Reverse Interpretation of the Beatitudes


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Once upon a time, lived a rich man and a poor man in a village. One day, a stranger came to the rich man’s house and asked for lodging over the night, but the rich man refused his request and chased him away. The poor man however took the stranger in his house and served him meals and gave him lodging. To their surprise, that stranger was not an ordinary man, but an angel who came to do God’s bidding. The angel, being appreciative, granted three wishes of the poor man. Having heard of the rumor, the rich man got on his horse, hurried to go after the angel. Shamelessly, he begged the angel to grant him three wishes also. The angel unwillingly agreed to grant him three wishes. The overjoyed rich man was heading home crooning. Then his horse began to limp because of being pushed too hard and too fast. Angered by his limping horse, he spat out the words, “You useless beast! Rather drop dead!” Right away his horse dropped dead. Recklessly used up the first wish, the rich man labored to carry the heavy saddle under the hot day sun for he wanted at least to recover the loss from the saddle.

Finally at home, upon hearing what had happened from the rich man, his wife started nagging at him of his stupidity. Already being exhausted and angry, the rich man screamed, “You stupid wife with a big mouth, get yourself stuck to this heavy saddle forever and never come off!” There, the second wish came true. Can you guess what he used the third wish for? He
probably had to use it to take the saddle off his wife. The blessings that were given to him were spent in vain on top of the senseless loss of his horse.

It is a fable we could have heard in our childhood. Although we can easily think the rich man foolish after all, so can anybody make a foolish choice like that. It’s because we don’t know what kind of blessing we really need. Jesus is teaching what the real blessings are to the foolish through this Sermon on the Mount that is well known to us. Are you the ones really blessed? Are you earnestly holding onto the Jesus’ blessing given to you in your life? Or aren’t you perhaps wasting the blessings He has given you in vain?

If you don’t have the correct understanding of the Biblical blessing, you can never be happy even while you carry your spiritual walk. If our ideas of blessings are for only the success stories of the world, we will be always unhappy when we don’t have it. A Christian who has the idea of worldly blessing might be the unhappiest person. He would never be satisfied; he would think he is treated unfairly and unjustly; he would always complain about something. In order to have the joy of true faith and to live the life of heaven, we must have the correct interpretation of the blessing. In today’s passage, Jesus is teaching the true blessing from which we can be genuinely happy.

It’s important that Jesus taught the disciples separately on this Sermon. “He opened his mouth” is the literary expression of emphasis on saying with firm conviction or will. Thus, using the expression “He opened his mouth” purposely, this passage tells us that the significantly important Jesus’ teaching is about to begin. Though the audience of Jesus’ teaching would have been the multitude of people who came, still its focus was on His disciples.
You may wonder what more is there to say about the Beatitudes after the pastor has already finished the sermon about it. However the in-depth of the Beatitudes is such that it is like a diamond mine in which the deeper we dig, the more nuggets we find. And the weight of the truth in the Beatitudes is immeasurable. The Beatitudes is categorized into two types. First four blessings describe the relationship between God and the believers, and the rest four blessings deal with the relationship and the duties of the believers toward their neighbors.

Before we discuss the Beatitudes, there's something we must first resolve. Eight people are mentioned in the Beatitudes. Then the question is if it was directed towards eight different types of people. What we must remember is that the blessings of the Beatitudes were talking about the eight different characteristics of one same person. The Beatitudes is not talking about eight separate teachings. It's saying that if you were truly a blessed person, then all eight of the Beatitudes would be revealed in you. It means, one who is poor in spirit mourns, is meek, hungers and thirsts for righteousness, and is a peacemaker. Furthermore, this Beatitudes is not meant for those spiritual royal class or elites who have attained great spiritual level, but is a spiritual guide book for all Christians. The eight blessings of the Beatitude were depictions of Jesus' ideology and purpose for God's children. Therefore, if we are true disciples of Jesus, then we should have a holy passion to live out the Beatitudes. If we put forth our effort, the Holy Spirit will also help us and work in us so that we may become doers of the Beatitudes.

Another thing we must consider is what the meaning of the promised blessings of the Beatitudes is. The eight blessings that are introduced in today's message are not separate blessings but blessings that are given together. If a person who has inherited the Kingdom of God cannot inherit
the earth, wouldn’t it become meaningless? How can you be called children of God without obtaining God's mercy? Without seeing God, how can you be comforted by God? The Beatitudes does not have its meaning when separate, but becomes a privilege for God's people when blended together, and through those Beatitudes, God's reign will be over our lives.

Another thing we need to consider with the Beatitudes is whether we can receive the blessings in our present lives or if they are the blessings we'll receive in the future when we go to heaven. The answer to that is, both. Among the Beatitudes, the first and the last blessings, 'for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven', are written in present tense. Therefore, God's word is clearly promising the present existence of heaven. However, the remaining six blessings are all in future tense. Therefore the Kingdom of Heaven that Jesus promised is already our present and at the same time is our promised future inheritance. We, in our irrational lives, can receive mercy, comfort, and become God's children.

Then, what is the reason? Though there are even eight great blessings that Jesus gave us, and yet it's difficult to find people who actually have those blessings. We need to read closely over today's message to find out the reason why. Particularly this time, as I was reflecting on Jesus' Beatitudes, I read the Beatitudes backwards. When I did that, the meaning became even clearer. To help your understanding, I will read the Beatitudes reversely.

"Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them; cursed are the prideful, rich in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of hell. Cursed are those who do not mourn because they do not realize their sins, for they will not be comforted. Cursed are those who are rude and violent, for they will inherit anxiety and
sleeplessness. Cursed are those who hunger and thirst for destroying righteousness, they will hunger eternally. Cursed are those who are not merciful, for they too will not be shown mercy. Cursed are those who are filthy in heart and spirit, for they will never see God. Cursed are those who stir up strife and war, for they will be called children of Satan. Cursed are those who reject persecution coming from righteousness, but instead persecuted because of their wrongdoings, for theirs is the kingdom of hell.”

This is the meaning of the Beatitudes when read reversely. I do not know how you understand about the Beatitudes, but I newly realized that there are not only eight blessings, but also eight curses included as well within Jesus' Beatitudes. That was a secret which began from the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth. In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, God gave humans various blessings. However, those blessings all turned into curses when God and man's relationship broke as a result of man's sin. I felt intensity that raised goose bumps when I came to this new realization of the Beatitudes, i.e. the Beatitudes are exactly the same as the original blessings of God that turned into curses. It may be okay if it's as simple as not receiving the blessings when we do not live out the disciple’s life as Jesus commanded in the Beatitudes. However, the path of selection that God set forth before man is absolutely either blessings or curses and there is no middle ground. You can't merely just live without receiving the blessings and avoiding the curses. What we must seriously consider and respond to is that if we are not living out the 'life of Beatitudes', then we are living the 'life of eight curses' that I just read out to you reversely.

The important characteristics of the Beatitudes are inseparable relations between obligations and blessings of Christians. It is absolutely not
Christianity, believing that you will be blessed with fortunes without performing one's own obligations at all. If you want to be truly blessed as a Christian, then there are obligations you have to perform accordingly. That is the Christianity. In other words, the Beatitudes are the ones least summarized and given to us.

The Kingdom of Heaven, in a broad sense, includes all the privileges in the earthly world as well as the eternal blessings we will enjoy after this world. However among the Beatitudes of Jesus’ teachings, the first blessing as well as the last are both meant the Kingdom of Heaven, which implies all the blessings in between are related with a life in the heaven.

Today, I would like to go over only the first blessing, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven". Whenever I read this verse, I feel my heart gets very exalted, yet I don't know why.

Originally, ‘being poor’ means lack of material things. The poor people are those who are unable to save themselves out of agony of material hardships. However they are aware that they have no rights to ask God for help, so they merely depend on God. Consequently ‘being poor’ thereby means that we confess our spiritual poor status and our spiritual bankruptcy before God, because we are basically sinners and deserve to be punished by sacred wrath of God. Therefore, ‘people of poor in spirit’ means being humble absolutely recognizing their worthlessness before God so that they only compel to confess their complete reliance on God. That is to say, being humble in the hearts.

Historically, the first blessing of Jesus – ‘people of poor in spirit’ - aroused many misunderstandings. The Roman Emperor Julian who succeeded Constantine the Great, who first publically recognized the Christianity, was a platonic philosopher. The Emperor Julian being highly
proud of his philosophy thought the Christian teachings were non-sense and unreasonable, insisting the public recognition of Christianity by Constantine the Great was a big mistake and persecuted Christianity again. Having abused "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven", pretending to send Christians to heaven by confiscating their belongings to make them poor, and made a mockery of it. This is one specific example representing falsification of Jesus' teachings. However the Emperor Julian ruled only two years from AD 361 to AD 363 and died. He was recorded in history so called as "Anti-Christian Julian" on his death. Hope you do not confuse between the ‘spiritual poor’ and the ‘material poor’.

The exact translation for ‘the poor in spirit’ is ‘those who are poor and realize their need in spirit’. Even in poor and hard situations, they totally depend on God and put their hope in heaven. They are those who confess that they cannot live even for a moment without God.

At present, there may be some of you who can’t live day by day without tears. In an extreme suffering, any kind of comport or encouragement is no use. You, however, remember the first blessing of Jesus. Even if your present life is complicated like a ball of tangled threads and pent-up situation passing through a long tunnel that seems to have no end, I hope your heart totally stays poor before God. I eagerly wish your spiritual nature does not break down because of a difficult situation. Even if you shed tears in the present life, I wish you find the Kingdom of Heaven given for you and be comforted when you meet the Lord in a dark and silent night. I wish you could feel the Kingdom of Heaven specifically. I wish you get the power from heavenly excitement that can overcome your present hardship. I wish your spirit revives.

If you read the verses carefully, the Lord did not say that the Kingdom of Heaven will be given to the poor in sprit. Neither did He say that He will
give you the Kingdom of Heaven to make you happy if you become poor in spirit. Instead, the poor in spirit is already blessed since he has the Kingdom of Heaven. Do you understand the difference? It means that those who have the Kingdom of Heaven already are poor in spirit.

You can see the clear comparison of those who are poor in spirit and those who are not from Luke 18:10-13. Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed, "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 got." But, the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Ironically, it was not a Pharisee who thanked God for his accomplishment that entered the Kingdom of Heaven. It was not even the Zealot who dreamed to change the world with swords and blood. It was the tax collectors who thought themselves as shameful beings. It was prostitutes who were so lowly and disgraceful that they were rejected by the world. Since the tax collectors and the prostitutes knew that they had nothing, and all they could do was cry for the mercy of the Lord. The Lord wiped their tears and listened to their cries. A tax collector who was praying with tears at the yard of the temple was truly poor in spirit.

Then, the answer is clear. We all should be like the tax collector who prayed to God heartily, beating his breast. "God, have mercy on me. I am a sinner." The Kingdom of Heaven will surely be given to those who beat their breast and pray to the Lord with a whole heart.

Aren’t you living an extremely arrogant life, because your heart is well-off saying, "Well, I can live my life with my own will and strength, even
“without help of God”? Is there anyone who flatters himself by boasting like that? Is there anyone who looks down the sinners, because he is full of his own righteousness? Is there anyone with spiritual fullness, thinking he is fundamentally different from those unfaithful people who are not as passionate for the mission? Your spiritual pride and self-satisfaction may have some ground. You must, however, remember one thing. You may be standing on a socially and religiously fulfilled and high position, but the Kingdom of God has nothing to do with you. The Kingdom of God does not belong to you.

The generation that is not poor in spirit - that is the most tragic symptom of the modern church. Don’t you think the modern believers resemble much of the Pharisees, as both are too proud of themselves and intoxicated by their own religious zeal? One of those churches mentioned in the Book of Revelation is the Church at Laodicea. The church saw itself, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” But Jesus criticized, “you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.” (Revelation 3:17) The Laodicean church’s Christian confessions may have been more religiously passionate than any other church, but it was not a true church of Christ. As Jesus had diagnosed, the Laodicean church was a stripped, blind beggars. It was tragic that the church never realized that by themselves. Do you know why? It was because their spirits had been too rich. To these days, the essential condition for an acceptance to the Kingdom of God is to be poor in spirit.

One who is poor in spirit means one who is aware that he cannot help but to rely on God, because he sees his weak self straight. That is why he cannot help but to become humble before God. He realizes that he is a sinner all the time. He is pure in spirit like a child, grateful to even smallest thing. Because he knows that he always stand before God, he praises God,
denies himself and passionately seeks Heaven. These are the characteristics of a person who is poor in spirit. Jesus promised the Kingdom of God to those who are poor in spirit.

The heaven is not a concept of physical place, but a concept of where the reign of God reaches. It refers to influence of our Lord Jesus Christ. If our hearts are ruled by God, then there is heaven within us. Those who are poor in spirit are promised that heaven. That heaven is not a futuristic concept where you go after your death, but what you delight in present.

One who is poor in spirit relishes a blessing of heaven. Life in heaven, as shown in the Psalm 1, means not walking in step with the wicked, or standing in the way that sinners take or sitting in the company of mockers, but delighting in the law of the Lord. All kinds of human tragedy, sins, quarrels, blames result from proud, selfish and greedy hearts. Poor heart is a humble heart, a heart that depends on God. Only those with poor heart will enter into the Kingdom of God. That is heaven.

Heaven promised to those who are poor in spirit is not something that comes in future. To those who have poor heart, heaven exists in presents. Therefore they live in heaven no matter what kind of hardships they may experience now. I pray that you solely trust God because you are poor in spirit, despite of your poverty and difficulty in your life. I pray that you are truly blessed with Kingdom of God in present, even if you don’t have material abundance right now.