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Poverty, Sloth and the Beatitudes

by: Dr. Marcellino D'Ambrosio



Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" is probably the most famous sermon of all time. And the opening lines of that sermon are equally famous – for 2,000 years they've been known as "the Beatitudes."



In nine short verses, Jesus lays out the character sketch of the spiritually successful person who is truly blest, fortunate, positioned to experience perfect happiness and the fullness of joy. This is what "beatitude" means.

Now the very first qualification takes us back a bit. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." Is Jesus endorsing indigence? Is he a Marxist who champions the proletariat and vilifies the bourgeoisie?

Not at all. Note that he is talking about the "poor in spirit" here. In other words, those who are aware of their own smallness and emptiness. The poor in spirit are not those who beat themselves up, but those who frankly recognize how puny they are before the mysteries of the Universe and the Creator of that Universe. They don't let their own accomplishments and abilities blind them to their mortality and vulnerability. They don't fool themselves.

Jesus mentions elsewhere how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom because it is very easy for the successful to lose touch with their neediness and to actually believe the flattery of their fan club. Those who are not influential, educated or wealthy have an easier time recognizing their need since it stares them in the face every place they turn. For this reason, the Church was full of such people in the New Testament era (1 Cor 1:26-31) just as it is today.



The poor of spirit are empty and so long to be filled. They hunger and thirst for the wholeness that is called holiness, for the food that truly satisfies.

The rich in spirit don't hunger for anything. They are "full of themselves," self-satisfied. When offered an opportunity to grow spiritually, they protest "but I'm a good person and worship God in my own way" or "I go to Church every Sunday, isn't that enough?" They are too busy for prayer and yawn when exposed to a spiritual discussion. They are too

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absorbed with themselves to be interested in God. They may get excited about the Superbowl, but never about heaven.



This lack of spiritual hunger, this utter apathy in the face of the things of God, is actually one of the Seven Deadly Sins. It is called Sloth or spiritual laziness, and it is one of the most striking characteristics of American society. It is a sneaky sin that quietly creeps into the lives of even religious people and gradually chokes out true spirituality. It diverts our attention from the things of heaven to a myriad of other things until we find ourselves bored with God, making only routine and mechanical efforts to “fulfill our Sunday obligation.” There is no passion, no zeal, no desire--just lots of excuses.

“Blessed are the single-hearted, for they shall see God.” The hearts of the blessed, the truly happy, are not divided between God and football and career and money. Those truly happy have only one God, and look to Him alone to be filled. If they play sports, they do it for his honor and glory, not theirs. If they marry, they love Christ and are loved by Christ through their spouse. If they pursue a career or build a business, they do it according to His will to advance His kingdom.

Reading the Sermon on the Mount, and especially the Beatitudes, is a gut check for us all. It's one of the best examination of consciences that there is, perfect to read before every confession and every Lent. Incidentally, that's what the penitential season of Lent is about. The fasting is meant to re-stimulate our spiritual appetite. The spiritual exercises are designed to shrug off the laziness of sloth. Christianity is not just a matter of believing in God, but avidly pursuing Him.

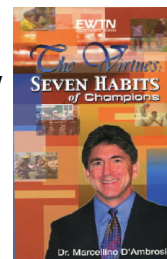


This article originally appeared in Our Sunday Visitor as a reflection on the Scripture readings for the fourth Sunday in Ordinary time, cycle A (Zeph 2,3; 3:12-13; Ps 146; 1 Cor 1: 26-31; Mt 5:1-12) and is reproduced here by permission of the author.

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