

1. SURRENDER

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

—Matthew 5:3

God Is Enough

When I was in college, I worked one summer at a church in a poor part of Greenville, South Carolina. The houses in the neighborhood were small and run-down, the tenants poor and struggling. I was shocked that some people lived without running water in their homes. They filled buckets from an outside hose or from the neighboring fire department and carried it inside to shower, use the bathroom, and take care of other daily needs. Many were not only unemployed but unemployable, coming to the church's food pantry each week in desperate need. Had they shown up at our door angry and rude, I would have completely understood why. They had no money, no jobs, no comfort, no safety, and no social status to speak of. By earthly standards, their lives were dreadful.

And yet, most of these people didn't think that their lives were dreadful. Very few complained. Many of them were incredibly friendly, optimistic people who enjoyed life. They smiled when I greeted them, laughed freely and loudly, sat and talked as though I was a long-lost friend. There was no doubt that many of them were coping with serious issues, but by and large, they believed they lived blessed lives.

In Macon, Georgia, where I live today, there is a man I've come to know at the homeless day center who typifies my experiences from that summer in college. Highly intelligent and pleasant to talk to, if you were to meet him on the street knowing nothing about him, you'd think that he was a teacher or counselor at a school. In fact, he was for many years. Unfortunately, because of mental health issues, he can no longer maintain a job or take care of his life as he once could, and he's landed where so many end up—living on the streets, forced to sleep under a bridge. He relies on the center for food, showers, laundry, and basic medical attention. Surely not a situation in which many could find hope.

But ask him how he's doing in the morning, and his answer will always be the same: "I'm blessed, Father, truly blessed." He reads the Bible daily, prays constantly, and is one of the most positive, dedicated people you'll ever meet. He believes with his entire being that his life is a gift from God to be shared. At the center, he doesn't just take what he needs; he volunteers his time as a reliable member of the staff, seven days a week. He sees that his entire life is filled with gifts from God and that he has something to provide others on the streets—that being homeless isn't as much an affliction to escape as it is an opportunity to serve others. It's through his experience of poverty that he has come to love God and neighbor in a way that stability and comfort never would allow.

When I say that his story is similar to those of others I've encountered, that's not an exaggeration. His life is an incredible witness of how God is enough, that even those with absolutely nothing can feel satisfied when they have faith. Starting that summer in college but continuing throughout my life as a friar, I have met hosts of people in multiple countries around the world who exhibit the same level of faith despite their humble means. It is because of this that many have argued that it is not *despite* their poverty that their faith is so strong, but entirely *because* of it. Many are convinced that the poor have stronger faith.

Of course, this perspective does not apply to all of the poor. For as true as it is that great faith can exist even when money doesn't, there are also plenty of people suffering from poverty who want nothing to do with God, who curse God and neighbor for what they have to deal with. Some may not mind living under a bridge or walking to the fire station in order to flush the toilet, but most find those things dehumanizing. They want a bed. They don't think it's too much to ask that every person be afforded a working toilet to use. Gradually beaten down by these serious grievances, they find themselves with no time for God. The poor do not all have faith because they're poor—some are just as hopeless, mean, greedy, and evil as anyone else. I've met plenty of them.

I regularly encounter another man at the homeless center who, I believe, has never once smiled in his whole life. He walks in with a frown on his face, shoulders tensed, ready to pick a fight with someone. As far as I'm concerned, he is not just unpleasant to be around, he's vicious. On numerous occasions I have found myself the recipient of one of his cutting remarks because I didn't recall how he liked his coffee from the last time I served him—a week earlier with more than fifty coffee orders between. Rather than just saying what he wants when I politely ask him, he launches into a tirade about how I'm incompetent

for not remembering, insulting me and the center. (Although, to be fair, if his goal was to get me to be so afraid that I would remember his order next time, it worked. I'm not sure I will *ever* forget it.)

To receive treatment like this was nothing unusual if you spent any time working at the friars' soup kitchen in Philadelphia, as I did during another summer in college. While some of those we served touched me with their kindness and faith, quite a few more left an impact on me for being just awful people. One time, an employee literally saved a man from overdosing on drugs, springing to action with a naloxone shot when he lost consciousness; once revived, the man did not thank the employee but tried to attack him for ruining his high. When there are enough volunteers, one person is assigned to watch the bathrooms, as people will come in each day to steal the industrial-sized rolls of toilet paper, take a shower using the sink, or leave the bathroom entirely trashed and unusable for others. There are people who bring weapons into the dining room, threatening the staff or guests. And while it's not a frequent occurrence, we occasionally have to add a name to our list of the "permanently banned . . . for the time being." "Permanently banned" because they are a menace to society that can't be safely admitted, and "for the time being" because we're Franciscans and no one is beyond mercy.

That is simply the reality of poverty. Some of the poor have wonderful faith, yes, but others are absolutely wretched. People who live in poverty have just as much free will as the rest of us to be good or bad, to follow God or not.

Because of the wonderful people that feel blessed despite their poverty, there can be a tendency to romanticize poverty itself as a blessed condition, to make destitution into a sort of virtue, and so believe that God loves poverty or desires it. Yet this is simply not the case. While scripture tells us that the

materially poor do have a special place in God's heart—that he hears their cries, answers their prayers, identifies with them, and will always end up on their side—it is also true that in scripture poverty is always treated as an *affliction*. It is an experience of evil. Material, involuntary poverty is not the product of God's will but of humanity's greed. The suffering that humanity experiences as a result of poverty is not something that brings joy in itself, and being poor is no automatic ticket to heaven. To believe this might lead some to read the first Beatitude as declaring charity and justice unnecessary, that the poor should endure their suffering quietly or that God somehow desires destitution. None of these things are true.

When Jesus refers to the poor as blessed, he does not refer to the condition itself, as if destitution was a good to be sought, but rather to the opportunity the materially poor have in their spiritual lives. Because poverty strips people of material comfort, a sense of safety, and all too often the simple grace of being treated with dignity, the poor may find themselves more readily disposed to face the futility that life throws their way. The poor often know how to ask for help, while the rich may be too proud. The people I met at the food pantry knew that they were not capable of taking care of themselves, that their own abilities were not enough; they knew what human weakness got them, and so looked to the last place left to offer help. Many of those people knew what rock bottom feels like, that there is nowhere else to go but to God. In this way, the poor can find themselves more readily predisposed to God, not because of what they have—suffering, oppression, anxiety—but because of what they don't have: arrogance, self-sufficiency, or, frankly, other options. Unlike the rich and comfortable, the poor are too often forced to see that there is no hope in anything but God, that if they want to survive, they must choose him above all else. In this there is blessing. But they still have to choose. We all do.

Being poor doesn't give someone a ticket to heaven in the same way that being rich doesn't negate our salvation. Entry into the kingdom isn't granted based on the status of one's bank account, but by the wholehearted commitment to God's love. It's about recognizing the futility of the world and surrendering one's entire life to God, finding treasure in nothing more than the work of the Gospel. The condition of poverty offers the advantage of removing the worldly comforts that can distract us from the true source of life, but in the end, it is not about money. It's about faith. It's about dependence. It's about realizing that there is nothing in this world that could possibly offer us fulfillment if we don't have God, so what's the use in pursuing it?

When Jesus speaks of the blessedness of the poor, this is what he's talking about. When he tells his disciples that they must give up everything and follow him, this is what he wants: a complete surrender of one's life, the acceptance that human ability is nothing to God's ability. Jesus is not after suffering or destitution; he's after humility, trust, and complete dependence on God. Blessed are those who surrender completely to God, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

The Futility of a Self-Reliant World

A little more than a month before I wrote this, my sister gave birth to her first child. I met my first niece a few weeks later, and I have to say, she is an absolute blessing to the family. I know everyone thinks their baby is the cutest thing in the world, what with their big eyes, toothless smiles, and rolls upon rolls of fat on their legs, but nobody's baby has anything on my niece. Born ten pounds seven ounces, she is in the ninety-ninth percentile when it comes to cute, chubby babies.

As you can imagine, though, a baby that size was not the greatest blessing at the time of the delivery! She was a week

late, then too big to deliver, so my sister ended up needing a C-section. It made everyone a bit anxious the day of—nobody wants complications in childbirth—but both mother and baby made it through okay and are healthy today. Although complications can always arise and giving birth is itself *never* an easy task, medicine has advanced so tremendously over the years that such a procedure is all but routine for doctors today. Our family was concerned, sure, and I offered a prayer for my sister that everything would go well, but the worry we experienced was nothing like the debilitating fear that would have consumed a family in the same situation a century ago.

Which is really quite incredible, if you think about it. In the grand scheme of human history, we're talking about a drop in the bucket, and yet the differences make it seem like a foreign world. When my grandfather was born in 1920, his mother was 800 times more likely to die in childbirth than my sister was today. He himself was more than 100 times more likely to die before the age of one than my niece. And these were no doubt advancements from previous generations. Had I been living in any other time than our own when I received word that my sister had to have surgery to deliver the baby, I would have been worried sick. Chances are the delivery itself, even under normal circumstances, would have been cause for an all-night vigil, a prayer of desperate plea to God to bring hope to something so dangerous. Safe delivery would have evoked such overwhelming joy and thanksgiving that grand sacrifices would have been offered to God. Given the risk, how could people of old *not* have seen it as the work of God?

But I didn't do any of that. I said a brief prayer prior to the surgery, offered a moment of thanksgiving that night, and moved on with my life. A baby was born, as expected. Her presence is a profound blessing, as is the now-routine surgical procedure that brought her to us and kept both her and my sister

safe. The whole experience made me reflect upon things in a new way. As I think about how modern medicine has advanced, giving us such precision in our diagnoses and command over the human body, I can't help but feel emotionally disconnected from the healing stories of the Bible. The woman with hemorrhages suffered at the hands of doctors for twelve years until finding hope in Jesus; Jairus must have felt entirely helpless when his daughter died, not knowing how or why it had happened; the lepers couldn't even be around people, let alone find someone who could cure them. They all ran to Jesus because they had nowhere else to turn. They knew there was nothing they could do, nothing the world could offer, that could bring them relief. Jesus was all they could depend on.

Not so today. While I would like to make it abundantly clear that I find the advancements in modern medicine to be a tremendous gift to humanity—getting a scraped knee or paper cut and not having to worry about the possibility of death from infection is delightful!—I can't help but think we've also lost something along the way. As we continue to advance in our ability to take care of ourselves, there is a part of us that begins to think we don't actually need anyone but ourselves. However subtle or subconscious, there is a tendency to give our full trust to human endeavors, no longer needing to worry, no longer forced to pray, no longer aware of the fact that everything we do is dependent upon God's grace.

If complete surrender to God is the way to blessedness, it's no wonder our world is fragmented and fraught with controversy. Beneath the vast array of arguments and opinions that contribute to the divisiveness of our age, I believe there is but a single problem: a prideful world that trusts in itself and gives its allegiance entirely to saviors that cannot save. This can take many forms.

For some it is politics. Frustrated with the brokenness of society, increasing numbers of people are placing all their hope in politicians and social movements. It is not simply an engaged and concerned populace; it is a desperate and frenetic one. Every issue is treated as a matter of life and death; every debate an ultimatum defining one's relationships. It is as if the fate of the world depends on what a politician or news pundit says.

For others, it is a matter of lifestyle or identity markers that come to define everything. Feeling completely without control in an ever-changing, chaotic world, some have not only chosen to adopt a countercultural way of living, but have let it come to define who they are and why others are wrong. At some point, it moves beyond a personal desire for simplicity, tradition, antiquity, health, or personal aesthetic and becomes the unwavering belief—subconscious or not—that this particular lifestyle choice can solve the world's problems and bring about ultimate happiness.

For others still, it is nothing more than inflated trust in oneself. In some places, Christianity and the American spirit have become so fused that self-reliance and independence—the ability to take care of oneself without help from another—are treated as Christian values. These people rest on their abilities. They trust in the power within them to be the answer to every problem they may have, making human ingenuity their god. A being beyond reproach. A being not to be questioned. A being that deserves respect, so how dare you disagree with me?

Herein lies the problem. When one's utmost hope and identity come to rest in human ability rather than the truth of the Gospel, disagreement is no longer viewed as a mere difference of opinion but as a threat to one's god. At this point, it doesn't matter how trivial the conversation may seem, it is no longer a matter of civil discourse or philosophical debate; it is a matter of honor and supreme identity. Few will be able to tolerate this or

engage their critic civilly. Rationality need not apply; compromise is out of the question. It is no wonder, then, that hurtful rhetoric appears on one's social media feed or divisive arguments arise amongst family members. A god has been attacked and one's utmost hope has been questioned. All that's left is to fight or flee, choose violence or despair.

As much as a self-reliant attitude may offer us a sense of identity that we desperately crave, it will ultimately be one that cannot offer us what we truly need. Our abilities are not enough. Our social movements are too exclusive. Our politics are too shortsighted. They may be effective for a time but ultimately provide nothing more than a false sense of security. When we put our trust in something that is not God, we stake our claim on something that cannot bring us the ultimate answer, inevitably leading to disappointment. Politicians will let us down. Movements will go out of style. Bodies will become frail. There is only One who will never let us down, who can offer us the true fulfillment of the heavenly kingdom. It is only when we put our trust in God and God alone, surrendering completely to him, that we can overcome the discord in our world, for it is only then that we can see what truly matters and what is not worth fighting over.

How do we do that? I recommend a life committed to acts of voluntary poverty. Just as some people tend to romanticize poverty as a material condition, others tend to overly spiritualize it, stripping it of any lived experience. It is the person who lives a posh life, filled with luxuries, who says, "I have all of these things, but I don't need them. I could give them up and be just as happy." That may in fact be the case, but it remains to be seen. One may have great faith and be extremely thankful, but it is difficult to be dependent when all we have is comfort. If we are to understand what it means to fully surrender to God, there must come a point in our lives when we are actually desperate,