

THE BLESSED POOR?

Jesus pronounced the blessings of His kingdom to His hearers in Luke 6:17-26. Our twentyfirst-century ears hear them a bit differently than those to whom Jesus spoke directly. A blessing is a beatitude, pronouncing good will. Theologians describe "blessed" as a state of being, with or because of God's grace. It denotes spiritual well-being, in spite of difficult circumstances.

"BLESSED ARE YOU WHO ARE POOR" - "*for yours is the kingdom of God,*" declared Christ. In other words, for those of you who are poor it is a good thing, because you have the kingdom of God. In the beatitude pattern of the Old Testament, that's the good words of welfare, contrasted with the bad words of woe in verse 24, "*but woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.*" This contrast helps us understand the blessing.

But we must think carefully. Is Jesus making a blanket statement that being poor is to be blessed by God? That anyone in poverty has a special blessing of God? Some try to interpret it this way. But there are four different ways the Bible speaks about being poor, notes RC Sproul.

POOR BECAUSE OF LAZINESS? - Many Scriptures counsel against being lazy. The book of Proverbs speaks negatively of the slacker, the sluggard, the unwise. In 2Thessalonians 3:10 the apostle says "*If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat*" (and not take advantage of the sharing of the congregation). This kind of poor was not meant to be the lot of a believer, notes Sproul, and God's Word does not condone laziness nor pronounce blessing on the lazy.

POOR BECAUSE OF DISASTER? - People can be in poor circumstances through no fault of their own, such as the dire straits following disease or disaster. Obadiah 1:13 speaks of the plight of people after war, and 2Corinthians 8:1-5 speaks of believers providing relief for other saints experiencing troubles because of famine. God's blessing can shine through dark times.

POOR BECAUSE OF OPPRESSION? - Examples abound in Biblical and secular history where people were unable to defend against unjust and powerful people against them or over them. This is the case today in many regions of the world, where even people willing to work are forced to live in political situations which keep them poor and dependent on tyrants.

POOR FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS' SAKE? - These forsook material comforts of this world to seek a higher calling for the sake of the kingdom of God, says Sproul. Many people serve in missions and ministry with skills and experience which would command much higher income in other vocations. 1Timothy 6:5-19 speaks of those who take seriously God's calls to help the poor. Some believers choose to be so generous that it lowers their economic strata. Some give away a higher percentage of income than they use to live.

JESUS' DISCIPLES WERE BLESSED! - Jesus said in verse 20, "*blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*" The "you" were the disciples to whom He spoke. For many, their condition was due to having left their employment or their possessions to be part of His itinerant ministry. Followers of Jesus would experience extreme poverty because of disaster, oppression, persecution, and for righteousness sake, and because they would be generous to others in need. But they are in God's kingdom, having the greatest blessing.

Jesus' disciples would also experience God's blessing "here and now" by His providence in their lives. Many Scriptures record God's promises never to leave them, and to provide for all of their needs. Jesus is clear about that in the greater context of the Beatitudes (Matthew 5-7).

BEING POOR ISN'T JUST POVERTY - "This poverty is accompanied by grace," writes JC Ryle. "The want is entailed by faithful adherence to Jesus. Afflictions are of the gospel. Persecution is for the sake of the Son of Man - the inevitable consequence of faith in Christ, who supplies them and all who suffer like them for the gospel's sake, with special comfort and consolation."

In Matthew 5:3 Jesus spoke about being "*poor in spirit,*" which transcends the four categories above. It means to be poor toward this world but rich toward God, notes Sproul. The blessing of God is more than temporary feelings or being happy in spite of circumstances. It's a state of well-being in relation to God, which can only belong to those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ! □