

St. Gregory of Nyssa:

... “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens.” (Matt. 5.3 ONT)
... What, then, is this poverty of spirit through which we come to possess the Kingdom of Heaven? We know from Scripture that there are two kinds of riches, the one to be desired, the other condemned. The riches of virtue are to be pursued, but material wealth is rejected; for the one is gain to the soul, whereas the other is apt to deceive the senses. Therefore the Lord forbids laying up the latter, because it serves only as food for moths and attracts the wiles of burglars. [“Cease treasuring up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust doth destroy, and where thieves dig through and steal; but be treasuring up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth spoil, and where thieves do not dig through nor steal. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” Matt. 6.19-21 ONT] But He commands us to be zealous for spiritual wealth, which the power of corruption does not touch. By mentioning moths and thieves, He showed what destroys the treasures of the soul. Now if poverty is opposed to wealth, one must by way of analogy also teach a twofold poverty, the one to be rejected, the other to be considered blessed. If a person is poor in temperance, in the precious asset of justice, in wisdom or prudence; or if he is found completely lacking in any other of such great treasures, he is most wretched and pitiable, because he is poor in the things of true value. On the other hand, if a man is voluntarily poor in all that has to do with wickedness, if he has no diabolical treasures hidden in his inner chamber, but is fervent in spirit, he lays up for himself the treasure of poverty in evil. He is the man whom the Word presents as enjoying that poverty which is called blessed, whose fruit is the Kingdom of Heaven.

But let us once more get back to this business of the treasure, let us not weary of letting the probing word bring to light what is hidden. “Blessed”, He says, “are the poor in spirit”. This has in some way also been said before, and will now be said again, that the end of the life of virtue is to become like to God. Yet man can by no means whatever imitate the purity that is without passion. For it is simply impossible that the life that is enmeshed in passions should become like the Nature that is impervious to passions. If, therefore, as the Apostle says (cf. 1 Tim. 6.15), the Divine alone is blessed, and man shares in this blessedness through the likeness with God, but if, on the other hand, it is impossible to imitate God, then beatitude is out of the reach of human life.

There are, however, things belonging to the Godhead which are set up for the imitation of those who wish. Now what are these? It seems to me that by poverty of spirit the Word understands voluntary humility. As an example of this the Apostle adduces the poverty of God when he says: “that being rich, He became poor for your sakes, that ye might become rich by the poverty of that One.” (2 Cor. 8.9b ONT) Now everything else that is being contemplated in the Divine Nature surpasses the limits of human nature; but humility is connatural [belonging to a person by nature; inborn] and as it were a brother to us who walk on the ground, who are composed of earth and again dissolve into earth. If, therefore, you imitate God in what is possible to your nature, you will yourself have put on the blessed form.

But let no one imagine that humility can be achieved easily and without labor. On the contrary, it needs more effort than the practice of any other virtue. Why? Though man had received good seeds, the chief of the opposite seeds—the tares of pride—sown by the enemy of our life, took root while he was asleep. For the same thing by which the devil had caused his own downfall to earth, caused the miserable human race to fling itself down with him into the common ruin; and there is no other evil so harmful to our nature as that which is caused by pride.

Since, therefore, the vice of arrogance is ingrained in almost everyone who shares the human nature, the Lord begins the Beatitudes with this. He removes pride, the root evil, from our character by counseling us to imitate Him who became poor of His own will, Who is the truly Blessed One. In this way we may, as far as we are able, become like Him by being poor of our own free will, and so be drawn to share His Beatitude. “For”, as is said, “let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, Who, existing in the form of God, deemed it not a prize to be seized to be equal with God; but He emptied Himself and took the form of a slave, and came to be in the likeness of men.” (Phil. 2.5-7 ONT)

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Extreme Humility (provenance unknown).

What greater poverty is there for God than the form of a servant? What more humble for the King of creation than to share in our poor nature? The Ruler of rulers, the Lord of lords puts on voluntarily the garb of servitude. The Judge of all things becomes a subject of governors; the Lord of creation dwells in a cave; He who holds the universe in His hands finds no place in the inn, but is cast aside into the manger of irrational beasts. ["The ox knows his owner, and the ass his master's crib: but Israel does not know me, and the people has not regarded me." Esaias 1.3 Brenton's LXX]



Detail from an Icon of the Nativity of Christ showing the beasts (provenance unknown).

The perfectly Pure accepts the filth of human nature, and after going through all our poverty passes on to the experience of death. Look at the standard by which to measure voluntary poverty! Life tastes death; the Judge is brought to judgment; the Lord of the life of all creatures is sentenced by the judge; the King of all heavenly powers does not push aside the hands of the executioners. Take this, He says, as an example by which to measure your

humility.

...

Nor should you, my dear brethren, disregard the other interpretation of poverty which begets the riches of Heaven. "... sell," He says, "thy possessions, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and keep following Me." (Matt. 19.21 ONT) It seems to me that this kind of poverty does not differ from the one that is called blessed. Behold, we have left all we had and followed Thee, says the disciple to the Master, what therefore shall we have? And what is the answer? "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens." (Matt. 5.3 ONT) Would you like to know who it is that is poor in spirit? He who is given the riches of the soul in exchange for material wealth, who is poor for the sake of the spirit. He has shaken off earthly riches like a burden so that he may be lightly lifted into the air and be borne upwards, as says the Apostle, in the cloud walking on high together with God. ["For the Lord Himself shall descend from heaven with a shout of command, with a voice of an archangel, and with a trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we the living, the ones remaining over, shall be carried off together with them in clouds to a meeting of the Lord in the air, and so shall we always be with the Lord." (1 Thess. 4.16-17 ONT)]

Gold is a heavy thing, and heavy is every kind of matter that is sought after for the sake of wealth—but virtue is light and bears souls upwards. Truly these two, heaviness and lightness, are opposed to each other. Therefore, if a man has attached himself to the heaviness of matter, it is impossible for him to become light. Since, then, we ought to tend to the things above, let us become poor in the things that drag us down, so that we may sojourn in the upper regions. The Psalms show us the way: "He dispersed, he gave to the poor; his righteousness abideth unto the age of the age." (Ps. 111.8a OP) The man who gives to the poor will take his share in Him who became poor for our sake. The Lord became poor, so be not afraid of poverty. But He who became poor for us reigns over all creation. Therefore, if you become poor because He became poor, you will also reign because He is reigning. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven, of which may we also be made worthy in Christ Jesus Our Lord, to whom be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

St. John Chrysostom:

What is meant by "the poor in spirit?" The humble and contrite in mind. For by "spirit" He hath here designated the soul, and the faculty of choice. That is, since many are humble not willingly, but compelled by stress of circumstances; letting these pass (for this were no matter of praise), He blesses them first, who by choice humble and contract themselves.

But why said he not, "the humble," but rather "the poor?" Because this is more than that. For He means here them who are awestruck, and tremble at the commandments of God. Whom also by His prophet Isaiah God earnestly accepting said, "To whom will I have respect, but to the humble and meek, and the man that trembles at my words?" (Esaias

66.2a Brenton's LXX) For indeed there are many kinds of humility: one is humble in his own measure, another with all excess of lowliness. It is this last lowliness of mind which that blessed prophet commends, picturing to us the temper that is not merely subdued, but utterly broken, when he saith, "A sacrifice unto God is a spirit having been made contrite; a heart having been made contrite and humble God will not treat with contempt." (Psalm 50:17 OP) And the Three Children also offer this unto God as a great sacrifice, saying, "But with a soul having been made contrite and a spirit having been made humble, may we be accepted!" (Seventh Biblical Ode, v. 11, OP; cf. "The Song of the Three a Children", v. 15, following Daniel 3.23, Brenton's LXX.) This Christ also now blesses.



The Four Men in the Fiery Furnace, Novgorod School, 15th century (Timken Museum of Art)

3. For whereas the greatest of evils, and those which make havoc of the whole world, had their entering in from pride:—for both the devil, not being such before, did thus become a devil; as indeed Paul plainly declared, saying, “lest having been puffed up with pride he should fall into the condemnation of the devil” (1 Tim. 3:6b ONT)—and the first man, too, puffed up by the devil with these hopes, was made an example of, and became mortal (for expecting to become a god, he lost even what he had; and God also upbraiding him with this, and mocking his folly, said, “Behold, Adam is become as one of us” (Gen. 3:23b Brenton’s LXX); and each one of those that came after did hereby wreck himself in impiety, fancying some equality with God:—since, I say, this was the stronghold of our evils, and the root and fountain of all wickedness, He, preparing a remedy suitable to the disease, laid this law first as a strong and safe foundation. For this being fixed as a base, the builder in security lays on it all the rest. But if this be taken away, though a man reach to the Heavens in his course of life, it is all easily undermined, and issues in a grievous end. Though fasting, prayer, almsgiving, temperance, any other good thing whatever, be gathered together in thee; without humility all fall away and perish.

It was this very thing that took place in the instance of the Pharisee. For even after he had arrived at the very summit, he “went down” with the loss of all, because he had not the mother of virtues: for as pride is the fountain of all wickedness, so is humility the principle of all self-command. (Cf. Luke 18:9-14) Wherefore also He begins with this, pulling up boasting by the very root out of the soul of His hearers.

“And what,” one may ask, “is this to His disciples, who were on every account humble? For in truth they had nothing to be proud of, being fishermen, poor, ignoble, and illiterate.” (cf. Matthew 4:18, 19:27) Even though these things concerned not His disciples, yet surely they concerned such as were then present (cf. Acts 4:13 ff.), and such as were hereafter to receive the disciples, lest they should on this account despise them. But it were truer to say that they did also concern His disciples. For even if not then, yet by and by they were sure to require this help, after their signs and wonders, and their honor from the world, and their confidence towards God. For neither wealth, nor power, nor royalty itself, had so much power to exalt men, as the things which they possessed in all fullness. And besides, it was natural that even before the signs they might be lifted up, at that very time when they saw the multitude, and all that audience surrounding their Master; they might feel some human weakness. Wherefore He at once represses their pride.

And He doth not introduce what He saith by way of advice or of commandments, but by way of blessing, so making His word less burthensome, and opening to all the course of His discipline. For He said not, “This or that person,” but “they who do so, are all of them blessed.” So that though thou be a slave, a beggar, in poverty, a stranger, unlearned, there is nothing to hinder thee from being blessed, if thou emulate this virtue.

St. Leo the Great:

“Blessed,” He saith, “are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of the heavens.” (Matt. 5:3 ONT) It would perhaps be doubtful what poor He was speaking of, if in saying “blessed are the poor” He had added nothing which would explain the sort of poor: and then that poverty by itself would appear sufficient to win the kingdom of heaven which many suffer from hard and heavy necessity. But when He says “blessed are the poor in spirit,” He shows that the kingdom of heaven must be assigned to those who are recommended by the humility of their spirits rather than by the smallness of their means.

Yet it cannot be doubted that this possession of humility is more easily acquired by the poor than the rich: for submissiveness is the companion of those that want, while loftiness of mind dwells with riches. Notwithstanding, even in many of the rich is found that spirit which uses its abundance not for the increasing of its pride but on works of kindness, and counts that for the greatest gain which it expends in the relief of others’ hardships. It is given to every kind and rank of men to share in this virtue, because men may be equal in will, though unequal in fortune: and it does not matter how different they are in earthly means, who are found equal in spiritual possessions. Blessed, therefore, is poverty which is not possessed with a love of temporal things, and does not seek to be increased with the riches of the world, but is eager to amass heavenly possessions.

III. Scriptural examples of humility.

Of this high-souled humility the Apostles first, after the Lord, have given us example, who, leaving all that they had without difference at the voice of the heavenly Master, were turned by a ready change from the catching of fish to be fishers of men, and made many like themselves through the imitation of their faith, when with those first-begotten sons of the Church, “of the multitude of those who believed there was one heart and soul;” (Acts 4:32a ONT) for they, putting away the whole of their things and possessions, enriched themselves with eternal goods, through the most devoted poverty, and in accordance with the Apostles’ preaching rejoiced to have nothing of the world and possess all things with Christ.

Hence the blessed Apostle Peter, when he was going up into the temple, and was asked for alms by the lame man, said, “Silver and gold have I none; but what I have, this I give to thee: in the name of Jesus Christ the Nazaræan, rise up and be walking.” (Acts 3:6 ONT) What more sublime than this humility? what richer than this poverty? He hath not stores of money, but he hath gifts of nature. He whom his mother had brought forth lame from the womb, is made whole by Peter with a word; and he who gave not Cæsar’s image in a coin, restored Christ’s image on the man. And by the riches of this treasure not he only was aided whose power of walking was restored, but 5,000 men also, who then believed at the Apostle’s exhortation on account of the wonder of this cure. And that poor man who had not what to give to the asker, bestowed so great a bounty of Divine Grace, that, as he had set one man straight on his feet, so he healed these many thousands of believers in their hearts, and made them “leap as an hart” [“Behold, our God renders judgement, and he will render *it*; he will come and save us. Then shall the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall hear. Then shall the lame man leap as an hart, and the tongue of the stammerers shall speak plainly.” Esaias 35:4b-6a Brenton’s LXX] in Christ whom he had found limping in

Jewish unbelief.

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