

THE GOSPEL MAGAZINE

Editor

MAURICE HANDFORD

9 Birtlespool Road, Cheadle Hulme, Cheshire SK8 5JZ

Incorporating the Protestant Beacon and The British Protestant

New Series
No. 1587

MARCH — APRIL 1996

Old Series
No. 2587

Editorial

ONE OF THE MOST FAMILIAR VERSES of Scripture is surely "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14). This is one of the Trinitarian passages that we shall do well to remember when speaking to those who deny this fundamental doctrine of the faith. The Grace, however, is not primarily a credal statement, nor a theological proposition, but a benediction.

It is significant that the Apostle starts with the thought of God the Redeemer — he does so because man's greatest need is deliverance from sin. He could never forget that he had experienced the grace of Christ in rich measure. His grace was such that He came down from heaven's glory to make salvation possible.

The Bible in both Old and New Testaments is the record of God's love towards men. He so "loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son". This is the proof of His love; here is love in action. The love of God towards the world is not a vague abstract idea of mercy. It is a love that has been manifested by a mighty gift, a gift of unspeakable value.

This benediction speaks of the communion of fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle Paul says, "if any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of His". The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the common mark of all true believers. If we have the witness of the Holy Spirit within, what do we know of fellowship with other believers? The fellowship of the early Church was a truly amazing thing.

May we know in a yet deeper way the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

The Poor in Spirit

A Sermon by the Editor

“And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain: and when he was set, his disciples came unto him: And he opened his mouth, and taught them, saying, Blessed are the poor in spirit: for their’s is the kingdom of heaven”
(Matthew 5:1-3)

THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT came from the lips of the greatest Preacher that ever preached and of Him God testified: “This is my beloved Son, hear ye Him.”

It is important for us to remember that the Sermon on the Mount was not meant for everyone. It was for believers. Notice in verse 1: “His disciples came unto him . . . and he taught them.” It was spoken to the disciples with the crowd listening in, or, as someone has put it: “The Sermon on the Mount was spoken in the ears of the Church and overheard by the world.” The people were “listening in” because at the end of it it says: “When Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at his doctrine: for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes” (7:28-29). It was essentially for believers.

The standards of the Sermon on the Mount are exceedingly high. To preach it to the people of the world would only be to mock them. Indeed we could not in any sense begin to fulfil the conditions of the Sermon on the Mount in our own strength. Indeed, Matthew tells us that Christ came into the world to save His people from their sins, and not only that, but to provide them with a dynamic for abundant living. The message, then, was to believers, and you will notice where it was given. “Seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain.” It is interesting to recall our Lord’s association with the hills. It was on a hillside that He spent lonely nights in prayer. Luke tells us that immediately before the choosing of the twelve disciples our Lord spent a night on the mountainside, and when the disciples had come to understand who He was we find that He went up into a high mountain and He was transfigured before them. At the very end of His earthly life and ministry He went up into a mountain and from there He ascended into heaven, and it was on a mountain that He promulgated the law of the kingdom.

Let us look at these three verses. Notice it says, “when he was set, his disciples came unto him”, that is, when He had sat down. It is interesting to recall how a Rabbi would sometimes talk with his disciples by the roadside, as he walked along with them, but when he was teaching them he sat down. That was the recognised position of teaching. You remember how our Lord went into the Synagogue at Nazareth and there in Luke 4 we read the incident how He read from the Book of Isaiah and when He had finished the reading He closed the

Book and He sat down, and began to say unto them, "This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears". He sat down to teach and He sat down on the mountain-side to teach the disciples the principles, the rules of His kingdom. Today we have the Professor's Chair in the University, whatever the Faculty may be. What **Matthew** intends us to understand here is that this was no chance teaching of our Lord. This was no pleasant discourse delivered by the wayside, but here is the official teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. I find these verses are very full.

Now notice verse 2: "And he opened his mouth." This is a phrase used to introduce any weighty or important discourse. One might even call it "the phrase of the great occasion". Let me remind you of two other instances where **this** happens. Philip when he was sent to minister to the Ethiopian eunuch, he got alongside the chariot, and the eunuch was reading from the 53rd chapter of **Isaiah** and there in Acts 8:35 Luke tell us that "Philip opened his mouth and preached unto him Jesus". There was Philip giving an authoritative exposition of the Lord Jesus Christ and His work. "He opened his mouth." Here was a ministry of supreme importance. Then in Acts 10:34 the word is used in connection with Peter after the conversion of the Roman centurion, how he expounded the epoch-making discovery that the Gospel was preached to the Gentiles also, and then we read, "Then Peter opened his mouth". It was the phrase of the great occasion. Here in the Sermon on the Mount it is said of our Lord, "He opened his mouth, and taught them". Our Lord's teaching was so penetrating and so challenging there was little danger of His congregation nodding off to sleep.

Now let us look at the first of the **Beatitudes**, verse 3: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for their's is the kingdom of heaven." In each case you will notice the word "are" is in italics; that is the conventional sign that there is no corresponding word in the original. In the Greek there is no verb, which means that **Beatitudes** are not statements but rather explanations. So we could read: "Blessed the poor in spirit." So notice what our Lord is saying, that these promises are not only of future happiness, not a prophecy of what may be in another world; they are affirmations of the bliss into which the Christian can enter even now. Oh! in saying that, we are not meaning to say that the bliss will reach its perfection and completion here, but we may have a foretaste even now of the blessedness of those who belong to Him.

What do these **Beatitudes** teach? That Christian bliss is independent of outward circumstances. The bliss mentioned here completely reverses the world's standards. On the face of it, it might appear that the **Beatitudes** are looking for blessing or bliss in the wrong places, but, no, here is the word of the greatest Preacher that ever preached. The popular idea is that if only you have enough wealth and an absence of sorrow and a gratification of appetites, and if we are kindly treated by all and sundry, then we have bliss indeed. But our Lord said no such thing. The reverse is often true. So He begins, "Blessed are the poor in spirit".

What do we make of the word "Blessed"? Dr. Campbell Morgan said that it is a word "full of sunshine, thrilling with music". There is no English word that quite comes up to the standard of the meaning of the original. Some have translated it "happy", which is fair enough, and one translator puts it like this, "the poor in spirit are to be congratulated". The word "happy" and "blessed" then seem to be much of a parallel. We find the same word "happy" in two places at least. When our Lord was speaking to the disciples immediately before the cross He said to them, "If you know these things, happy are ye if ye do them". That is the same word. James in his Epistle says, "Behold, we count them happy which endure" — the same word.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit." There could hardly be a more startling beginning to the Sermon on the Mount than this. We can imagine that our Lord's first hearers must have been shattered to hear our Lord say "Happy are the poor". Now what does He mean? There are few that would agree that poverty is a blessing and that there is any blessing to be found in destitution. Dr. Johnson, of literary fame, said, "Resolve not to be poor. Poverty is a great enemy to human happiness. It certainly destroys liberty and it makes some virtues impracticable and others extremely difficult." What did our Lord mean when He said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit"?

It definitely does not mean "poor" in this **world's goods**. There are some people over the centuries who have misunderstood this word of our Lord and they have taken "vows of poverty" thinking that they were thus fulfilling the Beatitudes. Poverty, in itself, is not a blessing. It can be a curse. But even the poor literally can be blessed. I knew one person who was very poor indeed, an earnest Christian woman, and she said to me one day: "I don't mind being poor because the Lord supplies all my needs." Well, she found that true in a literal sense, but I don't think this is quite what our Lord is meaning here. Also He does not mean, "Blessed are those who are poor-spirited". Remember the great story of the sending off of the representatives of the twelve tribes into the land of Canaan to reconnoître the Promised Land. Two of them signed a minority report, Joshua and Caleb, but the rest were poor-spirited, craven-hearted, they quaked in their boots when they saw the inhabitants of the land, the sons of Anak the giants, and this is what the ten had to say: "We were in our own sight as grasshoppers and so we were in their sight" (Numbers 13:33). One who thinks of himself as a grasshopper will soon find that other people will accept his evaluation of himself! They were poor-spirited in that they had no fight in them — "we are not equal — we are not going in" — and you remember how they set this great murmuring going among the Israelites and then Moses had a terrible time with them. You will also remember in our Lord's teaching in the parable of the talents, how the man that received the one talent was craven-hearted and poor-spirited and when it came to the day of reckoning he brought his one talent to his master and said, "I was afraid and went and hid my talent in the earth". He was afraid of life and its consequences. That is not our Lord's meaning here. The

publican, of whom our Lord spoke, was poor in spirit standing that day in the Temple afar off, smiting upon his breast, and would not so much as lift up his eyes unto heaven — he was poor in spirit and he was blessed. Isaiah, when after that great vision of the thrice holy God, saw his own corruption and spiritual destitution and cried, “Woe is me, for I am undone, 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” (Isaiah 6:5). Isaiah was poor in spirit and he was blessed. When our Lord is speaking of the blessedness of the poor in spirit He is describing the man who is conscious of his own inadequacy, who recognises that by himself life is impossible, but that “with God all things are possible”. This man had become so dependent upon God that he had become independent of everything else. So to be poor in spirit is the very opposite to spiritual pride or self-sufficiency. A financially poor man is not necessarily poor in spirit; he may be quite as proud and self-sufficient as his rich neighbour, but here is a blessing pronounced on those who are conscious of their own need. What our Lord is saying is that the blessing comes to those who are conscious that they have nothing of themselves, those who realise that the way to victory lies through an admission of defeat, that the way to holiness lies through a confession of their own sin and their own unworthiness.

Here, then, is the essential truth that our Lord was driving home. “Blessed are they” who acknowledge themselves for what they are in the sight of God. *Do we?*

This verse should lead us on to a revelation of what constitutes wealth. It is not in the possession of things. How it runs counter to modern-day thinking! We all realise more and more how worthless money is in and of itself. “We brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out.” The only thing you can carry out with you is that which is of spiritual value. Material things are quite insecure; they are often lost unexpectedly and without warning, and do not Christians need afresh to take stock of themselves and ask, “Where do my possessions lie?”. There was the Church at Laodicea, outwardly wealthy, lacking nothing, puffed up with a sense of its own importance. “I have need of nothing” was the motto of this Church, and the risen Christ came knocking on that Church’s door and said in effect: “Get down on your knees and work out again your true values. You say that you have need of nothing, but you do not know that you are miserable and blind and poor and naked.” They didn’t know anything about being poor in spirit. But this Beatitude lays it down that the man who has put his trust in his own skill or in his own ingenuity to acquire possessions has got it all wrong and one day will wake up to realise what a tragic mistake he has made. Our Lord said, “A man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth”. He also asked the question that has never been answered, “What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?”. If we are to be independent of the chances and the changes of this mortal life, then that independence must come from a complete dependence upon God. The man who is poor in spirit is the man who recognises his own inadequacy on

the one hand and on the other the adequacy of God and draws on his illimitable resources. The man of the world often drowns his inadequacy in drink and drugs. The Christian is glad to be totally dependent upon the Lord, knowing that his poverty will lead to spiritual wealth and the way to blessing is through a recognition of our own need through the conviction that that need can be met when we trust the Lord to meet it. All the resources of heaven are at the believer's disposal, and we can draw on an inexhaustible supply. Paul wrote to the Corinthian Church: "God is able to make all grace to abound toward you, so you lack nothing." Hannah was a woman of great spiritual insight and she said: "God is able to raise the spiritually poor out of the dunghill and set him among princes." This is exactly what our Lord says here. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Paul also speaks of "having nothing, and yet possessing all things".

Now we must ask the question. Where do our true values lie? In the bank balance, in what you have got in your home, or in abiding values — things that do not depreciate, things that don't go down because of the rise of inflation, but increase as life goes on and your Christian experience deepens? The poor in spirit can be happy because there is ever an adequate supply of God's grace. True happiness does not depend on outward circumstances, but on a right relationship with God in Christ. If then you are "poor in spirit" bless God for it and rejoice because this word is for you: "Blessed are the poor in spirit: for their's is the kingdom of heaven." May the Lord God write His Word upon our hearts, for His Name's sake, Amen.

M.H.

For Younger Readers

CARINE MACKENZIE

THE DANGER OF POISON IVY

MY HUSBAND was out walking in the woods near the farm with two friends — both men who knew a lot about the countryside and wildlife.

One of them spotted a green creeper covering the trunk of a tree. "You had better get rid of that," he said. "That is poison ivy. It will soon kill the tree."

So the man started pulling the ivy off the tree trunk. "Stop," said the other friend. "That's not the way to do it. You should wear gloves before you touch that ivy. It is very poisonous. Touching it can give you a bad rash." This man was more of an expert on trees. He advised cutting the poison ivy at the root and then pulling it away from the tree with great care.

How like sin that poison ivy is. Sin can get a grip on our lives slowly and steadily — starting perhaps in a small way, but growing until it has a lethal hold