

Not all God's people were poor in Babylon. Some managed to do very nicely for themselves, but only by compromising. Those who sold out to the Babylonians, who adopted their culture and their pagan religious ways, were able to become quite wealthy. When the time came to return to Israel and rebuild the temple, they decided to stay in Babylon. The Faithful kept their hope in God and returned in poverty to the Promised Land.

By the time of Jesus and the New Testament, several hundred years later, a similar situation existed. Israel still suffered under the hand of foreign powers, although perhaps not to the extent of the Exile. There were still some who had become wealthy by adopting the ways of the Greeks and the Romans (for example, the Herodians and the tax-collectors). And there were still those who set their hope in the promise of God's kingdom-- and so remained poor.

6. Given this historical view of 'the poor' in Israel, what more can you add to your definition of being 'poor in spirit' from question 5?

Undoubtedly, the 'poor in spirit' of Jesus' day had no attachment to the riches and possessions of this world. They had given themselves over to absolute dependency on God (see Psalm 121). They longed for God to intervene in history and set up his worldwide kingdom.

7. What do you understand to be 'the Kingdom of Heaven,' which Jesus promises 'the poor in spirit'?
8. How might being 'poor in spirit' be expressed in the life of a Christian today?
9. [optional] Is it possible to be materially wealthy and yet 'poor in spirit'?
10. How will you seek to cultivate 'poverty of spirit' in your own character? Who and what will help you?

Pray for each other to grow in your 'poverty of spirit' and take time next week to see how this is going.

1 The Blessed Life

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7

The "Sermon on the Mount" is famous. Many of Jesus' teachings here remain embedded in Australian culture. When we hear people say, "He's the salt of the earth", "Don't hide your light under a bushel," "Let your 'yes' be 'yes'," "You can't serve two masters," "Don't throw your pearls before the pigs," or "first take the speck out of your own eye"-- these are all quotations from this Sermon on the Mount. But what did Jesus mean when first taught these things? What is this sermon really all about?

Discussion: From what you already know of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), what do you think the Sermon on the Mount is all about?

The Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-10)

The word 'Beatitude' does not appear in the Bible. It comes from the Latin word for 'Blessed'. The Beatitudes (Mt 5:1-10) act as a kind of Overture to the Sermon on the Mount. These short pithy sayings introduce the main themes and prepare us for what is to come.

Just as words and actions taken out of context are often meaningless, we must be careful to enter into Jesus' world and frame of reference in order to rightly take hold of Jesus' teachings in The Beatitudes.

The Biblical Context: some background thoughts

In the context of the whole Bible, the Sermon on the Mount occurs at a time when the fortunes of Israel were at a low ebb.

There had been a time when this was not so-- under David and Solomon, Israel had been a safe and prosperous nation. According to his promises to Abraham, God had planted them in the Promised Land, subdued their enemies, and blessed them with prosperity. They were entering into the Blessed Life. This was the historical high point of the nation of Israel.

From that point on, things went downhill. Israel was destroyed because of its chronic apostasy and rebellion against God. By the time of the Exile to Babylon in 587BC, the everlasting kingdom promised to David in 2 Samuel 7 was in ruins (see Psalm 89).

But all was not lost. God's promise to Abraham still stood. As Israel's fortunes declined, the prophet emphatically declared that God would restore his kingdom.

[optional] **Read Isaiah 9:1-7.** What did the prophet look forward to? What sort of kingdom would 'the child' rule over? Now read Matthew 4:12-17. How does Jesus fulfil Isaiah's prophecy?

The Old Testament looked forward to a day when the eternal kingdom of God would be established throughout the world, and it would be presided over by 'one like a son of man' (see Daniel 7; Isa 11:1-10; Ezk 34:23ff).

The Message of the New Testament is that this hope was gloriously fulfilled by Jesus. Jesus says as much in the Sermon on the Mount: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them" (Mt 5:17).

The Beatitudes and the Sermon on the Mount come at a pivotal point of God's plan of salvation. The Messiah has come; the Kingdom of God is at hand. However, not all has yet been accomplished. The cross, the resurrection, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost-- these momentous events are still to come, and we live on the other side of them.

Read Matthew 5:1-10

1. Jesus has commenced his public ministry and called his disciples to follow him. He has declared that 'The Kingdom of Heaven is near' (Mt 4:17). What do we now learn about the Sermon on the Mount from Mt 5:1-2? To whom is this teaching directed? How will this shape our understanding of Jesus' words here?
2. Reading through Mt 5:3-10 again, describe the overall impact of Jesus' teaching on you? Imagine yourself sitting on the grass at Jesus' feet as one of his first disciples-- what thoughts arise for you as you hear his words?
3. Describe the structure and pattern of these sayings.
4. What do you think it means to be 'blessed' by God?

The Privilege of the Poor

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven".

What blessing is there in being poor? Being financially poor is a crushing and humiliating experience. Poverty is usually passed on from generation to generation with no way out. If money is power, then the powerlessness of the poor means they are often exploited. Being poor is no fun. But Jesus seems to say here that poverty is a desirable state.

5. The poverty that Jesus refers to here is no financial but 'in spirit'. What do you think it means to be 'poor in spirit'? Does it imply a shortage of the Holy Spirit? Or a general lack of human spirit-- like a kind of spiritual wimp, worldly and *un*-spiritual? Or something else?

Some further biblical insights on being 'poor in spirit' may help you develop a better description of the 'poor in spirit' whom Jesus has in mind. In the Old Testament, being 'poor' meant a lot more than simply being short of cash. Narratives such as the book of Ruth associated poverty with lowliness and godliness because those who don't have much money tend to trust in God-- they have no one else to turn to. They are only too aware of their need and of their true status before God. There is no pride or self-sufficiency to stand in the way. So, the pious poor had their hope in God and their riches were to be found in his kingdom.

God's people in the Old Testament experienced both great wealth and poverty at various times. During the times of Joshua and David and Solomon, Israel experience prosperity and plenty. In times when foreign powers ruled Israel, financial, cultural and religious oppression was common. During the time of the Exile in Babylon, many acutely experienced the pain of poverty of all kinds.

[optional] **Read Isaiah 61:1-7.** This prophecy was written during the time of the Jewish Exile to Babylon. What good news will be preached to the poor? Who is going to free the captives and proclaim the year of God's favour? How do you think this prophecy might relate to the ministry of Jesus (see Luke 4:17-21)?