

Blessed Are The Poor in Spirit

The Beatitudes (part 2)

Summary: To be poor in spirit is the opposite of that haughty, self-assertive, and self-sufficient disposition that the world so much admires and praises; it is to realise we have nothing, are nothing, and can do nothing, and have need of all things. Thus, the friends of Jesus avoid arrogance and pursue a sense of one's own need, relying on the Lord our God for that which is truly important.

Scriptures: Matthew 5:3–16; Romans 7:14–24

Date: Sunday, 12 February 2023 (Narellan Cong)

Introduction

Will The 'Authentic' Sam Smith Please Stand Up?

While I didn't watch the awards show myself, on 6 February, Sam Smith and Kim Petras performed their song "Unholy" at the 65th Grammy Awards.

In an interview with *Billboard* magazine, Smith explained he wanted to explore queer joy for his latest album, stating, "I think joy for me, and for a lot of queer people, is quite a dangerous place. We're all masters of pain, and I think it's ... courageous to step into the queer joy of it all."

If that was his intention, I don't think there's any joy in the song "Unholy", which details infidelity among a couple. The music video depicts the singers at a raunchy cabaret show featuring notorious drag queens.

When Smith and transwoman Petras performed the song during this week's Grammy Awards, it seemed as if they intended to lead a moment of satanic worship.

During the performance, Smith wore red leather pants and high-heeled boots. Petras sang from inside a cage set in the foreground of a burning stage. Dancers dressed as demons brandished whips.

According to *Rolling Stone* reporter Ryan Bort, "it was just two artists having fun at the Grammys".¹

Whether the singers intended it as worship or not, to call the song "Unholy", to sing about sinful behaviour leading to a dysfunctional relationship, to present it all in satanic imagery is to make a religious statement. It's shameful, but who is going to tell Smith otherwise?

There really is no doubt Smith is a very confused individual, despite his fame and fortune and music skills. Writing for *Quillette*, two academics from Brigham Young University noted,

Singer Sam Smith has made serial LGBTQ+ identity transitions in his ongoing—and apparently tireless—search for authenticity ... Smith first came out as gay in 2014; yet just three-and-a-half years later announced a newly discovered status as "genderqueer". After two more years living under that ambiguous label, Smith announced a new (and presumably yet more authentic) identity: non-binary, which is to say, neither fully male nor female. (David A. Nelson & Edwin E. Gantt)²

Broken relationships, Satanism, a fluid ‘authentic’ self all suggest Sam Smith is a hurting and confused individual. With his apparent confusion, Smith is yet another casualty of the *zeitgeist* of modern Western civilisation.

Pastor and academic Mark Sayers argued on a recent episode of the *Rebuilders* podcast that the authority and trust in mediating institutions —for example, families, schools, governments, even churches— has been demolished.³ We now have a culture of Radical Expressive Individualism.

In this dysfunctional milieu, nothing and nobody is holding anyone back. Despite claims to the contrary, no one is being repressed. You can do anything you want and someone is ready to sell you a product to help you realise your every dream and whim.

But when you are unable to achieve your goals or feel lost, you have no one to blame but yourself; hence, the increasing incidence of extreme risk taking behaviour and mental illness.

Whether Sam Smith, Kim Petras, Ellen Paige, or other LGBTQI+ celebrities, or any of your neighbours, friends and family, we all have every reason to be confused about who we are and how to become our best selves. This fallen world seems to prefer our confusion, so as to heighten our dependance on its products and services. ‘You are whatever you want to be and this product is what you need to be who you know you are.’

What & Why?

Yes, this is a confused and chaotic world, fallen in disgrace and sinful in disposition. We feel the emptiness and it causes us pain. “What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” wrote the apostle Paul (Rom 7:24).⁴

The Beatitudes offer an antidote to the human condition. The first beatitude is the opposite of the arrogant, self-assertive, and self-sufficient disposition the world so much admires and praises, a facade which masks our true confusion and pain.

In contrast, the friends of Jesus avoid arrogance and pursue a sense of one’s own need, relying on the Lord our God for that which is truly important: our salvation.

Explanation

“Blessed Are...”

As I noted last week,⁵ the “Blessed are...” statements in *Matthew* chapters 5–7 are known as the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3–12). They are a form of wisdom saying found in ancient literature, but may also be found in contemporary self-help and personal development literature, although using a more subtle version of the words, “Blessed are...”

The Beatitudes open the famous “Sermon On The Mount” of Jesus. They are its preamble, which then introduce its conclusion using the symbols of salt, light and a city on a hill to foreshadow the sermon’s final call-to-action (Mt 5:13–16).

While my sermons are significantly less memorable, most people with at least a little knowledge of the Bible will know exactly what you mean when you mention the Beatitudes or the words “Blessed are...”

The Beatitudes are commonly taken as “Jesus’ authoritative pronouncement of divine blessing on those who embody the listed characteristics”.⁶ Yet, as I mentioned last week,

these are not statements declaring certain people to be in a privileged, fortunate circumstance, neither are they a psychological description, but a recommendation. Thus, my preferred translation would be, “To be commended are...” However, biblical studies scholar K. C. Hanson made a more nuanced case, when he wrote,

These forms are part of the word-field and value system of honour and shame, the foundational Mediterranean values ... I propose the translation of “How honourable” for $\alpha\psi\gamma\epsilon$ and ΜΑΚΑΡΙΟΣ ... (K. C. Hanson)⁷

Honour and shame are still important psychological and social values today. We just pretend they don’t matter. ‘You’re just doing you, right?’ Yet we all feel the humiliation when we’ve gone too far or not far enough to meet the expectations of our group. Shame and honour still matter.

Whether “fortunate”, “happy”, “commendable” or “honourable”, just remember the Beatitudes are not a state of mind or of status as much as a recommendation to be like what is described in these statements. Be and do these and your Creator will be pleased and it will go well for you in the Kingdom.

The Beatitudes represent the values and worldview of the friends of Jesus and they stand in stark contrast to the fallen and sinful world in which we reside and to which we bear witness.

Why The Beatitudes?

The Beatitudes are the wisdom pursued by the friends of Jesus. According to biblical scholar Eugene Boring, "Matthew's beatitudes are not practical advice for successful living, but prophetic declarations made on the conviction of the coming-and-already-present kingdom of God."⁸

Because the Beatitudes are not feelings *per se*, their opposite is not “unhappy”. Their opposite is “cursed”. Yet the lost are already cursed because of our collective fall into sin.

Thus, the Beatitudes describe a progression from fallenness to reconciliation, being far from grace to being welcomed into salvation.

They are not pronouncements of general human virtue, nor do they describe nine different kinds of good people who get to go to heaven. They describe the blessedness of the authentic Christian community living in anticipation of God’s reign.

While each beatitude invites careful consideration and reflection on its own, it is the combination of the nine that reveals their beauty and the grace within, the complete picture of a citizen of the Kingdom.

The Poor In Spirit

Let us now turn our attention to the first beatitude.

We read in the *Book Of Isaiah*,

Come, everyone who is thirsty, come to the water; and you without silver, come, buy, and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without silver and without cost! (Isaiah 55:1)

The prophet Isaiah reminded us salvation with God is free. There is nothing we can do to earn it or deserve it, yet God offers it nonetheless for he wants to be reconciled with His fallen creation.

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

Throughout the Bible, the lack of spiritual riches and gifts is described as an especially distressing poverty. Once the lost become aware of their spiritual poverty, there is an opportunity to turn toward God in order to receive the riches He graciously offers through the good news about Jesus.

To be poor in spirit is to lack faith, as was seen when Jesus was rejected at his hometown of Nazareth:

And he did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief. (Matthew 13:58)

It is to have a lack of understanding, as was prophesied by Hosea:

My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I will reject you from serving as my priest. Since you have forgotten the law of your God, I will also forget your sons. (Hosea 4:6)

A similar lack of understanding was described in the *First Letter to Timothy*:

and constant disagreement among people whose minds are depraved and deprived of the truth, who imagine that godliness is a way to material gain. (1 Timothy 6:5)⁹

Needing salvation because they lack faith and understanding, the poor in spirit lack a relationship with our creator God and so do not belong to the family of God, as it is written:

At that time you were without Christ, excluded from the citizenship of Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. (Ephesians 2:12)

As a result, the poor in spirit lack eternal life, as it is written:

For what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will anyone give in exchange for his life? (Matthew 16:26)¹⁰

The poor in spirit may recognise something is missing in their life, but lack knowledge of their spiritual poverty, as it is written:

For you say, 'I'm rich; I have become wealthy and need nothing,' and you don't realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked. (Revelation 3:17)

Great men and women throughout history have been aware of their spiritual poverty. The celebrated king of Israel, David, recognised he was poor and needy:

I am oppressed and needy; may the Lord think of me. You are my helper and my deliverer; my God, do not delay. (Psalm 40:17)¹¹

The apostle Paul recognised he was poor in spirit:

For I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do what is good is with me, but there is no ability to do it. (Romans 7:18)

So did Job:

Therefore, I reject my words and am sorry for them; I am dust and ashes. (Job 42:6)

Another psalmist wrote:

When I observe your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you set in place, what is a human being that you remember him, a son of man that you look after him? (Psalm 8:3–4)

And the apostle Peter:

When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus's knees and said, "Go away from me, because I'm a sinful man, Lord!" (Luke 5:8)¹²

So too did John D. Rockefeller, who has been widely considered the wealthiest American of all time and the richest person in modern history.

John D. Rockefeller, Sr., was strong and husky when small. He early determined to earn money and drove himself to the limit. At age 33, he earned his first million dollars. At age 43, he controlled the biggest company in the world. At age 53, he was the richest man on earth and the world's only billionaire.

Then he developed a sickness called "alopecia," where the hair of his head dropped off, his eyelashes and eyebrows disappeared, and he was shrunk like a mummy. His weekly income was one million dollars, but he digested only milk and crackers. He was so hated in Pennsylvania that he had to have bodyguards day and night. He could not sleep, stopped smiling, and enjoyed nothing in life.

The doctors predicted he would not live over one year. The newspaper had gleefully written his obituary in advance—for convenience in sudden use. Those sleepless nights set him thinking. He realized with a new light that he "could not take one dime into the next world." Money was not everything.

The next morning found him a new man. He began to help churches with his amassed wealth; the poor and needy were not overlooked. He established the Rockefeller Foundation whose funding of medical researches led to the discovery of penicillin and other wonder drugs. John D. began to sleep well, eat and enjoy life.

The doctors had predicted he would not live over age 54. He lived up to 98.¹³

Great persons of history and ordinary folk have all felt their poverty of spirit, have turned to God and been saved.

"How has their life changed after recognising their poverty of spirit?" you might be wondering. Not just in the Beatitudes, but throughout the Bible is described how those who know they are poor in spirit will be blessed by God, for God will satisfy the poor in spirit (Mt 5:3). He will also save the poor in spirit:

The LORD guards the inexperienced; I was helpless, and he saved me. (Psalm 116:6)

God will accept the poor in spirit:

The sacrifice pleasing to God is a broken spirit. You will not despise a broken and humbled heart, God. (Psalm 51:17)¹⁴

God will be close to the poor in spirit:

For the High and Exalted One, who lives forever, whose name is holy, says this: “I live in a high and holy place, and with the oppressed and lowly of spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and revive the heart of the oppressed. (Isaiah 57:15)¹⁵

God will hear the prayers of the poor in spirit:

He will pay attention to the prayer of the destitute and will not despise their prayer. (Psalm 102:17)

God will give grace to the poor in spirit:

But he gives greater grace. Therefore he says: God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble. (James 4:6)¹⁶

God will meet the needs of the poor in spirit:

He has satisfied the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:53)

The human condition of fallenness is such that we all begin life poor in spirit, we do not have a relationship with God, our creator. As a result, we succumb to the patterns of this world—and give in to “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride in one’s possessions” (1 Jn 2:16)—and become sinners, in need of grace and mercy.

While we might become confused in life, pile hurt upon hurt, lack faith, understanding, a relationship with our Creator; lack access to the free, full and forever promised by Jesus to his friends. We are missing something and are lost, but we need not remain that way.

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

Recognising our condition of poverty of spirit creates the opportunity for us to enter the kingdom of God.

Entering or inheriting the kingdom of God is the privilege of those who acknowledge and live by the rule of God and become part of the new order of salvation and righteousness in Christ.

Application

The renowned English Bible teacher, Arthur W. Pink, explained,

What is poverty of spirit? It is the opposite of that haughty, self-assertive, and self-sufficient disposition that the world so much admires and praises. It is the very reverse of that independent and defiant attitude that refuses to bow to God, that determines to brave things out, and that says with Pharaoh, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice?” (Ex. 5:2). (Arthur W. Pink)¹⁷

There is no doubting, in the modern Western world we have much, even more than we need. Because this is true, it is no surprise many people ask, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice?”, “Why do I need Jesus?”

It’s an honest question if your pursuit in life is for fame, fortune, beauty, happiness or influence.

What happens when you discover these are not enough? That these are not worth pursuing? They do not satisfy.

Where we once relied on our riches and fame, intelligence and beauty, we need to come to the place of recognising we are, in reality, blind, naked, foolish and forgettable.

To be poor in spirit is not a good thing, but it is the beginning step toward entering and living within the kingdom of God.

Taking this step, we will find that we are not lost and alone.

According to Stephanie Martin, writing for *ChurchLeaders.com*,

Super Bowl LVII will feature the first-ever matchup between two Black quarterbacks—both of whom are outspoken Christians. Patrick Mahomes is taking the Kansas City Chiefs to their third Super Bowl in four years, and Jalen Hurts of the Philadelphia Eagles is making his debut at the big game...

I want to thank God,” Mahomes told Tracy Wolfson of CBS during a post-game interview. “He healed my body this week. To battle through that, he gave me the strength to be out here.” ...

[Speaking to *ChurchLeaders.com*], Hurts explained how he’s “realized that God is everything and he’s worthy of praise.” He added, “You have to put [God] at the center of everything that you do.”

Hurts also has been vocal about trusting in God’s plans. “I know everything will unfold according to God’s timing”, he wrote in 2019 ... “I am blessed to be where my feet are. My trust is in [God’s] hands.”¹⁸

It turns out, not only are the two quarterbacks in this year’s Super Bowl outspoken friends of Jesus, so too are Eagles Linebacker T.J. Edwards and the team’s Wide Receiver A.J. Brown. So too are the Chiefs Linebacker Nick Bolton and Kicker Harrison Butker. Not that these six are the only Christians on the two teams, but they are the most outspoken about their faith.

Being a professional athlete brings one a lot of fame and fortune —not that I would know anything about that— and we could almost excuse these athletes for arrogance and self-reliance.

Yet, from different perspectives and experiences, these discovered their poverty of spirit and sought reconciliation with God. In Him, they have found peace.

The blessedness of their life is not in their fame and fortune and who gets to wear the Super Bowl ring after the game. Their blessedness is found in the Kingdom of God.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit” is not a denial of life. It is not downplaying one’s capacities or rejecting one’s resources. It does not eschew courage, charisma, confidence or certainty. It is to find the centre of our existence, the core of our being, is dependant on our Creator.

Biblical scholar Boring noted, in the psalms of the Bible,

[In the OT,] “the poor” had been understood as a characterization of the true people of God, those who know their lives are not in their own control and that they are dependent on God. [In the Gospels] “poor in spirit” makes this explicit. Persons who are pronounced blessed are not those who claim a robust ego and strong sense of self-worth, but those whose only identity and security is in God. Their identity is not in what they know, but in having a certain (poverty of) spirit. (M. Eugene Boring)¹⁹

Do you know what it is to live and move and have your being in our Heavenly Father? Or are you perfectly fine on your own, thank you very much?

To be poor in spirit is the opposite of that haughty, self-assertive, and self-sufficient disposition that the world so much admires and praises; it is to realise we have nothing, are nothing, and can do nothing, and have need of all things. Thus, the friends of Jesus avoid arrogance and have come to terms with our own need, taking comfort from relying on the Lord our God for that which is truly important.

For those who know life is empty without someone filling what is missing, I encourage you to stand with me and let us pray together, responsively:

We give thanks to you,
God our Father,
for mercy that reaches out,
for patience that waits our returning,
and for your love that is ever ready
to welcome sinners.

*We praise you that in Christ Jesus
you meet us with grace,
embrace us in acceptance,
and affirm us as citizens
of a forgiven universe.*

We give thanks to you
that by your Holy Spirit
you move us to change direction,
receive your love,
and become what we most truly are.

*In darkness and in light,
in trouble and in joy,
help us then, O God,
to accept your forgiveness,
to believe your love,
and to trust your purpose.*

Through Christ Jesus our Lord,

*Amen.*²⁰

Endnotes

- 1 Ryan Bort, “Ted Cruz, Marjorie Taylor Greene Raise Hell Over Sam Smith’s Grammys Performance”, *Rolling Stone*, 6-Feb-2023, <https://replug.link/74cd5020> (accessed 8-Feb-2023).
- 2 David A. Nelson & Edwin E. Gantt, “Every Gender Identity Is ‘Authentic’—Until It Isn’t”, *Quillette*, 31-Jan-2023, <https://replug.link/4ec73210> (accessed 8-Feb-2023).
- 3 Mark Sayers, “Discipling the contemporary self”, *Rebuilders* podcast, 1-Feb-2023 <https://replug.link/1ed8d3c0> (accessed 8-Feb-2023).
- 4 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 5 Ian Forest-Jones, “Salt, Light, and a City: The Beatitudes (part 1)”, *Narellan Community Congregational Church*, 5-Feb-2023, <https://narellancong.org.au/teaching/the-beatitudes-part-1/> (accessed 7-Feb-2023).
- 6 K. C. Hanson, “How Honourable! How Shameful! A Cultural Analysis of Matthew’s Makarisms and Reproaches”, ed. Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Semeia* 68 (1995), pg 80–81.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 M. Eugene Boring, “The Gospel of Matthew”, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 8 (Nashville, TN, USA: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), pg 177.
- 9 See also Pr 10:21; Is 5:13; Is 56:10–11; Je 5:4.
- 10 See also Lk 12:20–21; Lk 16:22–23; Jas 5:1–6.
- 11 See also Ps 34:6; Ps 35:10; Ps 70:5; Ps 86:1; Ps 109:22.
- 12 See also Lk 7:6; Ro 7:24.
- 13 Paul Lee Tan, “Story Of John D. Rockefeller”, *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations: Signs of the Times* (Garland, TX, USA: Bible Communications, Inc., 1996), pg 276–277.
- 14 See also Is 66:2.
- 15 See also Ps 34:18.
- 16 See also Jas 4:10; 1 Pe 5:5–6; Pr 3:34.
- 17 Arthur W. Pink, *The Beatitudes and the Lord’s Prayer* (Bellingham, WA, USA: Logos Bible Software, 2005), pg 16.
- 18 Stephanie Martin, “Patrick Mahomes and Jalen Hurts Express Gratitude to God Ahead of Super Bowl LVII”, *Church Leaders*, 30-Jan-2023, <https://replug.link/56129260> (accessed 8-Feb-2023).
- 19 Boring, pg 178.
- 20 Terry Falla, “A Future Where Forgiveness Is Waiting (based on Luke 15:11–32)”, *Be Our Freedom Lord* (Adelaide, SA, AUS: Open Book Publishers, 1994), pg 136.