Are the poor really blessed?

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After nearly eight hours of standing in the sun, Amy and I were physically and emotionally exhausted.[1] It was a surreal time. Even the paramedics and police officers waiting with us on the street corner joined in our quiet conversation. Nervous laughter thinly covered our uncertainty and deep fear. But what had brought us together was no laughing matter.

Amy lived half a block from our home with her brother Andrew. She had been part of our life long before we formed our inner-city church, Little Flowers Community. Ever passionate about Jesus, Amy had shared with Andrew her love for and hope in Jesus, which he gladly embraced. This gifted young man soon became part of the Little Flowers family, his whole countenance changing for the better in spite of his untreated mental illness.

Which is why I had been unprepared for Amy's call earlier that morning. While she was visiting across town, she had received an emergency phone call from local police informing her that Andrew had scaled the fence opposite their home, gaining entry to a construction site. He had climbed several stories on the scaffolding there and was threatening to jump. Since I lived seconds away from her house, she asked if I would go there and wait until she arrived. Grabbing my keys, cell phone, and hat, I jogged the half block to where the police were trying to talk Andrew down.

My heart leapt into my throat as I watched him sprint across narrow, bouncing boards to the far end of the scaffolding. Throwing off the planks that made up the walkway, he cut himself off from all immediate access and leaned out over the edge. It was clear that he was terrified, confused, and not himself.

Before long, crowds began to form as people in the neighbourhood were drawn to the scene. Amy arrived, and we stood together there, watching and praying. The day dragged on. Surely after Andrew had spent so many hours high on the scaf-

folding, it was clear that he was not prepared to jump. Just in case, though, I positioned myself so that I could continue to watch him and keep Amy informed, as she stood with her back to the scene. I can only believe that it was the Holy Spirit who inspired me to stand in that way, because moments later Andrew leaped to his death. The instant he jumped, Amy saw the pain and disbelief on my face. As soon as her brother's body had fallen to the ground, grief came crashing down on her and she cried over and over: "No! No! O God, please, no!"

With Andrew's devastated sister sobbing into my chest, her fists clenched on my coat, I was overwhelmed by the gravity of what had just happened—the absolute, irreversible loss that Amy was feeling, that all of us were experiencing. Death is never easy, but this death was so tragic, so sudden, so violent. I had no words. All I could do was hold her and share her grief.

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Spiritual poverty or material poverty?

When faced with the stark reality of unimaginable suffering, our carefully articulated theology, our spiritual platitudes, and our easy assurances of salvation seem to crumble. How, in light of such loss and suffering, can we ever call ourselves blessed? Again and again in our inner-city neighbourhood, the devastation of poverty makes itself apparent, yet all my life I have quoted this scripture without a thought: "Blessed are the poor . . ." I wonder now, what could these words possibly mean?

The phrase "poor in spirit" has been a source of great debate throughout church history. Was Jesus advocating poverty as a blessed state? Are these words a further affirmation that, like the rich young ruler, we must sell all we have and give to the poor in order to follow Jesus? Should we, like Francis of Assisi and other saints, take Jesus literally? Or is the inclusion of "in spirit" an indication that Jesus was talking about something more spiritual, relating to the attitudes of our hearts and not to actual, material poverty?

An all-too-common misconception is that we face a binary choice between two opposing options, material poverty or spiritual poverty. The posing of this choice is related to a false dichotomy that pervades our Western worldview, separating the "spiritual" world from the "material" one. Jesus and his followers, on the other hand, would have seen these two realities, the spiritual and the material, as inseparable aspects of a single whole. We must therefore consider both elements in order to understand the integrated whole.

Who inherits?

The words "Blessed are the poor in spirit" would likely have called to mind several scriptural texts Jesus's followers had heard all their lives. Poverty or humility of spirit was a posture commended in their religious texts, prayers, and other practices of faith. In the face of their enemies and their own prideful negligence, God's people knew full well their need to be contrite in spirit and humbly dependent on God (see Ps. 34:4–6; Zeph. 3:12). Prophetic writings clearly commend living in humility and repentance: "But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word" (Isa. 66:2; NRSV). The King James translation of this verse makes a connection between poverty and humility or contrition: "But to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word."

Familiar though Jesus's listeners were with this language, the notion that poverty is connected to inheriting God's kingdom would have come as something of a shock. They were not strangers to the idea of God's reign breaking in in times of trial or exile, but salvation in those cases had come through defeat of their enemies and in liberation from bondage, often after communal repentance. Now Jesus seemed to be saying that *in the midst of their poverty* they would inherit the kingdom. Liberation from Roman oppression did not seem to be on his immediate agenda. Somehow Jesus was inaugurating a kingdom in which the weak and the defeated are his blessed heirs. This was not the messianic revolution they were expecting.

Those who seemed to be positioned to inherit were Pharisees and Sadducees, whose righteousness was characterized not so

much by humility and poverty of spirit as by careful adherence to the law, or by their exercise of priestly and political power. While ordinary people grumbled at what they saw as collusion or compromise, many recognized that these religious men had influence among their Roman overlords, thus providing at least a buffer for the Jewish community as a whole. Surely these leaders were the ones who would inherit the kingdom.

Instead, Jesus's words reflect a paradoxical shift in expectation. They foreshadow his words in Matthew 20: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:26–28; NIV).

Taking pride in poverty?

These words might have stirred some smug satisfaction among ordinary folk, all too eager to see the powerful and self-righteous taken down a peg. But as the implications began to sink in, their pleasure would have been short-lived. After all, if the commonly accepted categories of righteousness that kept the religious leaders in their positions of authority were dismantled, Jesus's new articulation would allow no one to escape responsibility. Where one's acknowledged sin and inadequacy would have provided ordinary people with an excuse to avoid living in accordance with God's commands, that very brokenness now held the potential to produce humility and contrition, to make them poor in spirit.

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Jesus was not inviting the poor to take pride in their poverty, as though it were evidence of their righteousness. To adopt that view would be to make the mistake the religious leaders made, but in reverse. Neither poverty nor prosperity is evidence of righteousness. Rather, Jesus is speaking of a poverty that is not accidental or circumstantial; instead it is an intentional relinquishment. If we make poverty an external commodity with which we purchase

righteousness, we lose sight of the inner transformation born of humility and contrition that God is seeking and nurturing in us.

Jesus is declaring here that the humble and repentant heart is fertile soil for the growth of his kingdom. The poverty of spirit he desires is not a humility of false piety or exaggerated self-deprecation; he is commending the heart that knows its dependence on God for forgiveness and restoration, a heart that sees and acknowledges both the brokenness and the strengths within it. Such a heart has no place for pride manifested either in arrogance or in self-centered loathing. When we find ourselves responding to God's grace in the light of our own sinfulness, then we are already in the kingdom of God.

The bondage of material wealth

With this foundation of humility and contrition clearly in place, Jesus could have avoided the language of poverty. The Greek word used for "poor" is explicitly connected to material poverty. Was Jesus using the word in an awkward way, ignoring the confusion such an association might cause? Of course not. The fact that Jesus said more about the challenges associated with material wealth than about any other topic demonstrates that he would not have casually used such language here or anywhere. It is clearly an intentional use, and we would be remiss to ignore or minimize it.

In his classic work *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, John Stott affirms the overlapping meanings of this word. First, he demonstrates that the Old Testament concept of humility and contrition was born out of a dependency rooted in material need.[2] Second, he recognizes a pattern: "The rich tended to compromise with surrounding heathenism; it was the poor who remained faithful to God. So wealth and worldliness, poverty and godliness went together."[3] While being poor in spirit entails acknowledging our spiritual bankruptcy before God, it includes a more holistic declaration of dependency.

One of the most significant hints we have that Jesus also intends in this beatitude to point to poverty as such is the parallel blessing found in Luke's Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20–26). Here the list of four blessings is followed by a set of matching woes. Each blessing, then, is paired with a woe, which contrasts

with and informs the meaning inherent in the corresponding blessing. With this understanding, we can better understand Jesus's intentions. In this case, the first beatitude in Luke 6 reads: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (v. 20).

Luke clearly did not use "poor in spirit," but this fact alone does not demonstrate that Jesus intended a material application, for the connection to humility and contrition would still have been assumed by the average Jewish listener. However, when we look at the matching woe in verse 24, it becomes clearer that material poverty is in view: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort."

With this understanding, we can then recognize that the first beatitude in Matthew's Gospel is speaking to more than metaphorical poverty; rather, it makes a deliberate connection to material wealth and poverty. But the questions remain: What did Jesus mean? Was he really saying that it is a blessing to be poor?

Poverty is no blessing

The combination of meanings of "poor in spirit"—pointing both to literal poverty and to humility—has often been overlooked or minimized among Christians, especially those who live in affluence. Focusing on humility and repentance, they become comfortable with that end of the spectrum, unaware of (or unwilling to contemplate) the other—material—side of Jesus's meaning and its implications for their own lives. It has been encouraging to see this trend shift in the church in recent years, bringing an increased awareness of the economic and political dimensions of Jesus's teaching. But in pursuing this corrective path, we must be careful not to make the mistake of going to the opposite extreme, focusing on the material and ignoring the spiritual aspects of poverty of spirit.

One thing has become crystal clear to me after more than fifteen years of missionary service, most of it in an inner-city context: poverty is no blessing. Billions of people worldwide needlessly suffer and die because of complex and far-reaching factors associated with poverty. Disease, exploitation, persecution, slavery, misogyny, murder, and genocide flourish in contexts where the poorest of the poor reside. This suffering was never

God's intention. In no way was Jesus saying that the dynamics of poverty are good. Rather, he was speaking of his capacity to redeem our suffering, to subvert the powers of sin and death for his glory through the power of his resurrection. The state of poverty can open up opportunities allowing us to engage redemptively with God's work in freedom from attachments, distractions, and compromises that draw us away from God.

Yet throughout the church's history Christians have had difficulty holding together the tension in these two extremes. More often than not, when Christians have failed to hold together the material and the spiritual, it has been a result not of blatant disregard but of well-intentioned but misguided emphasis on one extreme over the other. Few of us could argue that consumerism and materialism have not had devastating and corrupting effects on the church in our culture, predisposing us to minimize, ignore, or even reject the material implications related to being "poor in spirit." But as we seek to address neglect of the material dimension, we ignore at our peril the ways neglect of poverty of spirit can lead us into dangerous territory.

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Few examples better highlight the strengths and weaknesses of both sides of this spectrum than the life of St. Francis of Assisi. The Franciscan order he founded adopted a severe vow of poverty: they would trust God to provide food and shelter through begging and working alongside the poor, with whom they generously shared. The Franciscan friars were mendicants, relying for their survival entirely on alms given to them. While Francis's literal adherence to this vow contributed significantly to the authority he had in the church and to his positive impact on the culture of his day (and beyond), his extreme asceticism also had damaging effects. Even Francis, finding himself prematurely at the end of his life, repented to his suffering body for subjecting it to excessive austerities.

But Francis's commitment to owning no property and living as a mendicant was an expression of his passionate devotion to Christ and his attempt to follow Jesus's teachings as literally as he

could, seeking to find the blessings associated with being "poor in spirit."

Voluntary and involuntary poverty

Some have criticized Francis on this account. These critics charge that the Franciscans' "voluntary poverty" trivialized the involuntary poverty of the truly poor, those with no alternatives. They argue that linking poverty to religious devotion provided an excuse for wealthy Christians to withhold charity and fail to confront systemic injustices that contributed to the very poverty they sought to relieve. Instead, the rich could view people in poverty as holy and justify withholding alms as a way of supporting the poor in their righteousness. Further, some critics have suggested that the popularity of the Franciscans led to a situation in which much of the alms that would otherwise have been given to the poor were instead given to the growing number of wandering friars.

Rather than affirming poverty, Jesus is exposing the dangers of wealth and privilege. This is a critical distinction, because many passionate Christians romanticize poverty as they move toward lives of "service to the poor."

While criticisms may oversimplify the matter, we should heed their caution. With evangelical Christians giving increased attention to issues of social justice, and with the rise of new monastic movements in which people choose to share life among the poor in the "abandoned places of empire," how we relate to poverty is increasingly important. For many of us, to be poor in spirit includes attempting to divest ourselves of our wealth, to identify with those on the margins. Many who embrace lives of simplicity and service alongside the poor have done so voluntarily. We choose to give up something of our wealth and privilege—even as we recognize that the very freedom to choose this kind of poverty is itself an expression of privilege. While this does not negate the value of such commitments, it should compel us to have a great deal more caution and intentionality as we seek to embrace a more holistic spiritual poverty.

Affirming poverty or exposing the dangers of wealth?

Rather than affirming poverty, Jesus is exposing the dangers of wealth and privilege. This is a critical distinction, because many

passionate Christians romanticize poverty as they move toward lives of "service to the poor." They equate their "sacrifices" with noble gestures of love and self-denial for the sake of the poor whom they have come to save. While embracing a form of external poverty, they fail to grasp the need for the humility and contrition on the other end of the spectrum.

And for what should we be contrite and humble? For many of us, our material, educational, familial, and social privilege was inherited in part at the expense of others. Our participation in and failure to address the rampant materialism in our culture and in our churches also indict us. Giving up wealth and privilege to share life among the poor is something believers do, not simply for the salvation of the poor but also for the salvation of the rich (Luke 6:24). After all, if we are servants of our king and his reign, then all we give (material or otherwise) is his, to be used for his purposes and glory, not our own. It is no credit to us to give to those in need what is neither ours to begin with or intended for our use alone.

Whether or not we are called to live among the poor (and not everyone is), all Christians are called to repent of the sin of greed and materialism, embracing sacrificial lives of radical generosity, hospitality, and simplicity.

Imitating Christ

While extreme in his interpretation, St. Francis's embrace of the vow of poverty was not (as is often popularly suggested) primarily a matter of identifying with the poor. Rather, Francis was attempting to identify with and imitate Christ alone, whom he believed had embraced voluntary poverty. For Francis, incarnation itself was an act of humility and love. That Christ went on to identify with the poor was only natural and to be expected. Christ was the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned one. Francis would have vehemently rejected any identification with the poor that was not first rooted in this primary identification with Christ, for without Jesus at the center, life among the poor risked becoming mere activism and social posturing. Only in identifying with Christ could he have any true connection to his neighbour, whether poor or rich.

When we grasp this understanding, the implications for all Christians are staggering. Whether or not we are called to live

among the poor (and not everyone is), all Christians are called to repent of the sin of greed and materialism, embracing sacrificial lives of radical generosity, hospitality, and simplicity. For in following the example of Christ—identifying with him and his uncompromising commitment—we discover what it means to be truly poor in spirit. It is only through identifying with Christ that we can begin to identify with the poor in meaningful and mutual ways.

When confronted by the suffering and sadness of poverty, as we were with Andrew's suicide, we understand what it means—and does not mean—to be blessed. Yet in the days that followed his death, our community came together to mourn and comfort one another, encountering a peace and intimacy few of us had ever experienced in the church. And in that grace we find our hope and are truly blessed.

Notes

[1] Names have been changed to protect privacy.
[2] John Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 38.
[3] Ibid., 39.

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