

BLESSED ARE

A PRACTICAL LOOK AT THE BEATITUDES

LJ HARRY



WORD AFLAME PRESS
WELDON SPRING, MO

Contents

Introduction	7
1. Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit	13
2. Blessed Are Those Who Mourn	23
3. Don't Worry	33
4. Blessed Are the Meek	41
5. Blessed Are the Hungry	53
6. The Most Popular Verse in the Bible	63
7. Blessed Are the Merciful	73
8. Blessed Are the Pure in Heart	85
9. Stay Out of the Boss's Office (Revenge)	95
10. Blessed Are the Peacemakers	105
11. Blessed Are the Persecuted	115
12. 29¢ Candles (Salt and Light)	129

1

Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit

Some of the audience in the nosebleed seats might have nudged one another when He started. “Someone needs to give that man a mic. It sure sounded like he said the poor in spirit are happy. I’ll tell you who’s happy. The ones who don’t have to pay taxes to the Romans anymore; those guys are happy.”

His buddy elbowed him and laughed. “I’ve got one better. The guy with the new four-door, four-horsepower Lariat chariot, now he’s happy.”

“I’ve got one even better. The one with the high-rise office and six-figure payroll to pay for the four-door, four-horsepower Lariat chariot is happy.” They stopped listening to Jesus long enough to dream about being rich enough to own anything. They were taxed at every turn. They were oppressed every day. Being happy, or blessed, didn’t look like poverty; it looked like revolution. If only they were strong enough and brave enough to revolt and get rid of those pesky Romans, then they would be blessed. They could have bigger, nicer, and newer without worrying a Roman soldier with a wandering eye would come by and steal it. Their road to blessedness was paved with violence and greed.

Jesus’ journey and destination were as different from theirs as the Book of Malachi is from the Book of Matthew. True blessing

or happiness wears a different nametag. We know it better as joy. Joy cannot be measured on an inventory sheet, in square feet, or in horsepower. Joy comes from knowing Jesus, being in right relationship with God. In order to know Him, we all start on the ground floor: we all start at poor in spirit. That seems to be a poor way to start a sermon. That seems to be a poor way to start a life.

Okay. Just how poor is poor? Are we talking kinda poor, or are we talking poor poor? Is this, “Please, sir, may I have a bowl of soup?” Two different words in the New Testament describe the poor. One of them means the working poor. They wake up at sunup and work until sundown just to survive. They don’t have anything to their name or in their name. They have the clothes on their backs, and that’s just about it. But they have some pride in their work because they can still work. They may never be rich, but as long as they can eke out a living by working, they can keep living. They’re the working poor. (See II Corinthians 9:9, “he hath given to the poor.”)

The other word describes the begging poor. They have less than little. They often don’t have the strength to work. Maybe they don’t have the skills to work. They’re not alive because of their works; they’re alive because of someone else’s grace. You probably guessed it. That’s the word Jesus used to describe the poor in spirit—the begging poor.

For five years, my wife (Andrea, “the lovely”), and I lived in Florida. We saw panhandlers all the way from Miami to the Panhandle. Since it is sunny 363 days of the year in Florida, people stand at intersections and off-ramps holding cardboard signs asking for money. Most of the signs appeal to our generous, Jesus side. They read, “Homeless, need food. God bless.” How can you roll up your window and speed through the intersection when they say, “God bless”? One gentleman stationed himself in front of Walmart and waited for the light to turn red. He was the one

glad guy in Seminole County, Florida, who smiled when the green light turned red. He walked up and down the median as he held his cardboard sign asking for cash.

One sunny day Andrea was leaving Walmart, and she noticed him and his sign. She has a tender heart for people, and she had just been to Walmart to shop for groceries. We needed bread, milk, eggs, and donuts. We were stocking up on breakfast. As she was driving away with our favorite-meal-of-the-morning favorites, she stopped at the red light, and he walked right up to her window. She reached into the bag of groceries, rolled down her window, and handed over the donuts. He was surprised. Disappointed. He scowled for a second, took the donuts through the open window, and said with a sigh, “We’ll take that.” He walked away, she rolled up the window, and when the light turned green, she drove away. What just happened there?

When she told me the story, I wanted to drive to Walmart and take the donuts back. If you don’t want them, I do. If I was part of the begging poor, I’d be glad for donuts; I’d be glad for peanuts. Thankful for a dime, thankful for a dollar. In Jesus’ day, the begging poor were grateful for any gift anyone gave because they relied on grace. There but for the grace of God we all go.

That is the word Jesus used to describe the poor in spirit. When we first come to Jesus, we come to Him with nothing we have on our own. We don’t impress him with how well we sing, how much money we make, how many followers we boast on social media. We come poor in spirit. We know we’re only here because of His amazing grace. We must take inventory of our hearts and ask ourselves if we are poor in spirit. Even if we’ve been part of a church family and have been to so many church services that the car drives itself to the sanctuary, the only way to come to God is like the begging poor. We don’t have a line of good works

and good words to parade before God. We don't even have one single, solitary float to parade before God.

The poor in spirit don't care what song or sermon or speaker is on the menu. They're just glad someone is singing and someone is preaching to feed their starving soul. The poor in spirit will worship with all their heart whether the lyrics are in a hymnal or on a screen. They worship Jesus with the slow songs, the fast songs, and everything in between. The poor in spirit cheerfully give, not to bribe God, but as a reminder that all we have comes from Him. The poor in spirit respond to the preached Word of God just because it's the Word of God, not because of who's preaching it.

The poor in spirit spend time at the altar seeking God just to be close to Him. They're not trying to twist God's arm into doing what they think He should do. The poor in spirit join with their church family as often as they can to be with the people of God in His presence. The poor in spirit give thanks before every meal and teach their children to pray because they realize they wouldn't have a crumb if it weren't for God's grace.

The poor in spirit don't demand anything of God. He doesn't owe us anything; we owe Him everything. The poor in spirit understand we won't always understand. God doesn't owe us an apology or explanation when He doesn't answer our prayers like we ask. He doesn't have to work a miracle for us just because we asked Him to. He is able, and He is willing, but the poor in spirit realize that He is God, and we are not. And He knows what He's doing, even when we don't.

We all want to be blessed. We all want to be happy. We all want joy. But as Jesus sat on the side of a mountain and taught, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," the crowd was surprised at Jesus' turn-by-turn directions on the journey to joy. The rich, the poor, the well-known, the unknown all start at the same place. We all start at poor in spirit. We need to check the map to make sure we

set our destination to joy and travel the right road to get us from here to there. I'm the right guy to tell you about taking the wrong road to get to the right place.

It was an August Sunday, the day after our wedding in 2000. We were pulling out of our apartment parking lot in St. Louis to head for Gatlinburg for our honeymoon. We had everything we needed. Fuel in the tank, air in the tires, drinks in the cupholders. Check, check, check. As we were leaving the parking lot, my sweetheart innocently asked me, "Do you know where you're going?" Check that, too. I called the hotel to ask for directions, and the kind lady told me to take Highway 40 out of St. Louis to exit 407 and follow the signs to Gatlinburg. It really couldn't get any easier. We left around four that afternoon and planned to arrive around midnight.

I didn't bother with a hard-to-read, harder to fold map because not even I could botch these driving directions. We could just sit back, relax, and enjoy our drinks and snacks on the eight-hour jaunt to Gatlinburg. What a great way to start a marriage. I remembered seeing a Highway 40 from my three years of living in St. Louis. I drove onto the interstate until I saw the signs for US Route 40 and turned off the interstate onto US 40, driving out of Missouri and into Illinois. US 40 weaved in and out of small towns and big cities. We passed barbershops and mom-and-pop shops. US 40 turned right and left and right and left. We sped up to fifty-five, we slowed down to twenty-five.

As we passed through Illinois and into Indiana, I was getting road weary. Andrea drove for a while as I slept in the passenger seat. I woke up to a dark and stormy night.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Indianapolis."

Seconds later, all the street lights went dark. The wind howled. The rain fell. We're both from the Midwest, and we both knew

what this felt like. We turned the radio on and heard that a tornado was loose in Indianapolis. Andrea turned the car around, and we took shelter under a gas station roof. We stayed put and listened to the radio. Finally, around ten o'clock, the coast was clear, but we were hungry. The only place we could find open was an Omelette Shoppe. On our honeymoon. But they spelled shoppe like the olde English, so it had to be fancy. We walked in the Omelette Shoppe and into a wall of cigarette smoke. We made it to our booth, and I looked around the restaurant. Slot machines lined one wall. Guys sat on the stools in front of the slot machines with fistfuls of quarters, just sure they were about to strike it rich.

Soon the server came to take our order. I looked the menu over, but the Omelette Shoppe wasn't featuring steak and lobster. This was a far cry from our wedding-day dinner at the top floor of the Hilton. But it was still our honeymoon, and I wanted to treat my bride of one day. The fanciest meal I could find was Turkey Manhattan. That sounded exotic. I asked our server, "Is the Turkey Manhattan very good?"

She thought for a second and replied, "My dog likes it."

Who needs a food critic when you've got Snoopy?

Although it was August, it was chilly that night. I asked for a refill on my hot chocolate. She scooped up my empty coffee mug, leaned in, and whispered, "I'm not supposed to do this." Do what?

She hid my coffee mug behind her back and began to slink toward the counter as if refills would get her twenty-five to life. We finished our dinner date, got back in the car, and drove down US 40 until we crossed into Ohio. I'm from Ohio, and I know we're not supposed to be in Ohio. We're supposed to be minutes away from Gatlinburg by now. I pulled into a gas station in Dayton, ran inside, and asked the attendant, "How far to Gatlinburg from here?"

He looked puzzled. He quizzically asked me, “Why are you on this road if you’re going to Gatlinburg?”

I confidently answered him, “Well, I was told to take Highway 40 to exit 407 and follow the signs to Gatlinburg.”

That seemed to satisfy his wee-hours-of-the-morning curiosity. “Well, from here, it’ll take you about three hours.”

Three hours? That’s not so bad. We lost a little time when we were hiding from the twister in Indianapolis. And we lost a little time when we were aiding and abetting a felon in the Omelette Shoppe. I got back in the driver’s seat and told Andrea, “We’re about three hours away.” It’s taken longer than we thought, but we should be there soon.

It was around two o’clock on Monday morning. About five minutes later, I saw another gas station and thought, “I’ll get a second opinion.” That’s what a good, responsible husband should do. I’m really doing great in this husband role. I ran inside and asked, “How far to Gatlinburg, Tennessee?”

The sleepy attendant answered, “Why are you on this road if you’re going to Gatlinburg?”

That’s strange. That’s what someone else asked. That should have been a clue. “Well, I was told to take Highway 40 to exit 407 and follow the signs to Gatlinburg. I’m just following directions.”

“Okay,” she said. “It’ll be about eight hours.” Eight hours? Five minutes ago, I was five hours closer. We’re either failing in geography or math in Ohio. I walked to the car a little slower. I sat in the driver’s seat, buckled my seatbelt, and asked more than answered. “Eight hours?” We motored onto US 40 and I saw another gas station. I’m getting a third opinion. I can’t make the math work. I ran inside and asked, “How far to Gatlinburg from here?” I wish I was making this story up, but I’m not that creative.

He fired back at me, “Why are you on this road if you’re going to Gatlinburg?”

I was exhausted, exasperated. I fired right back, “Because I was told to take Highway 40 to exit 407 and follow the signs to Gatlinburg.”

He thought for a moment and said, “Hmm—gonna take you about five hours.” I had heard enough. I glanced around the room and noticed the maps for sale by the door. They were well designed. Glossy cover with pictures inside. I walked over to the map stand, opened up a map of Ohio and a map of Tennessee. I saw where we had come from, where we were, and where we were going. My stomach dropped into my shoes. For the last ten hours, we were on the wrong highway. The clerk at the hotel must have been thinking about the famous exit 407 off of Interstate 40. But Interstate 40 doesn’t touch St. Louis. US 40 does. But US 40 also touches a lot of small towns and a lot of red lights.

Put yourself in my newlywed wingtips. How am I going to explain to my beautiful, sweet, trusting bride who vowed to follow me to the ends of the earth that I can’t even get her to Gatlinburg for our honeymoon. I walked much slower to the car, trying to come up with a great reason why we’re going to laugh about this at two in the morning. I had nothing. I broke the news to her and slowly, quietly pulled back on US 40. But we were wiped out. An hour later, we pulled into a Perkins parking lot for a nap. I reclined the seat a few inches and fell asleep. Then bang! Slam, crash, bang. I bolted awake as a truckload full of loud, hungry guys parked their truck and slammed their doors right next to us. It sounded like shotgun blasts.

I blinked a few times and cast my tired eyes on a Red Roof Inn across the street. We rented a vacant room for \$55. When we awoke later that morning, I opened up the map and mapped out the route to get us to Gatlinburg. Thankfully, Andrea was still there. She could have slipped out during the night and driven back to her dad’s house. No one would have blamed her. “Dad, that guy

can get lost on a bike trail.” That actually did happen one time, but that’s another story for another time. I called the hotel to let them know what happened, and they refunded our nonrefundable night. That was a bright spot.

We found the interstate and started heading toward Tennessee. We were all the way up to around seventy miles per hour. The steering wheel was convulsing. I didn’t know our Dodge Spirit could go that fast. It probably shouldn’t go that fast. It might free up some of the duct tape. We drove into Kentucky and into a monsoon. Rain pounded our poor little car. The windshield wipers were working so hard, I could hear them beg for mercy. “If you get us out of this, I promise I’ll never squeak again.” We were back down to thirty-five miles per hour again. I looked over at Andrea who was still calm, and I cried.

With tears streaming down my face like a waterfall, I confessed, “I just can’t take this anymore.” God bless the lovely Andrea.

On that Monday night, around 7:30, we finally pulled into Gatlinburg, Tennessee. It should have been a short, eight-hour drive from St. Louis, but it took us twenty-seven and a half hours because I took the wrong road to get to the right place. I’ve seen thousands of people motoring through life heading for happiness. You have, too. Some of them were living for Jesus, some weren’t. They kept working to buy happiness, searching to find happiness. But when they finally ran out of steam, they found that happiness isn’t found in bigger, nicer, newer, faster. Happiness is only found right where Jesus said it would be found. “Happy are the poor in spirit.” Those who realize we need Him are the ones abundantly blessed with joy to have Him.

Poor in spirit looks a lot like humility. But as soon you know you’re humble, you aren’t. Being poor in spirit is not advertising our poverty before people. It’s realizing our spiritual poverty before God. The poor in spirit realize without Him, we have nothing, but

with Him, we have everything. We can be rich in pocket and still be poor in spirit. We can be poor in pocket and still be poor in spirit. God isn't impressed or depressed when He looks at our bank account. He smiles when He sees that we realize we need Him. God does not need us, but He still wants us to be close to Him. I don't understand grace, I can't explain grace, we can't earn grace, but I sure am grateful for grace.

God has everything to offer us just as soon as we stand on the first rung and realize we have nothing without Him. Take a deep breath. It's quite a climb. But the journey to joy starts on the first rung of the ladder in this first beatitude—blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.