

POOR, YET RICH

"Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 5:3.

One of the most obvious characteristics of church life today is superficiality. One of the principal causes of this is the attitude of church members toward the Scriptures. It is our failure to take it seriously, our failure to take the Bible as it is and let it speak to us. We know nothing about God and the Christian life in a true sense apart from the Bible.

This Sermon on the Mount is meant for us, and an urgent need confronting us is that we should face it and its demands. Its words are quick and powerful to rebuke, to challenge and to inspire. It is the most searching and powerful utterance on the moral life that we possess.

In verses three to ten we have a description of the character of the Christian. These are the things that characterize the Christian in general. Then, verses eleven and twelve describe the character of the Christian as proved by the reaction of the world to him. In other words, the character of the Christian is described positively and negatively—that is the sort of man he is, and because he is that, certain things happen to him. Then, verses thirteen to sixteen give an account of the relationship of the Christian to the world, or the description of the function of the Christian in society, and in the world, as he faces it.

Here is a general account of the Christian. He is a man who displays certain characteristics, and because of that, certain things happen to him.

For Christ the days of privacy were over. He had emerged from the seclusion and quietude of Nazareth, and had begun to tread the pathway of the public preacher and teacher. As He began there was a strange and wonderful attractiveness in Him, and the multitudes gathered around Him. He attracted to Himself all sorts and conditions of people. Some were attracted to Him by His works and others by His words. People jostled each other who had never done so before; Pharisees were side by side with publicans; ritualists were side by side with sinners and harlots; scholars were side by side with the illiterate.

What an audience it was that faced Christ! That vast throng was composed of all kinds and conditions of men. It was a cross-section of humanity. Among them were the successful and the failures, those who had conquered and those who had been defeated. The Master saw their condition of ruin, and then He visualized the possibility of their being rescued therefrom. He saw them as they were and as they might become.

In order to get away from the multitudes, Christ ascended the mountain. There He sat down and His disciples came unto Him, whereupon He opened His mouth and taught them. He taught with simplicity, with tenderness and with authority.

It is interesting to observe how His Sermon opened. Christ did not begin by pronouncing maledictions on the wicked, but benedictions on His people. He delineated the features of character, conduct or experience on which He congratulates people because of the results which accrue to them. In this matchless sermon, the Master never pronounced a blessing upon having anything or doing anything. His blessing was primarily upon being. It was not what people had or did, but upon what they were. That is where Christ began, and there is where we should begin also.

Christ began by speaking of the blessedness of those who are children of God. His words might well be translated, "Oh, the happiness of those who are poor in spirit!" or "Oh, the blessedness of those who are poor in spirit!" Note that He was not offering a reward, but was stating a fact.

Some of the things that are most difficult to understand are most worth understanding. That is very often true of the words of Christ; those with the shell that is hardest

to break have the sweetest kernel. Every informed and instructed person knows that it is not easy to be a Christian. When one understands what it means to be a real Christian, it is difficult to put it into practice. It includes so many things. And the fatal blunder is that some think it is easy, or that it is no trouble at all to be an imitator of Christ. Consequently, they are feeble and ineffectual, and the world ignores them as if they did not matter.

Christ observes that all are out on the same quest. They are all seeking happiness. Every person here is searching for happiness. Everybody wants to know how to achieve happiness. The Master tells us how to be happy as He enumerates these attitudes of being. He teaches us that the road to happiness is the same today that it was nineteen centuries ago. However, "happiness" is not quite a complete enough word for this ancient and modern quest, if we interpret it only in terms of pleasure. It is true that we have a craving for pleasure, but we also want pleasure that satisfies, a satisfaction that will go deeper than mere surface contentment and enable us to live well and to die happy.

Christ came to teach men that character is before conduct. He says, "blessed," but never did He pronounce a single blessing upon having anything or doing anything; every blessing He pronounced was upon being. Happiness does not depend on having or upon doing, but upon being.

According to the New Testament, blessedness never depends upon circumstances, but always upon character; never upon outward condition, but always upon inward spirit. The secret of happiness is to be sought within and never without. That happiness is not born of any outward conditions or circumstances is one thing that has been established by the experiences of countless millions, yet it seems that every person has to learn it for himself. We still have the feeling that the happy man is the one who achieves outward success. We think, happy is the man who makes a fortune, happy is the man who has won the applause of his fellows, or happy is the woman who has become the darling of society. But, Christ makes it plain that happiness is not born of what we have, or of what we fail to have.

Happiness does not depend upon what we have, nor upon what we do, but upon what we are. If we seek happiness on the outside, we shall miss it forever. Happiness, if it ever comes, must come from within. It does not depend upon the kind of house in which we live; it depends upon the kind of person who lives in the house. It does not depend upon the kind of garments in which we dress; it depends upon the kind of individual that is dressed.

All engage in the search for happiness. The majority appear to look for it in something outside themselves; whereas, a few search for it in the enjoyment of what they have, and still others in the acquisition of what they hope for. Long ago non-Christian philosophers warned the unheeding crowds that the secret of happiness consists in what a man is rather than in what he has. Cicero left on many an eloquent page the lesson that he who would taste bliss must cultivate virtue. What says present-day society? Happy is the man who has an abundance of wealth; whose jovial face is wreathed with smiles; who, holding his head high, can crush his enemies.

We are inclined to think that happiness depends on the possession of material goods--that we would be happy if we had a new car, a better home, a larger income, or the means to indulge all of our desires. But these things do not guarantee happiness. Sometimes we drive along the streets through some fine residential part of a great city. We see the lights streaming from the homes and we wonder if there is happiness there. We know wealth is there; also, success in the business world, and standing in the social realm. But we are just as likely to find happiness in the humblest home in the city as we are in the finest home in the best residential section. All of us know people who have money, business success, position in the social world; in fact, all the things for which the world seems to be striving with such feverish haste and anxiety--every thing

except one, and that is happiness. And when we read history, we find that it is full of the sighings of successful men over the disappointment that their success has brought to them. When the prize is won, it ceases to charm.

"Blessed" is a word which many today consider debased currency. It has gathered about it associations of a smug and not too healthy piety. People nowadays are not sure that they want to be "blessed." They want to be happy. They are keen to be healthy. They like to be successful, to make good in life, and to draw from experience the best qualities it can impart, but they are not stirred by the word "blessed." Nevertheless, "blessed," is such a condition as to create a consciousness of a perfect peace, a perfect joy and a perfect rest. All of these things are included in God's will for man's life.

How may happiness or blessedness be secured? To this question many answers have been given. A thousand formulas have been devised whereby this universal desire of the human heart may be achieved. In our text we have Christ's answer to this question--His recipe for true and abiding happiness. He says that true and abiding happiness depends on an inward condition rather than on outward circumstances or material possessions.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit." This has no reference whatever to poverty of possessions or the absence of material wealth. The poor man's poverty will not give him any more claim upon heaven than the rich man's wealth. The New Testament never puts its blessing upon poverty as such. What it does show is that the poor man is saved from many dangers to which the rich man is exposed. Poverty is not a blessing in itself, though by creating a sense of need it may become a means of blessing.

"Poor in spirit" means the opposite of all that is summed up in the word "pride." One who is "poor in spirit" does not boast of his talents or his attainments, because he knows that he does not have anything which he did not receive. He knows that he does not possess anything to make him conceited. He knows that all the progress which he has made in the Christian life is due to the grace of God. He knows how far short he comes and how great are his needs. "The poor in spirit" are the very antithesis of the proud, the satisfied and the complacent. "Blessed are those who feel their spiritual need." The hopeless condition is when a man is satisfied with himself and sure that there is nothing wrong with him. God cannot do anything with a self-righteous and self-satisfied person.

On the tombstone of William Carey at Serampore you may read the inscription set there by his own instructions. There is the name, with no honors or degrees, the dates 1761-1834, and then a quotation from a now forgotten hymn by Isaac Watts,

A wretched, poor and helpless worm
On thy kind arms I fall.

There is nothing more. We do not talk like that today, and the language may even strike us as rather funny, but we can surely appreciate the spirit of the very great and learned man who chose that for his epitaph. 'If God could use me,' he once said, 'he can use anybody.'

To be "poor in spirit" is to see ourselves as we are in the sight of God, and to be conscious of our need of Him. It means to be entirely free of conceit, pride and self-sufficiency. How few of us have this quality! Of one thing you may be sure--that the proud in spirit are unblessed. Pride spoils fellowship and isolates us from others. Miserable and wretched are the proud in spirit. Happy and blessed are the poor in spirit. Christ does not pronounce a blessing upon a self-sufficient person, but upon the one who is keenly conscious of his own insufficiency. As long as arrogance, pride, self-sufficiency and self-exaltation constitute one's attitude, he cannot receive the blessings of God.

Instead of cherishing the self-satisfied spirit that made Rousseau make the impious boast

that he would stand at the bar of God with his Book of Confessions in his hand, and challenge any one living to say, 'I am better than that man,' it is infinitely better to kneel with Toplady, and cry:

"Nothing in my hand I bring,
Simply to Thy cross I cling;
Naked, come to Thee for dress;
Helpless, look to Thee for grace;
Foul, I to the fountain fly:
Wash me, Saviour, or I die."

We are most blessed when we fully realize our own emptiness. Paul said, "When I am weak, then am I strong," meaning that when he realized his own weakness most, then he was really strongest, because then he relied most upon God. We need to be emptied of self-importance and self-righteousness in order that there may be a working of divine grace in the heart. "The poor in spirit" enjoy happiness here and have a wonderful blessedness in reserve.