



## **The Joyful Heart**

Matthew 5:3, Jeremiah 29:11

In Matthew 5:3 we read the first of what we call the Beatitudes. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” It seems to be a total paradox that Christians can be poor and blessed at the same time. Many of us think of the poor as one class of people and the blessed as another class. We may also feel proud of the fact that we are not poor.

It is ingrained in us to be proud. From birth we are taught to be proud of our country, our economic system, our culture, our wealth, our family trees, our race, our gender and various other things. And so it is a little difficult for us to see being poor as a good thing. But Jesus tells us that we must be poor in spirit in order to inherit the kingdom of heaven. What does this mean to us if we are not materially poor?

In the Old Testament to be poor meant to be in literal material need. But gradually, because those in poverty had no refuge but God, the word “poor” began to have a spiritual connotation and came to suggest a humble dependence on God. Therefore, the poor in spirit are those who have the attitude of humble dependence upon God’s grace. We must depend less on our on abilities and more on God’s power working through us.

If we are not righteous in our own sight (self-righteous) then we are able to reach out to accept God’s righteousness. Luke chapter 18 tells the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector who went into the temple to pray. The Pharisee thanked God that he was better than others. His pride would acknowledge no neediness in himself. He was self-righteousness. But the tax collector was poor in spirit and he laid down the burden of his heart to God asking for mercy realizing he needed help from outside himself. The condition to receiving the kingdom of God is to acknowledge our spiritual poverty. There is nothing we possess and no action we can perform that will make us worthy of God’s favor. Only through the mercy of God are we extended the gift of salvation.

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis (paraphrased) compares Christians to ships and says it is no good to tell the ship itself to steer to avoid collision. There must be something that directs the ship from the inside. This is where our dependence upon God is important. If we declare our total dependence upon God and then we allow God to steer our thoughts and actions our hearts will be free from trying to be righteous in our own selves. Only then are we able to claim the righteousness of God. Real righteousness is open, honest and transparent. It is not what we are doing that impresses God; it is what we are inside.

There should be happiness in realizing that we are poor in spirit. When we give ourselves totally over into God’s hands more wonderful things than we could ever imagine are possible for us. Jeremiah 29:11 tells us “For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to

prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” We will not be steered wrong if we allow God to control the direction of our lives. It is exciting to contemplate the plans that God has for our future.

Our journey of faith should be a joyful journey. Allowing God to be our righteousness enables us to have joy in our hearts through any situation or problem which life brings to us. Even when we suffer from sickness, poverty, disabilities, loss of loved ones and seemingly insurmountable problems our hearts can retain the joy that only a total dependence on the grace of God can give us. Joy is not some fleeting emotion that we feel when everything is going well for us. It is the abiding feeling of security we have from being totally in God’s hands.

Because of the authority of Jesus who spoke the words of the Beatitudes to his disciples these blessings are not only some future dreams but they are conveyed to his disciples at the time of his speaking. And the blessing which we have in the present will be perfected in the future fulfillment of the Kingdom of God.

The undeserved bonus of being “poor in spirit” is that “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” The “poor in spirit” are “blessed” not only because they will have participation in God’s future kingdom but can also participate in God’s kingdom in the present. God’s kingdom is that over which God rules. Those who are subject to God are a part of God’s kingdom.

The kingdom of God came to earth through the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not offer it as merely a future hope but as a present reality. God’s kingdom can be seen partially here on earth, at the present time, alive in those who have accepted his reign in their hearts. God’s kingdom in heaven is eternal and perfect but that kingdom is not fully actualized on earth. It is “now and not yet.” In heaven God’s kingdom will be fully realized. Those of us who are citizens of God’s kingdom on earth will also be citizens in the heavenly kingdom.

### **Heart-to-Heart Activities:**

1. Leader should have a group member to look up “joy” or “joyful” in a Bible Dictionary or Bible Concordance before the study. This person will then be prepared to give a good definition of “joy” along with supporting scriptures. This person may assign other persons in the group to read aloud the scriptures desired.
2. Sing the hymn, “Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee,” as a group. If hymn books are not available read verses one and three aloud together:

Joyful, joyful, we adore Thee, God of glory, Lord of love;  
Hearts unfold like flowers before Thee, Praising Thee their sun above.  
Melt the clouds of sin and sadness, Drive the dark of doubt away;  
Giver of immortal gladness, Fill us with the light of day!

Thou art giving and forgiving, Ever blessing, ever blest,  
Wellspring of the joy of living, Ocean depth of happy rest!  
Thou our Father, Christ our Brother, –All who live in love are Thine:  
Teach us how to love each other, Lift us to the Joy Divine.

**Reflection Questions:**

- ♥ In your own words and in your own life what does “poor in spirit” mean? Share your thoughts with a neighbor. Compare ideas and feelings.
- ♥ Discuss with a neighbor someone you know who truly exhibits the characteristic of being “poor in spirit.”
- ♥ With a neighbor discuss the significance of what “humble dependence” means in your life. How are you dependent upon God? What can you do (or not do) to become more dependent upon God? What is standing in the way of you exhibiting this characteristic more fully in your life this week?
- ♥ In what ways can we lay down our own righteousness in order to accept the righteousness of God?
- ♥ What does Jeremiah 29:11 mean to you?
- ♥ In what way do we participate in God’s Kingdom here on earth? In what way will we participate in His future kingdom?

**Prayer:**

Our Lord and Creator of our joy,  
Guide us to live in a daily dependence upon your grace and empowerment. May our joyful hearts throughout our journey of faith be a witness of your grace to the world. Help us to live purposefully in your present kingdom while we wait expectantly for the realization of your perfect kingdom of the future. Amen