

HERO
of
HEROES

SEEING CHRIST
IN THE BEATITUDES

IAIN M. DUGUID


P U B L I S H I N G
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I N T R O D U C T I O N



THE CHRISTIAN HERO

It has been said that Britain and America are two countries divided by a common language. From my own unique perspective as a British person married to an American, I would say that language is one of the least of the differences. Certainly, we have different items of clothing in mind when we talk about pants, but the more British people know about America—and the more Americans know about Britain—the more you come to realize that the two countries have fundamentally different ways of thinking about things. We think differently about money, about politics, about opportunity . . . about so many different things.

What happens when you move from one country to the other is that all of your beliefs and ideas are challenged. You have to think again about all the things you do and the way you do them, because now you are faced with a culture that embodies a whole new set of attitudes.

That is also what happens when someone becomes a Chris-

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tian. Christians have an entirely different set of attitudes from those of the general public around them. They have a different scale of values. They have different heroes. They are different people. Christians, however, are—or at least ought to be—even more different from other people than the British are from the Americans. They are called to march to the beat of an entirely different drum.

In Matthew 5–7, the portion of Matthew’s gospel that is often called the Sermon on the Mount, we hear that drumbeat. This section of the Bible has sometimes been described as the “manifesto of God’s kingdom.” In it, Jesus spells out the attitudes that are to shape us as Christians. It is not intended to be a set of rules and regulations with which to measure ourselves and others to see whether we are good enough to be in the kingdom. Rather, as those who have been brought into God’s kingdom, it is a call to our hearts and to our minds to be shaped by the reality of who we are as Christians.

The Sermon on the Mount challenges us with this question: “To which drum are we marching?” Are we marching to the drum of the world, like those around us, or are we marching to the drum of God’s kingdom as we hear it in God’s Word, the Bible?

Jesus starts his kingdom manifesto by describing the Christian hero (Matt. 5:1–12). In these verses, which are sometimes called the “Beatitudes” because they all start with the word “Blessed,” Jesus paints a word picture of the person we are to envy. That’s really what the word “blessed” means: it means that this is the kind of person we are to envy. This is the kind of per-

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son we are to be like. We all have our heroes. Some of us would love to be able to play baseball like Sammy Sosa, or to dance like Fred Astaire, or to sing like Celine Dion. Some of us would like to be rich and beautiful, or perhaps we would settle for being rich or beautiful.

We all have heroes in our hearts. We all have people we wish that we were more like. Maybe we know we could never be entirely like our heroes, but we want at least to be more like them. So we spend hours throwing a baseball around the yard or singing in front of the mirror, or playing the lottery, or shopping for the clothes that make us look our best.

Nor does this human trait disappear as we grow older. As we get older, and we start to realize that many of our dreams can never come true in our own life, we transfer them to our children. Instead of dreaming about ourselves, now we dream that our offspring will be rich or beautiful or play baseball for the Cubs or sing to packed audiences . . . or all of the above. We long for our children to live out our fantasies.

Now it is entirely natural for us to have heroes. It is part of who we are as human beings to have dreams and aspirations, to want the very best for ourselves and for our children. But Jesus turns upside down our definition of what a hero is. Jesus challenges our dreams and desires. He wants us to long to be a different kind of person. He doesn't want us to spend our time wishing that we were rich, beautiful, talented, and influential, but rather that we were poor in spirit, a mourner, meek, hungry and thirsting after righteousness, merciful, and so on. These are the

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virtues we are long to see not only in our own lives, but also in the lives of our children.

This is, of course, radically different from what we are like by nature. How much of our time is spent daydreaming about becoming poorer in spirit or purer in heart, or more merciful or a better peacemaker? That is not the normal focus of my dreams! The attitudes of God's kingdom certainly do march to a different drumbeat from our natural rhythms.

In this little book, we'll be looking at the attributes and the attitudes of the Christian hero. What are the marks of such a person? What are Christians to long to be like? What kind of people should we set our hearts on becoming?

Jesus lays down eight attitudes that we are to have. These are not tasks we can do and then check off on a little list. They are defining characteristics, heart habits that mark the core of our being. These Beatitudes are the "attitudes" we are to "be." However, Jesus doesn't simply describe for us in abstract terms what a Christian hero ought to look like. His description has power because he himself came and lived out all of these attributes for us. He has shown us in living, breathing flesh what we ought to be, and what a faithful Christian should look like.

But Jesus is not simply a good role model to follow. He himself has completed the course in our place. For us who are Christians, his perfection is already attributed to our account, exactly as if it were our own. Studying the Beatitudes is not, therefore, simply an exercise in self-criticism, in which we mentally beat ourselves up for not being what we ought to be. Studying the attri-

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butes of the Christian hero will lead us to praise over and over again as we see how these very virtues are on display in the person of Jesus.

By grace, all of these virtues are even now attributed to every Christian's account; by grace, all of these attributes will ultimately be evidenced in our own hearts through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. Here we may only make small beginnings toward imitating our perfect model, but thanks be to God that he will not give up on us until every one of his people is a perfect reflection of the Christian hero!

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. How do you find yourself being influenced by the drumbeat of the world?
2. What attitudes does the world think of when it thinks about Christians? To what extent are these an accurate description?
3. In what ways are the Christians you know distinctively different from those who aren't Christians?
4. Do you have a "Christian hero"—someone who has had a significant impact on your Christian walk? What was it about him or her that impressed you?
5. Why is it important that Jesus is not just our role model?

ONE



THE POOR IN SPIRIT

*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs
is the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:3)*

Jesus begins his analysis of the nature of the Christian hero by telling us that he or she is “poor in spirit.” Being poor in spirit is not quite the same as simply being poor in things. Many of us are, or have been at some time in our lives, poor in things. We know what that situation is like and it’s not much fun. But are we poor in spirit? What does that involve?

To be poor in spirit means to know that we don’t have any resources within ourselves, and therefore we have to look to God for help and to depend on him.

NO RESOURCES TO SAVE OURSELVES

The first part of being “poor in spirit” is knowing that we don’t have any means of saving ourselves. One of the first steps on

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the road to becoming a Christian is coming to the point in our lives when we see that our own personal goodness is not good enough to measure up to God's standards. Indeed, we come to see that our own goodness never could be good enough even if we were one hundred times better than the best person alive today. As the apostle Paul puts it in his letter to the Ephesians, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God . . . so that no one can boast" (Eph. 2:8).

Christians know that they are not saved by their own goodness and hard work. They know that even if they turned over a new leaf every day from now to the next millennium, they could never measure up. If they are to be saved, it can only be by grace—by the goodness of Jesus Christ credited to their account.

There's a great picture of what it means to be poor in spirit in the story Jesus told about the tax collector and the Pharisee (Luke 18:10–14). Both men went up to the temple to pray. The Pharisee prayed like this:

God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.

Like so many respectable people, he stood there full of pride, thanking God that he wasn't a nasty sinner like all those immoral commoners around him. Especially, he thanked God that he wasn't like that awful tax collector over there, who connived with the Roman authorities to cheat and steal whatever he could from honest folk.

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The tax collector, on the other hand, stood at a distance and hung his head, ashamed of what he was. He simply cried out, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." He was poor in spirit; he recognized who he was before God and so, according to Jesus, he was the one who went away justified. He was the one who received forgiveness, because he knew that he couldn't contribute anything to that forgiveness. He knew that he didn't have anything to give.

The Pharisee, on the other hand, received no forgiveness. In fact, he didn't even ask for any. His problem was his pride. He was proud of his own goodness and of his performance relative to those around him. To be poor in spirit, however, means the death of all such pride. It means coming to God and saying, in the words of Augustus Toplady's "Rock of Ages,"

Not the labors of my hands
 Can fulfil thy law's demands
 Could my zeal no respite know,
 Could my tears forever flow,
 All for sin could not atone:
 Thou must save, and thou alone.

NO RESOURCES TO LIVE
 THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

But there is more to being poor in spirit than simply knowing that we can't save ourselves. To be poor in spirit also means knowing that even though we have been saved, we still can't live

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the Christian life in our own strength. It's very easy for us as Christians to fall down at this point. We view the Christian life as rather like learning to ride a bicycle. At first, when we were just beginning, we needed Dad or Mom to run behind us and hold the saddle while we wobbled about. But after a little while, we got the hang of it and zoomed off on our own. We say to the Heavenly Father, "Thanks for saving me, God, but from now on I'm off on my own. You just stand back and watch."

Maybe we don't say that in so many words, but do our actions not speak louder than our words? I know that mine do. When I pass over spending time praying in order to spend more time doing, what am I saying? I'm saying that what I do is what really counts; what God does is simply a bonus. I'm saying, "Stand back, God, and watch me go!"

Or when I try to run my own life according to what seems right to me, with no thought for what God says in his Word, what am I saying? I'm saying that I can run my own life very nicely, thank you. I'm saying "Bye, God! I'm on my own now!" How often do we act as if we know better than God and we don't really need his help? I know that I often do. To be poor in spirit, however, means total dependence on God.

Remember the illustration Jesus gave of the vine and the branches?

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he

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is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:5-8)

God wants us to bear fruit for him—much fruit. He wants to answer our prayers. But that can only happen as we remain in intimate touch with Jesus, dependent on God and his Word. Otherwise we will be about as much good as a branch that has fallen off the vine. And dried-up vine wood is not even good for making toothpicks out of. It is good for nothing except the fire.

JESUS SHOWS US HOW TO BE
POOR IN SPIRIT

No one exemplifies what it means to be poor in spirit better than Jesus. This is, of course, no surprise. Since he is the ultimate “Christian hero,” we will see that he embodies the perfect form of all of these attitudes. He is therefore the one who shows us perfectly what being poor in spirit looks like.

Of all of us, he was the only one who did have the resources he needed for life within himself. He is the wisdom and the power of God in human form, the Perfect One. Yet when the devil came to him in the wilderness to tempt him, he didn't answer with his own words (Matt. 4:1-11). If anyone could have done so, surely

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he could have! But no, he answered each of Satan's snares by quoting from God's Word, the Bible.

Thus when Satan said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread," Jesus replied, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God," citing Deuteronomy 8:3. When Satan took him up to the highest point of the temple and said, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down," he replied, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test,'" citing Deuteronomy 6:16. When Satan showed him all the kingdoms of the world and said, "All this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me," he replied, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him alone,'" citing Deuteronomy 6:13. Why did Jesus adopt this Scripture-based approach to temptation? Surely it is so that he could be our model of complete dependence on God, of what it means to be poor in spirit.

Moreover, if anyone could have afforded to get by on a minimal level of prayer, it was Jesus. If anyone knew what was the right thing to do in every situation, it was he; surely he wouldn't have to wrestle in prayer for guidance? If anyone had the power within himself to live a victorious Christian life, he had it; surely he wouldn't have to plead with God for strength to triumph over temptation? If anyone had the presence of God continually with him, Jesus did; surely he didn't need to set aside special times to experience the reality of that presence?

Yet the Scriptures show us that no one was more dedicated to a life of prayer than Jesus. He got up early to pray on numerous

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occasions (Luke 5:16). He went away by himself to pray before crucial junctures in his ministry: before choosing the twelve disciples (Luke 4:42), at the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28), preparing himself for the cross (Luke 22:39–46). In his prayer life, with its expression of total dependence on God, Jesus was a model of what it means to be poor in spirit.

This expression of the attitude of being poor in spirit was also what led Jesus to be baptized by John at the outset of his ministry. John's baptism was a baptism of repentance for sins, and therefore John sought to dissuade Jesus from being baptized when he came to him, saying that he should rather be baptized by Jesus (Matt. 3:13–14). But Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness" (v. 15). In other words, such was his identification with his people that he would even be their sin-bearer. Therefore, it was fitting that as their representative he should also undergo baptism, not for any sins of his own but for the sins of his people.

Jesus took that modeling of what it meant to be poor in spirit all the way to the cross. By nature, he didn't have to die. He is the ever-living One. Yet the writer to the Hebrews tells us that he chose to share our flesh and blood so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death, that is, the devil—and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death (Heb. 2:14–15). He brought himself down even to the point of death on the cross. Why? Because it was the will of God the Father to save for himself a people, and that could only happen through the death of Jesus. Jesus shows us what it means to be poor in spirit.

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BEING POOR IN SPIRIT

What would our lives look like, if we began to be truly poor in spirit? To begin with, our lives, and not just our lips, would express total dependence on God. This would transform our prayer lives. Instead of the optional extra that prayer seems to us to be now, it would become the essential and central focus of our lives. We would start to act as if we really believed Psalm 127:1: “Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it” (NASB).

Instead of seeking “quick-fix” solutions to our numerous problems and the sins that continue to beset us, we would plead with the Lord to use all of our trials to draw us closer to him. We would ask him to use our sufferings to fill us with a sense of our weakness and our sins to fill us with a sense of our own unworthiness, and both to drive us again to praise him for our full salvation in Christ. When we are perplexed and lack wisdom, we would turn to him to seek it, both through prayer and searching the Scriptures.

If we were truly poor in spirit, that would be demonstrated in an attitude of humble self-emptying, of willing to be the servant of all for the sake of the gospel. Does God ask me to give up my wealth? It is no more than he has given up for me! Does God ask me to give up my comfort? It is no more than he has given up for me! Does God ask me to give up my reputation? It is no more than he has given up for me! There is no task too lowly he can assign to me. There are no wages too small, no people too ungrateful or undeserving of my help, when I consider that I am to exhibit the

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same attitude as Jesus. Instead of our natural tendency to want to lord it over others and to win their praise and admiration, we would be content to do the work God assigns us faithfully, whether or not anyone else notices and applauds.

WHY BE POOR IN SPIRIT?

Why should we want to be poor in spirit? Jesus tells us the reason: “For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” God’s kingdom belongs to such people as these. What more reward could we ask for? God declares that he is willing to be our God, to be our king, to be our shepherd. What a privilege! The Bible says that he himself will dwell with his people, and he will wipe away every tear from their eyes (Rev. 21:3–4). No one who is ushered into his presence on that great day will have to ask himself or herself, “Was it all worthwhile? Was it worth the sacrifices and suffering?” God’s presence will more than convince his people that heaven is worth any cost.

Elsewhere Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a great treasure, to a pearl of great price. It is such a treasure that it is worth selling everything to acquire it (Matt. 13:45–46). To be in the kingdom is everything. To be outside the kingdom is worse than nothing.

Given the great value of a place in the kingdom, it may seem surprising that the doorway to it is open to all. We don’t need to be rich to enter this kingdom. We don’t need to be powerful. We don’t need to be beautiful. We don’t need to be clever. It’s not like the country club, where you have to know the right people to be

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invited to join. We don't even need to have lived a particularly good life. All we need is to become poor in spirit, empty in ourselves, so that we can be filled with the righteousness of God. All we need is to trade in our own filthy rags of righteousness, and receive the clean white robe that Jesus offers to all who come to him by faith.

One of our basic problems in life is that we don't think about heaven nearly enough. That's the reason why our daily dreams are filled with the wrong kind of heroes. Our longings and aspirations turn out to be full of this world and empty of the next. Jesus, however, calls us to march to the beat of a different drum, and to fill our dreams with eternal realities, not earthly toys.

This is not because everything Jesus promises to his people here is to be filed away for the future, like a savings bond that has to mature before it can be cashed in. It's not simply a promise of "pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die." If we are Christians, then we are citizens of God's kingdom right now, even while we remain here on earth. We can enjoy vibrant fellowship with him now. He is our God even now. We are his people even now. We may begin to experience his blessings even now.

However, we will not *only* enjoy God's blessings here and now. Nor will we even *mainly* enjoy them now. If that were so, we might be right to envy Sammy and Celine, with their vast endowment of the good things that this world has to offer. But for us as Christians the best is yet to come. The best of the pie does await the heavenly feast, even though we taste the appetizers here and now. What is more, the best is well worth waiting for. When all

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the earthly dreams have turned to dust and blown away in the wind, God's kingdom will still remain. And the poor in spirit will remain with it, rich beyond belief in the things that really matter.

So it is that we are to envy the poor in spirit and to become like them. We must become like them in not depending on our own goodness to save us—for we have none. We must become like them in not depending on our own ability to live the Christian life, but remaining dependent on God every step of the way. We must become like them in longing above all things to belong to God's kingdom, to be part of his people, now and for all eternity.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Define in your own words what it means to be “poor in spirit.”
2. In what ways does your life demonstrate a failure to be poor in spirit?
3. How does remembering the example of Jesus show us what it means to be poor in spirit? Why is it important that Jesus has been poor in spirit in your place?
4. What Christians do you know who have shown you more clearly how to be poor in spirit?
5. How does a focus on God's heavenly kingdom help us to be poor in spirit?