



**Part 21: Blessed are the poor in spirit**  
Matthew 5:3

Congratulations! Joyful are the humble before God, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

For the first two centuries of the Church, Christians automatically turned to Matthew's gospel for the essential content for the teaching about Jesus (RT France, 7).

"...it was Matthew's gospel which created the climate of ordinary Christianity." – R.T. France, *Matthew, Evangelist & Teacher*, 20.

**I. What are the Beatitudes?**

- Beginning of Jesus' most famous teaching, and the first of five teaching sections (Matthew 5-7).

Matthew was cited by the early church fathers more than twice as often as the other Gospels probably because Matthew arranged Jesus' teaching in five blocks (Fee, *How to Read the Bible*, 269).

- Declarations to Jesus' disciples (Matthew 5:1-2).
- Further expressions of the gospel of the Kingdom (Matthew 4:17, 23).

*The gospel is the good news that God has kept His promises to Israel to rescue and renew His groaning creation from Satan, sin, and death through King Jesus (his life, death, resurrection, and ascension). Life in God's beautiful kingdom is available now and forever to all who entrust themselves to King Jesus and follow him as Lord.*

*Congratulations! Be joyful! The grace of the King rests upon you, and you belong to Him forever. You, who least expected it, are now in the beautiful kingdom, and your life is forever changed.*

## II. Biblical Interpretation

### A. Scriptural Context Isaiah 61; Matthew 4:17, 23).

- Immediate context (Matthew 4:17, 23).
- Matthew (cross & resurrection)
- Rest of the New Testament (post- Pentecost).
- Old Testament (Isaiah 61).

“It is a passage of celebration because God is acting graciously to deliver us from our poverty and captivity into God’s reign of deliverance, justice, and joy... Therefore, each beatitude begins and ends with joy, the happiness, the blessedness of the good news of participation in God’s gracious deliverance. The beatitudes say what Isaiah 35:3-4 says: ‘Strengthen the tired hands and revive the stumbling knees. Say to the despairing hearts: Be of good cheer. Do not be afraid. See, your God is coming.’” – *Glen Stassen, Living the Sermon on the Mount, 42-43.*

### B. Meaning of “Blessed” (*Makarios*).

- No single English equivalents.  
Ex. “Happy, congratulations, fortunate, blessed...”

“*Makarios* is a state of existence in relationship to God in which a person is ‘blessed’ from God’s perspective even when he or she doesn’t feel happy or isn’t presently experiencing good fortune.” – Michael Wilkins, *The Matthew NIV Application Commentary*, 204.

- “Congratulations! Be joyful!”

### C. Meaning of “Poor in spirit”

Contrast with Luke 6:20

Two Greek words for “poor” –

1. *Penichros* = day laborer who has the bare essentials
  2. *Ptochoi* = destitute, totally helpless, beggarly poor
- Both Matthew and Luke use *ptochoi*.
  - In the Old Testament, poor (*anawin*) gradually came to have spiritual overtones. It described those who were materially poor and powerless, who came to see God as their only refuge. They were the “poor” who cried out to God in humble dependence (Psalm 40:17).

- Matthew and Luke are describing the same person who realizes they are dependent on God for everything.

“The poor in Judaism referred to those in desperate need (socioeconomic element) whose helplessness drove them to a dependent relationship on God (religious element) for supplying their needs and vindication. Both elements are consistently present. For Matthew, poor in spirit are those who find themselves waiting, empty-handed, upon God alone for their hope and deliverance while beset with abuse and rejection by those in their own social and religious context.” – Glen Stassen, *Living the Sermon on the Mount*

- Radical perspective in Jesus’ day

“Blessed are the spiritual zeros – the spiritually bankrupt, deprived and deficient, the spiritual beggars, those without a wisp of religion.” – Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*

- Jesus is both announcing good news to the socially powerless, and he is expressing a Way of living that embodies the Kingdom.

### III. Good News!

Congratulations! Be joyful! The grace of the King rests upon you, and you belong to Him forever. You, who least expected it, are now in the beautiful Kingdom, and your life is forever changed.

Congratulations! Joyful are the humble before God, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.

“Now here is my secret: I tell you with an openness of heart that I doubt I shall ever achieve again, so I pray you are in a quiet room as you hear these words. My secret is that I need God – that I am sick and can no longer make it alone.” – Douglas Copeland

#### Discussion Questions:

1. What has been your understanding of the Sermon on the Mount in general and the Beatitudes in particular?
2. Does Doug’s explanation of the biblical context help you? If so, how?
3. New Testament scholar Glen Stassen connects the Beatitudes with Isaiah in general and especially Isaiah 61 (see his quote in the notes). Does this help you understand what Jesus may be declaring to his disciples?
4. How do you think Jesus’ disciples would have heard this first Beatitude? How do you hear it? Why is it good news?