
The Poor in Spirit

Philip Henry

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PHILIP HENRY

Philip Henry (1631-1696), father of the famous commentary writer, Matthew Henry, was born at Whitehall, London, and studied at Westminster School and Christ Church in Oxford. In 1653, he went to Flintshire, North Wales to serve as preacher at Worthenbury Chapel and as tutor to the sons of John Puleston at Emral. He was ejected from his living in 1662, then was forced underground in 1665 by the Five Mile Act. He was not able to resume a regular ministry until 1672. In 1681, he was fined for holding conventicles and imprisoned briefly. After James II proclaimed liberty of conscience in 1687, he preached daily at Broad Oak in Flintshire and in neighboring areas.

Philip Henry was not as prolific as his son. His most famous book, *Christ All in All*, was recently reprinted in two paperback volumes. After his death in 1696, several of his manuscripts were published, all of which are now scarce works. These include *Eighteen Sermons* (1816), *Skeletons of Sermons* (1834), *Expositions upon Genesis* (1839), *Remains* (1848), and *Diaries and Letters* (1882).

The Poor in Spirit

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

—Matthew 5:3

These are the first words of the first solemn sermon that was preached by our Lord Jesus. We have the text of one before: "Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 4:17). But this is the first printed sermon, the first thought deemed fitting to be left upon record. And as it is the first, so it is the longest, consisting of three chapters. The truth is, the subject was wide and large. It is an exposition of the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer, and several other weighty matters, containing, in effect, the whole duty of man.

He begins with "blessed." This was the first word. His errand into the world was to bless the world. "God having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his

iniquities" (Acts 3:26). David begins his Psalms so. The *end* is first in intention; we must be fixed upon that. Would we be blessed? Here is the way prescribed. The first step is poverty of spirit. "Blessed are the poor in spirit."

Where was He when He preached this sermon? He went up into a mountain. It was a field-meeting, being persecuted of late so much. In a mountain, the law was given; that was Mount Sinai, full of terror. In a mount also it was expounded, with no terror, but with all possible sweetness. Blessed! Blessed!

Who were His hearers? The multitude, and His disciples. It was a mixed audience, neither all good nor all bad, neither all converted nor all unconverted. To such we preach. To each of them He had something to say; so have we.

What does "He opened his mouth, and taught them" mean? He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. God had given Him a mouth; grace was poured into His lips; and He used the mouth and grace He had. So

should ministers. It is a double gift to have a mouth and to have a heart to open it: to have gifts, strength, and abilities. This is promised as a mercy. "In that day will I cause the horn of the house of Israel to bud forth, and I will give thee the opening of the mouth in the midst of them; and they shall know that I am the LORD" (Ezek. 29:21). But here are the words themselves, so as to detain you no longer in the preface: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Doctrine: The poor in spirit are a blessed people, and heaven is theirs.

1. What this poverty of spirit is, and who the poor in spirit are.
 2. Wherein consists their present blessedness.
 3. What there is in it, that heaven is theirs.
 4. The application.
1. Who are the poor in spirit.
There are two kinds of poor. There are the poor in *estate*: those that have little or

nothing of this world's goods, little money, house, or land, or it may be none at all, as poor as Job when upon the dunghill, stripped of all his possessions and all his comforts. There are many poor.

There are the poor in *spirit*. This relates to the inward, not to the outward man. There are such as are poor in estate, and are contentedly so, submitting therein to the good will and pleasure of their heavenly Father, and bearing it patiently, without murmuring, repining, or complaining, not even desiring to be rich. This is an excellent frame. They are truly blessed upon right grounds. They are truly blessed to whom God hath given Christian patience upon a right principle; and God will reward them for it in His heavenly kingdom.

There are such, though rich in worldly estate, yet in respect of their inward frame, who are meek and humble, lowly and contrite; whose heart is a broken heart; whose spirit is a tender spirit. It is one thing to be poor in spiritual matters, and another thing to be poor in spirit.

There are multitudes that are poor in spiritual matters. They have no grace, no repentance, no faith, no love, no heavenly mindedness, no knowledge, no wisdom—or next to none. The case of such is sad, they are not blessed. “Thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (Rev. 3:17). “There is that maketh himself rich, yet hath nothing” (Prov. 13:7). Oh, see that it be so with none of you, especially you that are poor in the world! “Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him” (James 2:5)?

To be poor in spirit is another thing. I shall give you their character in four particulars. Will you try yourselves as I go along, and see whether you are such as are poor in spirit? Our Lord, according to Luke, applies it to His disciples: “And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said, Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the king-

dom of God" (Luke 6:20). Oh, that I could say in like manner to all and each of you, Blessed are *ye* poor, *thou* poor in spirit!

1. Such as are poor in spirit, have had a due sight and sense of sin, and are truly contrite in soul for it.

Is it so with you? Have you seen sin, your own sin, in the bitterness of it? Have you felt from it accordingly the bitterness of godly sorrow? Then you are poor in spirit. This godly sorrow, this poverty of spirit, is described by being pricked in the heart: "Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the Apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Observe, the description is different from what is related in Acts 7:54: "When they heard these things they were cut to the heart, and they gnashed on him with their teeth." True poverty of spirit is joined with contrition: "To this man," says Jehovah, "will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word" (Isa. 66:2). "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit: a broken and a

contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise" (Ps. 51:17).

2. Such as are poor in spirit have seen God in His greatness and glory, in His holiness and purity, and are truly humbled and laid low by it.

See this illustrated in the case of Job: "I have heard of thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). Moses is an eminent example: "And Moses said, I will now turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt. And when the LORD saw that he turned aside to see, God called unto him, and said.... I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God" (Exod. 3:3-6). Isaiah's experience is a further illustration. After he had seen in vision "the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up," and witnessed the adoring worship of the seraphim, he exclaimed, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a

people of unclean lips: for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts" (Isa. 6:5). Whatever other considerations we have had towards pulling down our pride and haughtiness, if there has not been this, our humility is not genuine.

3. Such as are poor in spirit have low thoughts of themselves, and carry themselves accordingly, both towards God and towards man.

It is in our nature to value ourselves, and mostly to *over-value* ourselves, thinking much better of ourselves than we ought. It is a difficult thing to be cured of this. But when grace comes, the case is altered. Then the confession is, "So foolish was I, and ignorant: I was as a beast before thee" (Ps. 73:22). "Surely I am more brutish than any man, and have not the understanding of a man" (Prov. 30:2). Now where it is thus within, like light or fire, it will not, it cannot, be hid.

It will be manifest in our carriage towards God. There will be thankfulness for the least mercy. "It is better than I deserve; it is too good for me," will be the

language of the poor in spirit, as Jacob: "I am not worthy of the least of all the mercies, and of all the truth, which thou hast shewed unto thy servant" (Gen. 32:10). Such will say, with the church of old, "It is the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because his compassions fail not" (Lam. 3:22). There will be quietness and submission also under the sharpest trials: "I will bear," such say, "the indignation of the LORD, because I have sinned against him, until he plead my cause, and execute judgment for me: he will bring me forth to the light, and I shall behold his righteousness" (Micah 7:9). If we are poor in spirit, we shall discover reverence and godly fear in all our addresses at a throne of grace. This was the case with Abraham (see Gen. 18). So also with the publican: "And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner."

It will be manifest, likewise, in our deportment towards men. If we are poor in spirit, we shall prefer others in honor

above ourselves, both in word and deed. We shall condescend to low things, when we may do the least good by so doing, as our Savior washed the disciples' feet. We shall slight and despise the slights which others put upon us. Our Lord did so "for the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, despising the shame" (Heb 12:2). So did David; observe his answer to the taunts of Michal: "I will yet be more vile than thus, and will be base in mine own sight" (2 Sam. 6:22).

The opposite of this poverty is pride and haughtiness of spirit—a sin that reigns in some, that *remains* in all. The sweet Psalmist of Israel was guilty of this: "And David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people. And David said unto the LORD, I have sinned greatly in that I have done: and now, I beseech thee, O LORD, take away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly" (2 Sam. 24:10). It is said of Hezekiah, he "humbled himself for the pride of his heart" (2 Chron. 32:26). Observe, he was *humbled* for it; so was David.

4. Such as are poor in spirit discover a trembling frame under God's Word (Isa. 66:2).

They feel a holy reverence in the reading and hearing of it. They remember that *God* speaks. Eglon, king of Moab, shewed this reverence when "Ehud came unto him; and he was sitting in a summer parlour, which he had made for himself alone. And Ehud said, I have a message from God unto thee. And he arose out of his seat" (Judg. 3:20). The Emperor Constantine would never sit during a sermon. King Edward the Sixth would not tread on the Bible.

They are suitably wrought upon by it so as to fear the threatenings and tremble at the executions the sacred Word records. "And Shaphan the scribe shewed the king, saying, Hilkiyah the priest hath delivered me a book. And Shaphan read it before the king. And it came to pass, when the king had heard the words of the book of the law, that he rent his clothes" (2 Kings 22:10-11). Such was the conduct of the pious Josiah, king of Judah. See the difference between him and his son Jehoiakim. That

monarch caused the word of the Lord to be consumed in fire (see Jeremiah 36). "Therefore thus saith the LORD of Jehoiakim king of Judah; He shall have none to sit upon the throne of David: and his dead body shall be cast out in the day to the heat, and in the night to the frost. And I will punish him and his seed and his servants for their iniquity" (vvs. 30-31).

2. Prove their present blessedness. They *are* blessed.

What blessedness is theirs? Can a man that is poor be a blessed man? Yes, certainly. He may be poor in the world, and, notwithstanding that, be a blessed man. The poor in spirit are blessed—I say, they *are* blessed.

1. There is the blessedness of evidence in it, as it is a certain proof, sign, and companion of true grace.

He that is poor in spirit, as I have described him, is certainly a godly man. The good work is begun in him; he is passed from death to life. And is it not a blessed thing to know that to be so, to

know that I am a new creature? What would many a doubting soul give if this were clear to him! Get to be poor in spirit, and that will clear it.

2. There is the blessedness of comfort in it. God will be sure to look to him. "To this man," saith the Lord, "will I look, even to him that is poor, and of a contrite spirit." Is not he blessed to whom God looks?

He will look towards him as a sight that pleases Him. They are the desire of His eyes. He overlooks all the beauties and glories of heaven and earth to look at him who is poor in spirit. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit" (Ps. 51:17). "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth" (John 4:24). He seeks such in the congregation; and if He find but one, He regards him with approbation and delight.

He will look after him. He will take care of him, and suffer no man to wrong him. "Whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the

depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:6). They are here described as *little* ones—poor in spirit. "Seek ye the LORD, all ye meek of the earth, which have wrought his judgment; seek righteousness, seek meekness: it may be ye shall be hid in the day of the LORD'S anger" (Zeph. 2:3). Such shall be hid.

3. There is the blessedness of supply in it. What they have need of they shall have from Him. He will provide for them. "He hath filled the hungry with good things; and the rich he hath sent empty away" (Luke 1:53). Hungry there is opposed to rich. "He satisfieth the longing soul, and filleth the hungry soul with goodness" (Ps. 107:9). "I have satiated the weary soul, and I have replenished every sorrowful soul" (Jer. 31:25). He filleth the hungry—that is, the poor—with good things: such things as they most need, and most desire to have. He supplies the hungry with food, the wounded with healing, the condemned with a pardon. The rich get nothing at His door; they receive no alms. It is only poor people, only those who are poor in spirit, whose wants He supplies.

3. What is there in it, that heaven is theirs?

“Theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” It is theirs in reversion; it is entailed upon them and turned over to them by a special deed. Whenever their bodies fail—that is, die—they shall be sure of it. This is certainly intended not only for the comfort of such as are thus poor, but for encouragement to all to labor after it. This poverty of spirit brings heaven, the kingdom of heaven, for a sure recompence of reward.

1. Now, in this reward there is suitability.

To the weary it is promised under the notion of rest; to those that love pleasure, as a paradise: so to the poor, under the notion of a kingdom. Comfort thyself, thou poor-spirited Christian! Thou art heir to a kingdom. Thou shalt be rich enough shortly: thy inheritance will make thee so. “Hearken, my beloved brethren, Hath not God chosen the poor of this world, rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?” (James 2:5). It was Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians that they might know what was

the hope of their calling and the riches of the glory of the *inheritance* of the saints (Eph. 1:18).

2. In this reward there is sufficiency.

It is not an earthly, but a heavenly kingdom; between these there is no comparison. Heaven is a happiness that eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor has it entered into the heart of man to conceive of its glory. To be there is to be freed from all evil, and to be supplied with all desirable good. It is to see God, and to enjoy Him. It is to be in Abraham's bosom. It is to sit down with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob, in the kingdom of God. It is to be with Jesus. It is not only to be with the saints, and with none but saints, but it is to be with the King of saints. And for how long? For ever and ever. After millions of millions of ages, heaven will be still heaven. The joy will be eternally fresh. The last of glory will be glory.

4. The Application

1. Let us mix faith with this first saying of our Lord Jesus in this His first sermon.

If we do not, it will not profit us. But is it not an unlikely thing that these poor-spirited people, whom all men despise, and trample upon, should be so honored of God? Likely or unlikely, Jesus Christ hath said it is so, and we are bound to believe it.

2. Let the fruit of that faith be serious desires and endeavors that we may be such. Would ye be blessed? Then be poor in spirit. Would you have heaven be yours? Then be poor in spirit.

What is to be done? Beg for it earnestly of God. It must be the work of His Spirit and grace in us; yet it is expressly promised in the new covenant, under the notion of a heart of flesh in opposition to a heart of stone: "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh" (Ezek. 36:26). Stone is cold, heavy, dry; flesh is the reverse.

What is to be done? Look often at God and thyself. Consider what He is, and what a worm thou art. He is *all*; thou art noth-

ing. There is nothing like this to humble us and to lay us low.

What is to be done? Acquaint thyself with the way of the gospel. There are two things in the gospel which are greatly impoverishing, and which conduce much poverty of spirit.

The one is that in the gospel, we have all carried on, from first to last, in a way of free grace, exclusive of all merit and worthiness in us. Free grace chose us, redeemed us, calls us, justifies us, saves us. Should we not, then, be humble and low, and poor in our own eyes? "God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise...and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: that no flesh should glory in his presence" (1 Cor. 1:27-29). Consider what vile wretches God hath made saints, even Paul and the Corinthians. "And such were some of you; but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of

the LORD Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11).

The other is, that there we have the most glorious pattern and example of poverty of spirit, humility, and self-denial set before us in the blessed Jesus that ever the sun saw. Thus He addresses us: "Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matt. 11:29). See also John 13:4-18. Especially view the Redeemer in His suffering and dying. "They shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn for him, as one mourneth for his only son, and shall be in bitterness for him, as one that is in bitterness for his firstborn" (Zech. 12:10). "Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich"—rich in spiritual matters, but poor in spirit.

3. Then it follows, by the rule of opposites, that those who are proud in spirit are not blessed. Theirs, certainly, is *not* the kingdom of heaven.

Will God look to such? No; He beholds them afar off: "Though the LORD be high, yet hath he respect unto the lowly: but the proud he knoweth afar off" (Ps. 138:6). Will God provide for them? No; He sends such away empty (Luke 1:53). Will He comfort them? No; He resists them, and sets Himself in battle against them (James 4:6). See Job 40:9-12. Oh, then, see that none of you be such. Humble yourselves under His mighty hand. Say, "Lord, I am a poor worm; lowly as a creature, vile as a sinner." Cast thyself down at His feet. Cry as the poor publican, "God be merciful to me a sinner." It was the publican, not the proud Pharisee, who went away justified.

But is not this poorness of spirit contrary to that greatness and height of spirit that is so much commended to and in the saints? "The Lord plentifully rewardeth the proud doer," or the magnificent doer (Ps. 31:23). Such a spirit was in the three worthies mentioned in the book of Daniel. Such was in Paul, trampling upon the world, the smiles and the frowns of it; not

valuing even life itself. "Should such a man as I am flee?" (Neh. 6:11).

That and this will very well co-exist. There is no inconsistency in saying, I can do nothing of myself, therefore I am poor, low, and humble; but I can do all things through Christ strengthening me; therefore I am bold, venturous, and daring in the way of my duty. None were more humble than Paul, though none were more bold.

4. Then let the poor in spirit be comforted. This text is a cordial to such; lay it up accordingly. Thou art blessed, and thou shalt be blessed. Heaven is thine, and it shall be thine. God looks to thee; go thou on, and look to Him with a single eye in all thy ways. Seek not thine own things, but His things, and thou shalt not repent it.

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