

Blessed are the Poor in Spirit

by Charles Grandison Finney
President of Oberlin College

from "The Oberlin Evangelist" Publication of Oberlin College
Lecture VI
December 4, 1844

Public Domain Text
Reformatted by Katie Stewart

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

In several of the first verses of this chapter, Christ states the distinctive features of the Christian character, and affirms the blessedness of those who possess them. The text gives one of them: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

In this discourse I shall show--

I. What it is to be poor in spirit.

II. Why such are blessed.

I. What it is to be poor in spirit.

- 1. To have a realizing sense of our spiritual state. In this it is implied that we understand our own guilt and helplessness, and realize as a practical fact our own utter emptiness by nature of every thing good, and of any tendency to that which is good. It is one thing to hold this in theory, and another thing to be heartily sensible of the humbling fact. Most professing Christians admit in words that they are in themselves wholly helpless and destitute, but to know and feel as an abiding practical conviction that this is their true spiritual condition how few are able!
- 2. Being poor in spirit implies that we see in its true light the tendency in us to every thing evil--that we understand that the habitudes of our minds, that our appetites and propensities, that nearly the whole power of the sensibility continually tends to selfishness.
- 3. A realizing conviction of being shut up to the grace of God for help. I know people hold in theory that salvation is all grace, and suppose themselves not to doubt it; and I know too that very many of those same people do not believe it after all: they do not conceive it so as to

realize the fact. Ask them--do you expect to be saved by your own works? and they will say no, to be sure. Are you shut up to the grace of God? Yes. But to hold it as part of your creed, and to realize it as God's truth, are two vastly different things.

- 4. A conviction that we are shut up to faith in Christ as the only possible way of obtaining help. This too is held in theory, and many suppose themselves to understand it, who yet do not really apprehend it at all. And let me ask, who that has come to a realization of this fact has not been astonished to see how superficially he once held the truth on this point? Who in such a case has not been shocked to see in how loose and heartless a manner all the truths respecting the importance of man were held by him--to see that his belief was mere theory, without ever so much as reaching the heart at all? To be poor in spirit implies a right sense of the fact that we are shut up to faith in Christ as the only possible way of obtaining help in our helpless condition.
- 5. A conviction of being shut up to God for faith-- to the sovereign working of God's Holy Spirit, and the sovereign grace of God as manifested through Christ, to produce this faith. Not that it is not our own exercise; it is indeed, and from its nature must be, but we must be sensible that without the Spirit of Christ we shall no more exercise this faith, than we shall get to heaven by our own works of obedience to law. It is one thing to hold this as the doctrine of an orthodox creed, and quite another to feel it in our inmost being.

My own experience speaks strongly here. I was led to contemplate unbelief as a distinct sin, and its infinite guilt and inexcusableness. The question came--do you believe God as you believe men? Do you take His word and trust in His promise as you take the word and trust the promise of men? The answer was unavoidable--no, I do not. I do not trust God's promises as I trust man's promises. Herein was revealed and laid open to me my infinite wickedness, that I would not trust in God's promises and rest in them, even as firmly as I would trust in the word of men. I saw it now clearly. I saw the God-dishonoring, damning (for so I viewed it) the God-dishonoring, damning fact, that while I knew, and confessed, and saw clearly that God would not and could not lie, after all I did not believe fully and with all my heart. I would not take the word of the Mighty God as I would the word of frail and fallible man. And then, being led to perceive my absolute unbelief, I felt notwithstanding, that unless God pleased so to reveal Himself to me, that I could throw my soul upon Him--so to enlighten my mind and draw it to Himself by laying open before my soul His goodness and truth as to induce me to cast myself on Him by faith, I should sink. I felt that unless He would give me faith in Him, I was as certain to be damned as that I existed. Now this is what I mean by being sensible that you are shut up to God for faith. But moreover, we must be willing thus to be shut up to God. We must not merely see the fact, but be willing to be thus. We must see that we are condemned and that justly, for not being right; and hopeless, helpless in ourselves, shut up to the sovereign love of God to work that which is well pleasing in His sight, and thus shut up to the sovereign grace of God by our voluntary wickedness.

- 6. A deep and abiding sense of the absolute need we are in of a Savior from our utter wickedness, helpless and just condemnation. The mind must perceive and feel its guilt in such a sense as to be sure that its salvation is out of the question, except Christ shall substitute His

death for ours, a ransom for our souls; such a sense of our own vileness as to lay hope out of the question altogether, except through the sacrifice of Christ. O it is easy to say we are helpless and that Christ is our only hope and dependence; it is easy to recite for our creed--"I believe that salvation is through Christ alone and wholly." But how hard is it to see our vileness and guilt--our abominable filthiness, our loathsomeness, and our hopeless condemnation except Christ be applied to our souls in His offices and relations as Redeemer, Savior, Sanctifier, Teacher and King. How hard to know this as we know what we see and hear without eyes and ears.

- 7. Not only a sense of this dependence upon Christ, and helplessness out of Him is implied, but a willingness to have it so-- a willingness to cleave to Christ in all His offices and relations, a setting aside self, a self-loathing, a self renunciation in all respects, a casting away all hope in ourselves, all dependence upon ourselves, all trust in our own wisdom or righteousness, or our efforts at sanctification, and every thing else which is our own. These things are implied in poverty of spirit in the text. In short it is a correct view of our utterly helpless state, a realizing sense of that fact, and a disposition of soul corresponding to such views.

I come now to show--

II. Why those who are thus poor in spirit are blessed.

- 1. Because the kingdom of God is within them. The text says, "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." They have already the first elements of the kingdom of God within them.
- 2. Because flesh and blood has never revealed this to them. Before, they might have had it as mere theory after the flesh, but if they have come to feel and realize their state in its dreadful aggravations, flesh and blood have not revealed it unto them, but God has uncovered with His own hand the deep vileness of their souls and undertaken their cure.
- 3. They have already surmounted the greatest difficulty in the way of their salvation. After Christ has provided a feasible method of salvation, so that God can be just and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus, the greatest difficulty is to make mankind see their need of Christ. It is a great work to make men feel themselves hopeless, to humble them, to tear away their self-dependence and self-righteousness, and the notion of resources in themselves for any thing good. God is constantly engaged in bringing about this result. When a man has come to know himself and to renounce himself in all respects as to dependence and hope, then rely upon it the greatest difficulty is over come, and the chief discipline endured.
- 4. It is the most painful part too. To slay him, to tear away the last fiber of hope in his own righteousness or efforts after righteousness, and burn in upon his soul a sense of his real abominable wickedness and hopeless ruin in himself--O this costs more trouble and patience and loathing of soul, and anguish of spirit than anything else. How many times must he be infinitely ashamed of himself--so sunk in the lowest pit of shame, as to abhor himself with unutterable loathing! How often be compelled in agony to exclaim--Infinite wretch that I was. How full of pride and of hell I was, and how little I knew it! To be mortified so many times in order to empty him of himself; he must weep, and agonize, and grieve, and despair so often;

must undergo a perpetual dying--for it is indeed a perpetual dying, while passing through this process of having himself shown to himself. He sees this sin and that sin, is ashamed here and ashamed there, is mortified at every turn; he dallies with temptation, breaks his resolutions, and falls into shameful sins, and is vexed and angry at himself, and ready as it were to spit in his own face; he stumbles, and plunges, and flounders and falls, till at last all hope vanishes, and the soul lies down, weary and worn out by vain struggles, and gives up in despair. All this is painful enough; but once gone through with, the man begins to understand himself thoroughly, becomes poor in spirit, glad to renounce all self, part with his own righteousness, his own wisdom, his self-dependence, because they are nothing. When he is thus thoroughly crucified the most painful work is done. If he falls from this, then he must do his first work over; but let him keep in this state of mind, continue thus poor in spirit, and the rocks and breakers are well nigh past.

- 5. Because he has now come to be prepared for the application of the remedy for his disease. He is in an attitude in which Christ is best pleased to see him. The thing is effected for which Christ has been laboring. Heretofore Christ has been trying to crown Himself upon the mind, but self has been a constant hindrance and this Christ has been belaboring with a continual stroke. Christ would knock and knock, but to use a homely figure, the mind has been brushing up, and brushing up, and putting things to rights like an untidy housekeeper, unwilling to admit Him, and trying to put matters in a little better trim instead of letting Christ in forthwith, and saying--"Lord, thou seest what filth and rubbish are here." He is obliged to knock and keep knocking and to stand without till His head is wet with dew, and His locks are the drops of the night. The sinner is making preparations, and must become exceedingly righteous before he comes to be saved. But when Christ has convinced him of his own utter helplessness and that the more he tries to wash and cleanse his pollution, the more polluted he becomes, and that all he can do is only sinking him deeper into the horrible pit--then, then the soul is ready to receive Christ in all His offices and relations--to receive a whole Christ as presented in the gospel.
- 6. Because in a sense, such a person has already learned what the remedy is. He has learned to reject himself, and that his dependence must be utterly and forever on another than himself. He has learned how blessed it is to be nothing, to know and do nothing of himself, to be universally dependent upon Christ for every thing--for breath, for grace, for faith, for every thing; to have Christ his "all and in all."
- 7. Because they learn how blessed it is to trust Christ. They see such fullness in Christ, they do not wish any strength of their own. Their wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption are in Christ, and they need and wish for none of their own. Christ is all they need, and they need nothing in themselves. They have them all in Christ, and they are willing and glad to have them in Him.
- 8. Because they have learned how to be composed in the midst of all kinds of trials. They neither have nor seek any resort in themselves. They know in whom their strength lies, and who is their strong tower. They can depend on Christ for all, and they know He cannot fail them. But let me say,

- 9. Because they have no self interest. They have seen themselves to be perfectly destitute and worthless. They have no reputation to build up, they have no appetite that must be gratified, no passion that must be catered for, none of these to contend for or hold on to. They are emptied out, and every particle of self value is gone entirely. They labor not for themselves, but for Christ.
- 10. Because to be poor in spirit is to be rich in faith. Then poor in the proper sense, emptied of dependence upon themselves, then they are rich in faith. But I hasten to conclude with several

REMARKS.

1. It is easy to see what Paul meant when he said "When I am weak, then am I strong." Paul you know had a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet him. He was at first very uneasy at it, and he besought the Lord thrice that it might be removed, but Christ told him His grace should be sufficient for him. As if He had said, "I shall not remove that thorn. I gave it to keep you under such a pressure of infirmity that you could never forget your dependence upon me." Paul then gloried in his infirmity. He says he gloried in infirmities and tribulations and persecutions, because they emptied him of himself, and made Christ his strength. They made him know his weakness and his strength. When he was weak in himself, he was strong in Christ. His trials kept alive a sense of his entire dependence, and thus prepared him to do all things through Christ who strengthened him.

2. To be poor in spirit, is to be in a highly spiritual state. Persons are often in a spiritual state without being aware of it. In my intercourse with Christians, I have often been struck with the sad mistake made in respect to what is a spiritual frame. Certain high wrought pleasurable emotions are often regarded as the highest spiritual states; whereas other states, which can exist only under a high degree of the Spirit's influence, are nevertheless not so regarded at all. Is this state, in which a man sees himself all empty and naught, shut up to God's goodness, shut up to God to make him as He shall please, a vessel of wrath or a vessel of mercy--sees how infinitely reasonable it is for God to deal with him thus; that it is just for God to consult wholly His own wisdom, and to consult the creature not at all, and that he lies in the hands of God as clay in the hands of the potter, for God to mold from the filthy lump a vessel of honor or dishonor as seems good in His sight; when he feels thus, and lies crucified and dead as to the least idea of self-dependence--is this a state of weak and low spirituality? Nay verily. Scarcely can there be a state of higher spiritual exercise than this. This poverty of spirit, total renunciation of self, is far enough from being a carnal state of mind.

3. This state of spiritual poverty is a very healthful state of mind. It is healthful to be laid in the dust, to be emptied, and stripped, and made naked and bare; to be laid in the dust and kept there. It is the only state of mind that is safe. Of a man who is kept in such a state, I have great hopes.

4. Certain forms or stages of this spiritual poverty are very disheartening. Individuals, when Christ reveals to them the depth, as it were bottomlessness, of their misery, and gives no such revelation of Himself, and of His intention to do all for them as to give them a firm hope, feel greatly disheartened. There is such a sinking away from all expectation in themselves, that unless Christ gives them an indication of His love, and opens a medium of communication between Himself and them, a state of great misgiving and anxious suspense will ensue. The mind comes into a state in which it does not rebel, it does not murmur or weary itself except in this; it does not see at the time, its acceptance with

God. It feels that God would be just in casting it out, and it lies there with the eye fixed on Christ, and cries, "If God does not take me up, and by His self-moved goodness sanctify and save me, I am lost to all eternity." While there is nothing in the mind upon which it can seize as a present evidence that Christ is his, this self-renunciation and self-emptying will leave the mind in a state of despondency. I do not mean of despair. I hardly know how to express it; the mind is not joyful, nor is it in that agony which is the accompaniment of clear light and desperate resistance; but it is in despondency, in a kind of mourning--and perhaps that is what is meant by the "mourning" in the next verse--"Blessed are they that mourn for they shall be comforted." The mind mourns when thus completely emptied of all self-trust, while yet it has no such hold on Christ as to feel assured of its interest in Him. It mourns for sin, for its own madness; it mourns at the thought of being separated from God, it mourns over its lost condition. It is a state of most perfect mourning. If you have experienced it, you know well the state to which I refer. If you have experienced what it is to be driven out of self, and torn away from self, and crucified to self, before you had faith to lay hold on Christ and feel yourself set upon the rock; if you have every been emptied of self, having no longer any expectation of helping yourself, no more than of creating a universe, having no more thought or intention of trying to save yourself, or of doing any thing effectual for yourself, than of walking in mid air, or than of stepping upon the boiling waves, (for if you have been in the state, you no more thought of helping yourself than of going a journey to Europe across the Atlantic on foot,) having it well settled in your mind, that you will no more succeed in doing any thing in your salvation, than you would succeed in walking from the top of a house into mid air, if you have been thus, and at the same time the offices and relations of Christ were not so revealed to you as to enable you to avail yourself of them, then you know the mourning which I mean. It is any thing but a worldly sorrow, any thing but an ungodly sorrow. It is a sorrow after a godly sort which worketh life. And remember--a man needs to be thoroughly emptied of self in order to come into the state of mourning above described. Most have so much self reliance, so much complacency in self, and know so little of themselves, that they cannot have this state. It can be produced in no other way than by showing a man his character and nothingness as they really are. But I remark

5. Such seasons as these very commonly precede and are the prelude to great spiritual enlargement. Where you witness great spiritual enlargement, inquire and you will find that in proportion as it is deep and abiding, the season of spiritual poverty was thorough and complete. If the sense of poverty be slight, the enlargement will be so, and the opposite. If the enlargement be great, the man can tell you what none but spiritual minds can tell; such experience as "none but he that feels it knows;" and the things that he will tell you will be any thing but unreasonable. He sees what common eyes never saw. He has found out what all men ought to know, but what few have seen. If his enlargement is abiding, he will have a rich history to give. He may not be communicative, but fish him out, get at the bottom of his heart, and he will drop his eyes and tell you what he found in himself, how he found himself out, how he sank, and kept sinking from one depth to another still lower, till it was like sinking into the bottomless pit itself. He was driven from the last hold upon himself, the last link was broken, and he fell into the arms of Christ and was saved. And O, the salvation! Such a salvation is worth the having! But again,

6. Christ has no pleasure in causing this poverty of spirit only as it is the only way to get Himself before the mind. In no other way than by revealing to us by bitter experience our own weakness and sin, can He make us renounce ourselves and cast our all upon Him: and so He takes this way. And I tell you that no man can have a more important revelation from God, than this same revelation of self

by the Spirit. And no man sees God in Christ, or apprehends Christ as He is for the soul, till he has seen himself--till he sees the old man and the necessity of putting on the new man.

7. These seasons of spiritual poverty are indispensable to holding on to Christ. See a young convert--young converts know little of themselves or of Christ. They run well for a time, but they must be taught more of Christ, and this they can learn only by learning more of themselves. Well, Christ begins the work in a soul. The convert was all joy, but his countenance falls. Poor child! do not scold him. He is sad; he dares hardly indulge a hope. What is the matter? He desponds. You encourage him to trust in Christ and rejoice in Him. But no, that will not serve the turn, that does not remove the load. Christ has undertaken a work with him--has set about revealing him to himself, and the work will cost the poor soul many prayers, and tears, and groans, and searchings and loathings of heart. He prayed before for sanctification and he is astonished out of measure. He receives any thing in the world but sanctification. He prayed for the Baptism of the Holy Ghost, and he verily expected some beatific sight. He thought he should see the heavens opened as Stephen did. But instead of this, what a state! he seems given over to the tender mercies of sin. Every appetite and lust is clamorous as a fiend; his passions get the mastery; he frets, and grieves, and vexes himself, and repents and sins again; he is shocked, ashamed of himself, afraid to look up, is ashamed and confounded. Poor thing! he prayed to be sanctified, and he expected Christ would smile right through the darkness, and light up his soul with unutterable joy. But no! it is all confusion and darkness. He is stumbling, and sliding, and floundering, and plunging headlong into the mire, till his own clothes abhor him, and he is brought to cry--"Lord, O Lord, have mercy on me!" He expected--O what a fairy land! and he finds--what a desert--barren, dark, full of traps, and gins, and pitfalls; as it were the very earth conspiring with all things else, to ruin him. Child be not disheartened; Christ is answering your prayer. Cold professors may discourage you, but be not discouraged; you may weep and groan, but you are going through a necessary process. To know Christ, you must know yourself; to have Christ come in, you must be emptied of yourself. How will He so this for you? If you would but let go of self--if you would but believe all that God says of you, and renounce yourself at first and at once, you might be spared many a fall; but you will not, you will believe only upon experience, and hence that experience Christ makes sure that you shall have to the full. And now, mark: whoever expects to be sanctified without a full and clear and heart-sickening revelation of his own loathsomeness, without being first shown how much he needs it, is very much mistaken. Till you have learned that, nothing you can do can avail aught; you are not prepared to receive Christ as He is offered in the gospel.

GLOSSARY

of easily misunderstood terms as defined by Mr. Finney himself.

Compiled by Katie Stewart

1. **Complacency, or Esteem:** "Complacency, as a state of will or heart, is only benevolence modified by the consideration or relation of right character in the object of it. God, prophets, apostles, martyrs, and saints, in all ages, are as virtuous in their self-denying and untiring labours to save the wicked, as they are in their complacent love to the saints." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE VII)*. Also, "approbation of the character of its object. Complacency is due only to the good and holy." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE XII)*.
2. **Disinterested Benevolence:** "By disinterested benevolence I do not mean, that a person who is

disinterested feels no interest in his object of pursuit, but that he seeks the happiness of others for its own sake, and not for the sake of its reaction on himself, in promoting his own happiness. He chooses to do good because he rejoices in the happiness of others, and desires their happiness for its own sake. God is purely and disinterestedly benevolent. He does not make His creatures happy for the sake of thereby promoting His own happiness, but because He loves their happiness and chooses it for its own sake. Not that He does not feel happy in promoting the happiness of His creatures, but that He does not do it for the sake of His own gratification." *Lectures to Professing Christians (LECTURE I)*.

3. **Divine Sovereignty:** "The sovereignty of God consists in the independence of his will, in consulting his own intelligence and discretion, in the selection of his end, and the means of accomplishing it. In other words, the sovereignty of God is nothing else than infinite benevolence directed by infinite knowledge." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXVI)*.
4. **Election:** "That all of Adam's race, who are or ever will be saved, were from eternity chosen by God to eternal salvation, through the sanctification of their hearts by faith in Christ. In other words, they are chosen to salvation by means of sanctification. Their salvation is the end- their sanctification is a means. Both the end and the means are elected, appointed, chosen; the means as really as the end, and for the sake of the end." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LXXIV)*.
5. **Entire Sanctification:** "Sanctification may be entire in two senses: (1.) In the sense of present, full obedience, or entire consecration to God; and, (2.) In the sense of continued, abiding consecration or obedience to God. Entire sanctification, when the terms are used in this sense, consists in being established, confirmed, preserved, continued in a state of sanctification or of entire consecration to God." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LVIII)*.
6. **Moral Agency:** "Moral agency is universally a condition of moral obligation. The attributes of moral agency are intellect, sensibility, and free will." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
7. **Moral Depravity:** "Moral depravity is the depravity of free-will, not of the faculty itself, but of its free action. It consists in a violation of moral law. Depravity of the will, as a faculty, is, or would be, physical, and not moral depravity. It would be depravity of substance, and not of free, responsible choice. Moral depravity is depravity of choice. It is a choice at variance with moral law, moral right. It is synonymous with sin or sinfulness. It is moral depravity, because it consists in a violation of moral law, and because it has moral character." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
8. **Human Reason:** "the intuitive faculty or function of the intellect... it is the faculty that intuits moral relations and affirms moral obligation to act in conformity with perceived moral relations." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE III)*.
9. **Retributive Justice:** "Retributive justice consists in treating every subject of government according to his character. It respects the intrinsic merit or demerit of each individual, and deals with him accordingly." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXIV)*.

10. **Total Depravity:** "Moral depravity of the unregenerate is without any mixture of moral goodness or virtue, that while they remain unregenerate, they never in any instance, nor in any degree, exercise true love to God and to man." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE XXXVIII)*.
11. **Unbelief:** "the soul's withholding confidence from truth and the God of truth. The heart's rejection of evidence, and refusal to be influenced by it. The will in the attitude of opposition to truth perceived, or evidence presented." *Systematic Theology (LECTURE LV)*.