

SESSION 1: THE POOR IN SPIRIT



SESSION SNAPSHOT

Weekly Verses: Matthew 5:1-3; James 4:1-8

Session Objective: To help students understand that being “poor in spirit” is good news about God’s grace.

OPENER

Invite your students to respond to the following questions.

Would you rather:

- Be a famous athlete or musician?
- Visit 100 years in the past or 100 years in the future?
- Be invisible or read minds?
- Not use your computer for a month or not eat junk food for a month?
- Have to sing instead of speaking or have to dance everywhere you go?
- Have only two close friends or many acquaintances?
- Be rich or poor?

Follow up this activity by saying, “Compared to the others, the last question wasn’t very difficult to answer, was it? Today we’re talking about Jesus’ words, ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit.’ At first glance, his statement can seem challenging. However, Jesus is bringing us wonderful news about trusting the Father and depending on God’s grace. His words are freeing and meant to save us from our self-reliance and striving.”

Understanding Matthew 5:1-3

Jesus chose his words carefully as he began his Sermon on the Mount. He said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3). But how can anyone who can claim the kingdom of heaven be “poor” in anything? The first beatitude signals a radical departure from the way the world thinks. If being poor means having no resources to help oneself, then being poor in spirit includes those who recognize they are spiritually helpless. It’s referring to people who know they have no way to save themselves. Only those who recognize that they are poor in spirit will realize that they are totally dependent on God.

In a world that tells us to earn more, try harder, and be better, Jesus gives us permission to be honest about our frail humanity—and receive his free, transforming grace.

Understanding James 4:1-8

In chapter four, James warns his fellow believers to submit to God and not the influences of the world (v. 4). He calls out those who are quarreling in church and seeking their own way instead of godly wisdom. *Don’t be friends with the world,* he warns, *because that is in opposition to God.*

James is talking to believers who are followers of God and at the same time captivated by the ways of the world. Pride leads us down a path of self-centeredness; however, God “favors the humble.” The remedy for pride is submitting to God—turning our focus off self and, in humility, surrendering our will to God.

OPENING THE WORD

Ask a student to read Matthew 5:1-3.

Share with students that in Jesus' day, those with material wealth were viewed as blessed beyond others. The reverse of this belief was that the poor were bad and deserved their poverty. When Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," his words would have shocked those who were listening. And yet, he was teaching us about humility, relationship, and trusting the Father. If being poor means having no resources to help oneself, then being poor in spirit means recognizing that we are spiritually helpless and have no way of saving ourselves. Only when we recognize we are poor in spirit do we realize we are totally dependent on God. For Jesus, blessing is all about relationship. That relationship is an invitation into his kingdom.

Discuss the following questions:

- What do you think it means to be poor in spirit?
- How does being poor in spirit bring us into deeper relationship with God?
- In a society so focused on self and consuming more, what are the challenges of remaining poor in spirit?
- In what areas are you tempted to do life in your own strength and without God's help?

Ask a student to read James 4:1-8. Discuss the following questions:

- According to verses 2-3, how important are our motives when we pray?
- In what ways is the world opposed to the ways of God?
- What do you think it means when Scripture says, "He jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us" (verse 5)?
- Verse 8 says, "Come near to God and he will come near to you." How does pride keep us away from God? What are the spiritual benefits of a humble spirit?

UNDERSTANDING THE LARGER STORY

Read the following to your students.

Everything God does is for our good. When he invites us to be poor in spirit (depending on him) rather than proud (depending on ourselves), we can trust that he's giving us insight into the best and most fruitful way to live.

So, what are the ways we proudly try to do things on our own? One way is through striving and religious self-help. It's a worldly kind of pride that is nothing new. In Jesus' time, people would work themselves into a frenzy trying to please the gods and goddesses of their day. They would bring elaborate gifts to pagan temples, seeking to "buy" divine favor. Even parts of Judaism were like this. The Sadducees and Pharisees advocated careful observance of Temple liturgy, rituals, and worship. It seemed as though everyone was

trying to earn their way, which isn't altogether different from today. Even those who don't strive for God's approval strive for the approval of their peers.

With the first beatitude, Jesus swept away all other approaches to salvation that relied on human strength, smarts, and righteousness. The truth is, God is the source of all, and we must come to him with humble hearts.

REFLECTION

Have students use their student handout for the following activity.

Being poor in spirit is recognizing our need for God. Those areas where we feel the weakest, the most helpless, or ashamed are actually opportunities to draw near to God and rely on his strength. In this way, God turns the bad into good! After explaining this, ask students to find a place to pray and reflect on areas where they need God's help. Invite students to write down the top five things they are depending on the Lord for. If they struggle to come up with answers, they can use the prompts on their student handout.

TAKEAWAY THOUGHT

This week invite students to pray that the Lord will reveal one area in their life where they may be hanging on to pride or self-reliance. When God reveals an issue, tell students to lay it at the foot of the cross and rejoice, knowing they can depend on him to provide for every area of their life.

SESSION 1: THE POOR IN SPIRIT



THIS WEEK'S SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Matthew 5:1-3

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."

James 4:1-8

What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you? You desire but do not have, so you kill. You covet but you cannot get what you want, so you quarrel and fight. You do not have because you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures.

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world means enmity against God? Therefore, anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. Or do you think Scripture says without reason that he jealously longs for the spirit he has caused to dwell in us? But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble."

Submit yourselves, then, to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded.

BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT

REFLECTION

Being poor in spirit means recognizing our need for God. Those areas where we feel the weakest, the most helpless, or ashamed are actually opportunities to draw near to God and rely on his strength. In this way, God turns the bad into good! Find a place to pray and reflect on areas where you need God's help. Write down the top five things you are depending on the Lord for. If you struggle to come up with answers, you can use the prompts below.

At school, I am depending on God to help me _____.

At home, I am depending on God to help me _____.

In my heart, I am depending on God to help me _____.

With my friends, I am depending on God to help me _____.

In life, I am depending on God to help me _____.