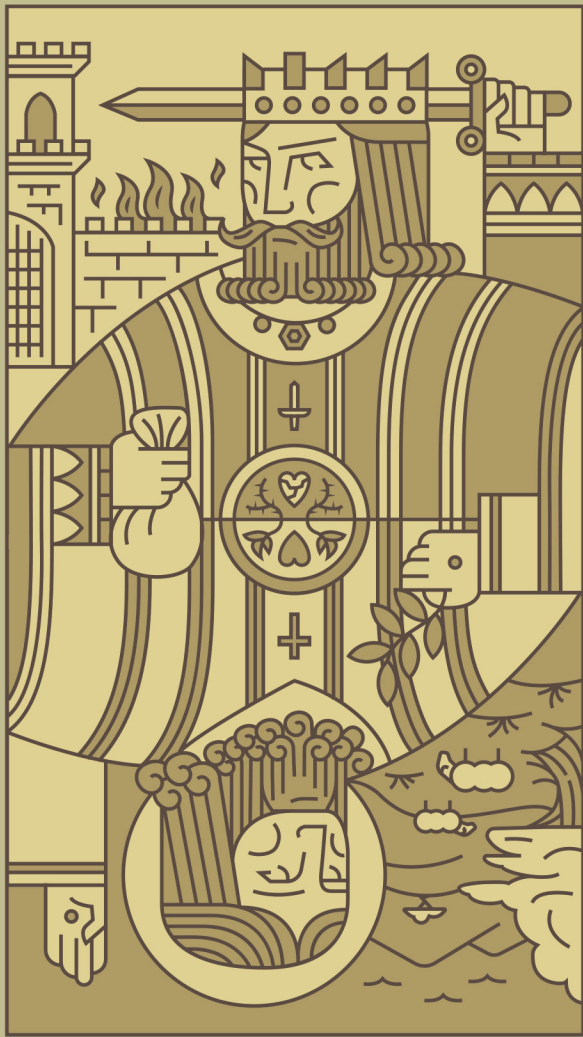


THE UPSIDE DOWN KINGDOM

— WISDOM FOR LIFE —



— FROM THE BEATITUDES —

CHRIS CASTALDO

“G. K. Chesterton once defined a paradox as ‘truth standing on its head calling for attention.’ And this, most certainly, is what Chris Castaldo achieves as he deftly guides us through the inverted glories of the Beatitudes in *The Upside Down Kingdom*. His beautifully written exposition invites these eight compressed theological H-bombs to graciously detonate within our hearts. *The Upside Down Kingdom* is not only a treasure trove of wisdom; it’s also a bracing call to deeper devotion to Christ and the gospel.”

R. Kent Hughes, Senior Pastor Emeritus, College Church, Wheaton, Illinois

“What happens if we read the Beatitudes from a relentlessly biblical perspective that interprets them in terms of the unmerited grace God has offered us in Christ? What happens when we read them in terms of what God has done *for* us in Christ’s cross work, what he is doing *in* us by the Holy Spirit, and what he will do for the world *through* us? Chris Castaldo’s *The Upside Down Kingdom* startles us with the answers. Here is a book that equips us to be the world’s salt and light by helping us learn to live according to the ‘rhythms of heaven’ that beat in God’s own heart.”

Mark Talbot, Associate Professor of Philosophy, Wheaton College;
author, *Suffering and the Christian Life* series

“To modern readers, the Beatitudes can sometimes sound confusing or even off-putting. Chris Castaldo does a lovely job demystifying Jesus’s teachings—and therefore making them truly beautiful—for Christians today. His explanations and examples are easy to grasp, giving context in a gentle and winsome way. This book would be perfect for a group Bible study or individual devotions—I read with my Bible on my lap, highlighting and making notes the whole way through.”

Sarah Zylstra, Senior Writer, The Gospel Coalition; coauthor,
Gospelbound: Living with Resolute Hope in an Anxious Age

“I love this book. Thank you, Chris Castaldo, for the gift of *The Upside Down Kingdom*. This warm, engaging, and yet thought-provoking work wonderfully draws us to the vision of the Beatitudes. In the words of Castaldo, this is ‘a vision that invites us from the shadows of alienation into the purpose and joy of Christ’s kingdom.’ Truly, when we embrace this counterintuitive vision and way of life, we will be portraits to a watching world of what it looks like to live according to God’s heart.”

Crawford W. Loritts, Jr., author; speaker; radio host; President, Beyond Our Generation

“Chris Castaldo is a model pastor-theologian, and *The Upside Down Kingdom* puts his considerable pastoral and theological gifts on full display. Wise and winsome, subtle and profound, thought-provoking and heart-warming, his exposition of the Beatitudes captures the living voice of their original author and thus provides a tonic for the lackadaisical and a solace for the beleaguered—an invitation into Jesus’s upside-down kingdom. Beautifully done! Highly recommended!”

Todd Wilson, Cofounder and President, Center for Pastor Theologians

“Chris Castaldo has issued a timely and desperately needed prophetic call for the church to embody the lordship of Jesus Christ in distinctly countercultural and counterintuitive ways within our increasingly polarized world. Incorporating depth of biblical-theological reflection, historical perspective, pastoral experience, and cultural sensitivity, with appropriate nuance and refreshing personal honesty, this book warmly invites us to experience the blessedness of identity in Christ as we align our affections and allegiances more fully with Christ and his kingdom. In a day of significant cultural confusion, *The Upside Down Kingdom* is a clarion call for Christian identity and ethic.”

Laurie L. Norris, Professor of Bible, Moody Theological Seminary;
coeditor, *One Volume Seminary: A Complete Ministry Education from the Faculty of Moody Bible Institute and Moody Theological Seminary*

“The Beatitudes are a special part of the New Testament. Chris Castaldo’s excellent exposition brings them to life with the aid of real-life examples and the wisdom of the ages. A challenging and inspiring book that is recommended to all.”

Tony Lane, Professor of Historical Theology, London School of Theology

“I’ve learned a lot from Chris’s teaching and example of following Christ through the counterintuitive turn of the kingdom. And I’m thrilled that many more will benefit likewise with this book. When we realize the way up first goes down, then we’ll find the power of God to overcome today’s challenges.”

Collin Hansen, Vice President and Editor in Chief, The Gospel Coalition;
author, *Timothy Keller: His Spiritual and Intellectual Formation*

The Upside Down Kingdom

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Wisdom for Life from the Beatitudes

Chris Castaldo

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*This book is dedicated with love
to Luke, Philip, Simeon, Aliza, and Malachi*

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For theirs is the kingdom of heaven

MATTHEW 5:3

Introduction

You Are Invited

WHEN WE PRAY for God's kingdom to come "on earth as it is in heaven" (Matt. 6:10), we sometimes imagine the kingdom to be far away. It is, however, closer than we think. In the crucified and risen King, the two realms now overlap—a holy ground that is simultaneously mundane and heavenly, temporal and eternal.

Jesus's Beatitudes are concerned with cultivating this kingdom life, though perhaps not in the way we would expect. For many, the Beatitudes are thought to increase our happiness by imparting blessings—at least that's the impression our Israeli tour guide gave us. Facing the shimmering Sea of Galilee, she portrayed the rabbi from Nazareth on a grassy slope, holding forth in a flowing violet robe, encircled by attentive disciples. "Here, Jesus offered the secrets to living a happy life," she explained.¹

Unfortunately, the gently blended lines of this portrait easily obscure the stark, counterintuitive thrust of Christ's kingdom. Our guide's pastel-colored depiction may offer comfort, but it's not where we live. Many of us labor under nagging concern

for our children, encroaching loneliness, financial disaster, and creeping old age. We are haunted by the past and afraid of the future. We are troubled over the brokenness in our communities. Scammers prey on the elderly and walk away laughing. Victims of abuse wrestle with heartache and bitterness. In our world, naked with lust and greed, people often grab whatever they can get. And just when we start to feel morally superior to those wretches “out there,” we find uncomfortable traces of this evil in ourselves. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn bluntly observed, “The line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.”²

In this familiar cauldron of life and death, of struggle and strain, how does one experience the peace of God’s kingdom? The Hebrew word for peace is of course “shalom.” It describes life as God intended, the long-awaited age in which his manifest glory would set the world right, making crooked places straight and rough places smooth. Weeping would become joy, mountains would drip with fresh wine, and deserts would flourish with life. In the words of Cornelius Plantinga Jr.,

People would work in peace and work to fruitful effect. Lambs could lie down with lions. All nature would be fruitful, benign, and filled with wonder upon wonder; all humans would be knit together in brotherhood and sisterhood; and all nature and all humans would look to God, walk with God, lean toward God, and delight in God.³

This is the vision of the Beatitudes—a vision that invites us from the shadows of alienation into the purpose and joy of Christ’s kingdom. But, as we shall see, this blessedness is both counter-

intuitive and countercultural.⁴ The Beatitudes pour gasoline on our contemporary ideals—and then light a match. To satisfy our hunger for wealth, Jesus offers poverty. He extols meekness over hostility. Rather than personal pleasure and fame, he proposes patience and a commitment to justice. Instead of lust and greed, he commends purity of heart. For the soul riddled with anxiety and fear, he offers peace. Rather than vanity and pride, he bestows security and inner strength. The Beatitudes dig beneath the surface, exposing what we really need to value and practice. Servais Pinckaers suggests that we can compare the work of the Beatitudes to that of a plow in the fields. “Drawn along with determination,” he writes, “it drives the sharp edge of the plowshare into the earth and carves out, as the poets say, a deep wound, a broad furrow.”⁵ This blessed furrow uproots the weeds of our pride and perversion, renewing the soil of our souls, a renewal in which the eternal fruit of God’s kingdom burgeons with life.

By excavating the attachments of our soul, the Beatitudes reveal the pernicious lies we have internalized while simultaneously portraying the life God intends for his people. In them Jesus is not, as many suppose, offering a religious ladder that can be climbed all the way up to a smiling Deity who rewards our religious effort. Nor is he giving an ideal moral system reserved for an elite group of chosen disciples, or laying out a penitential program whereby one receives divine blessing by assuming the posture of a doormat.

Rather, Jesus is describing the man or woman who belongs to his Father’s kingdom and therefore lives according to God’s heart. These blessed ones lived in the “shadow of death,” but now “a light has dawned” (Matt. 4:16), a divine illumination that offers a new logic. In this fallen world, it’s the wealthy, the charming,

and the strong who are exalted. But Jesus shows us that God’s heart—full of steadfast love and faithfulness—extends to the weak, the vulnerable, and the awkward. Throughout his parables, Jesus makes the marginalized and oppressed the heroes, an ironic and unexpected turn that explodes like fireworks throughout his teaching. He preached:

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

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matt. 5:3–12)⁶

Our Counterintuitive Calling

The Greek word rendered “blessed” (*makarios*) is rich in meaning. There is no single term in English that conveys its complexity, beauty, and nuance.⁷ Some suggest the word “fortunate” best

conveys the idea because it describes a valuable gift that cannot be earned.⁸ Others have translated *makarios* as “happy.” Augustine, for example, takes this approach, identifying happiness as the goal and outcome of a righteous life, a gift that one enjoys in communion with Christ.⁹ But however sure the link between happiness and holiness, this understanding must be supplemented by the full-orbed, biblical conception of blessedness offered to us in the Beatitudes.

The fleeting nature of worldly happiness, after all, is not sturdy enough to sustain the eternal weight of glory to which Jesus points us. “Happiness,” wrote William Bennett, “is like a cat. If you try to coax it or call it, it will avoid you: it will never come.”¹⁰ Nevertheless, it’s still commonplace to hear Christians promoting “Be-Happy Attitudes,” as Robert Schuller used to say.¹¹ In his book by that title, Schuller offers motivational insights to fortify the church with cheerfulness. For instance, he paraphrases the blessing upon mourners with the affirmation, “I’m really hurting—but I’m going to bounce back!”¹² The message of positive thinking is clear: the right attitude and sufficient effort will produce the happiness we desire.

Life in the kingdom, though, is not about striving for happiness or avoiding the ills of human existence. It’s about *receiving* and *finding*. It’s about recognizing and living into God’s promises, even amid the pain and suffering of life (Eph. 1:3; James 1:17). “Blessed” is therefore not an achievement, attitude, or a subjective emotion; it is the tangible gift of God’s loving embrace, an identity in Christ that experiences life as it *ought* to be—“as in heaven.”

God’s blessing, however, goes even further. In addition to saving our own souls, the Beatitudes set forth the clearly demarcated way of righteousness in the world. Thus, when Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) started a seminary for the Confessing Church at

Finkenwalde, it was modeled on the Sermon on the Mount.¹³ Fiercely opposed to Hitler, Bonhoeffer and his colleagues employed the Beatitudes to confront the Nazi's devilish propaganda and influence. Here is how Craig Slane explains it:

Bonhoeffer believed that it was possible for a community gathered on the basis of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount to provide the necessary ground for resistance against tyranny. The practices of dying to one's self in confession, meditation, and intercession produced openness to others and forged the kind of solidarity required for moral risk-taking.¹⁴

Like Bonhoeffer, we must put Jesus's message into the foreground. We must stress, as he did, that the only place on earth where one finds this beatitudinal life "is where the poorest, meekest, and most sorely tried of all men is to be found—on the cross at Golgotha."¹⁵ The wealthy, charming, and strong, as it turns out, may become the greatest tragedies of all because they rely on their natural gifts. But people who lack such advantages, or those who are courageous enough to confess their need for God, are poised to receive his blessing.

The Beatitudes, therefore, answer the essential questions of identity and calling by placing squarely before us a counterintuitive kingdom that inexorably aligns our affections and priorities with the rhythms of heaven. Here we find the "blessed" life that God intends for his people—not just in the future, but here and now.

We begin by considering the "poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3).

The Poverty That Makes One Rich

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

MATTHEW 5:3

MIKE VETRONE was accustomed to luxury sports cars and beachside mansions during his years as a drug runner for the New York Mafia, a lifestyle that is now a distant memory. “With judges, court clerks, and casino officers on the payroll, I pranced through Atlantic City like the mayor,” he says now.¹

Yet Mike soon began a descent into a heroin addiction that threatened his life. After a customer discovered that Mike had stolen some of his drugs, Mike packed a bag and fled to Florida. Menacing death threats followed him, intimidation that continued for months. “I remained alone,” he remembers, “bound by my addiction, facing a dismal future.”

He began thinking of suicide. “I was now haunted by what was, in fact, a not altogether unpleasant idea of ending my misery with the click of a trigger,” Mike says. “My .22 caliber handgun, which was usually within arm’s reach, held a fresh cartridge. After two years, the moment of reckoning had come.”

On an uncharacteristically overcast morning in South Florida, Mike dropped by a favorite haunt, Big Apple Bagel, to pick up what he assumed would be his last meal. Back in his apartment, he flipped on the television, looking for company one last time as he ate. On came a television preacher. With a distinct southern accent, the man exclaimed, “Life has a way of grabbing you by the collar, forcing you down to your knees.”

Mike turned up the volume.

“There’s a chain that binds every soul,” the preacher exclaimed, “and that chain is sin—an addiction from which Jesus’s death and resurrection sets us free.” Suddenly, as the television evangelist invited viewers to embrace Christ, Mike felt energy pulsing through his veins and found himself shouting at the television, “Yes!” In that moment, he no longer felt alone but sensed an encircling presence. Mike was facing not the end of his life, but a new beginning.

I met Mike in 1995 while serving as a pastoral intern in South Florida. For nearly three months, I shadowed him, learning that the addicted, downtrodden, and hopeless are the people who are poised to receive the blessing of God. The kingdom, I learned from Mike, is not for the graspers, but for the broken—those who reach the end of themselves and approach God with empty hands. Such people recognize that “they are completely and utterly destitute in the realm of the spirit.”²

This is what it means to be “poor in spirit” (Matt. 5:3). Unlike the Pharisees of Jesus’s day—full of religious swagger—the spiritually poor see their bankruptcy. They know that they can do nothing to merit divine favor. So, they depend on the Lord’s provision, the one who gives the most magnificent gift imaginable—himself.³ Indeed, this living relationship with the King defines what it means to participate in the kingdom, not in the far-off future, but right now. Today.

The Dominion of Dependence

Impoverished spirits have a long ancestry. Hearing God’s promise to make of him a great nation and to bless the world, Abraham “obeyed” and “went,” leaving the wealth and security of his home (Heb. 11:8). Through shimmering mirages, he wandered through deserts and into cities, trusting the one who had called him. A mortified and empty Jacob faithfully wrestled with God and exclaimed, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Gen. 32:26). And a jailed Joseph trusted God in Egypt (Gen. 39–41). In countless ways, Israel experienced poverty.

After four hundred years of silence, God’s people continued to anticipate the long-awaited kingdom. Matthew’s Gospel, where we find the Beatitudes,⁴ sets the stage in its opening chapters. Like the nation of Israel, Jesus travels down to Egypt, meets a hostile king, returns from Egypt, passes through the water, and enters the wilderness. In these movements, Matthew portrays familiar turns of salvation history, but with a twist.

This portrait features Christ as the realization of Israel’s destiny, the long-anticipated King of the kingdom (Matt. 16:28; Luke 17:21). Time collapses as Jesus enters the stage of history as the

ultimate servant and faithful offspring of Abraham who fulfills God's promise (Gal. 3:16–18; 2 Cor. 1:20). Matthew is rhetorically shouting to his readers that Jesus is the culmination of Jewish hope. He records, "From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Matt. 4:17).

The phrase "kingdom of heaven" occurs throughout Matthew and is generally synonymous with "kingdom of God."⁵ It describes the true, peaceful, pure, and joyful life that is realized in communion with God (see Matt. 4:23). Such blessings confront our idols—the gods of comfort, success, and national pride—and promise something far greater.⁶ Indeed, idols are merely the profane and twisted parody of which the kingdom is the satisfying reality. So, Jesus frames his Beatitudes with reference to the kingdom: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3; see 5:10).

Notice how Jesus describes the kingdom of heaven as "theirs." The positioning of this word at the beginning of the clause gives the sense that the kingdom is for this particular group, the poor in spirit, the marginalized and forgotten—and not for the rich, self-assured, ambitious, or proud. It's not for those who are content with life and consistently in control. It's not for those who believe in themselves, who have the natural ability to win the day. As Martin Luther proclaimed from his deathbed, "We are all beggars; this is true."⁷

In his 1520 treatise *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther makes this point by describing a king who marries a prostitute, which results in the sudden change of her identity. She is now the queen, acquiring all the privileges associated therein. In one sense, of course, she remains the very same person. When she looks in the mirror, she sees the same old face staring back at her. And yet

now, because of the king's love, her status has radically changed. Having heard his wedding pledge, "You are my beloved and I am yours," the queen is secure (see Song 2:16).

In like manner, says Luther, Christ, the bridegroom, takes our sin as his own. Luther writes,

Who can even begin to appreciate this royal marriage? What can comprehend the riches of this glorious grace? Here, this rich, upstanding bridegroom, Christ, marries this poor, disloyal little prostitute, redeems her from all her evil and adorns her with all his goodness. For now it is impossible for her sins to destroy her, because they have been laid upon Christ and devoured by him. In Christ, her bridegroom, she has her righteousness, which she can enjoy as her very own property.⁸

This, according to Luther, is the "great exchange" in which all that the church has (her sin) is given to the King and all that he has (justice, blessedness, life, and glory) is bestowed on her. Condemnation is therefore now in the past, as Luther exclaims: "Believe in Christ, in whom grace, righteousness, peace, freedom, and all things are promised to you. If you believe, you will have these things; if you do not believe, you will lack them."

Here is where it gets especially practical. Each day when we look into the mirror, we face a shameful sinner who falls short of moral beauty and excellence. Embarrassed by this honest estimation of ourselves, we groan, "How long, O LORD?" (Ps. 13:1). We descend into the valley of self-loathing and despair. But then, just as our souls enter this familiar and dreaded valley, we remember the King's vow, his promise that lifts us from our downward

spiral: “In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (John 14:2–3).

Billy Graham wisely said, “When we come to the end of ourselves, we come to the beginning of God.”¹⁰ In God’s kingdom, the valley is the turning point. If you’ve ever read a Dostoyevsky novel, you’ve seen variations of this theme. Some smart and influential figure is battered and bruised by the failures and defeats of life until he crawls into a fetal position and pleads for mercy. That’s the necessary inflection point where the direction of life changes.

The high and mighty are not able to hear this word. Only the lowly hear it. So the Lord says, “This is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2). This was Isaiah’s point when he declared that only the remnant of believers would remain in the land (Isa. 6:12–13) and that they would depend not on themselves, but on the promise of God (Isa. 10:20–23). Zephaniah hits the same note:

But I will leave within you
 the meek and humble.
 The remnant of Israel
 will trust in the name of the Lord. (Zeph. 3:12 NIV)

This is the spirit Jesus describes in the Beatitudes, of those who have been emptied and are now ready to be saved. It was the spirit of the eighty-year-old Moses at Mount Horeb before the burning bush, sufficiently emptied of his savior complex and ready to listen. It was the spirit of Jeremiah, whom God had called:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations. (Jer. 1:5)

Before Jeremiah's initial breath—indeed, before his conception—God determined to speak through his weakness and poverty, and this grace would illustrate God's character through the centuries. We can also look at the austere obedience of John the Baptist or the repeated sufferings of the apostle Paul, the one to whom God said, "My grace is sufficient for you" (2 Cor. 12:9). Most importantly, there is the supreme example of our Lord Jesus Christ, God's suffering servant:

He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.
(Isa. 53:2–3 NIV)

The Contours of Human Poverty

Poverty often comes uninvited. Sometimes it is thrust upon us. The poor and disenfranchised—in their need for food, clothing, housing, and employment—know this reality. Illness is another form of poverty, especially when chronic pain is part of

the picture. We experience poverty of affection—the paucity of a parent’s love that stunts a child’s growth, a spouse who withdraws relationally, or the isolation that sometimes accompanies singleness. Advanced years can become a poverty as strength fails and abilities diminish. This is certainly true for those with Alzheimer’s as well as their family members. All of this poverty is at some level interconnected and leads to the ultimate experience of poverty—the primal hardship called death.

Yet Christ doesn’t leave us to languish and die in this condition. He fully embraced our impoverishment, being born in a manger and having nowhere to lay his head. By such humility, Jesus assumed human frailty and deprivation, a condescension that led redeemed humanity through the darkness of the cross into the radiance of eternal life. In the words of Paul, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

This is where the poor in spirit go—to the cross of Christ—for there our desperate plight is revealed. There, at the cross, we are exposed as inadequate in a world that values winners. There we are left naked and discovered to be cursed by the Judge whose verdict matters forever. But then we discover the good news: that on the cross Jesus died in our place, shedding his blood to purge our sin. In this encounter, says Jonathan Edwards, repentant sinners “unexpectedly find him with open arms to embrace them, ready forever to forget all their sins as though they had never been. They find that he runs to meet them, and makes them most welcome, and admits them not only to be his servants but his friends.”¹¹ Again, in the words of our beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3).

To be clear, this poverty is not an impulsive plunge into destitution or a masochistic disregard of responsibility in favor of pain or failure. Neither is it the cloistered asceticism of hermits. It is, rather, a humble and honest recognition of our spiritual bankruptcy. As the Psalmist put it, “If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand?” (Ps. 130:3).

Such poverty of spirit, says the Puritan preacher Robert Harris (1581–1658), is the starting point of life—the realization of one’s “extreme need” of salvation: “Thus God undoes a man before He saves him, mars him before He makes him, takes him all to pieces and then joins him together forever.”¹² Such transformation occurs in the daily rhythms of life—before God, in our communities, and in the church. We’ll consider each of these relationships in turn.

Before God’s Throne

When the prodigal son of Jesus’s famous parable (Luke 15:11–32) requested his inheritance, he was essentially asking his father to declare himself dead. Leaving home, the son used the inheritance to enjoy all the pleasures money could buy—until he went broke. The son then descended into poverty and disgrace, eventually envying the food of pigs. The story to this point illustrates the plight of humanity, captured by our own sin and needing a Savior (Rom. 1:18–32).

Having severed his family ties and squandered his inheritance, the son finally considered returning home. But he knew that while the pigpen could be left behind, the stench of shame would follow him. Because there was no earthly reason to believe he would be restored to his father, he was prepared to relinquish his position as a son and be accepted as a mere servant.

Destitute and broken, the son began the long, homeward journey. The words that follow, however, are among the most beautiful in Scripture. Jesus says, “But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). With a decisive love that defies our expectations, the father rushed to his bedraggled son, embraced him, and clothed him with honor.

Demoralized by shame, we too approach the Father in poverty of spirit, confessing our sin and unworthiness. And, likewise, he embraces us not as servants but as beloved sons and daughters. This astounding reality gives us a durable hope. As the psalmist declares, “O Israel, hope in the LORD! For with the LORD there is steadfast love, and with him is plentiful redemption” (Ps. 130:7).¹³ Hope, after all, is a form of poverty. Hoping means that instead of grasping and possessing, we wait for God’s provision. In the words of Paul, “For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (Rom. 8:24–25).

To be poor in spirit is to recognize, as in Luther’s parable, that God’s steadfast love is the only true basis of our hope.

Relating to One’s Neighbor

This hope is needed in full strength today. Anyone half awake these days recognizes that we have a problem. As the world increasingly shifts under our feet, loud voices are shouting down the sinister Other—the malefactors who are deconstructing life as we know it. We use inflammatory speech against our foes, driven by a big dose of adrenaline. Categorical in our denunciations, we seem to find this spleen-venting exercise to be a necessary catharsis.

By contrast, we observe the way Jesus addressed the hostilities of his day. He consistently embodied humility and warmhearted affection toward others. Never did he incite the poor and oppressed to foment a rebellion. He did not assemble a cache of weapons or prepare a company of commandos for toppling the current order. In words that likely enraged the Zealots, he told his followers, “Love your enemies” (Matt. 5:44).

Jesus’s response to hostility was often misunderstood by his contemporaries. Many of them expected a deliverer like Joshua or David, a military commander who would vanquish the Romans and establish an earthly kingdom. Instead, he became known as a friend of tax collectors—a circle of traitors who aligned with the political enemy. And of a certain Roman centurion he provocatively stated, “Truly, I tell you, with no one in Israel have I found such faith” (Matt. 8:10).

In keeping with our Savior’s example, we don’t always need to defend ourselves or have the final word. Christians who are poor in spirit can live with being maligned and misunderstood. We can be like Jesus before Herod Antipas—silent. Such poverty is essential when we are tempted to excoriate our “enemy” who thinks differently about a social or political issue. As Jesus told Pilate, “My kingdom is not of this world. If my kingdom were of this world, my servants would have been fighting. . . . But my kingdom is not from the world” (John 18:36).

Poverty in the Church

Yet, loving our neighbors is not the only task ahead of us. We must also do the same in our own churches, which can sometimes feel like an even harder feat. I’m not a bishop, but I spend a lot of time talking with pastors, and these conversations currently reveal

dangerous levels of disillusionment. According to a Barna report published on November 16, 2021, 38 percent of U.S. pastors have thought about quitting full-time ministry in the past year.¹⁴ This comes after many months of quarantining and isolation, which has produced a deluge of mental health issues (including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation), bitter division concerning virus mitigation policies, and financial strain. Add to the equation political dissent and culture wars and it is no surprise that we have an alarming percentage of weary pastors who are considering a departure from ministry.

In this context, the problem is compounded by the way churches sometimes strive toward prominence. Emotional or affective marketing campaigns often use technology in ways that engage people at visceral, rather than cognitive, levels. Video filters, lighting, fog machines, pacing, and musical chords are employed to stimulate a euphoric high that increasingly struggles to accommodate the impoverished spirit. Add to this a corporate model of ministry that defines success by numerical growth and nurtures larger-than-life celebrity pastors and it's no wonder that we have a problem with authoritarian and abusive leadership styles that cause churches to rise and fall.

Whether it's among pastors facing discouragement or in churches that are overly indebted to the marketing methods of the corporate world, Jesus's call to spiritual poverty provides a wisdom that takes us by the hand and guides us through the minefield of ambition and vanity. It does this by shaping our mission, objectives, and methods of ministry according to the humble character of the servant Savior who did not exploit his deity but instead humbled himself to the point of death.

Good News of the Kingdom

As mentioned earlier, Jesus emerged from the water of baptism to announce the “good news” of God’s reign, also called the “kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 4:17). In that day, “kingdom” had social, political, and religious overtones, for it was a movement that transcended one’s private spirituality. To proclaim the good news of another kingdom, then, was a socially subversive act that recognized a competing loyalty to the rule of Caesar.

For the poor in spirit, however, this subversion is not aimed at consolidating personal power and influence; it is about submitting oneself to the true King. Our covetous striving for more and more is to be reordered according to a new ethic. “For where your treasure is,” said Jesus, “there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). This new treasure is none other than the King himself—the God of heaven and earth—who loves us beyond description, however much we may feel shame and regret. Such love compels us to proclaim the good news of the kingdom.

Given its countercultural trajectory, God’s kingdom required citizens to analyze the countervailing “gospel” proclaimed by society, a call to discipleship that recognizes and responds to the supremacy of Christ over every dimension of human experience. Ethnicity, cultural affiliation, and socio-economic status are no longer the most important ties that unite us. Now, as royal subjects, we are bound by a greater purpose—to “proclaim the excellencies of him who called [us] out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). It’s no accident that the “kingdom of heaven” book-ends the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3, 10), thus stressing our calling to live in this world’s empire as citizens who belong to another King.

This was Mike Vetrone's legacy, the mentor I mentioned earlier. And it was especially clear in the final Bible study he presented that summer, a message from Matthew 13:31–32. There Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a grain of mustard seed. . . . It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is larger than all the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

After reading the text, Mike displayed a picture of a mustard seed from his study Bible and asked us to imagine it having fallen to the ground somewhere, unnoticed by birds or human beings. Over time, he explained, the seed sprouted into a large bush, so lush and expansive that the birds of the air nested in its branches. "God's kingdom is like that," he suggested with a tear in his eye (Mike often got emotional when talking about Scripture). "It has such an obscure beginning that people disregard and disparage it. But against all odds, God's kingdom grows and spreads, comforting the weary, the poor, and the hopeless."

At this point he looked at me. I imagine it's because I was about to return to Bible college and prepare for ministry. He said,

This is how Jesus was born, unnoticed by the world. And it's also the way he departed—progressively abandoned, first by Peter and then by Judas. Next came the Jewish leaders and people who cried "crucify him." Then there was Pontius Pilate, representing the pagan world. Finally, upon the cross, stripped of all dignity, Jesus cried out to the Father, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

This, friends, is the counterintuitive turn of the kingdom, the impoverished experience to which we're called—weak, rejected, and alone, and yet not abandoned, because the Lord has promised to sustain us. We appear, in the world's eyes, as a pathetic spectacle; but, all the while, God is at work in our poverty. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3).