

THE POOR IN SPIRIT: MATTHEW 5:3

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MATTHEW 5:3 "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

I was six, sitting spellbound by the suited man in the pulpit. His shouting was drenched in a thick East Texas accent. Clenching a black brick of a bible in one hand and pounding the other like a gavel, he spewed scripture and spat his plea at us, "When you leave church this morning you could walk out in that parking lot and get hit by a truck! And if you don't have Jesus that truck's gonna send you to Hell! Straight to hell!! Who wants Jesus?!"

I never knew the church parking lot was so perilous. I ran down the aisle before they even starting singing "Just As I Am," filled out a 3x5 card (I think it was yellow) and wrote in six-year-old scrawl, "I NEED JESUS!!!!!" After that the preacher shared my decision with the congregation to many Amens and approving Mhmms. He stood me before the crowd, asking folks to come by and welcome me into the family of God after the service. Hundreds of mostly old women paraded past me, hugging and kissing me, which freaked me out a little, and then my family took me to Luby's to have a steak. I got saved—American style.

Afterwards, I put Jesus—my life vest as He was described to me by the preacher—in the proverbial closet in case it ever rained. And when I was 12 it began to. My parents, good people but still human, didn't seem to be getting along, something about bills past due. I acted out and acted up. I played at friends' houses more and more and lied often to look better, braver or smarter than I was. I was driven by an overwhelming desire to be liked, which led me to steal, curse, look at pornography and basically follow the herd around me. I grew more and more ashamed, angry and scared of having my sins discovered, and worried about everything. I was depressed, tired and getting worse.

For the first time in my life I felt the water around my ankles and creeping up me, in me, pulling me down. I knew the sway of sin's tide, my own tendency towards selfishness and evil. I was convinced that I was a sinking ship, a sunk ship, and I cried out to Jesus for help, for love and forgiveness, for anything. I begged God for rescue like a dying man pleas for his next breath. I reached for God like He was my only chance of survival, because He was. He is.

The difference between a disciple of Christ and a believer in Him, I now believe, is sometimes the starting point. Some of us begin with a 3x5 card, a religious tradition or emotional experience. And from there we grow uninspired, numb and unmotivated by our faith. But some begin their journey with God at poverty of spirit. They realize how worthless, how without value,

their hearts truly are. And they gain an appreciation for the love and friendship and fathering their perfect God has on us all. They aren't bored. They aren't stingy with mercy and compassion. They are awe-struck followers of a merciful God and bent on dispensing that mercy to others who don't deserve it either.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, those who know how penniless their hearts are, for they are the most appreciative and rare disciples of God.