

Catechetical Series:

## **Blessed are the Poor in Spirit, for Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven (Mt 5:3)**

Sr. Grace Marie Heinrich, SCTJM

### **"By His POVERTY YOU MIGHT BECOME RICH"**



When we speak of poverty in modern society, most of us seem to envision the hovels that line the streets of undeveloped nations. We seem to have an internal movie playing through our minds images of devastating poverty and malnourished children with swollen bellies because they don't have enough to eat. So of course, when we hear Jesus proclaiming "Blessed are the poor" (cf. Lk. 6:20; Mt. 5: 3), we and many of our contemporaries may have a hard time understanding. Sometimes we try to accommodate Jesus' words according to what we think he meant, but in doing so we often lose the radicality that He preached and soften the challenge that He made to those He encountered during His ministry. His person, presence, and preaching remains as much of a challenge for us today as it did for his contemporaries.

He meant what He said: "Blessed are the poor." Why? Because He came to elevate the dignity of the human person even beyond the our original dignity. We had been created in the image and likeness of God, but He had come now, taking on human nature to shed His Blood to bring us into union with the Godhead. If this was His mission, He came not to call us to poverty that degrades our humanity, but rather to a poverty that realizes our human dignity by liberating our hearts from the chains of possessions. He says, "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life and what you will eat, or about your body and what you will wear...All the nations of the world seek for these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, seek his kingdom, and these other things will be given you besides." (Lk. 12:20, 30-31) Jesus recognizes that we have human needs, but is calling us to look beyond the flesh, and desires us to find our fulfillment in God who is enough. "For where your treasure is, there also will your heart be." (Mt. 6:21) If our treasures (and therefore our hearts) lie in earthly goods - as good as they are - then they cannot rest in communion with God. This is the meaning of "You cannot serve both God and mammon." (Mt. 6:24)

Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI points out, "One of the deepest forms of poverty a person can experience is isolation. If we look closely at other kinds of poverty, including material forms, we see that they are born from isolation, from not being loved or from difficulties in being able to love. Poverty is often produced by a rejection of God's love, by man's basic and tragic tendency to close in on himself, thinking himself to be self-sufficient or merely an insignificant and ephemeral fact, a "stranger" in a random universe."<sup>1</sup>



It is precisely this isolation that Jesus came to abolish. God came to dwell with us to bring us the immense richness of communion with God. St. Paul tells us, "for your sake he became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich." (2 Cor. 8:9) Jesus invites us to embrace the path of poverty in order to free ourselves to enter into this life of communion with Him. Let us examine the examples and models He leaves us.



### THE POVERTY OF JESUS' CLOSEST DISCIPLES



In resuming our look at Gospel poverty, we turn to those who were the closest to Jesus--his Apostles. How did Jesus' radical poverty extend to those who followed Him closely? We see that He called them to live detached from earthly goods to be more available for Him and His will. While none of us can approach the depth of Jesus' poverty, those who Jesus called to follow Him closely logically would be called to share this path of life more deeply.

In looking at Jesus' explicit instructions to the Apostles before sending them on mission, "Do not take gold or silver or copper for your belts; no sack for the journey, or a second tunic, or sandals, or walking stick. The laborer deserves his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, look for a worthy person in it, and stay there until you leave." (Mt 10:9-11) Jesus is exhorting His Apostles, to whom He entrusts a share in His mission to announce the Good News, to trust in the Providence of the Lord and not in their own wealth or self-sufficiency. He is also speaking to the tendency of the human heart to move on when we get accustomed to something, or when something seems old. He instructs His apostles to stay in the house that receives them until they leave, rather than moving around until they find one of their particular liking. He is showing us that poverty is more than just material possessions, but rather what our hearts search for. Are our hearts satisfied with what we truly need, or are we always searching for more prestige, more power, more entertainment ...more worldly things that occupy the place of God in our hearts?

Jesus goes on to exhort His followers, "But to you who hear I say, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. To the person who strikes you on one cheek, offer the other one as well, and from the person who takes your cloak, do not withhold even your tunic. Give to everyone who asks of you, and from the one who takes what is yours do not demand it back." (Lk 6:27-30) In saying this, He points out a true detachment from one's possessions -- a willingness to give them away to those who need them, even to those whom we don't like or those we would even call 'enemies'.

Yet with this detachment and poverty, Jesus makes a promise. "Jesus said, "Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come. But many that are first will be last, and the last will be first." (Mk 10:28-31) He says that those who embrace this poverty of heart, and who allow the Lord to fill their hearts, will receive their reward--the first of which is the union with the Lord that their poverty allowed. "It is precisely in this that the happiness of poverty resides, in the emptying ourselves of everything in order to possess He who is everything."<sup>2</sup>



Yet wealth can be put to the service of the Kingdom. The need for wealth is a human reality, but Jesus tells us to "Take care to guard against all greed, for though one may be rich, one's life does not consist of possessions." (Lk 12:15) We must learn to see possessions and wealth with eyes transformed by the values of the Gospel so that we can truly place all that we have at the service of the Kingdom.



## THE POOR WIDOW



The Gospel call to poverty, as we have seen, is more than just lacking material possessions. It also involves interior dispositions and detachments from ways of being and thinking that occupy a place in our hearts and lives that belong to God. Poverty, as seen in the Gospels, is also active and often involves some form of generosity. Of course, when we are detached from things, we are more willing to give them away, and so generosity is often an expression of a truly poor heart (in the best sense of "poor" of course!). We see this dimension in Jesus' exhortations to give food and cloaks to those in need. In a very concrete way, we also see this generosity in the account of the poor widow that we read about in the Gospels of Luke (Ch.

21) and Mark:

"He sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury, Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents. Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, 'Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury. For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood.'" (Mk 12:41-44)

St. Mark narrates that "many rich people put in large sums." If we are talking about generosity, according to secular standards, this would seem to meet it. However, the Gospel values dictate something different. Generosity involves not so much quantity, but disposition of heart and desire. The widow that the Gospels speak of gave only two small coins, but point out her disposition to give everything that she has.

We often see those we would least expect, who we know have financial difficulties, give the most at our parishes. Why is this? Because they have learned the truth that "one's life does not consist of possessions" (Lk 12:15). While they may be materially poor, they have also learned a spiritual poverty which is of far greater eternal value. Of course, as Jesus tells us both in the Gospels of Luke and Matthew, the Father knows our needs and will provide. He knows we need food and clothing, and shelter, but He is happy to give us these things. We just need to trust His Providence.



This can become an examination of conscience for us, then. How much do we actually contribute? Do we contribute only from our "surplus wealth" or do we contribute our "whole livelihood", even if it only adds up to a few cents? Do we really trust that the Lord will provide for our needs?

Another relatable parable is found in the Gospel of Luke chapter 12, of the rich fool who tore down his existing barns to build bigger ones to store his wealth. The Lord then told him that he would die that night and all that all that he had saved would be of no use to him. Jesus then warns, "Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God." (12:21) So then we can ask ourselves, do we keep saving and saving for the future, rather than help build up the kingdom now? Wealth is always one of those sensitive subjects, but Jesus never shied away from speaking of it -- precisely because it can pose such a danger to the human heart if not moderated. It is through a proper understanding and practice of poverty that the human heart can be freed from this danger.



### THE RICH YOUNG MAN



Another of the well-known Gospel passages that speaks about poverty is the account of the rich young man that approaches Jesus and asks what more is necessary to attain eternal life. The significance of this story is demonstrated by the fact that all three Synoptic Gospels record it (Matt. 19:16-24; Mark 10:17-25; Luke 18:18-25). In it, we are introduced to a man who is searching for eternal life, for the path of righteousness. All three accounts attest that he seems to be a pretty righteous man, knowing and having followed the commandments that Jesus first invites him to obey. However, even in this, we see that something else is necessary. He would not have kept looking for the path to eternal life if he thought that just obeying the Law was enough. So he sought out Jesus, who is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," (Jn. 14:6) to learn what more was necessary.

This is significant for today's society in which many view the practice of religion as a series of rules and regulations to obey. But there is something more! What is tragic is when people either fail to recognize that there is more or are unwilling to take the step to embrace it, as with the rich man in the Gospel passage we are discussing. We read that "in the final analysis, then, what barred the ruler from entering the kingdom was not the demands of the Mosaic Law, but his reluctance to part with his wealth—and thus to love the poor—and follow Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus' new commandment to His disciples is to love God above all things and to love their neighbor as themselves. But if we are not willing to give our neighbor a share in our wealth, are we loving them as ourselves? If we are not willing to give them our wealth, do we even love them more than our possessions? We see how a disordered attachment to our wealth and possessions can really be an obstacle of authentic love for our neighbor, and God. It is precisely for this reason that "The Synoptic Gospels take a dim view of wealth, not because it is evil, but because it can become a hindrance to having a personal relationship with God."<sup>4</sup>

This goes back to what we have discussed before -- the need for a healthy detachment from wealth in order to rely more solely on God and less on ourselves. "In effect Jesus was asking the ruler to give up the wealth in which he was placing his confidence for salvation. This is not salvation by "works"; it is salvation by trusting completely in Jesus alone. The young ruler was to give up his confidence in riches and to place his confidence in Jesus."<sup>5</sup>

Thus we see that the invitation that Jesus extends to the young man requires a response. Jesus invites him to sell all that he has to give to the poor and then *follow* Jesus. This is the dynamic of any vocation, an invitation and response, even the vocation to a life of faith since "faith is not merely uttering some words; it is to be seen."<sup>6</sup>



### THE PARABLE OF THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

One of the most prominent stories that illustrates God's attitude and tenderness toward the poor is the story of the rich man and the poor man, Lazarus, who lies at the gate of the rich man covered in sores. We see this story played out time in different ways in our own day -- the lady with her child who is a few dollars short in line at the grocery store or the homeless man who no one even looks at pretending he doesn't exist.





Many families can say, along with the author of the article, "The Poverty of Abundance", "Since I am not poor and do not feel rich, his words can easily hit me and bounce off."<sup>7</sup> These words show a certain indifference towards the plight of the poor that runs through our society today, and this indifference is precisely what is illustrated in this story of Jesus. We also see another attitude of the rich man that is telling. After he dies, he asks that Lazarus be sent to him to refresh him in his torment. Those who take no notice of the suffering of others are often entrenched in an attitude of entitlement -- of being served

rather than serving.

Along with this attitude of even subconsciously thinking oneself as deserving of all that one has, comes an attitude of self-justification: "if something went wrong, it's not *my* fault" and placing the blame on the other. While the problem of material poverty in society (the degrading kind of poverty that the Gospel tries to alleviate rather than encourage) is a complex one with many factors and causes, we can each ask ourselves if we have really stopped to even take notice let alone make an active decision to help alleviate the degrading poverty that we encounter around us. "Jesus certainly does not follow the line of the Pharisees who claim that wealth is God's reward for righteousness and poverty is a sign of God's judgment."<sup>8</sup>

It is an interesting point that Lazarus finds himself in the bosom of Abraham after he dies, noting that Abraham himself was very wealthy during his life. So the fate of the rich man does not seem to be a direct consequence of merely possessing wealth, as other wealthy men have avoided his fate. The rich man in the parable "was punished, not because of his wealth, but because he did not use his wealth as a trust; not because he enjoyed his wealth, but because he neglected the needy at his doorstep...What seemed to be affluence was really poverty, for the person who appears to be rich in the short view may actually be desperately poor in the long view."<sup>9</sup>



And thus we see another example of the responsibility that comes with possessing wealth. As we see in other aspects of the spiritual life, the sinfulness does not lie in the wealth itself, just as it doesn't lie in the mere emotion of anger, but rather in what we do with it (or don't do with it). And this is a perspective that perhaps many today need to consider in their own lives. Do I see wealth as a means to be placed at the service of the Kingdom, or as a means merely for my own security and enjoyment? The possessions themselves aren't good or bad, it's what you do with them that counts.

### POVERTY OF HEART



As we have seen in our previous reflections on Gospel poverty, Jesus' invitation to be "poor of heart" is more than just regarding our attitude toward material possessions. Although it may not be readily apparent, many of Jesus' exhortations to His listeners are rooted in poverty. We see this in a particular way in the Gospel of John in a strong sense of the call to conversion. Yet conversion can only occur through a turning away from sinful ways and towards the values of the Gospel.

Detaching ourselves from our sinful inclinations can be seen as a deepening of our poverty -- leaving everything behind to follow Jesus.



We see this invitation to leave behind our old way of thinking even in subtle phrases in the Gospel. For example, in St. John's narration of Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well, he describes that the Apostles "were amazed that he was talking with a woman, but still no one said, 'What are you looking for?' or 'Why are you talking with her?'" (4:27). Why were the Apostles surprised that Jesus was speaking with a woman? Because it was not customary to do so, and even more unheard of among Jews to speak with Samaritans. Yet they did not ask Jesus why, because they knew that by His example, He was asking them to leave behind their preconceptions and the prejudices of their culture, to embrace the mercy and compassion of His love. Bl. John Paul II tells us that "The divine Master proclaims, 'blessed'...before everyone else - the poor in spirit, that is to say, those who have their hearts free of prejudices and conditionings, and therefore, who are willing to accomplish in all things the divine will. The total and confident adhesion to God presupposes the coherent detachment from oneself."<sup>10</sup>

This theme of detachment and poverty of heart continues in His discourse on the Bread of Life, but this time it is an invitation to a detachment from our way of thinking. Some of those listening to Him said, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" (Jn 6:60). Only the one who is willing allow themselves to be "transformed by the renewal of their minds" (cf. Rom 12:2) will be able to accept this new way of thinking, the logic of the Gospel.

We also see another lesson in poverty in the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and the feeding of the multitudes. God can reveal His power more effectively through poverty. If the crowds had all had enough food, the miracle would not have been done. If the couple in Cana had had enough wine, He would not have turned the water into wine (Jn 2)...we see this pattern over and over again in the Scripture. This is the basis for what St. Paul writes when he says, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness...for when I am weak, then I am strong." (2Cor 12:9,10)

Jesus became poor, taking on our human nature in order to redeem us, making us rich in grace. In the weakness and poverty of the manger of Bethlehem, the power of God was manifested through the Incarnation. In the utter vulnerability and helplessness of the Cross, Jesus manifested the power of the mercy of God to bring the immense good of salvation through the scandal of the Cross. In Jesus, we see the truth and fruitfulness of poverty, the poverty that He calls every Christian to embrace.



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<sup>1</sup> Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, June 29, 2009. n. 53

<sup>2</sup> Mother Adela Galindo, Foundress SCTJM, "Blessed are the Poor in Heart" retrieved from [http://www.piercedhearts.org/mother\\_adela/talks\\_adobe/blessed\\_poor\\_spirit.pdf](http://www.piercedhearts.org/mother_adela/talks_adobe/blessed_poor_spirit.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Stanley, Alan P. "The Rich Young Ruler And Salvation." *Bibliotheca Sacra* 163.649 (2006): 46-62. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 1 Nov. 2013. p. 55.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60

<sup>7</sup> Huie, Wade P. "Poverty Of Abundance." *Interpretation* 22.4 (1968): 403-420. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials. Web. 2 Nov. 2013. p. 403

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 404

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 407

<sup>10</sup> Bl. John Paul II, Homily, November 1, 2000. N. 3

