

The Unbelievable Beatitudes

How to receive their blessings in your life

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About the Author

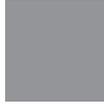


Lori Tripp Peckham is a Christian writer and editor, as well as an experienced teacher and speaker. She served as an editor of *Insight*, the Seventh-day Adventist magazine for teenagers, for 16 years, the last eight as senior editor. During her time there the magazine received national awards for editing, content, and design. Part of her ministry has also included speaking at youth events, Pathfinder camporees, academies, colleges, and writing workshops.

After *Insight* she served as editor of *Women of Spirit*, a Christian outreach magazine for women. She has been a featured speaker at various women's ministries events throughout North America and Australia. She also wrote the leader's guide for the Bible study series "Surprised by Love," sponsored by the North American Division Women's Ministries Department.

Lori has edited numerous books, including 10 of the *Guide's Greatest* stories series and *Insight Presents More Unforgettable Stories*. She is the author of *Jesus in My Shoes*, as well as scores of articles for *Insight*, *Guide*, *Winner*, *Listen*, *Primary Treasure*, *Women of Spirit*, and *Marriage Partnership*.

Lori has been a Sabbath school teacher for the past 25 years and currently leads a young adult class at her church in Maryland. She lives in the historic town of Sharpsburg with her creative husband, Kim, and their energetic son, Reef



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

— Matthew 5:3

Chapter One

The Poor in Spirit

“The Beatitudes are Christ’s greeting, not only to those who believe, but to the whole human family,”¹ wrote Ellen White. Yet Christ’s greeting was far from platitudes and pleasantries. During His brief ministry on earth, Jesus went for shock value—at least it might seem so from reading the gospels. His actions and words were counterculture—not only back then but today as well.

From a young age Jesus established Himself as someone who intimately knew the Law and Scripture. In fact, He did this at age 12 when His parents brought Him to the Passover celebration in Jerusalem. Ellen White describes how Jesus went to the Temple and asked questions of the rabbis, particularly concerning their understanding of the prophecies relating to the Messiah. Then He taught them—and shocked them:

With the humility of a child He repeated the words of Scripture, giving them a depth of meaning that the wise men had not conceived of. If followed, the lines of truth He pointed out would have worked a reformation in the religion of the day. A deep interest in spiritual things would have been awakened; and when Jesus began His ministry, many would have been prepared to receive Him.²

Unfortunately, these rabbis—lacking that all-important quality of being “poor in spirit”—rejected the knowledge of this youth whom they had not taught in their schools:

¹ Ellen White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. vii.

² Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 78, 79.

They could not but see that their expectation in regard to the Messiah was not sustained by prophecy; but they would not renounce the theories that had flattered their ambition. They would not admit that they had misapprehended the Scriptures they claimed to teach. From one to another passed the inquiry, How hath this youth knowledge, having never learned? The light was shining in darkness; but “the darkness apprehended it not.” John 1:5.³

Jesus also shocked the establishment when He attended social gatherings with “sinners,” touched lepers, forgave a prostitute, healed blind and crippled beggars, asked for water from a Samaritan woman, had lunch with a tax collector, and freed a demoniac. The company He kept was just plain beneath the social norm, considered “lowlifes” and “untouchables.”

But Jesus obviously saw something in them. Was it this poverty of spirit He blessed first of all? While the rabbis and Pharisees rejected Him from their earliest association with Him, these other individuals embraced Him, listened to Him, thanked Him, and were transformed by Him.

A Progression

A number of Bible scholars hold that the Beatitudes were spoken in a specific order and that they show a distinct spiritual progression. White writes: “Throughout the Beatitudes there is an advancing line of Christian experience.”⁴

Arthur W. Pink, an English evangelist and biblical scholar, explains that the first four Beatitudes reveal “a definite progression of spiritual awakening and transformation.”

First, there is a discovery of the fact that I am nothing, have nothing, and can do nothing—poverty of spirit. Second, there is conviction of sin, a consciousness of guilt producing godly sorrow—mourning. Third, there is a renouncing of self-dependence and a taking of my place in the dust before God—meekness. Fourth, there follows an intense longing after Christ and His salvation—hungering and thirsting after righteousness. But, in a sense, all of this is simply negative, for it is the believing sinner’s perception of what is defective in himself and a yearning for what is desirable. In the next four Beatitudes we come to

³ Ibid, p. 80.

⁴ Ellen White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 13.



ADVENTIST VOICES PAST AND PRESENT

- Human power, in fact, gets in the way of divine power. The paradox of Christianity lies in this cosmic truth: “My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12:9, NKJV), and from the human side: “When I am weak, then I am strong” (verse 11). Heaven’s doors open to the soul that feels and acknowledges its powerlessness. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 5:3). Without distorting the text we could paraphrase it: “Blessed are those who aren’t hungry for power, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
William G. Johnsson, Mark: *The Gospel of Jesus*, p. 75.
- Self-conceit is one of the most difficult sins to conquer because of its deceptive nature. This is the chief reason why Christ’s preaching fell largely on deaf ears. He especially blessed “the poor in spirit,” those who recognized their spiritual poverty and mourned over it.
Taylor G. Bunch, *Love*, p. 64.
- God has never been impressed with human strength or self-sufficiency. Rather, He is drawn to people who are weak and admit it. According to Jesus, this is the number one attitude that God blesses. Being poor in spirit is a tacit recognition of our need to depend on God; it humbles us and prevents arrogance. The first beatitude is encouraging news for all of us, since none of us is self-sufficient.
Daniel S. Dapaah, “The Sermon on the Mount,” *Adventist Review*

the manifestation of positive good in the believer, the fruits of a new creation and the blessings of a transformed character. How this shows us, once more, the importance of noting that order in which God’s truth is presented to us!⁵

White explains why poverty of spirit is such an important first step.

He who feels whole, who thinks that he is reasonably good and is contented with his condition, does not seek to become a partaker of the grace and righteousness of Christ. Pride feels no need, and so it closes the heart against Christ and the infinite blessings He came to give. There is no room for Jesus in the heart of such a person. ... Those who know that they cannot possibly save themselves, or of themselves do

⁵ Arthur W. Pink, *The Beatitudes*

any righteous action, are the ones who appreciate the help that Christ can bestow.⁶

Pink goes on to note that while the Beatitudes teach us about God's kingdom, they teach us much more about those who belong to the kingdom of God.

What is poverty of spirit? It is the opposite of that haughty, self-assertive, and self-sufficient disposition that the world so much admires and praises. It is the very reverse of that independent and defiant attitude that refuses to bow to God, that determines to brave things out, and that says with Pharaoh, "Who is the Lord, that I should obey His voice?" (Ex. 5:2). To be poor in spirit is to realize that I have nothing, am nothing, and can do nothing, and have need of all things. Poverty of spirit is evident in a person when he is brought into the dust before God to acknowledge his utter helplessness. It is the first experiential evidence of a Divine work of grace within the soul, and corresponds to the initial awakening of the prodigal in the far country when he "began to be in want" (Luke 15:14).⁷

The Story of Max

Christian author Brennan Manning tells a dramatic story of a man who must be emptied of self and brought to the realization of his poverty of spirit. This man's experience also demonstrates the need for honesty—no matter how painful—as we consider our sinfulness and spiritual need. Below is the story in his words:

One of my indelible memories goes back to when I was a patient at an alcoholic rehabilitation center in a small town north of Minneapolis. The setting was a large, split-level recreation room on the brow of a hill overlooking an artificial lake.

Twenty-five chemically dependent men were assembled. Our leader was a trained counselor, skilled therapist, and senior member of the staff. His name was Sean Murphy-O'Connor, though he normally announced his arrival with the statement: "It's himself. Let's get to work."

Sean directed a patient named Max to sit on "the hot seat" in the center of the U-shaped group. A fastidious man, Max was a nominal Christian, married

⁶ Ellen White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, p. 7.

⁷ Arthur W. Pink, *The Beatitudes*.



INSPIRED THOUGHTS

- The poor in spirit feel their poverty, their want of the grace of Christ. They realize that they know little of God and his great love, and that they need light in order that they may know and keep the way of the Lord. They dare not face temptation in their own strength, for they realize that they have not moral force to resist evil. They have no pleasure in reviewing their past life, and little confidence in looking to the future, for they are sick at heart. But it is to such that Christ says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Christ saw that those who feel their poverty may be made rich.
Ellen White, *Signs of the Times*, August 1, 1895
- The proud heart strives to earn salvation; but both our title to heaven and our fitness for it are found in the righteousness of Christ. The Lord can do nothing toward the recovery of man until, convinced of his own weakness, and stripped of all self-sufficiency, he yields himself to the control of God. Then he can receive the gift that God is waiting to bestow. From the soul that feels his need, nothing is withheld. He has unrestricted access to Him in whom all fullness dwells.
Ellen White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 300
- Whom Christ pardons, He first makes penitent, and it is the office of the Holy Spirit to convince of sin. Those whose hearts have been moved by the convicting Spirit of God see that there is nothing good in themselves. They see that all they have ever done is mingled with self and sin.
Ellen White, *Thoughts From the Mount of Blessing*, pp. 7, 8

with five children, owner and president of his company, wealthy, affable, and gifted with remarkable poise.

“How long have you been drinking like a pig, Max?” Murphy-O’Connor had begun the interrogation.

Max winced. “That’s quite unfair.”

“We shall see. I want to get into your drinking history. How much booze per day?”

Max relit his corn cob pipe. “I have two Marys with the men before lunch and twin Martins after the office closes at 5:00. Then—”

“What are Marys and Martins?” Murphy-O’Connor interrupted.

“Bloody Marys—vodka, tomato juice, a dash of lemon and Worcestershire, a splash of Tabasco; and martinis. Beefeaters, gin, extra dry, straight up, ice-cold with an olive and lemon twist.”

“Thank you, Mary Martin. Continue.”

“The wife likes a drink before dinner. I got her hooked on Martins several years ago.”

No one responded.

“As I was saying, we have two martinis before dinner and two more before going to bed.”

“A total of eight drinks a day, Max?” Murphy-O’Connor inquired.

“Absolutely right. Not a drop more, not a drop less.”

“You’re a liar!”

Unruffled, Max replied: “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that. I have been in business for 20-odd years and built my reputation on veracity, not mendacity. People know my word is my bond.”

“Ever hide a bottle in your house?” asked Benjamin, a Navajo Indian from New Mexico.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve got a bar in my living room.” Max felt he had regained control. He was smiling again.

“Do you keep any booze in the garage, Max?”

“Naturally. I have to replenish the stock. A man in my profession does a lot of entertaining at home.” The executive swagger had returned.

“How many bottles in the garage?”

“I really don’t know the actual count. Offhand, I would say two cases of Smirnoff vodka, a case of Beefeater gin, a few bottles of bourbon and Scotch, and a bevy of liquors.”

The interrogation continued for another 20 minutes. Max fudged and hedged, minimized, rationalized, and justified his drinking pattern. Finally, hemmed in by relentless cross-examination, he admitted he kept a bottle of vodka in the nightstand, a bottle of gin in the suitcase for travel purpose, another in his bathroom cabinet for medicinal purposes, and three more at the office for entertaining clients. He squirmed occasionally, but never lost his veneer of confidence.

Max grinned. “Gentlemen, I guess we have all gilded the lily once or twice in our lives” was the way he put it, implying that only men of large character can afford the luxury of self-deprecating humor.

“You’re a liar!” another voice boomed.

“No need to get vindictive, Charlie,” Max shot back. “Remember the image in John’s Gospel about the speck in your brother’s eye and the two-by-four in your own. And the other one in Matthew about the pot calling the kettle black.”

(I felt constrained to inform Max that the speck-and-plank comparison was found not in John but in Matthew and the pot and the kettle was a secular proverb found in none of the Gospels. But I sensed a spirit of smugness and an air of spiritual superiority had suddenly enveloped me like a thick fog. I decided to forgo the opportunity for correction. After all, I was another broken-down drunk like Max.)

“Get me a phone,” said Murphy-O’Connor.

A telephone was wheeled into the room. Murphy-O’Connor consulted a memo pad and dialed a number in a distant city. It was Max’s hometown. Our receiver was rigged electronically so that the party dialed could be heard loud and clear throughout the room.

“Hank Shea?”

“Yeah, who’s this?”

“My name is Sean Murphy-O’Connor. I am a counselor at an alcohol and drug rehabilitation center in the Midwest. Do you remember a customer named Max? (Pause on the other end.) Good. With his family’s permission I am researching his drinking history. You tend bar in that tavern every afternoon, so I am wondering if you could tell me approximately how much Max drinks each day?”

“I know Max well, but are you sure you have his permission to question me?”

“I have a signed affidavit. Shoot.”

“He’s a great guy. I really like him. He drops 30 bucks in here every afternoon. Max has his standard six martinis, buys a few drinks, and always leaves me a five. Good man.”

Max leapt to his feet. Raising his right hand defiantly, he unleashed a stream of profanity. He attacked Murphy-O’Connor’s ancestry, impugned Charlie’s legitimacy, and the whole unit’s integrity. He clawed at the sofa and spat on the rug.

Then, incredibly, he immediately regained his composure. Max reseated himself and remarked matter-of-factly that even Jesus lost His temper in the Temple when He saw the Sadducees hawking pigeons and pastries. After an extemporaneous homily to the group on justifiable anger, he stoved his pipe and presumed that the interrogation was over.

“Have you ever been unkind to one of your kids?” Fred asked.

“Glad you brought that up, Fred. I have a fantastic rapport with my four boys. Last Thanksgiving I took them on a fishing expedition to the Rockies. Four



OTHER VOICES

- The smallest package in the world is a person wrapped up in himself.
Traditional
 - Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel that we are good—above all, that we are better than someone else—I think we may be sure that we are being acted on, not by God, but by the devil. The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether or you see yourself as a small, dirty object. It is better to forget about yourself altogether.
C. S. Lewis, *The Joyful Christian*, p. 166
 - Christ opposes selfish desire only to replace it with unselfish desire, not emptiness. We are to be spiritually poor only for the sake of becoming spiritually rich, detached from what we can own so that we can be attached in a different way to what we cannot own, detached from consuming so that we can be consumed by God.
Peter Kreeft, *Back to Virtue*, p. 106
 - It is really only the poor in spirit who can, actually, have anything, because they are the ones who know how to receive gifts. For them, everything is a gift.
Simon Tugwell, *The Beatitudes: Soundings in Christian Traditions*
-

days of roughing it in the wilderness. A great time! Two of my sons graduated from Harvard, you know, and Max, Jr., is in his third year at ...”

“I didn’t ask you that. At least once in his life every father has been unkind to one of his kids. I’m 62 years old and I can vouch for it. Now give us one specific example.”

A long pause ensued. Finally: “Well, I was a little thoughtless with my 9-year-old daughter last Christmas Eve.”

“What happened?”

“I don’t remember. I just get this heavy feeling whenever I think about it.”

“Where did it happen? What were the circumstances?”

“Wait one minute!” Max’s voice rose in anger. “I told you I don’t remember. Just can’t shake this bad feeling.”

Unobtrusively, Murphy-O’Connor dialed Max’s hometown once more and spoke with his wife.

“Sean Murphy-O’Connor calling, ma’am. We are in the middle of a group therapy session, and your husband just told us that he was unkind to your daughter last Christmas Eve. Can you give me the details, please?”

A soft voice filled the room. “Yes, I can tell you the whole thing. It seems like it just happened yesterday. Our daughter Debbie wanted a pair of Earth shoes for her Christmas present. On the afternoon of December 24, my husband drove her downtown, gave her \$60, and told her to buy the best pair of shoes in the store. That is exactly what she did. When she climbed back into the pickup truck her father was driving, she kissed him on the cheek and told him he was the best daddy in the whole world. Max was preening himself like a peacock and decided to celebrate on the way home. He stopped at the Cork ’n’ Bottle—that’s a tavern a few miles from our house—and told Debbie he would be right out. It was a clear and extremely cold day, about 12 degrees above zero, so Max left the motor running and locked both doors from the outside so no one could get in. It was a little after 3:00 in the afternoon and . . .”

Silence.

“Yes?”

The sound of heavy breathing crossed the recreation room. Her voice grew faint. She was crying. “My husband met some old Army buddies in the tavern. Swept up in euphoria over the reunion, he lost track of time, purpose, and everything else. He came out of the Cork ’n’ Bottle at midnight. He was drunk. The motor had stopped running and the car windows were frozen shut. Debbie was badly frostbitten on both ears and on her fingers. When we got her to the hospital, the doctors had to operate. They amputated the thumb and forefinger on her right hand. She will be deaf for the rest of her life.”

Max appeared to be having a coronary. He struggled to his feet making jerky, uncoordinated movements. His glasses flew to the right and his pipe to the left. He collapsed on all fours and sobbed hysterically.

Murphy-O’Connor stood up and said softly, “Let’s split.”

Twenty-four recovering alcoholics and addicts climbed the eight-step stairwell. We turned left, gathered along the railing on the upper split level, and looked down. No man will ever forget what he saw that day, the twenty-fourth of April at exactly high noon. Max was still in the doggie position. His sobs had soared to shrieks. Murphy-O’Connor approached him, pressed his foot against Max’s rib cage, and pushed. Max rolled over on his back.

“You unspeakable slime,” Murphy-O’Connor roared. “There’s the door on your right and the window on your left. Take whichever is fastest. Get out of here

before I throw up. I am not running a rehab for liars!”

The philosophy of tough love is based on the conviction that no effective recovery can be initiated until a person admits that he is powerless over alcohol and that his life has become unmanageable. The alternative to confronting the truth is always some form of self-destruction. For Max there were three options: eventual insanity, premature death, or sobriety. In order to free the captive, one must name the captivity. Max’s denial had to be identified through merciless interaction with his peers. His self-deception had to be unmasked in its absurdity.

Later that same day Max pleaded for and obtained permission to continue treatment. He proceeded to undergo the most striking personality change I have ever witnessed. He got honest and became more open, sincere, vulnerable, and affectionate than any man in the group. Tough love had made him real and the truth had set him free.

The final outcome to his story: The night before Max completed treatment, Fred passed by his room. The door was ajar. Max was sitting at his desk reading a novel entitled *Watership Down*. Fred knocked and entered. For several moments Max sat staring at the book. When he looked up, his cheeks were streaked with tears.

“Fred,” he said hoarsely, “I just prayed for the first time in my life.”

Max was on the road to knowing God.⁸

A Divine Work

A humble, honest realization of our sinful, selfish state is the first step toward Christ-like living and spiritual growth. But how do we get there? When we watch movies or news broadcasts, we can believe we’re pretty good. We’re certainly not as “sinful” as those people, right? Wrong! God’s Word tell us:

We are all dirty with sin.

Even our good works are not pure.

They are like bloodstained rags.

We are all like dead leaves.

Our sins have carried us away like wind.⁹

The King James Version words it this way: “But we are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags...” Bible commentaries point

⁸ Reprinted from *The Ragamuffin Gospel*, by Brennan Manning, © 1990 by Brennan Manning. Published by Multnomah Press, Portland, Oregon.

⁹ Isaiah 64:6, ERV.