PARADOX PEOPLE

LEARNING
TO LIVE
THE BEATITUDES

JONATHAN LANDRY CRUSE

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Scripture quotations from the New Testament use the ESV's alternate, footnoted translation of *adelphoi* ("brothers and sisters").

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

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For Neil Quinn,
a fellow herald of the kingdom

and to him who became a curse for us,
so that in him we would be blessed (Gal. 3:13–14)

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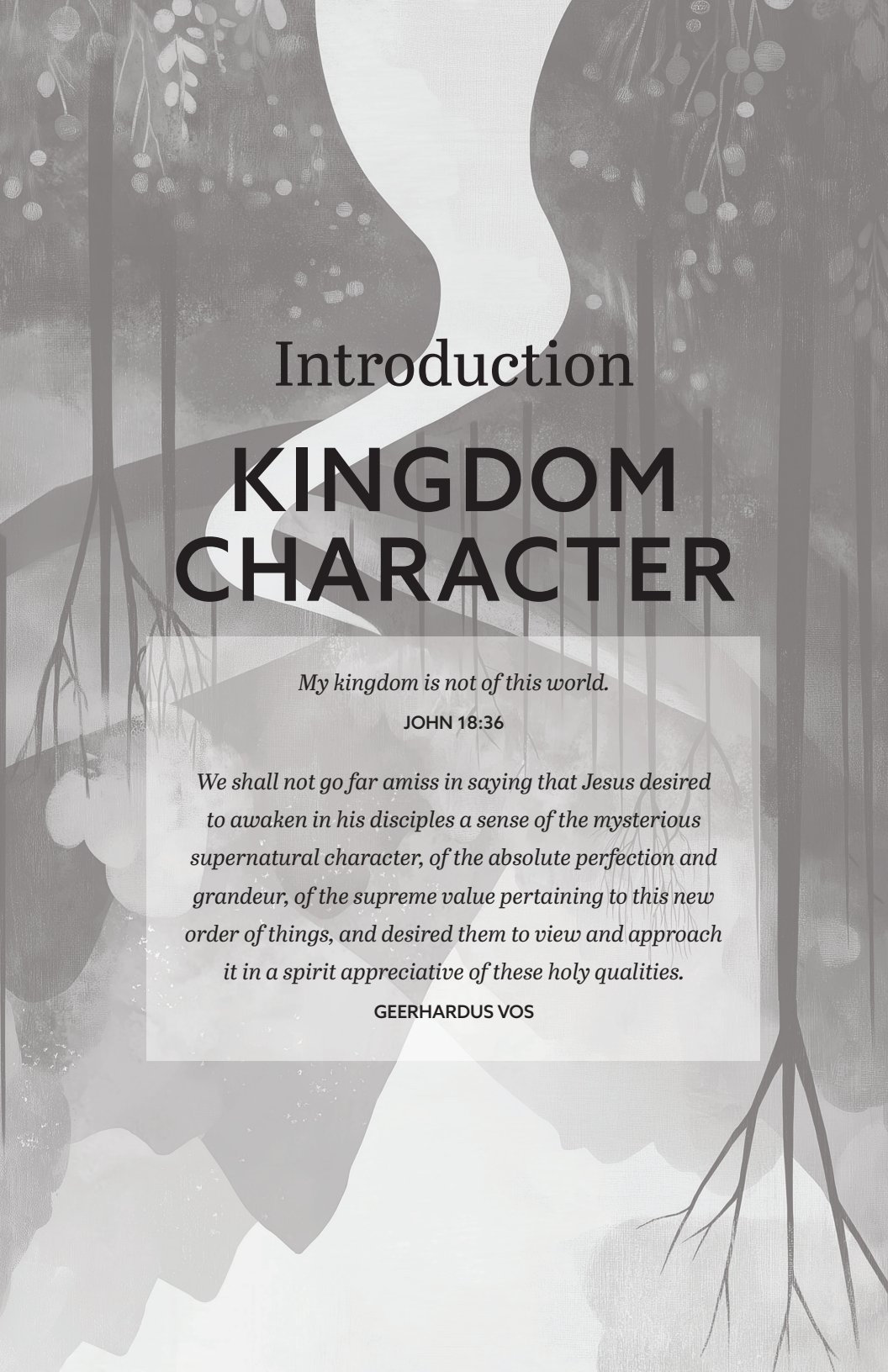


Introduction

KINGDOM CHARACTER

My kingdom is not of this world.

JOHN 18:36

We shall not go far amiss in saying that Jesus desired to awaken in his disciples a sense of the mysterious supernatural character, of the absolute perfection and grandeur, of the supreme value pertaining to this new order of things, and desired them to view and approach it in a spirit appreciative of these holy qualities.

GEERHARDUS VOS

MY FIRST TIME driving in the UK was a harrowing experience for my family—and the rest of the motorists in Edinburgh. Everything seemed backward and out of whack. The road signs were indecipherable, the lanes were too narrow, and, worst of all, everyone was driving on the wrong side of the road! Add the little sleep I got on the red-eye from Philadelphia, and the drive was a recipe for disaster. I remember shouting to my wife, after a double-decker bus zoomed past with its horn blaring, "What is wrong with everyone?!"

Of course, the answer was *absolutely nothing*. The other drivers were doing just fine. *I* was the problem. The bus didn't nearly hit me—I nearly hit it (and several others)! Here's a humbling question, and one we are resistant to ask: When the world seems messed up, could the problem actually be me? One thinks of the famous anecdote about G. K. Chesterton. In reply to a 1905 *Daily News* op-ed asking the question "What is wrong with the world?" he purportedly replied, "Dear sirs, I am."

There is no question that the world is a sordid and messed-up place. How is a Christian to respond? Or, put another way, how does a Christian individually, or a church corporately, live in and engage with a culture such as ours?

RUN, BLEND, OR FIGHT

Well, some would say you don't. Some would say you ought to run and hide. An increasingly popular view is that the only way for the church to remain pure from the defilement of the world

is to remove itself entirely from any interaction with it. In this approach, the church becomes a clandestine commune.

Another option, perhaps, is to keep one's head down and try not to draw unnecessary attention to oneself. But this tactic can easily morph from a survival instinct in a moment of weakness to a full-out and unashamed campaign of solidarity with the prevailing culture. The flags and banners that an increasing number of so-called churches wave above their front doors indicate that there is no distinction between what they are offering and what the world is selling.

Still other believers have proposed that the days of winsome witness are long past and that now is the time for action and retaliation. The world must be conquered for Christ—and by force. We see this play out in uncompromising stances pushed on social media, generally bolstered by crass language and hostility to any who take opposing views. Theirs is a reductionistic worldview that makes no room for nuance, compassion, or discernment—the state of society proves that it is far too late for such things, they would argue.

Though these three are each quite different approaches—run, blend, or fight—there is something that unites them: They operate under the principle that the world is the primary problem. But in thinking through how the Christian relates to culture, I wonder if that puts the focus on the wrong place. Perhaps there is much wisdom in the Chestertonian perspective: *I am wrong*. The issue that should concern us most is not that we are *in* the world but that we are all too often *like* the world (see John 17:15–16).

A similar theme emerges in Jesus's magnificent discourse known as the Sermon on the Mount (see Matt. 5–7). Its great theme is that of life in the kingdom of God. How do we know? Beyond the eight explicit references to "kingdom" in the sermon itself, Matthew summarizes Christ's preaching with the

proclamation "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (4:17) and describes his public ministry this way: "And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming [*kerusso*; 'preaching'] the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people" (4:23). Yet in this sermon on kingdom living, he doesn't say anything about running from the world, blending into it, or taking up arms against it. Instead, he talks about holiness. He talks about character. He talks about virtue. He talks about what is true for those who are holy and righteous by virtue of their union with him, and he calls us all to live out that internal reality. Bishop J. C. Ryle once wrote, "Would we know what kind of people Christians ought to be? Would we know the character at which Christians ought to aim? . . . Then let us often study the Sermon on the Mount. Let us often ponder each sentence, and prove ourselves by it."[1] Wise counsel, and the very aim of this little book.

INTRODUCING THE BEATITUDES

In this book, we will not consider the entirety of Jesus's sermon but simply consider his introduction to it. Jesus opens not with a personal illustration or a humorous anecdote but with a series of incisive, memorable aphorisms on kingdom character known as the Beatitudes. This term comes from the Latin *beatitudo*, which means "blessedness." Each beatitude promises a blessing to the citizen of God's kingdom who bears a particular character trait, after which Jesus briefly explicates what the blessing is. Interestingly, the first and last blessings on the list are the

1. J. C. Ryle, *Matthew: Expository Thoughts on the Gospels* (repr., Banner of Truth, 2012), 26.

exact same: ". . . for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (vv. 3, 10). This is a literary device known as an *inclusio*, something that acts as bookends informing the reader that everything *included* in the middle should be interpreted through the meaning of the bookends. So, in this context, the *inclusio* means that all the Beatitudes are teaching the blessedness of belonging to the kingdom of heaven.[2]

The rest of the sermon unpacks some of the particulars of kingdom living: what it means for our finances, marriages, or civil disputes, for example. But before all that, Jesus makes it abundantly (and mercifully!) simple for us. It's as though he says, "Do you want to know what it looks like to live in the kingdom of God? It looks like this . . ." Then he describes eight characteristics of kingdom citizens, concluding with two further metaphorical attributes:[3]

> Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:3)
>
> Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (v. 4)
>
> Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. (v. 5)
>
> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. (v. 6)
>
> Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. (v. 7)

2. See D. A. Carson, *Jesus's Sermon on the Mount and His Confrontation with the World: A Study of Matthew 5–10* (repr., Baker Books, 2018), 20.

3. Some interpreters suggest a total of nine beatitudes, as Jesus declares "Blessed are . . ." nine times. For the purposes of this study, I will be taking verses 10–12 together, with 11–12 serving as a further elaboration of the beatitude "Blessed are those who are persecuted." See R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Eerdmans, 2007), 161n13.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. (v. 8)

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. (v. 9)

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (v. 10)

Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (vv. 11–12)

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. (v. 13)

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. (vv. 14–16)

KINGDOM LIFE PICTURED

What should become immediately evident is that living in God's kingdom looks very different from living in man's kingdom. Jesus rhetorically establishes an antithesis between the world and the church through the repeated use of "theirs," implying that the blessing that belongs to the church is kept from the world. It is as though he said, "Theirs is the kingdom of God, and theirs only. No one else's."

The difference between the Christian and the non-Christian is "the vital thing that is emphasized everywhere in this passage," said the great preacher Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Writing in the 1950s, he claimed that "the first need in the Church is a clear understanding of this essential difference" and that the Sermon on the Mount was one of the best aids to that end.[4] Things haven't changed since then—in fact, things have never changed. Jesus climbed on the mount to deliver an address calling God's people to live different lives than the rest of the world. Over a thousand years earlier, another prophet named Moses did something quite similar.[5] Although there were many differences between the two prophets and their preaching, they sounded the same heavenly call: "You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine" (Lev. 20:26).

So, in what ways is life in God's kingdom pictured differently from life in man's kingdom? At least three things should be noted: Christians must be distinguished from the world by their values, their hopes, and, ultimately, their King.

The Kingdom's Value System

Right away, we see that the Beatitudes praise and favor what the world mocks and shames. What's so great about being "poor in spirit," after all? Mourning, meekness, and mercy are not rungs on the ladder of the corporate world. Nevertheless, these are what Jesus commends to us when describing kingdom life. Notice, he is

4. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (repr., Eerdmans, 1987), 39.

5. See Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Baker Academic, 2008), 173–75; and Jonathan T. Pennington, *The Sermon on the Mount and Human Flourishing: A Theological Commentary* (Baker Academic, 2017), 137–43.

not saying those who are poor, or mourning, or meek, or hungry will be blessed *because* they are so pathetic and wretched. He is saying they are blessed because their values align with his. He is not pitying such people but presenting them as examples! These are values the world criticizes, but Christ catapults them to the highest degrees of honor.[6]

Be that as it may, admittedly, it all seems sort of upside-down at first. It can be hard to approach the teaching of the kingdom of heaven with appreciation. It's difficult to "reconcile the blessedness we seek with the idea of shame, poverty, hunger, thirst, and other such afflictions," as John Calvin so honestly writes.[7] We are to be a people who pursue paradox: The values that we are called to won't seem natural to us—at times they might seem outright foolish—but blessing is found not by railing against them but by wholeheartedly embracing them. It's like when I was driving in Scotland: It was not until I accepted rules that were nonsensical to me that I found I could get around. Whether we fully understand it or not, there is, in the words of one Puritan, "blessedness in reversions."[8] Christianity is an otherworldly religion—so we should not be surprised when it turns us and others upside down (see Acts 17:6).

The Kingdom's Hope

The hope that a Christian has is ultimately not in this world; this is indicated by the fact that all but the first and last beatitudes promise a blessing that is ultimately reserved for a later time. The mourners *will* be comforted, the hungry *will* be satisfied, the pure

6. See Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom of God and the Church* (repr., Fontes Press, 2017), 18.

7. John Calvin, *Sermons on the Beatitudes* (Banner of Truth, 2006), 19.

8. Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes: An Exposition of Matthew 5:1–10* (repr., Banner of Truth, 1980), 24.

will see God. At the same time, the controlling theme of the Beatitudes is that those who are blessed have the kingdom of heaven right now (see vv. 3, 10). The Christian lives as one between the times, as it were. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven because the regenerating power of God has come into their lives, even though all the blessings that attend this transformation have not yet been realized (see 1 Peter 1:3–5). "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17); but he is not yet *in* the new creation.

The Beatitudes help us look somewhere other than the here and now for our comfort and consolation. Unlike the world, our hope is not in the next paycheck, the next vacation, or the next spouse. The faithful Christian says with Paul, "For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (Rom. 8:24–25).

The Kingdom's King

The key to the kingdom, however, is the King. The Beatitudes handed down from the mount matter because of the One who ascended the mount. Indeed, they are a portrait of him. Throughout his life on earth, Jesus was poor in spirit (see Phil. 2:8), he mourned (see Matt. 26:38), he was meek (see Matt. 11:29), he hungered after God (see Matt. 4:4), he was merciful (see Luke 17:13–14), he was pure in heart (see Matt. 4:10), he made peace (see John 14:27), and he was persecuted (see 1 Peter 2:23)—and on account of these things he has received the blessing of the kingdom of God, having been appointed "the heir of all things" (Heb. 1:2).[9] It is impossible to have a proper understanding of the Beatitudes without having a proper understanding of Christ, for there is no blessing apart from

9. For a wonderful treatment of Christ as the fulfillment of the virtues listed in the Beatitudes, see Iain M. Duguid, *Hero of Heroes: Seeing Christ in the Beatitudes* (P&R, 2001).

him. The King is the greatest kingdom blessing. The call to live in God's kingdom is a call to live before *this* King—and he is very different from any other the world has ever seen (see John 18:36).

In recent years, there's been a surge in shows centered on so-called "antiheroes"—protagonists who lack the classic virtues of heroism, such as courage, idealism, or moral integrity. Unlike traditional heroes who fight for justice, antiheroes are often cynical, flawed, and morally ambiguous—yet they still manage to earn our sympathy or admiration. Their rise in popularity says something sobering about our culture. What kind of heroes do we really admire? Those who mirror our own flaws and justify our sinful tendencies? Or those who are so radically virtuous that they call us to something higher?

Jesus is a hero in the classic sense—fighting the ultimate battle between good and evil. Yet his methods make him seem like an antihero, not because he does wrong but because he defies our expectations. He finds strength in weakness, values humility over power, refuses to defend himself, seeks no personal gain, and aligns himself with the outcasts of society. Our response to him reveals the state of our hearts. Do we love a hero like this? Kingdom living demands it.

KINGDOM LIFE PROMISED

The opening salvo of this New Moses's sermon is not a list of unattainable qualities but rather the declaration that God has made these things true of us and in us. Jesus "is describing *what the power of God's kingdom makes us*," writes Sinclair Ferguson.[10]

10. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Life in a Fallen World* (repr., Banner of Truth, 2009), 44. Emphasis original.

Therefore, in the Beatitudes we find kingdom life not only pictured but also promised! The anti-Beatitudes are found in Matthew 23, where Jesus declares "woes" upon the people of Israel who have rejected their God. For the Christian, the one who embraces God, life is not woeful. It is full of blessing. The gospel wondrously declares to us that we stand in God's favor. And this is not because we have earned it; it's because Christ has.

How could sinners such as us receive divine favor and approval? Only through union with the One who has found ultimate approval from God. Flip back a page in your Bible, and you will find that Matthew has told us who this is: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). The Beatitudes make sense only when viewed through a gospel lens. They are not goals for us to achieve but blessings we receive when we belong to the One who perfectly fulfilled all righteousness for us. And when we are in Christ, we are in him perfectly, completely, unshakably. We stand in the favor of God forever.

This is the best way to understand the "blessedness" of these blessings. It is the objective fact that no matter what happens in life, God is for us. This divine favor produces a state of being that Jesus refers to as utter blessedness. Some translations render the word *blessed* (*makarios*) as "happy." This helps convey the good life that the Beatitudes usher us into. Perhaps more helpful still (and definitely more interesting!) is the Welsh rendering of the Beatitudes, which uses the idiom *Gwyn ey byd*—literally, "white is their world"—which succinctly portrays the pristine, contented life of those who belong to Christ's kingdom. But we need to be cautious here, because the concepts of happiness and flourishing are very *subjective*, whereas the Beatitudes are largely concerned with the *objective* favor we have from God. In other words, they

teach, in part, that our happiness and wholeness and flourishing can come only from God's favor and approval.

That's what the *very first* beatitude declares, after all: Even when we have seemingly nothing ("poor in spirit"), we have absolutely everything ("the kingdom of heaven"). The gospel finds us impoverished in sin and promises that we will be filled with the very fullness of God (see John 1:16). All we have to do is believe it. We might not see it in this life. Again, we remember that most of the blessings are held out for us in the future world yet to come. But even this is gospel security. As R. V. G. Tasker helpfully explained, "The future tense . . . emphasizes their certainty and not merely their futurity."[11] We could put an *indeed* before each future blessing—and let's underscore it while we're at it: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall *indeed* be comforted" (v. 4). Don't sense the gospel promise yet? How about this: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall *indeed, really and truly, no-buts-about-it* be satisfied" (v. 6). There it is.

CONCLUSION

It is time for the Christian church to recover the genius of the Beatitudes. They give us the manifesto on Christian life in a non-Christian world that so many people have been desperately searching for. It was right in front of us all along, and it starts with the promise and guarantee of God's blessing. From that starting point, we as individuals, and especially as a church community,

11. R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1961), 61, quoted in John R. W. Stott, *Christian Counter-Culture: The Message of the Sermon on the Mount*, The Bible Speaks Today (InterVarsity Press, 1978), 35.

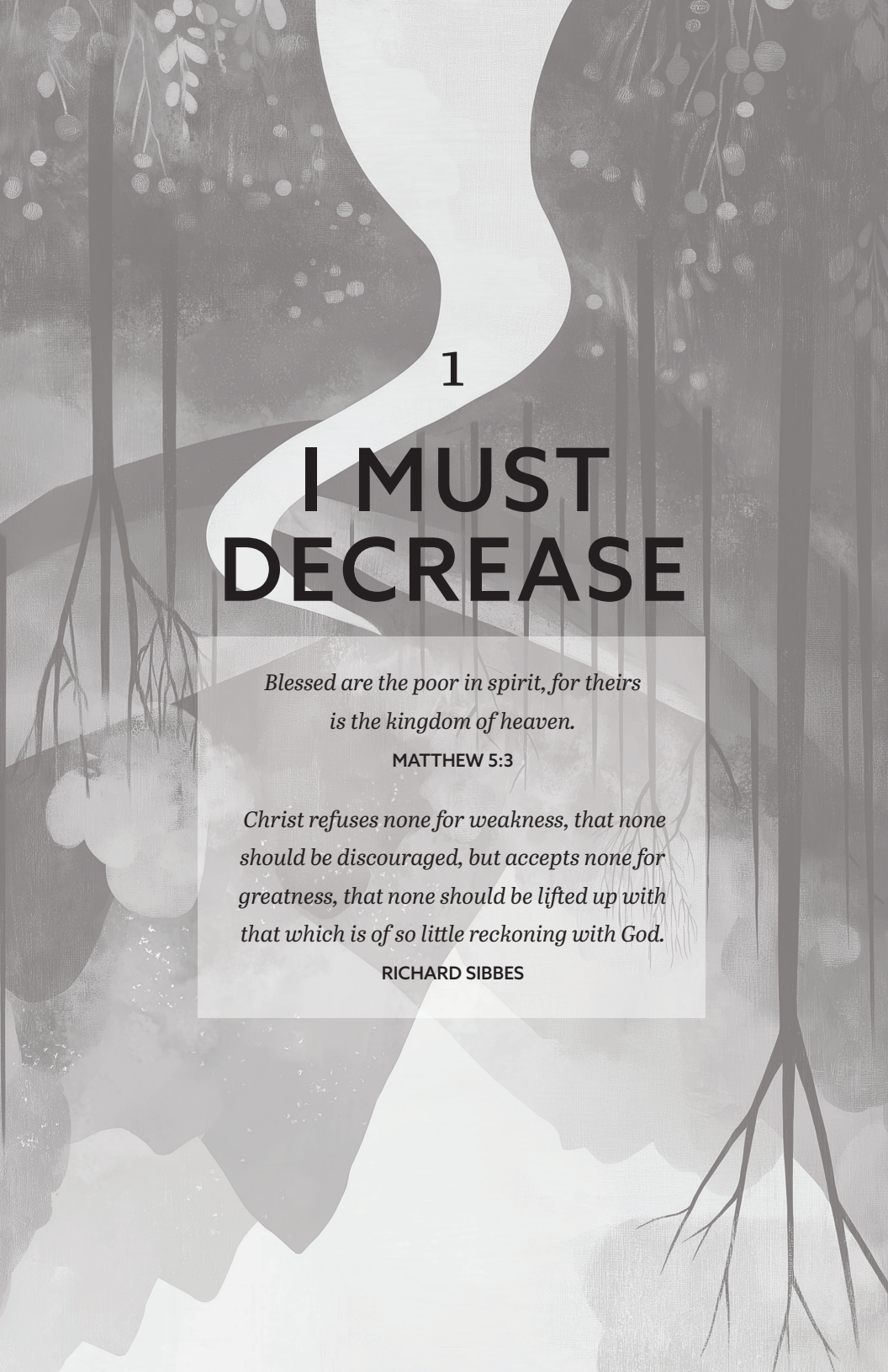
are able to live out in a meaningful way the sort of character pictured for us.

Is this your starting point? It makes all the difference to know that you have God's approval, his favor, his blessing. To start with the knowledge that all God's kingdom blessings are ours in Christ means we don't need to fly in fear from the kingdom of man when it turns its aim on us. We are untouchable. It also means we don't need to fight ferociously to win a kingdom. It's not one we earn, anyway; it's one that is bestowed upon us (see Luke 22:29). God builds his kingdom, then he gives it to us. We do not need to drive the world to its knees in submission to us or win victory for Christ though our persuasion and protest. We are already more than conquerors in and through him (see Rom. 8:37).

Some will think I am suggesting that this means we do nothing in this life, nothing to influence the culture, nothing to promote or protect the church. Holiness is far from nothing. It's a sad day when Christians think that living like Christ in the world is not enough for the world. Even the traits set forth in the Beatitudes indicate that there is activity on our part, not mere passivity. How can we make peace without confrontation and rebuke, without bold truth-telling? How would persecution come unless we stand up and speak out? I am in no way suggesting that the culture does not need to be changed; I am suggesting that the first step to change the culture is for me to change. That change is hard, and counterintuitive, but faithful Christians embrace it. Confident of the Spirit's help, we set out together in pursuit of paradox.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. What is your perception of the "good life"? In what ways does it clash with what Jesus presents in the Beatitudes? How does it conform?
2. Of the three common cultural responses mentioned in this chapter—run, blend, or fight—which are you most tempted toward when facing a hostile or confusing culture? Why do you think that is?
3. Why is it significant that Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount not with commands but with blessings? What does this reveal about God's priorities for his people?
4. Why is it crucial that we see the Beatitudes not just as virtues to strive for but as qualities formed in us through our union with Christ?
5. In what ways is Jesus the ultimate paradoxical King? How should that shape our own expectations of kingdom life?



1

I MUST DECREASE

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

MATTHEW 5:3

Christ refuses none for weakness, that none should be discouraged, but accepts none for greatness, that none should be lifted up with that which is of so little reckoning with God.

RICHARD SIBBES

HAVE YOU CHECKED your bank account lately? How did you feel about the number in there? My guess is that, even if you are living comfortably, you would feel better if there were more money, not less. Though we may not be multibillionaires, we well know why John D. Rockefeller—the oil magnate and the world's first billionaire—answered the question "How much is enough?" with the line "*Just a little more*."

More is better—right? In our consumeristic age, we are indoctrinated to believe that more stuff solves the problems of life. But the Scriptures teach a different doctrine—a better and truer, though harder, doctrine: *Less* is more. This is a truth that should be applied not to your savings account but to something far more significant: your spirit. That is, your very own self. To be great before God is to be small. We grow up in Christ by growing down in humility. God exalts the humble but lays low the proud (see Matt. 23:12).

This is the lesson behind the first beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Familiar words, but do we understand their meaning?

POOR IN SPIRIT

The first thing to underscore is the kind of poverty that Jesus is talking about here. This is not a claim that a crummy financial situation gets us a free pass into glory. There has been some confusion on this point in the church, perhaps enhanced by Luke's parallel passage to the Beatitudes, in which Jesus is recorded as

simply saying, "Blessed are you who are poor," with no mention of "in spirit" (Luke 6:20). Additionally, who can forget Jesus's answer to the rich young man's burning question? When the man asked, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" our Lord replied, "Sell all that you have and give to the poor" (Mark 10:17, 21)! Franciscan monks represent one take on these teachings, as they must "renounce the right to use and dispose of material goods without the permission of their Ministers and Guardians; indeed, after solemn profession they also renounce the right of ownership."[1]

Though God is undoubtedly concerned for the poor and suffering in this life (see Deut. 15:7–8; Prov. 22:22–23), salvation is by grace alone (see Eph. 2:5). Being rich doesn't keep you out of heaven, nor does being poor get you in. It should be noted that it was the rich young man's idolatry, not his wealth, that barred him from the kingdom. Jesus's command revealed that reality: He was exposing the love of this man's heart, and it was not for the Lord. Likewise, the absence of "in spirit" from Luke's account does not alter the meaning. There are other places in Luke where "the poor" stand in as a class of *spiritual* persons, like when Jesus declares his redemptive mission (quoting from Isaiah 61): "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). When the biblical data are taken together, it is clear that financial or material poverty is not commended as an inherent spiritual good, much less a necessity to receive God's blessings.

We also need to be careful as to what we mean by *in spirit*. It is not a synonym for demeanor or attitude. Some read this as an

1. General Curia of the Order of Friars Minor, *The General Constitutions, the General Statutes of the Order of Friars Minor* (Rome, 2021), 14, available online at https://ofm.org/uploads/The%20General%20Constitutions%20and%20Statutes%20ENG.pdf.

exhortation to live a quiet, diffident, timid existence. Gentleness and meekness are Christian virtues, to be sure, but they are not antithetical to boldness, courage, or extroversion. There will be plenty of mild, unassuming people in hell.

So then, what *does* it mean to be poor in spirit? It's critical that we understand this properly, because the poverty described here is a poverty without which you cannot enter heaven. What Jesus is calling us to is an acknowledgment that, with respect to the merit needed to be saved, we are found wanting—not just wanting but completely devoid of any good! To be poor in spirit is to recognize that there is nothing we have in and of ourselves on which we can bank our eternity. The poor in spirit know that they are empty, and they also know that only God can fill them. And this he promises to do: "For thus says the One who is high and lifted up, who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: 'I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly, and to revive the heart of the contrite'" (Isa. 57:15). What this beatitude is all about, in a word, is humility.

PURSUING POVERTY

So, how can we cultivate this sort of poverty of spirit in our lives? How can we ensure that we are not mastered by the pride that so easily blinds us to our true condition? It should be noted that such an endeavor is particularly difficult in a day and age marked by autonomy and expressive individualism. The slogans of today are "you do you" and "follow your heart." Young people are encouraged to be whomever they want to be. These are the messages in our movies, the themes in our music. They even show up in official legal opinions, such as former Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy's famous remark: "At the heart of liberty is the

right to define one's own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life."[2]

It is extremely difficult to have a humble view of yourself when the world is preaching to you that your self is actually the most important thing there is.[3] Every beatitude is countercultural, but this one is perhaps more so than the others. And even apart from the cultural pressures surrounding us, the pull of our own prideful hearts is eager to believe that we are the greatest thing there is. But you can't believe that and be poor in spirit. The Christian, therefore, must keep the following three things ever in view if he or she would be poor in spirit and receive the kingdom of heaven.

An Honest Assessment of Our Creatureliness

An honest assessment of our creatureliness starts by acknowledging that God is God and we are not. "I am the LORD, and there is no other," we read in Isaiah. "Besides me there is no God" (Isa. 45:5). The one who is poor in spirit will amen that truth, not rebel against it. Of course, we all have the same impulse as our first parents: to be like God (we also share the folly to think such a goal is attainable!). Instead, we need to think big thoughts about God. We need to put ourselves and God into proper focus: We are small, weak,

2. *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey*, 505 U.S. 833 (1992), Justia, https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/505/833/#:~:text=The%20Act%20requires%20that%20a,before%20the%20abortion%20is%20performed.

3. Matthew Roberts assesses the situation and its theological implications well, writing, "What the Self chooses is right by definition, for the Self is god. What is more, the desires that underly those choices are not subject to any external moral norms but have become the moral norm: they are aspects of the divine will which must be obeyed. Freedom, autonomy, the self, and the self's desires form a nexus which functions in Western thought as a kind of modern pantheon, the thing which is worshiped with the love and willing service due to God alone." Matthew P. W. Roberts, *Pride: Identity and the Worship of the Self* (Christian Focus, 2023), 42.

and finite; he "inhabits eternity" (Isa. 57:15). Well did Solomon cry out, "Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you" (1 Kings 8:27). Because he is immense and incomprehensible, even the best thoughts we have of God will never capture him well enough. As the great Puritan theologian Stephen Charnock once put it, "We cannot speak or think worthily enough of him, who is greater than our words, vaster than our understandings."[4]

If you want to work on growing downward in your view of self and magnifying your view of God, try going outside on a clear night. My in-laws live in Arizona, and there's nothing quite like the desert sky on a clear, crisp night. When I look up into our galaxy, with its billions of stars and seemingly endless openness, my chest tightens. It's a strange sensation, one that I can most closely associate with fear or anxiety. But what am I afraid of? That gravity will give up and I will suddenly get sucked into the great unknown? It was only in recent years that I realized the feeling wasn't fear, per se, but *awe*—and indeed, these are closely related! Looking up at the stars gives us an unmistakable dose of reality that we too often ignore: This world is so much bigger than us. In fact, it's greater than we could ever know, and this points to a Creator. The world he has made is truly awful (that is, full of awe).

Do you recall the psalmist's response when he gazed on one of those clear nights like the kind I enjoy in Scottsdale?

> When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers,
> the moon and the stars, which you have set in place,
> what is man that you are mindful of him,
> and the son of man that you care for him? (Ps. 8:3–4)

4. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God*, ed. Mark Jones (Crossway, 2022), 1:292.

Make no mistake about it: Only the poor in spirit ask a question like that.

A Heartfelt Admission of Our Condition

So, God is God, and I am man. That's key. But next I must recognize that I'm not even the man God has called me to be. Indeed, none of us is. We are called to obedience, righteousness, and holiness, but "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). The poor in spirit acknowledge they have no spiritual good to offer the Lord that would earn them a right standing in his holy presence. This is no small problem. Sin affects every aspect of our being: our intellect, our desires, our will. There is no part of our existence that is not tainted in one way or another by sin, rendering us incapable of performing the necessary spiritual good that God requires of us all. The Canons of Dort provide a sobering summary of the effects of our sinful estate. Through sin, man has "brought upon himself blindness, terrible darkness, futility, and distortion of just judgment in his mind; perversity, defiances, and hardness in his heart and will; and finally impurity in all his emotions. . . . Therefore, all people are conceived in sin and are born children of wrath, unfit for any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in their sins, and slaves to sin; without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they are neither willing nor able to return to God, to reform their distorted nature, or even to dispose themselves to such reform."[5]

Since "all people are . . . inclined to evil," it is no surprise that the world is a wicked place. There are countless hardships we endure because our home is broken and people are cruel. In the Old Testament, the term *poor* is often used to describe the person

5. Canons of Dort 3/4.1, 3.

who realizes these troubles and calls out to God for help.[6] Consider these examples from the Psalms:

> This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him
> and saved him out of all his troubles. (Ps. 34:6)

> As for me, I am poor and needy,
> but the Lord takes thought for me.
> You are my help and my deliverer;
> do not delay, O my God! (Ps. 40:17; see also Ps. 70:5)

> He raises the poor from the dust
> and lifts the needy from the ash heap. (Ps. 113:7)

While the poor in spirit are sensitive to the realities of sin in this world, they are also willing to make this admission: "Of all the problems I face in life, the greatest problem is *me*." Have you come to that realization? Our greatest problem in life isn't how people treat us, the trials we go through, or the suffering we might endure. Our greatest problem is our sin. "Sin is worse than affliction, than death, than devil, than hell," wrote Puritan Ralph Venning.[7] That's because sin is what keeps us from God—and *our* sin, not anyone else's. Therefore, the poor in spirit cry out to God for deliverance *from themselves* (see Psalm 51:1–3)! The poor in spirit echo the publican: "But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!'" (Luke 18:13). The poor in spirit can honestly say, with Paul, that they are the chief of sinners (see 1 Tim. 1:15).

6. Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Sermon on the Mount: Kingdom Life in a Fallen World* (Banner of Truth, 2009), 15.

7. Ralph Venning, *The Sinfulness of Sin* (1669; repr., Banner of Truth, 2021), 201.

Some reading this will feel the weight of that statement acutely. But it must be stated at this point that there is immense comfort when this beatitude is understood. To be poor in spirit is to have the kingdom of God. Both clauses must be equally accepted. We cannot only bemoan who we are by nature and not rejoice in that which we are given by grace. Though we sin much, and perhaps suffer often, Jesus lifts our heads with this word: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). How could that not lighten our load and brighten our eyes with joy?

Though the kingdom's blessings will not be fully realized until eternity, there is an immediacy to what this beatitude is promising: "Theirs *is* the kingdom of God—right now!" Dear reader: If you feel burdened by your sin and overcome by your unworthiness, know that Christ has given you himself, and all of heaven is not so lovely and valuable as he is. Here's a paradox to ponder for eternity: The poor in spirit actually possess the greatest treasure. How the humble are lifted high by this reality! It's true that some of us need to hear Jesus's warning to the church of Laodicea: "For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing,' not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17). But perhaps what you really need to hear is something of the inverse: "You say you are wretched and poor, not realizing that, in me, you are rich and need nothing."

A High Adoration of Our Christ

That is why, to capture real gospel humility, we need to do more than have a low view of ourselves. In fact, to have only a low view of ourselves and our sin and not wed it to a high view of God and his grace is a sign of spiritual pride, not spiritual poverty. As

Tim Keller has said, true gospel humility is not thinking less of ourselves but thinking of ourselves less.[8]

The way to do that is to occupy our thoughts with Another. Yes, we must see our sin, but then we must see our Savior.[9] He is sufficient—indeed, *more than* sufficient—to pay for all our sins. To be poor in spirit is to find our wealth and worth in the righteousness of Jesus Christ. As Paul says, "Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil. 3:8). That's because there is nothing greater in all the world than to know Christ and to be "found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (v. 9).

So, what do you think of Jesus? Who is he to you? Is he still something of a character in a novel—compelling but not quite *real*? Is he an interest to you, or a passion? Do you see him as what Paul calls the "all in all" (Eph. 1:23)? Is your heart bursting with good thoughts and high praise of Christ?

Those who are poor in spirit will always have a ready word to speak about their Savior. He is great not only in the generalities but in the particulars: Jesus is my help for today, my peace in the storm, my joy amid the current trial. Jesus is the Shepherd who brings me back, the Surety who paid my debt, the Mediator who reconciled me to God. He is my Teacher by his Word and Spirit. He is my Friend. He is my Lord. He is my Life. He is the great

8. Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness: The Path to True Christian Joy* (10Publishing, 2012), 32.

9. "It is not the sight of our sinful heart that humbles us; it is a sight of Jesus Christ. I am undone because mine eyes have seen the king." Andrew Bonar, *The Smile of Thy Love* (Christian Heritage, 2024), 31.

Prophet, Priest, and King. He is the fairest of ten thousands, the lover of my soul. Jesus is the Lamb of God, who takes away my sin. My elder Brother who shares his inheritance with me. The poor in spirit are never bankrupt of blessings to bestow on their Savior.

Having Christ, then, rescues the poor in spirit from the incessant pursuit for *more* that motivates the majority of our society. The implied messaging in most advertising is that we are not happy because we are missing something. But you see, to think that our happiness is intrinsically linked to something quantifiable is actually a sad way to live. The poor in spirit will be spared from the consumeristic impulse that says the solution to our trouble is more stuff. The solution is Jesus—*and the poor in spirit have him*. Though the Rockefellers of the world will be telling us we don't have enough, the poor in spirit say, "Thou, O Christ, art all I want, more than all in thee I find!"[10]

START HERE; STAY HERE

It is no accident at all that this beatitude is the first beatitude. It's the threshold that we must cross over to enter into all the blessings that the Lord is eager to give us. Thomas Watson writes, "Why does Christ here begin with poverty of spirit? Why is this put in the forefront? I answer, Christ does it to show that poverty of spirit is the very basis and foundation of all the other graces that follow. You may as well expect fruit to grow without a root, as the other graces without this."[11]

Can we prove that to be the case? I think so. Until we are poor in spirit, we will never mourn (the second beatitude). After all,

10. Charles Wesley, "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," 1740.

11. Thomas Watson, *The Beatitudes: An Exposition of Matthew 5:1–10* (Banner of Truth, 1980), 42.

what need is there for it? We are always cheered and comforted by the sense of our accomplishments and ability. Until we are poor in spirit, we are proud and arrogant—and therefore unable to know meekness (the third beatitude). Until we are poor in spirit, we will never hunger or thirst after righteousness. Why would we? We don't see or sense our lack (the fourth beatitude)! We could go on, but it's evident that "Christ begins with poverty of spirit because this ushers in all the rest."[12]

Poverty of spirit does not simply stand at the front of the list in a logical sense; it is the foundational beatitude because, without it, there can be no salvation. It is that significant. To put it quite bluntly, dear reader: You *must* be poor in spirit. Until you are poor in spirit, you cannot enter heaven: "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Until I am empty of myself, I can never be filled with Christ. Until I let go of the idols of this world, I cannot receive the kingdom that God desires to give me.

So, this sense of neediness is what starts the Christian life. But it needs to stay with the Christian too—we never outgrow our need for grace. When we think of the debts we have, our impulse is to see them eliminated, and that's good! We want to be out of debt so that we can be richer. But our debt to God is the opposite. The longer we walk with the Lord, the greater our sense of our debt should grow. We must become poorer every day.

CONCLUSION

Does that scare you? Friend, you have nothing to fear by being indebted to a God who is "*rich* in mercy" (Eph. 2:4). If you'll let him, he is ready to pour out his lavish grace on you. To

12. Watson, 42.

be poor in spirit is to be rich in grace. To be empty of yourself is to be full of Christ. To be full of Christ is to be the richest one could ever be. What have you to lose by declaring your spiritual bankruptcy to Jesus? He left his home in heaven to purchase your permanent place there. He wore a crown of thorns to ensure that you will wear a crown of glory. He was cursed by God so that, in him, you will be blessed with every spiritual blessing. "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Why is it important that poverty of spirit is the first beatitude?
2. In what ways does our culture's message of self-sufficiency directly contradict Jesus's call to be "poor in spirit"? How have you seen this tension play out in everyday life?
3. Why is spiritual pride often harder to detect than other sins? What are subtle signs that we might be relying on our own righteousness instead of Christ's?
4. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven belongs to the poor in spirit. What comfort can be found in this message?
5. The world says you must climb upward to gain status; Jesus says you must grow downward in humility to gain the kingdom. In what areas of life do you most need this downward growth?