

Have You Ever Been Destitute?

Message #3 in the series, "Blessed (for Chaos)"

Matthew 5:4

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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³ *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

⁴ *"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

⁵ *"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

⁶ *"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,
for they will be filled.*

⁷ *"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

⁸ *"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

⁹ *"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

¹⁰ *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3-10)*

Have you ever been destitute?

I was actually asked this once, during the wee hours of the morning. The person who asked me this was gripping my hand tightly. He stared deeply into my eyes as he asked, attempting to understand who I was, what I was doing, and why. But let me explain what prompted his question in the first place.

While I was in seminary, one summer I worked the graveyard shift from ten at night to eleven in the morning. When I boarded the train in Germantown each night heading for work in Glenside I would be surrounded by the many late-night street roamers who were asking for spare change.

Now, I had worked among street people, the homeless and prostitutes before. I had been taught that you never hand money out, because you might simply be supporting their addictions. In that case, your generosity would actually be counter-productive! However, if they allowed you to buy them a meal, not only would you be getting some much-needed nutrients into their system, you'd also be putting something into their stomachs to absorb the alcohol and you'd have some time for personal interaction. Those caught up in addiction need healthy interaction and companionship just like the rest of us.

One morning, when I arrived back earlier than usual, I was approached for handouts by many of the very same people who had asked me for change the night before. The air was redolent with the smell of alcohol. One older gentleman who had asked me for change the night before, approached me with the same question that morning. So, when he asked for spare change, I replied, "Have you had breakfast yet? Can I buy you something to eat?"

I don't think he believed me at first, but I reassured him that I was more than happy to buy him breakfast. So, we walked together over to the local deli and I encouraged him to step up to the counter and order what he wanted. The manager, who previously had been very cordial to me, stood behind his cashier with his arms folded and a scowl on his face, staring at me obviously disappointed that I had brought this 'drunk' into his establishment. He refused to seat us, but offered us take-out, as long as we promised to leave as soon as our order was fulfilled. They rushed to fill our order and sent us packing.

After we walked outside and talked for a while, I went to say, good-bye, since I had to head off to bed after all. When I extended my hand to shake his, that's when he gripped my hand firmly and asked his question, as if to wrap his head around my unexpected act of kindness, "HAVE YOU EVER BEEN DESTITUTE?" When I just smiled, he crooked his neck, you know, like when a dog turns his head to the side looking like he's trying to figure something out. Behind his question however was a very insightful connection.

Have you ever been destitute?

If you can answer 'yes', well, I have some very good news for you. When Jesus begins to describe the character of his disciples (followers or learners), he begins by describing them with this line: "**Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**"

The term translated 'poor' in Jesus' statement can accurately be translated 'destitute.' In the New Testament there are two Greek words used which can be translated 'poor.' One word, **penichros**, refers to those with access to minimal resources (almost equivalent to our term 'living hand-to-mouth'), just enough to get by day-to-day. But the word used here, **ptochos**, refers to those who are absolutely destitute, desperate, those who are forced to beg.¹

So, Jesus begins telling his followers that 'those who are absolutely without resources in spirit are blessed!?' Although we might be familiar with the words of this famous sermon, we might appreciate its literary quality, its cadence and meter, let's not miss the shock factor that is evident. What Jesus lays out here goes against everything we sense or feel or accept. But listen to what he tells his followers:

³ "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

It's the 'have-nots' not the 'have-it-alls' who are blessed in God's eyes.

⁴ "Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

In God's estimation, it's the unhappy not the happy who are favored.

⁵ "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Not the aggressive, win-at-costs but the gentle ones who are blessed!

⁶ "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Not those who have their fill are happy, but those who stir yearn from more.

⁷ "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.

God esteems the considerate, not the cut-throat, successful corporate ladder climber.

⁸ "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

The pure, single-minded committed ones, not the duplicitous, those with ulterior motives who get their way who are blessed.

⁹ "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

It's the reconcilers and not those who stir up the pot, those who are divisive (who justify the means to their end) who are blessed.

¹⁰ "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matthew 5:3-10)

Blessed are not who are approved, applauded and even adored, but those who are rejected and attacked. Really?

¹ Luke used both the words '**penichran**' (**Luke 21:2**) and '**ptoche**' (**Luke 21:3**) to describe this very poor widow. The reason Luke uses both terms is because she barely sustained herself by earning a meager wage, but after giving all that she had she was then utterly destitute <https://www.studydrive.net/language-studies/greek-thoughts.html?article=11>

What Jesus tells his followers is counter-cultural, counter-intuitive RADICAL, we might even conclude.....**CRAZY!**

Jesus, you're describing a world quite unlike the one I live in! Jesus, your values are quite disorienting. In fact, they turn the world we live in on its head!



When you've spent most of your life upside down walking on your hands with your face in the dirt, the good news of walking on your feet will seem strange.

Have you ever been destitute? How is it a blessing? I'd like to take two familiar passages to show how being 'poor in spirit' is blessed by God.

In the very first passage we'll see that being poor, holding out empty hands enables us to receive from God. And it is *only* the poor who can receive from God. We read in **Luke 18:9** about a worship service.... Luke tells us: ***.⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:*** This opening line is important. We're told who the parable is aimed at, and it is not aimed at those who need to repent and straighten out their lives, it's aimed at civil, moral, respectable people - people somewhat like us. People we'd hang out with, or hope to be regarded as!

Jesus introduces the characters...¹⁰ ***"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.*** Now, "Low-life" is not a nice thing to call anyone, but it pretty much sums up what most people felt about tax collectors.

For two main reasons they were among the most hated people in Jesus' day. First of all, they were considered traitors. They worked for the foreign occupying force, the Romans. Secondly, tax-collectors had the reputation of being corrupt, cheating their own fellow-countrymen to make a comfortable living for themselves. Their business made them outcasts to everyone but other tax-collectors and sinners. And, by 'Sinners' - a term that could legitimately refer to everyone, was meant to describe anyone who was involved in some obvious public sin (prostitutes for example).

Whereas tax-collectors were seen as 'low-life,' the wicked underbelly of society, the Pharisees were the opposite, held in high regard. They lived lives dedicated to biblical instruction, separated as much as possible from Roman influences. And 'separate' is the key word. They tried to *separate* themselves from any contamination, any foreign influence, any sin. Their dress *separated* them, their diet *separated* them, their strict 'faithfulness' *separated* them from the unfaithful. The Pharisees viewed themselves as sinless, pure and uncontaminated. To put it simply, they believed God wanted them to stay in a 'holy bubble' to avoid catching sin 'cooties' from outside influences.

Watch how these very different people pray: ¹¹ ***The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.'*** Let's admit it, we'd prefer our children and ourselves to be able to rattle off that list of

lifestyles avoided, and the spiritual disciplines recounted by the Pharisee. We want our kids to avoid those vices.

The tax-collector on the other hand, offers nothing. ¹³ ***But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'*** He prays with empty hands....he is praying, you could say, as 'poor in spirit.'

But listen to Jesus' conclusion: ¹⁴ ***I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.*** (Luke 18:9-14)

This story is a fascinating one because we're being asked to identify with the tax-collector! He's the hero of the story! Honestly, we know we're not to be Pharisees, but do we want to be like tax-collectors? Well, yes, we want to be like a tax-collector who comes before God with empty hands completely dependent on God's grace. You see, no matter how much God 'cleans up our act' (and of course he's working on that), we never graduate to the point of not needing God's grace. We are always dependent and desperate for that grace. That we can learn from a low-life tax-collector. That is why we need to remember, "I once was lost but now am found was blind but now I see. Grace must always **remain** *Amazing grace*. As the old hymns goes, "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling."

Have you ever been destitute? *How is it a blessing?*

**The Empty Hands of a destitute beggar
enable us to receive grace from God**

However, the opposite is also true.

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This is illustrated not so much by a teaching of Jesus, but by an episode in his ministry. We read in Luke 5: ***Once while Jesus was standing beside the lake of Gennesaret, and the crowd was pressing in on him to hear the word of God, ² he saw two boats there at the shore of the lake; the fishermen had gone out of them and were washing their nets. ³ He got into one of the boats, the one belonging to Simon, and asked him to put out a little way from the shore. Then he sat down and taught the crowds from the boat. (Luke 5:1-3).*** This episode might be familiar to you. In Jesus' preaching ministry, often the crowds were so large that Jesus had to retreat to avoid being trampled! This time he converted a little boat into a lake pulpit.

⁴ When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch."⁵ Simon answered, "Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets." After he finished preaching, he encouraged Peter to go fishing. Usually, the best fishing was done at night (which Peter would know, it's his profession), and at the very beginning of the story, we're told the fishermen are cleaning their nets of everything **but** fish! Peter says as much (we fished unprofitably all night) but agrees to take Jesus' fishing advice. I'm not sure what is going through Peter's mind, but after a long, fruitless (or fishless) night, and especially after you just finished cleaning the nets, I wouldn't be so eager to dirty them up again - especially during the less advantageous time of fishing in broad daylight!

6 When they had done this, they caught so many fish that their nets were beginning to break. 7 So they signaled their partners in the other boat to come and help them. And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. 8 But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying...

- "Holy Mackerel!" (actually, they would have been carp or tilapia)
- "How did you do that?!"
- "How about going into business together? I see it now, "Peter and Jesus' Fish market," no? okay, how about "Jesus and Peter's Fish...."

Or, at the very least, say, "Thank you!" No, Peter falls down and says, ***"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man!"***

"Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!" 9 For he and all who were with him were amazed at the catch of fish that they had taken; 10 and so also were James and John, sons of Zebedee, who were partners with Simon. Then Jesus said to Simon, "Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people." (Luke 5:1-10) So, they follow his instructions and lo, and behold, they not only catch some fish but a net-breaking catch.

Many people argue that Peter was so appreciative that Jesus met him at his need. And, of course, Peter was a fisherman, so an entire night without catching a single fish was not good for business nor for the family meal. But, I think Peter realized more in Jesus than simply performing a miracle on his behalf to meet his need. Jesus showed his mastery over the area of life which Peter felt most competent. **Jesus showed his Lordship over not only Peter's need, but even where he felt no need.** You see, we all need Jesus as Savior to meet our needs (especially forgiveness). But we also need Jesus as Lord to bless and direct every area of life for blessedness!

When Peter realized Jesus' uniqueness, his role as both Savior from his need and Lord of all of life, Peter's confession makes all the more sense that he is not worthy to receive his grace. And shockingly, IT IS PETER'S ADMISSION OF UNWORTHINESS THAT MAKES HIM FIT TO PASS ON THAT GRACE TO OTHERS. **Once Peter admitted his own unworthiness, AND Jesus' worthiness – ONLY THEN is he fit to pass on that grace to others.** Jesus responds, "From now on you will be catching people."

I used to think that people needed to see Jesus in me. As long as I was successful in what I did, as long as I was improving and obedient, they would give thanks to God. This would make Jesus look good, after all! But, you know what? I think missionary John Leonard hit the nail on the head when he wrote, "People don't need to see Jesus in you, they need to see people who need Jesus."

In my last church, a successful businessman, an elder statesman of the community once said to me, "Pastor John, I don't believe that the businessmen of Doylestown can hear Jesus' message, "Repent and believe!" I told him, "Jack they need to hear the story of how you, Jack repented and believed." Everyone loves a good story, and you'll have their rapt attention when you show them how you repented and believed! As one person put it, sharing the good news of Jesus is simply one beggar telling another beggar where to find food.

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Are you still destitute? "*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of God.*"
Poverty of spirit is difficult to maintain.

There are two forces that work against staying poor in spirit. First, there is our culture. Humility, poverty, unworthiness, sinfulness – these terms are all too 'negative' – and we're told such terms are 'to be avoided' because we live in an affirming culture. God don't make junk! That's true, but, let's be clear, no one can be more affirming than a Christian. As Christians we believe that we are made like God, and NOBODY CAN TOP THAT!

When we talk about poverty of spirit, unworthiness, or sinfulness this is when we are *compared* to God – and in that case, we have to admit he's greater than us. We live in a world of close to 8 billion people - but compared to God "*the nations are but a drop in the bucket*" according to the prophet, Isaiah (40:15). That's not to say they're insignificant, the point is that God is so awesome! But when we're talking self-worth, no one can beat what Christians believe.

But here's the other force that works against our poverty of spirit. God works in us to improve us. But that improvement can turn us into Pharisees. Don't I gain some spiritual capital by my spiritual maturity? Again, it's important to reiterate that we never lose our need for God's grace, we never outgrow that dependency upon him. Otherwise, we become Pharisees with little need or use for grace – that can impact how we relate to God (coming with full hands of our accomplishments with little room for His grace) and it effects how we relate to others (we don't share how we need Jesus as Lord and Savior). Christian maturity exposes our need of God's grace deeper than we ever expected....it never lessens. Outwardly it might appear less needed, but God's work goes ever deeper. Christian maturity makes us more appreciative not less for God's grace toward us.

Here is the blessedness of being poor, being a beggar, being destitute. It is the gateway blessing to all others. Notice, this first beatitude is in the present tense, "*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs **is** the kingdom of God.*" Most of the following blessings are in the future tense, e.g., "*they **shall** be comforted, ...they **shall** be filled, ...they **shall** inherit the earth*"). "*Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs **IS** the kingdom of God.*" Here is the present possession of the kingdom - **the presence of the King**. When we are poor of self; the King is present in his power and his riches. "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to thy cross I cling." In both our relationship with God and our ministry to others - that's poverty of spirit that is strong in the Lord!