the presence of God that she so desired.

There is a difference between spiritual poverty and spiritual apathy. Jesus declares, *Blessed are those who are poor in spirit*, not *Blessed are those who just don't care*. Spiritual poverty is measured relative to spiritual desire. When we desire God, when we desire faith, when we desire certainty, we are all the more conscious of their absence. We are all the more conscious of our spiritual poverty. But Jesus' promise to us, to all who know their own spiritual poverty, is this: you will have your heart's desire!

So what shall we do? What should you do?

First of all ... nothing! You should do nothing! Jesus does not give us a command. He makes us a promise. Jesus offers a promise of God's blessing to people who are poor in spirit. He does not ask any of us to try to become spiritually poor!

But if you are poor in spirit, if you know all too well that you are poor in spirit, if you know your faith to be weak and your spiritual struggle to be great, if you want so much to know God but don't ... If you are poor in spirit, don't fear it. The kingdom of heaven belongs to you!

Take the advice of another Christian who has been there, too -- Julian of Norwich:

Pray, even if you feel nothing, see nothing. For when you are dry, empty, sick or weak, at such a time is your prayer most pleasing to God, even though you may find little joy in it. This is true of all believing prayer.

Blessed are those who are poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to them!