

ADVENTIST
Review

*Special
Issue*

The Beatitudes Project



Blessings for

BY JENNIFER JILL SCHWIRZER

WE DIDN'T MIND DRIVING THE jalopy. It sported several unique features, such as a screwdriver-manipulated starter, a log for a parking brake, and a wadded plastic bag gas cap. In our eyes the car had character, humor, and pizzazz. But when we saw it through the eyes of some wealthy relatives we were visiting, everything changed. I remember how we reluctantly pulled off Florida's I-75, weaving in and out of shiny BMWs and Corvettes, humming the theme song to *The Beverly Hillbillies* under our breath to help laugh away some of the pain. Chugging past manicured golf courses and splendid mansions, we entered the gated community and tried to act as if we fit in. This worked until some of the relatives spotted the car. Suddenly we felt the urge to introduce ourselves as Mr. and Mrs. Jed Clampett.

The most trying aspect of poverty is the sense of isolation. Humans naturally compare themselves to one another, which brings an acute sense of shame to those who don't measure up. Garth Brooks attempted to throw off the burden of marginal living by celebrating lowbrowhood in the song "Friends in Low Places." He failed to convince me, given the fact that he was a multimillionaire when the song hit the charts, but at least I myself can sing it with conviction. I know what it is to stick

out like a poor thumb among poised diamond-clad pinkies.

How much more acute is the sense of isolation one feels when one is singled out because of spiritual poverty? Like a bum at a black-tie affair, our self-justifying rags appear filthy in the chandelier light of heaven. A full encounter with the Holy Spirit somehow circumvents our ability to comfort ourselves with the thought that we haven't fallen as low as others. Spirit-sharpened vision pierces through the outward actions to the inward motives. Suddenly we know the gut sensation that we are the most sin-laden scoundrel of all, corrupt right down to the molecules.

In His Holiness

Apostles and prophets have ever expressed this sense of consternation when coming into full encounter with the holiness of God:

Isaiah lamented, "Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. 6:5, NASB).

Peter cried, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Luke 5:8, NKJV).

Ellen White brooded, "It seemed to me that my doom was fixed, that the Spirit of the Lord had left me, never to return."¹

Why all this guilt and shame? We are relatively decent people! Aren't those feelings better suited for the truly wicked?

Consider, for instance, the infamous Ted Bundy, who violated, then murdered, at least 30 women before he was executed by electric chair January 24, 1989. He snatched his last victim—a 12-year-old girl—from a playground before he sexually assaulted her, killed her, and

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the Empty


threw her body into a pigsty. Understandably, Bundy's repentance and conversion, and subsequent interview with James Dobson, were greeted with cynicism and doubt. Crowds outside the prison carried signs saying "Burn, Bundy, Burn" and "You're Dead, Ted."

In today's climate of pop psychology we often grope for some causative factor in the home life of one who turns so bad. Yet Ted Bundy "grew up in a wonderful home with two dedicated and loving parents." The home was smoke- and alcohol-free, and the family attended church. It was through long-term exposure to harder and harder forms of pornography that Bundy finally craved the stronger stimulus of a "physical event." After a time of battling his own inbred

inhibitions against violent behavior, he finally threw caution to the wind and committed his first murder.²

Bankrupt, Yet Fortunate

Socially speaking, there may be no similarity between ourselves and Ted Bundy. Yet at our core we possess the same capacity to wed ourselves to vice, seeking stronger and stronger forms until overmastering passion controls us. Our police record may be pristine in contrast to a death-row criminal, but the dazzling light of God's law of love reveals even the best of us to possess a moral plague spot altogether rotten and dark. That plague spot is sinful human nature and its unlimited potential for evil. When the contrast between our sin and God's perfection removes the potential for tri-



All that I've done, races I've won
Works of art and style
Money I've earned, pages I've turned
Swept into a pile
Someone strike a match, now. Up it goes in smoke
Wisdom called it folly
It was no joke

Try as I might to make myself right
I indwelt a rut
All of my best, put to the test
Amounted to "So what?"
Empty as a hand from the pocket of the poor
I came barren-handed
To Your great store

Finally free, from all that is me
I receive the Son
Righteousness pure? Of this I'm sure
Truly, I have none
Yet when I was cowering
God gave, Jesus gave!
Riches so empowering
Mighty to save

Over and over I receive the Gift without price
Seems I just can't live without it, the righteousness of Christ.

—Jennifer Jill Schwirzer

umphing in our outward superiority to others, we can finally admit we have no righteousness of our own. We are spiritually, morally, and socially bankrupt. We are poor in spirit.

Even in affluent North America, where few want for the necessities of life, many suffer from a spiritual poverty that brings sorrow beyond words. An estimated 30 million Americans spanning the socioeconomic spectrum suffer from depressive disorders.³ The world's frenzied rush for pleasure and pride only mocks the inward ache of a discouraged heart. Yet in the context of eternity these depleted souls are at an advantage. Jesus said that the poor in spirit are "blessed."

A little Greek study peels back another layer on Jesus' meaning. "Blessed," or *makarioi*, literally means "fortunate," and "poor," or *ptochos*, means "cowering," as one in deep desperation. This makes Jesus' statement a seemingly senseless contradiction. He was essentially saying, "Fortunate are the unfortunate." These statements that offend every fiber of our worldly-wise logic are biblical paradoxes. "But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised" (1 Cor. 2:14, NASB). How can someone be blessed when they are *unblessed*? In what sense can depressed, discouraged people be considered *fortunate*? Jesus gives the answer in the same breath: "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Is God operating on a merit system here, searching for broken people so that He can reward them with heaven? Or is He simply stating the fact that broken people are the only ones willing to receive the Gift that He gives to all? The answer lies in the fact that "God so loved the *world*, that He *gave* His only begotten Son" (John 3:16, NASB). God gave Jesus to the world, and in that Son came "every spiritual blessing," including the kingdom of heaven (Eph. 1:3, NASB). While there is nothing we can do to merit those blessings, there is something we can do to make them our own. We can receive them only if we see our need of them. God is not interested in some kind of counterculture that approves of the marginalized in order to spite the conventional. He is not racking up points for the admittedly unrighteous as if they are champions of virtue simply for claiming none. Rather, only those in whom self-righteousness has vacated have room for the righteousness of Christ. It's not that God is doling out prizes for being empty—it's that only

the empty vessel has room for the prize.

Are you empty? Are you poor? If you aren't, you'd better get that way, or you will push the blessing of Christ's righteousness right out of your life. If you have trouble sensing your soul poverty, why not attend a gala ball where the holiness of God will be in attendance? Travel on your knees to this affair, and socialize with the prophets and apostles in the Word. In the illustrious company of holy beings you will suddenly look down upon your own grimy garments and notice every stain. Then and only then will you be poor enough to receive God's riches.

¹ Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1882), p. 79.

² James Dobson, *Life on the Edge* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 1995).

³ Aileen Ludington, M.D., and Hans Diehl, Dr. H. Sc., *Health Power* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 2000), p. 220.

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