

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. **For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me....** Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me.* Psalm 51:1-3,10-12

*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. He said: "**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**"* Matthew 5:1-3

*For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and **he who humbles himself will be exalted.*** Luke 18:14b

## ***Blessed are the Poor in Spirit....***

CBS News reported a story last week about a ruckus that broke out on a commuter train in Russia. The train connects several rural villages to a larger city, so it makes frequent stops along its route. During a stop on a very cold recent day, the conductor saw a cat strolling up the rail car's aisle. Believing it was a stray that had climbed aboard during the stop, she captured the cat and threw it out the door just before the train started rolling to the next village. Before long, **it was discovered that the cat actually was a passenger's pet** which had escaped from its carrier. Several passengers who witnessed the incident immediately began posting protests on social media. Hundreds of people gathered to search for the cat, which unfortunately was found frozen to death several days later. Within a few days, over 300,000 Russians had signed a petition calling for that conductor to be fired, and 100,000 had signed one calling for her to face criminal charges.

Sad as that story is, I found it ironic and even sadder that on the same frigid day that cat died, the Russian military launched dozens (hundreds, probably) of missiles, drones, and artillery shells at Ukrainian cities. Those weapons were fired for the expressed purpose of killing human beings, destroying public infrastructure and homes, and forcing the surviving residents out into the same deadly cold that killed that cat -- but I saw no mention or protest by Russian citizens against the people who took those actions. I read the cat article on the same morning I was reading several authors' analysis of Jesus' first Beatitude about poverty of spirit, which I have come to define as "**awareness and willing acknowledgment of our need for God.**" I couldn't help thinking that Jesus' spiritual poverty is sorely needed in that situation, not to persuade people they should love cats less, but to acknowledge that they were created to love fellow human beings a whole lot more. It becomes more apparent to me all the time that **the human race desperately needs God's help if we are ever to wake up spiritually** to see, care about, and invest ourselves in the things that matter most, "the things that are eternal" as Quakers refer to them.

**Imago Dei** I remember reading and discussing in a college philosophy class the unique inclination of humans throughout history to recognize and worship the source of life and the cosmos, whatever or Whomever it might be. Theologians cite the Bible's Creation narrative (Genesis 1:26,27) to explain that philosophical inclination as humans' spiritual need and desire to know the One in whose image we are made. Author C.S. Lewis wrote of that by saying, "**God designed the human 'machine' to run on Himself.** He Himself is the fuel our spirits were designed to burn, the food our spirits were designed to feed on. There is no other." One commentator agreed with Lewis and noted that "when people fail to worship the true God, they replace him because they must worship something." That issue was the basis for Jesus' discussion with the Pharisee Nicodemus in John 3:1-21 about spiritual rebirth. Jesus essentially told Nicodemus that he had come into the world as the Light of Life to make God known, but many people rejected him, claiming they did not need his Light because they loved the darkness that hid their sinful lives. That hasn't changed much in 2000 years.

**Turn Around** Matthew's record puts the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) early in Jesus' public ministry, right after his baptism by John the Baptist, his 40-day fast and spiritual testing in the wilderness, and his repetition at Capernaum of John's proclamation that **people should "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."** He invited four fishermen to follow him as his first disciples, and they began walking around Galilee proclaiming that jarring message in the synagogues while Jesus at the same time performed miraculous healings. Matthew indicates that word of this new phenomenon drew large crowds from all over Palestine who sought healing of all sorts of physical maladies (and who very likely longed for spiritual answers, too). Jesus' power over physical ailments and evil spirits gave his teaching some real authority. When the people heard his command "repent" (meaning to change direction, turn 180 degrees) linked to the accessibility of the kingdom of heaven, they wanted to know how they could comply. Matthew wrote that Jesus led a crowd up a mountainside, sat down, and began explaining it to them.

**A Spiritual Journey of Ascending Steps** In his book *Sermon On the Mount*, Clarence Jordan describes the Beatitudes as "a stairway to spiritual life," the steps into that kingdom of heaven which John and Jesus said was near. Jordan describes the eight Beatitude steps as a connected whole, not an assembly of random wise sayings. Jordan holds that **each step in that stairway was placed in an intentional order of progression.** In an important way, they are like the concrete porches on the east side of our meetinghouse. The bottom step begins at the building's wall and extends farthest out towards the street. The second step rests atop the first, also begins against the building's wall, and also extends outward, just not quite as far as the first step does. The third step rests atop both the first and the second and

stops slightly closer to the building to create the next step up. That progression continues until there is an eight-step staircase with each step supported by all of the others beneath it. In Jordan's analogy, each Beatitude step taken leads to the next one in growth towards a holistic life of discipleship (and none of the steps can be skipped).

**Blessed are the . . . Poor in Spirit** The teacher who first helped me understand the Beatitudes encouraged me to imagine the crowd which gathered around Jesus that day. Because he was an exciting new spiritual teacher who had been performing amazing miracles, the area's synagogue officials and other religious leaders almost surely would have been in the crowd -- and they would have been given the prominent places to sit or stand near Jesus. The VIPs would have been next closest, then the average citizens, and so on. At the very back would have been the poor, the sick, and the outcasts. That long-ago teacher told me that it would have been common for a religious teacher to begin a public discourse with **something like the Beatitudes, a literary form of wisdom rhetoric pronouncing a ranking of blessedness.** My teacher said then to imagine those proud teachers of the Law in their fine robes and regalia hearing Jesus say "Blessed are..." and getting puffed up in preparation to be praised by the young rabbi. Instead, they heard him complete the blessing with "...the poor in spirit" as he pointed to his fishermen disciples and the people who had been pushed to the back of the crowd. The teachers must have been embarrassed, then indignant, then angry. They were about to learn from the Messiah about God's upside-down Kingdom and its values that are the opposite of the world's.

**What did Jesus mean?** He knew the religious leaders had the Law, plus all the additions to it made by humans over the centuries for their own benefit, not necessarily for God's glory. They had literacy, education, status, and social power. As a group (though with some exceptions), **they were religiously rich and didn't feel they needed God,** so they spent little if any effort on actually knowing God. Jesus once told a group of them that it was because of "the hardness of their hearts" that Moses had to give them the Law (Mark 10:5). Luke's list of Beatitudes (Luke 6:20) gives the first one as "Blessed are the poor," without the "in spirit" at the end. The point is the same, regardless. No matter what people might become rich in -- religion, piety, knowledge, money, pleasure, power, or any other earthly thing -- **when it negates their sense of need for living friendship with God, it will not bring eternal blessing,** but only temporary self-satisfaction.

**Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven** Each Beatitude states a counter-intuitive blessing, then gives a promised outcome of taking that step in the journey. For all who humbly acknowledged their need for God, including those at the back of the crowd who probably assumed from their earthly circumstances that they'd been excluded from heaven, **Jesus' word was the Gospel, good news.** It was good news as well for those early disciples in that crowd who essentially had chosen voluntary poverty, leaving their businesses, homes, and families to accept Jesus' invitation to know God and work for his eternal kingdom. By the blessedness of his invitation, his loving presence, his care, and the truth of his teaching, Jesus had convinced them to trust his promise of a life of joy, purpose, and eternal richness that far outweighed anything the world could offer. That remains Christ's offer to all people today who will acknowledge their need for him and act on it.

**Every Journey Must Have a Beginning....** but not everyone chooses to begin the Beatitudes trek to the kingdom of heaven. The truth is that every human person needs the Lord, but not all are willing to admit their spiritual poverty. That admission requires some very basic things. If God is not God, such an acknowledgment makes little sense. If, however, there is a transcendent Creator of all; and if that Creator has expressed his intentions and purpose for all he created; and if by our inattentiveness, intentional neglect, or selfish defiance we have violated the Creator's intentions, then we stand in need of his forgiveness. Only the One who established that Truth can forgive its violations. There are many other reasons we need the Lord -- for his guidance, provision, protection, instruction, grace for daily living -- but **the first step on Jesus' "stairway to spiritual life" is the step of spiritual poverty.** People living apart from friendship with God must first, as John and Jesus announced, turn around to face and approach the Light. When Christ's Light shows them where they've fallen short, they must acknowledge their spiritual poverty and humbly accept his forgiveness as an unearned gift of grace. It is then they will learn that the result of being poor in spirit goes far deeper than the "happy are" which some Bible translations use for the Beatitudes. The blessedness of being in the Beatitudes journey through life is much more than an emotion. It means living in the presence and care and grace of Jesus every moment of every day.

Author Philip Yancey once wrote, *"God's kingdom turns the tables upside down. The poor, the hungry, the mourners, and the oppressed truly are blessed. Not because of their miserable circumstances, of course -- Jesus spent much of his life trying to remedy those conditions. Rather, they are blessed because of an innate advantage over those more comfortable and self-sufficient. People who are rich, successful, and beautiful may well go through life relying on their natural gifts. People who lack those advantages, hence underqualified for success in the kingdom of this world, just might turn to God in their time of need.... When they do, the kingdom of heaven draws near."* Thanks be to God -- let's travel that way together.

--Ron Ferguson, 28 January 2024

## **Queries for Worship-Sharing and Reflection**

- 1) Why is it so difficult for people to admit their need for God? Why is it especially hard for 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans?
- 2) Why do you think poverty of spirit is the first step on Clarence Jordan's stairway to the kingdom, not a different one?

- 3) Describe an example of spiritual poverty you have witnessed in your Christian life. Why did it bless or impress you?
- 4) Do you agree with Philip Yancey's observation in the final paragraph above? Why, or why not?