

Session 2: Poor in Spirit

Matthew 5:3

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

Session Overview

Discovery Aim. The group discovers who the *anawim* of the Old Testament are, why the first beatitude is first, and what poverty of spirit asks of people who are not materially poor.

Catholic Touchstone. CCC 2544-2547: poverty of heart; the kingdom belongs to those who hold everything with open hands.

What You Need to Know

The first beatitude is the foundation stone; Fathers like St. Gregory of Nyssa and St. John Chrysostom read the others as built upon it. "Poor in spirit" is Matthew's Greek wording for a posture the Hebrew Scriptures had already named. The Old Testament's *anawim* (the poor, the lowly, the afflicted) were those who, having nothing to lean on, leaned entirely on God, and the prophets increasingly associate the faithful remnant with exactly these humble and lowly ones. Zephaniah tells the humble of the land to seek the LORD; Isaiah is anointed to bring good tidings to the afflicted. Mary's *Magnificat* is an *anawim* song; so is the first beatitude.

Matthew writes "poor in spirit"; Luke's parallel says bluntly "you poor" (Luke 6:20). These are not rivals. Material poverty can strip away the illusions that wealth funds, which is why Jesus speaks so severely about riches; but Scripture knows poor men with grasping hearts and rich men (Abraham, Job, Joseph of Arimathea) whose hands were open. Poverty of spirit is the interior posture the exterior condition can teach: dependence, not destitution, is the blessing. The Church holds both texts together: a real preference for the poor, and a real demand on the rich.

Note the tense once more: "theirs IS the kingdom of heaven." The kingdom already belongs to the poor in spirit, really and presently, even as its fullness is still to come. Everything else in the Christian life fits through this door, which is why the door is first.

Old Testament Roots and Fulfillment

Zephaniah 2:3 addresses "all you humble of the land" and 3:12 promises that God will leave in Israel "a people humble and lowly" who seek refuge in the name of the LORD. Note the difference in register: 2:3 holds out a hope ("perhaps you may be hidden"), while 3:12 gives a promise. Prophetic remnant theology and *anawim* theology grow together here.

Isaiah 61:1 ("the LORD has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted") stands directly behind this beatitude, and the group will discover in Build 4 what Jesus does with this text in the synagogue at Nazareth. Psalm 34:18 belongs to the same root system: "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit." File it; it returns in Session 3.

Voices of the Church

ST. GREGORY OF NYSSA · DE BEATITUDINIBUS, AS QUOTED IN CCC 2546

The Catechism, at 2546, quotes St. Gregory of Nyssa on this beatitude: "The Word speaks of voluntary humility as 'poverty in spirit.'" Gregory reads the first beatitude as humility freely chosen, in imitation of the God who freely became poor.

Application (ours, not the saint's): the first step of the ascent: nothing can be climbed by a hand that will

not first let go.

ST. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM · HOMILIES ON MATTHEW

St. John Chrysostom, preaching through Matthew in Antioch, teaches in substance that the poor in spirit are the humble and contrite of heart, and that Christ set this beatitude first deliberately: pride was the first sin and the root of the rest, so humility is laid as the foundation of the whole edifice. Where pride toppled even angels, the lowly heart stands secure.

Application (ours, not the saint's): the order of the Beatitudes is itself a teaching. No one hungers for righteousness, shows mercy, or endures persecution well who has not first been emptied.

ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX · STORY OF A SOUL; ACT OF OBLATION TO MERCIFUL LOVE

St. Thérèse of Lisieux's "little way" is a sustained enactment of this beatitude: remaining little, expecting everything from God as a child expects everything from its father, and coming before him, as her Act of Oblation to Merciful Love prays in substance, with empty hands. She did not trust her own accumulated merits; she trusted his mercy.

Application (ours, not the saint's): poverty of spirit is not self-hatred. It is the relief of finally telling the truth about where the money comes from.

Catechism Connection · CCC 544, 2544-2547

CCC 544: the kingdom belongs to the poor and lowly, to those who accept it with humble hearts; Jesus was sent to preach good news to the poor and identifies himself with them. CCC 2544-2547 gathers the tradition under the heading "poverty of heart": the Lord asks his disciples to prefer him to everything, and abandonment to the providence of the Father frees us from anxiety. The precept is detachment; the promise is the kingdom, already given and still to be completed. (The open-hands image in tonight's touchstone is our gloss on these paragraphs.)

THREAD WATCH (LEADER ONLY)

FACE OF CHRIST (develop, do not reveal): tonight's line of the portrait is 2 Corinthians 8:9, "though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor." Note it privately; the citation and its place in the portrait stay sealed until Session 8 (paraphrase in prayer or patristic summary is fine, as tonight's closing prayer shows).

ANAWIM ROOTS (plant openly): tonight the group meets Zephaniah, Isaiah 61, and Psalm 34. Tell them these texts will keep resurfacing; the Old Testament root system runs under the whole sermon.

LADDER: first rung named (letting go). SEALED GUESS: envelopes remain sealed; if anyone asks, smile and say Session 5.

Session Goals

1. Participants can define *anawim* and locate the tradition in Zephaniah and Isaiah.
2. Participants can state the relationship between Matthew's "poor in spirit" and Luke's "you poor" without flattening either.
3. Participants discover the Isaiah 61 / Luke 4 connection themselves.

4. Participants answer the prosperity-gospel steelman from the text.

Time Note

90 minutes: Win 12, Read 5, Build 45, Steelman 12, Send 8, Live It + Closing 8. If running short: cut Build 6 and compress the Dig Deeper; keep the Nazareth discovery whole.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

Opening Prayer

Father, your Son had nowhere to lay his head. Teach us tonight the freedom of empty hands. Show us what we are gripping, and give us the trust to open our fingers. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Win: Opening the Circle

Win 1. What is something you would find genuinely hard to give up, not because it is expensive, but because of what it means to you?

Win 2. Have you ever met someone who had very little and yet seemed free? What was that like to be around?

Build: Into the Text

Build 1. Read Matthew 5:3 and Luke 6:20 side by side. What is different? Why might both be in the Bible?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Matthew: "poor in spirit"; Luke: "you poor," with a matching woe for the rich. Both are inspired. Luke guards against spiritualizing poverty into a comfortable metaphor; Matthew guards against reducing it to a bank balance. Held together: material poverty can teach the dependence that blesses, and wealth endangers it, but the beatitude finally names a posture of the heart available to (and required of) everyone.

Build 2. DISCOVERY. Read Zephaniah 2:3 and 3:12. Who is God addressing, what future does he hold out to them, and what descriptions keep repeating?

Leader cue: Live discovery: the anawim. Let the group notice "humble" and "lowly" themselves and build the profile from the text.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

The "humble of the land" who do God's commands and seek refuge in his name. Zephaniah 2:3 holds out the hope that the humble may be hidden on the day of wrath; 3:12 promises that God will leave exactly such a people. The prophets increasingly locate Israel's future not with the powerful but with the *anawim*, the poor of the LORD who lean on him entirely. The first beatitude is addressed to a people who already existed.

Build 3. Read Psalm 34:6 and 34:18. What do these verses claim God is actually like? How would a member of the *anawim* pray this psalm?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

"This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him"; "The LORD is near to the brokenhearted, and saves the crushed in spirit." Not a God who rewards the self-sufficient, but one whose nearness is promised precisely to the emptied. For the *anawim* this is not poetry; it is their entire security.

Build 4. DISCOVERY. Read Isaiah 61:1-2. Now read Luke 4:16-21. What does Jesus do with this text, and what does he claim?

Leader cue: Live discovery: the Nazareth scene. Give them time; the payoff line is Luke 4:21.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Isaiah: the Spirit-anointed one brings good tidings to the afflicted (the *anawim*). In the Nazareth synagogue Jesus reads from this Isaiah scroll (Luke gives the reading in the synagogue's Greek form, which also weaves in a line of Isaiah 58:6), rolls up the scroll, and says, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." He claims to be the Anointed One, and he defines his mission as good news to the poor. The first beatitude echoes the heart of that mission in one sentence.

Build 5. "Theirs IS the kingdom." Present tense. What difference does the tense make to someone in the room who feels they have nothing?

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

The kingdom is not only a consolation scheduled for later; it already belongs to those with empty hands, though its fullness is still to come. The poor in spirit are already citizens, which is why saints in real destitution have spoken of wealth.

Build 6. Honest inventory: for people who are not materially poor, what does poverty of spirit concretely require? Push past vague answers.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Concrete forms: holding possessions as an owner accountable to God and a steward for others; generosity that actually costs something; refusing to let net worth or achievement fund identity; the daily admission, in prayer, that everything is received; readiness to lose anything rather than lose God. The test is not owning things but whether we could open our hands without losing ourselves.

Steelman: the prosperity reading

At full strength: Scripture repeatedly attaches material blessing to faithfulness. Deuteronomy promises prosperity in the land for obedience; Abraham, Job, and Solomon are wealthy precisely as blessed men; Job's fortunes are restored double. Malachi even says, "put me to the test... if I will not open the windows of heaven for you" (Malachi 3:10, abridged). On this reading, God wants his people visibly blessed, poverty is a condition to be escaped by faith, and "poor in spirit" means poor in worldly attachment while rich in fact. Many sincere Christians hold some version of this.

Press: this steelman quotes real verses. Where exactly does it go wrong? Answer from the text, not from taste.

ANSWER (SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION)

Grant what is true: creation is good, prosperity can be a blessing, and God is generous. But the reading collapses on the New Testament's central data point: Jesus. He is the most faithful man who ever lived and he was laid in a manger because there was no room (Luke 2:7), had nowhere to lay his head (Matthew 8:20), and died stripped of everything. If prosperity tracked faithfulness, Calvary is inexplicable. Further: Jesus pronounces woes on the rich (Luke 6:24), warns that wealth chokes the word (Matthew 13:22), and says it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom (Matthew 19:23-24). The Deuteronomic blessings were real but pedagogical, and the Old Testament itself already complicates them: Job suffers though blameless and upright, and the *anawim* are met and blessed by God in the midst of their poverty (dependence, not deprivation, being the blessing), which never makes destitution good or its relief optional. The first beatitude does not promise the poor in spirit an upgrade; it gives them the kingdom.

DIG DEEPER

Luke's parallel sermon sharpens tonight's comparison: Luke 6:20-26 has four blessings answered by four woes ("woe to you that are rich..."). Some readers argue that Matthew spiritualized an originally socioeconomic blessing. Read the woes this week and test that claim against tonight's work: Matthew's *anawim* background is already both socioeconomic and spiritual, and Luke's own Gospel blesses a rich Zacchaeus the moment his hands open (Luke 19:1-10). The two evangelists guard each other; neither cancels the other.

DIG DEEPER

Mary's *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) is the great *anawim* prayer of the New Testament: God has "regarded the low estate of his handmaiden," exalted those of low degree, filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich empty away. Pray it this week alongside Matthew 5:3 and notice how completely the mother has absorbed what the Son will preach.

Send: Down the Mountain

Send 1. What is one thing you are gripping that this beatitude is asking you to hold with open hands?

Send 2. Who in your life is materially poor, and what would it mean to receive them as the beatitude does, rather than as a project?

Live It This Week

- Memorize Matthew 5:3 and add it to Matthew 5:12a from last week.
- Make one act of generosity this week that actually costs you something, and tell no one.
- Pray the *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) once this week, slowly.
- Read Matthew 5:4-5 before Session 3.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, rich beyond telling, you became poor for our sake. Unclench our hands. Give us the happiness of the anawim, who lean on you entirely and receive the kingdom with empty hands. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse

MATTHEW 5:3

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

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 2, in order:

- Matthew 5:3
- Luke 6:20 (parallel)
- Zephaniah 2:3; 3:12 (discovery)
- Psalm 34:6, 18
- Isaiah 61:1-2 (discovery)
- Luke 4:16-21 (discovery)
- Luke 6:24; Matthew 13:22; Matthew 19:23-24 (steelman)
- Malachi 3:10; Luke 2:7; Matthew 8:20; Deuteronomy 28 (steelman)
- Luke 6:20-26 (Dig Deeper)
- Luke 1:46-55 (Dig Deeper)
- 2 Corinthians 8:9 (leader thread, unread)