

A VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

# *The Beatitudes*

*by Rev. A. T. Vergunst*

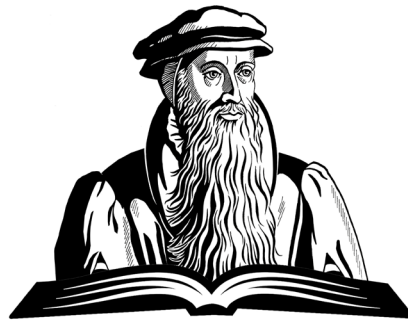


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Lecture #3

*Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit*

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**The John Knox Institute**  
of Higher Education

*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

## **John Knox Institute of Higher Education**

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# *The Beatitudes*

10 Lectures

*by Rev. A. T. Vergunst*

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# *The Beatitudes*

*by Rev. A. T. Vergunst*

## *Lecture #3*

### **Blessed Are the Poor in Spirit**

Dear friends, we finally reached the point to launch out and to dive deep into Jesus' Beatitudes. Let our prayer be that God will open our eyes for His truth and His work within us.

Throughout the Scriptures, beatitudes are not uncommon. There about thirty of them throughout the Bible, statements which clearly define who are the blessed people according to God's standards. You will notice that none of these thirty are connected to possessions or positions in life, but all of them are connected to having certain characters or relationships or possessing a certain knowledge. What we learn from that is that God mostly declares you to be blessed by who you are and who you are related to, and not by any outward things like positions or possessions, either materially or socially. Let's never lose sight of this comforting and assuring truth that it is none else but the King of the kingdom, Jesus Christ, who declares you blessed in these Scriptures. That means that if you possess within you—the inner person—this inner identity, this new identity sketched in the Beatitudes, then Jesus declares you, beyond what heaven and earth can ever give you, blessed seven times over. Please do not allow yourself to be robbed of this great comfort and encouragement. Do not allow anyone to trick you with saying that you need something more than this—you need some special divine whisper or divine vision to own these comforts to be yours. It's true that, in some measure, we need the Holy Spirit to enable us to read God's own evidences of grace in us, because within us is a lot else going on than what these Beatitudes are speaking on. Nowhere does Jesus say that we need more than being born again in order to know we are blessed. Please also avoid the error of basing your hope on what you see within yourselves, for as we examine each line of thought in this beatitude list, you will see many shortcomings within yourself. Do then exactly what you do, or should be doing, with little children. Even though they fail because of their youthfulness or their immaturity or their clumsiness, we encourage them, we build them up, we remind them of how special they are, or we correct them and instruct them and help them to grow, but we do not throw them under the bus as if they are no good just because, here and there, they fail. We are not to do that with those who are Christ's. In the "blessed are", we are listening to Jesus Christ Himself. He divinely declares you blessed. If you measure up to this, believe Him, trust Him, embrace what He declares. That, and that only, is the reason to rejoice, even if others reject you or mock you or, as it says in the end, persecute you.

"Blessed are"—the definition of the word *blessed* is hard to capture in one word. Blissful, happy, privileged, blessed, the word hints at something that exceeds anything we can ever possess in this life. For example, if you gain the whole world in your hand, you still hold less than one grain of sand compared to the entire universe around us. Yet even that comparison fails entirely, for even if you gained the entire universe, it would not satisfy, it will never stay with us, for we all know we are to die and need to let go of whatever we have in this life. It matters that Jesus calls us



blessed. Now these character issues are the evidences of a new creation, of a spiritual life that has an eternal dimension, that has an infinite duration, as it will never fade.

Let us examine the first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3). Jesus declares you blessed if you are poor in spirit. Let us ask what is it to be poor in spirit? Secondly, why are you blessed if you are poor in spirit? What is it then to be poor in spirit? Let us first look at these words. To be poor in spirit is not the same as to be poor. This beatitude has nothing to do with material or physical or social poverty. Any interpretation that leans into that direction is turning Jesus’ teaching in the Beatitudes and in the Sermon on the Mount into some social gospel. Of course, Jesus’ teaching in both the Old and the New Testaments has much to say about the poor and about the oppressed, and how we as Christians should minister to them and then represent the care and the love of God. Neglecting to take care of the poor is a sore evil, yet this beatitude is not dealing with that sort of poverty. It is dealing with a spiritual poverty or a spiritual disposition of the heart *about* our own poverty. To be poor in spirit is also not the same as to be spiritually poor.

Each of us is born spiritually poor as a result of what Genesis 3 tells us, our fall from our glorious beginning. We are therefore now spiritually poor in the sense that we are helpless, we are powerless to restore, powerless to change from the condition that we are in now back to the condition God spoke about in Genesis 1 and 2. When you read Genesis 6:5, it is quite shocking what God says, “And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” That is a very bleak and black statement. This same truth is a New Testament truth, the spiritual depravity emphasized in Romans 3:10–18. Paul writes there, as he concludes from all the teaching in the Old, “As it is written, there is none righteous, no, not one: There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God. They are all gone out of the way, they are altogether become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not one” (Romans 3:10–12). That sounds radical, but that is what the Scriptures confirm over and over. We are all spiritually poor, yet Jesus is not saying that this is what poor in spirit is, because normally we do not see this in ourselves. We are proud, we can be very self-satisfied or very conceited, arrogant about ourselves. We feel rich and able, we feel capable, we feel competent with regard to being good before God and men. It is because we look very shallowly at ourselves. In Luke 18, we read about an example of a Pharisee who stood before God, and he had one big rehearsal about himself, about how good he was and how worthy he was and therefore how entitled to salvation. Perhaps none of us would really blow our own trumpet publicly like he did, yet this is our inner attitude. In our inner attitude, we are not far from making these rehearsals about ourselves. Well, let us be honest. We simply think the world of ourselves. To be spiritually poor is in no way what Jesus is teaching us in the first beatitude. What then? To be poor in spirit is a mindset that is growing increasingly aware of one’s own spiritual poverty.

Now to see this spiritual poverty, we can need a reference point to compare to. That reference point is the first two chapters of the Bible, Genesis 1 and 2, and the study of those truths in comparison to where we are now as mankind together is the Spirit’s means to bring us to this being “poor in spirit” mindset. Friends, we have fallen so deeply from our original glory, from our original blessedness, happiness or joy. If you open Genesis 1 and 2 and read through it, it informs us of a beautiful truth. First, God placed us in a perfect and splendid living place, where we lived in the most beautiful and the most soul satisfying communion with God and with each other as humans, and with all of nature around us, nothing out of place. No sickness, no ill feelings, nothing. A place without thorns and thistles, without sickness and sadness, and place without fear and flaws, something we can hardly imagine. Besides our living place, we were the masterpiece of God’s creative power and wisdom. Genesis 1 tells us we were made to reflect the image of God. In what? It was mostly in the devotional love, in the holiness, or sinlessness of our living to Him, to each other and to nature around us. We were living and moving temples, dedicated to and filled

with God. Contrary to now, then we were spiritually rich. What does that mean? They were able to serve our God and Creator in loving service, with all of our being, all of our strength, all of our might. We were able to purely serve our neighbor, in total self-denial, in love. We were able to manage the earth, and explore, and invent, and develop, and engineer without ever bringing discredit to our Creator. There was then absolutely nothing wrong in us. There was no bent to sin. There was no battle with temptations to be selfish, there were not these embarrassing filthy imaginations we would dare to share today. There was no inner weakness or flaws that would lead us to stumble despite our best efforts. We were spiritually rich. In contrast to that today, we are now radically poor. The Greek word that Jesus uses for poor is someone who is bankrupt, totally penniless, not just poor but nothing else anymore. Blessed are the poor in spirit, the bankrupt. Now how true is that description spiritually? We are indeed completely, spiritually destitute and needy. We lack every quality in ourselves to be right and to do right before God's all-seeing eye according to His standards. We cannot love God with all our heart, and all our mind, and all our strength, and every ounce of our being, at all times and in all situations. We don't love, we can't love every neighbor as we love ourselves in the same degree as Jesus loved even His enemies. We miss that ability to love. We also missed the ability to make things right between God and us. We simply do not have the righteousness anymore. All we try to be or to do before God fails to bridge the breach, as all falls short of the glory of God and the satisfying of the demands of His holiness and justice.

Before we look at the second half of this verse, let us pause for one moment. Imagine you are sitting in a doctor's office, and he rolls out the X-ray in front of you. He reads you the devastating report that it tells you. "You not only have cancer," he says, "you have cancer in every organ, in every muscle, in every nerve and all over your skin." As you are just trying to process this devastating truth sinking into your mind, and as you kind of sense the evidence of it in your body, imagine that your doctor says to you, "Well, my friend, you are a blessed man. Congratulations." Wouldn't you look a little bewildered at him? Wouldn't you feel the urge to run out of the office? At least, would not you raise your voice to reject his congratulations? That is kind of the essence of what Jesus did. "Blessed are you who are poor in spirit," and not only the poor in spirit, but those that mourn, are meek and hunger. Jesus calls you blessed when you are dealing with spiritual poverty, when you grieve and feel guilty, when there is a gnawing spiritual hunger. What is the point? Why would He call such blessed? Well, that is our second thought.

Why are you blessed if you feel or if you see you are poor in spirit? Now, let us be clear, to be spiritually poor, or to be poor in spirit, or to discover this spiritual bankruptcy, is not a blessing in itself. Jesus is not glorifying poverty. He is not relishing negative feelings. He didn't say either; and please keep it in mind in all of these statements, He didn't say you are blessed when you *feel* poor in spirit or you *feel* mournful or you *feel* hungry. Yes, feelings are reflected in these first four beatitudes, but they aren't sweet, they aren't exciting, they aren't comfortable. If you would only understand these statements from the feeling perspective, it will be impossible to understand why He calls such people blessed. Yet "blessed are the poor in spirit." He declares you are blessed if you are poor in spirit, as a fruit of a growing understanding of your spiritual and moral bankruptcy. There are three reasons why you are blessed.

The first one is because you bear one evidence of the saving work of the Holy Spirit in your heart. This poor in spirit beatitude isn't a fruit of some self-reflection. It's not a fruit of some mental depression, it's not just the negativity of mind. Though all of those above can bring a sense of need or poverty and sadness, none of them bring a sense of mourning and grief over the sins I did, or a meekness before God and others, or a hunger and thirst after righteousness of Jesus Christ. This poor in spirit beatitude is fruit of the Holy Spirit's saving ministry. Without His personal ministry in us, we remain spiritually blind to our own selves. We remain unconcerned about the condition we're in, unmoved. However, as a fruit of this saving touch of God, He's preparing our heart for greater blessings than humanity or the earth can ever give or reach out to us. It's His preparation

for what is coming next. This is the first reason *why* it's blessed.

The second reason why it's blessed is because it is through this discovery that the Holy Spirit leads us to the feet of Jesus Christ, the King of the kingdom. As Jesus Christ was preaching these beatitudes, He had many listeners who were very impressed. You will notice that every time in His messages, many came to listen. At the end of the sermon, we already heard, "And it came to pass, when Jesus had ended these sayings, the people were astonished at His doctrine: for He taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes" (Matthew 7:28–29). Jesus had many admirers who followed Him for days, weeks, months, yet at the end of most of this ministry, these admirers turned away, and the number became smaller and smaller. Finally they rejected Him. Why? It is because they never embraced the main purpose of Jesus' spiritual ministry. Many wanted Him simply to cast off the oppressive government systems. They wanted Him to take the lead, to take away the physical sicknesses. They wanted Him to make everyone healthy and wealthy, like in the days of David and Solomon. That was not Jesus' main ministry. His ministry on earth was not with that intention or that purpose. The angel announced to Joseph, in Matthew 1:21, about the coming of Jesus, "Thou shalt call His name JESUS: for He shall save His people from their sins"—from their wrong, from their unbelief, from all that evil that is in us and takes hold of us and is around us. The Holy Spirit's ministry, friends, is to glorify Jesus Christ. It is to make the Person of Jesus irresistible to your heart as the Physician of your soul, as the One who can bridge the gap between you and your Creator with His atoning blood, as the One who's able to provide us the perfect obedience and righteousness that we need. Will we stand in the presence of the almighty and holy God with a righteousness we don't have? We are spiritually bankrupt. To accomplish that, the Holy Spirit makes us aware of our real spiritual need, and the need of our radical poverty and inability to make amends and satisfy God's demands. It is His preparatory work to lead us to the feet of Jesus Christ and His cross. This painful awareness of our spiritual poverty makes you diligent to seek Him. It is going to make you diligent to inquire, "How can I be saved from this reality?" That is the preparatory attitude by which the Spirit makes us ready to come to Jesus Christ as the provision of the Father of heaven and earth to meet our needs.

Now, and lastly, the third reason why you are blessed when you are poor in spirit is the promise that "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." Talk about an astonishing truth to these spiritually destitute people who are bankrupt, humbled, broken about this lost and poor condition, unable to restore it! He says to *you* belongs the kingdom of heaven! That means everything that belongs to the kingdom of heaven is yours already and will be so forever. In other words, these poor in spirit are not poor at all. All the blessings, all the riches, all the security, the provision, the promises, the content of God's gracious redemption and His future kingdom belong to these already. In 2 Samuel 9, we read about King David. He brings a paralyzed and impoverished son of Jonathan to his palace, and David tells him when he's there in his palace, "Fear not: for I will surely show thee kindness for Jonathan thy father's sake, and I will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father; and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually" (verse 7). Upon hearing that, Mephibosheth bowed before the king in stunned amazement. Now keep that picture in mind. Each born-again soul is like that paralyzed Mephibosheth, taken up by King David. Though in some ways you will be like Mephibosheth, you will remain spiritually poor in your own estimation about yourself all this life. Yet you are part of Jesus' kingdom of heaven already, you live on heaven's cost. As Paul writes, "Neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able" (Romans 8:38–39) to oust you out of that kingdom of heaven. Therefore, you are blessed.

In review of what we learned today, let me state two closing observations about this first beatitude. First, spiritual life, real spiritual life, is always accompanied with a convicting and a humbling sense of our spiritual poverty. The Spirit's saving ministry teaches us what John Newton, the old slave trader, saved by grace, the author of "Amazing Grace," once said quite powerfully,

“With regards to my salvation, I have nothing, I am nothing, I can do nothing, I can change nothing, I can give nothing.” I may add to it, and yet I have everything in Christ. That continually poor condition of spiritual poverty is what the Apostle Paul also experienced as he says, “O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death” (Romans 7:24). It remains with us all our life, but not beyond.

Secondly, the blessedness Jesus declares is not gauged in the feelings or experiences. While spiritual poverty is not a nice feeling, it is the common way that God uses to make our souls seek for the remedy in Jesus Christ. No one of us likes pain—physical pain—but while physical pain is no blessing in itself, yet it is a blessing, for it alerts us that there is some serious problem in your body that needs attention. Think of that when you think of this first beatitude. As Matthew Henry comments, “This poverty in spirit is a gracious disposition of the soul, whereby we are emptied of self in order to be filled with Christ.” Therefore, this conviction that we are nothing and void of all before our holy God is a foundational aspect of all spiritual growth.

May God bless this exposition of the first beatitude. Then we will be ready to move on to the next one, “Blessed are they that mourn.” Thank you, and may God bless you and make you a blessing.