LIVING THE OBEDIENT & SURRENDERED LIFE

A Balancing Act: Being Poor in Spirit While Rich in Things

Being surrounded with degrees of material prosperity and opulence that relatively few have ever enjoyed presents us with both an extraordinary challenge and opportunity that can either prove to be powerful or destructive depending on how we choose to respond.

As Americans, we live in the richest nation in the world. Because we are surrounded with degrees of material prosperity and opulence that relatively few have ever enjoyed, the idea of being poor in spirit presents us with both an extraordinary challenge and an opportunity that can either prove to be powerful or destructive depending on how we choose to respond to it. How are we supposed to be poor in spirit while being rich in things?

First, we must understand what the phrase poor in spirit means. This phrase is found in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:3. It is the first of the eight beatitudes that all begin with blessed, which means literally "to be happy, fortunate or blissful."

We need to understand the actual meaning of these words. The word poor comes from the Greek word that means "to shrink, cower or cringe," as beggars often did in that day. Classical Greek used the word to refer to a person who was reduced to total destitution: one who was crouched in the corner begging, with one hand reaching out and the other covering his face in shame. This term is not just used to simply mean poor, but begging poor. This is the same word used in Luke 16:20 to describe Lazarus.

The Greek word normally used for poverty is a different word entirely and is used in Luke 21:2 to describe the poor widow Jesus observed giving her offering at the temple. She had very little, but she still had two small copper coins. The words "in spirit" focus not on material poverty, but on spiritual poverty. In the same way that people are begging poor materially, here Jesus is describing begging poor spiritually.

Being poor in spirit comes when we recognize our total spiritual destitution and our complete dependence on God. There is no saving resource in us. There is nothing that we can offer of value. We are left begging poor and our only recourse is to reach out our sin-sick hands and beg God for mercy and grace.

The story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:10-14 (NIV) is the classic contrast between one who was rich in spirit and one who was poor in spirit. Jesus said, *Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*

We do not like the idea of admitting that we are poor in spirit. It is contrary to our human nature. We fight against acknowledging it. A good example of this resistance to admit a poverty of spirit is found in the great hymn "At the Cross." It has a line in the first verse that says, "Should He devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?" David uses this word "worm" in a Messianic sense in Psalm 22:6: But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by the people. This term is a biblically-inspired word describing Jesus on the cross.

The thought of being a worm is so repulsive in our modern culture that most modern hymnals have changed the original words to the song from "for such a worm as I" to "for such a one as I" or "for sinners such as I." We just do not like to admit that we are spiritual worms. But in contrast to the holiness of God, a worm is a very accurate description of where we stand with God spiritually.

The joy of it all is that God so loved us worms that He sent His son to redeem us so we could experience a spiritual metamorphosis and be changed from a worm to a son or daughter. Being poor in spirit is not about how God views me or even how other people view me, it is about how I view me.

The best way to understand what poor in spirit means is to look at how men viewed their own spiritual "richness" when they came into the presence of God.

- Isaiah lamented, Woe to me… I am a man of unclean lips (Isaiah 6:5, NIV).

- Gideon asked, O Lord, how shall I deliver Israel? Behold, my family is the least in Manasseh, and I am the youngest in my father's house (Judges 6:15, NASB).

- Jeremiah resisted God's call, Behold, I do not know how to speak, because I am a youth. (Jeremiah 1:6)

- Moses asked humbly, Who am I? (Exodus 3:11)

- David said, Who am I, O Lord GOD, and what is my house, that you have brought me thus far? (1 Samuel 7:18)

- Peter cried, Depart from me, for I am a sinful man. (Luke 5:8, ESV)

- Paul said, I am the foremost [of sinners]. (I Timothy 1:15)

Poverty of spirit is a personal awareness and recognition before God that there is nothing in us or about us that warrants any sense of self-sufficiency or spiritual "richness" that might be applied to our credit. We are all at our core begging poor spiritually.

St. Francis de Sales wrote a book entitled, "Introduction to the Devout Life," which is a series of hypothetical letters to a new convert he calls Philothea (which means "Lover of God"). In one of his letters de Sales addresses the issue of material possessions and the attitude a Christian who is poor in spirit ought to have towards them. His counsel is quite profound, especially considering it was written over 400 years ago:

"Blessed are the poor in Spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven." Accursed, then, are the rich in spirit for the misery of hell is their portion. A man is rich in spirit if his mind is filled with riches or set on riches. The kingfisher shapes its nest like an apple, leaving only a little opening at the top, builds it on the seashore, and makes it so solid and tight that although waves sweep over it the water cannot get inside. Keeping always on the top of the waves, they remain surrounded by the sea and are on the sea, and yet are masters of it.

The Poverty of Spirit to be Observed in the Midst of Riches

Your heart, dear Philothea, must in like manner be open to heaven alone and impervious to riches and all other transitory things. Whatever part of them you may possess, you must keep your heart free from the slightest affection for them. Always keep it above them and while it may be surrounded by riches it remains apart from riches and master over them. Do not allow this heavenly spirit to become captive to earthly goods. Let it always remain superior to them and over them, not in them.

There is a difference between having poison and being poisoned. Pharmacists keep almost every kind of poison in stock for use on various occasions, yet they are not themselves poisoned because they merely have it in their shops and not in their bodies. So also you can possess riches without being poisoned by them if you merely keep them in your home and purse and not in your heart…

Unfortunately, Philothea, no one is ready ever to admit that he is avaricious [someone who "has an insatiable greed for riches"]. Everyone denies having so base and mean a heart. One man excuses himself on the score that he has to take care of his children—that this fact puts him under obligation to them, and that prudence requires that he be a man of property. He never has too much; he always finds need for more.

The most avaricious men not only deny they are avaricious but even think in their conscience they are not such. Avarice is a raging fever that makes itself all the harder to detect the more violent and burning it is. Moses saw the sacred fire that burned but did not consume the bush. On the contrary, avarice is a profane, unholy fire that both consumes and devours but does not consume an avaricious man…

How to Practice Genuine Poverty Although Really Rich

Dear Philothea, I would like to instill into your heart both wealth and poverty together, that is, great care and also great contempt for temporal things.

Have greater care than the worldly men do to make your property profitable and fruitful. Princes' gardeners are more careful and faithful in cultivating and beautifying the gardens in their charge than if they were their own property. Why is this? Undoubtedly it is because they see the gardens as the property of princes and kings to whom they want to make themselves acceptable by their services.

> Philothea, our possessions are not our own. God has given them to us to cultivate and He wants us to make them fruitful and profitable. Hence we perform an acceptable service by taking good care of them. It must be a greater and finer care than that which worldly men have for their property. They labor only out of self-love and we must labor out of love of God…
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> Therefore let us exercise this gracious care of preserving and even of increasing our temporal goods whatever occasions present themselves as so far as our condition in life requires, for God desires us to do so out of love for Him. But be on guard so that self-love does not deceive you. Sometimes it counterfeits the love of God so closely that one might say it is the same thing. In order that it may not trick you and that care of temporal possessions may not degenerate to avarice…we must practice real poverty in the midst of all the goods and riches God has given us.
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> Frequently give up some of your property by giving it with a generous heart to the poor. To give away what we have is to impoverish ourselves in proportion as we give, and the more we give the poorer we become…until such time as God shall restore it to us we remain the poorer in the amount we have given. Oh, how holy and how rich is the poverty brought on by giving alms!

There are two "ditches" that must be avoided on each side of this narrow road of being poor in spirit while being rich in things. One ditch to avoid is letting our material possessions deceive us into becoming rich in spirit—thinking more highly of ourselves than we ought—as it says in Romans 12:3. The other ditch to avoid is being deceived into concluding that having material possessions is somehow carnal and unspiritual, leading us to become rich in spirit because we have little.

The centerline on this road, simply stated, is to be spiritually poor while being materially generous. The more begging poor we become spiritually, and the richer and more generous we become materially, the more useful we will become to His Majesty, the King.

STUDY GUIDE QUESTIONS

1. What is your initial reaction to this lesson?

2. What would you see as the difference between being "poor" in the United States and being "poor" in Haiti?

3. Compare your standard of living (the size of your house, the age of your cars) with that of your parents at a similar stage in their life.

4. How does your life compare to what de Sales says should be the proper purpose for growing one's wealth?

5. What does "Poor in Spirit" mean to you?

6. De Sales likens material possessions to poison, but tells us how to avoid being poisoned by them while we possess them. How effective have you been in avoiding being poisoned by your possessions?

7. What is to be our attitude toward the poor and how does that compare to what the Bible teaches our attitude ought to be? (Read, Leviticus 25.35, Deuteronomy 15:6-8, Proverbs 19:17)

8. Consider de Sales Statement: "Frequently give up some of your property by giving it with a generous heart to the poor." Why would this be so healthy for us to do on a regular basis? Why don't we do it more often?

9. Think about the two ditches described in the video. Which ditch is more problematic for you? Why?

10. What is going to change in your life going forward because of this lesson? What are you going to start doing differently?