

## **14. BLESSED ARE THE POOR**

Does Jesus want us to be materially poor?

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (Luke 6:20). In the Gospel of Luke, the poor refers to those who are deprived of material comforts. These people are blessed because they recognise their poverty and neediness and rely wholeheartedly on God’s providence to take care of them. However, the materially deprived does not mean that all of them are penniless to the extent of having to worry about their next meal. Rather, they must labour every day to earn a living. During Jesus’ times, there were many of such poor who laboured in work such as carpentry, shepherding, and farming; they were known as the “Anawim”.

The concept of “Anawim” originated a long time ago among the Jews who have been through exile and persecution. Knowing their human limitations, they cultivated a spirit of total dependence on God. They were conscious of the need for God’s help due to their lack. Hence, they were like little children – humble and completely obedient to God the Father. They too know how to give and share.

### **The Wealthy can be Poor too**

The conditions of the poor, which are beyond their control, allow them to trust and rely on God. What about the rich? In comparison, it is difficult for the rich to have such a spirit. With material self-sufficiency, they can become conceited and see no need for God. Indeed, many wealthy people indulge in luxurious material

possessions. They worship money, care only about their own needs, and are indifferent to the poor. Jesus remarked that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (Matt 19:24).

Does it imply that it is impossible for the rich to live the “beatitude of the poor”? To explain that the materially rich can also cultivate such a virtue, Matthew adds “spirit” after the word “poor” in the presentation of the Eight Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5:3). Matthew emphasises that the value of “poor” is in the “spirit” and not in physical sense of “poor”. Being poor without the right spirit is of no value. Having the right attitude is thus of utmost importance; consequently, wealth will not be an obstacle to attaining “spiritual poverty”. The rich cannot be richer than the Son of God nor the poor poorer than him. Christ himself is our greatest model who epitomised the attitude of “spiritual poverty”. He is the wealthiest and yet became poor for our sake; humbly fulfilling God’s will throughout his life, to the point of his death on a cross.

It is possible for both the poor and the rich to attain spiritual poverty and equally possible for both to lack such an attitude. A self-absorbed person, who is motivated only by his personal gain of wealth and glory and ignores the needs of others, is one who is lacking “spiritual poverty”. Conversely, someone with “spiritual poverty” is a person who on realising how his pride, jealousy, anger, greed, lust, and sloth interfere with living a fulfilling life, willingly give up all these and his puffed-up ego. To be spiritually poor, one must empty himself in order to free

his heart for spiritual treasures. In doing so, he will find his true self and attain wealth that will not decay. The poor in spirit is manifest in three ways: contentment, simplicity and generosity.

### **Contentment**

Being spiritually poor does not mean resigning to one's unfortunate fate but rather to maintain the right attitude towards life. Take as an example a poor man who fantasises himself as a rich man indulging in pleasures, splurging on luxuries, and squandering money with no limits. His heart is already corrupted by values of materialism, consumerism, and hedonism even though he has not actually done so. A spiritually poor person knows how to be contented – for what he has, he gives thanks; for what he does not have, he accepts the reality.

Without the right attitude towards money and material goods, a rich person will indulge in material possessions and flaunt his wealth. He pursues money relentlessly and his heart fails to be satisfied. A rich man who does not know contentment cannot find peace and tranquillity. Jesus once said that foxes had dens and birds had nests, but the Son of Man had no place to lay his head. Jesus is the Lord of all creation, owns everything in the world, and yet does not possess anything.

A wealthy person who embraces a spirit of poverty knows wealth to be illusory and treats it with a sense of detachment. He accepts Jesus' teaching of not piling up treasure. Jesus warned, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for

yourselves treasures in heaven...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt 6:19-21).

## **Simplicity**

The opposite of spiritual poverty is greed. The Chinese character for greed “贪” (*tan*) is very intriguing. It is made up of two characters “今” (*jin* meaning “now”) and “贝” (*bei* meaning “seashell”). The mode of currency in olden times was seashells; hence “贝” connotes “money”. Adding “now” above “money” has the connotation of “craving money now” and thus denotes an attitude of greed that cares only about wealth all the time. Greed is the root of evil. Those who are greedy may scramble for wealth and power and use dishonest or unethical means to accumulate possessions.

It is important to note that spiritual poverty does not mean disdain for wealth. As Confucius once said, “Riches and honour are what men desire, but the righteous acquire them not by dishonest means.” A financially poor person should improve his living conditions but remains tranquil before the conditions change for the better. Amid his challenges, he does not blame God and envy people around him. Embracing a simple lifestyle, he enjoys the simple pleasures of sharing a meal with loved ones and having fellowship over coffee and tea

Confucius said, “Coarse rice to eat, plain water to drink, my bended arm for a pillow – therein is happiness; Wealth and rank attained through immoral means are nothing but drifting clouds.” Confucius taught his disciples to acquire wealth only by righteous means and to consider wealth obtained through unjust means as passing clouds,

unworthy of his attention. This spirit was displayed in the life of Confucius' disciple, Yan Hui, who won praises from his master, "Admirable indeed was the virtue of Hui! With a single bamboo dish of rice, a single gourd dish of drink, and living in his mean narrow lane, while others could not have endured the distress, he did not allow his joy to be affected by it. Admirable indeed was the virtue of Hui!"

Confucius and his disciples did not think highly of status and wealth, not because they disliked a comfortable life. Rather, they chose not to compromise their values and character in exchange for it. They believed that if someone led his life with benevolence and integrity, not even poverty could take away the joy in his heart.

In our Catholic Church, St. Francis of Assisi is a model of one who practises the spirit of poverty. He gave away his fine clothing to a dishevelled beggar and showed compassion and love for a leper by embracing him. He taught his disciples to follow the poverty of Jesus without regrets. They were to emulate Jesus the Son of God from his moment of birth swaddled in the manger to the point of his death on the cross stripped of his clothing.

Jesus teaches us to seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness (Matt 6:33). And to him, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field." Yes, those who find the kingdom of heaven will be blessed. So, what is the kingdom of heaven? It really is where we can experience the presence of God, and His love, righteousness, forgiveness, and peace.

## **Generosity**

A person who practises poverty of spirit attributes everything he possesses to God. God has entrusted man to manage His wealth. As such no one has the right to use money only for himself and his kin. His spending decisions must fulfil God's righteousness, glorify God, and bless others. He would share his money with the needy rather than indulge in personal pleasure.

By being poor in spirit, one can be the master of wealth and not be enslaved by his possessions. He uses his wealth charitably to accomplish social services, educational development, and scientific research. He knows the joy of giving. Jesus shows us what it means to be generous: though he is the Son of God, the master of all creation, he chose to empty himself and offer his life for the service of others.

Some claim that they will support charity causes when they become rich, which implies that generosity is a virtue only for the wealthy. This view is erroneous. Generosity is a virtue independent of a person's financial status. What matters is his attitude towards money and his sensitivity to the needs of others. Many who are not well off often take the initiative to reach out to those who are needier by sharing their limited resources. We see such an epic example in a 90-year-old widower, Liu Sheng Lan, from the city of Yantai, Shandong province. He has donated seventy thousand dollars to sponsor more than a hundred needy students over 17 years by working as a collector of scraped matter. Today, even after he has stopped working due to ailments, he still redistributes the donation he receives to needy children.

Those who are financially well-off do not have to wait till someone knocks at their door for help. They can take the initiative to intentionally allocate a portion of their wealth for social welfare such as building schools, hospitals, churches, and setting up charity foundations. A father and son pair, Mr. Zhu Xiu Shan and Mr. Zhu Ying Long from Ning Bo, China has carried out various charitable works in their hometown as well as donated generously to poverty-stricken areas in Guizhou province and Shanxi province to build elementary schools and support projects for soil and water conservation. As Mr Zhu Ying Long has said, “My dad has taught me to work hard. More than that, he wanted me to have a ‘compassionate, grateful and generous heart’. He has shown me how to love.”

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of God belongs to them!