

Russell Kelfer

Relative Insignificance

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Series: The Beatitudes

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

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To the natural mind, it made sense. Two men were performing their duties at prayer. One was an intensely religious man, considered a spiritual giant by the standards of the church. The other was a man of questionable character who made his living in a questionable profession. One was respected and idolized by the inner circle of his day. The other was considered despicable and irreligious at best. Jesus told the story to see if His followers understood which man was the most spiritual of the two. It went like this:

Also He spoke this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others:

“Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, ‘God, I thank You that I am not like other men—extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this tax collector.

I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I possess.’

And the tax collector, standing afar off, would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

(Luke 18:9-14 NKJV)

It should have been a no-brainer from man’s perspective. The publican or tax-collector was considered the scum of society, a blight on the culture of his day. He was the equivalent of a crooked IRS agent on commission. The Pharisee, on the other hand, was the equivalent of a bishop or priest or president of a seminary to whom the ecclesiastical professionals of that era would go for religious approval or opinion. Like I said, it was one of the questions with a predetermined answer. Ask 100 people on the street and you would get an almost unanimous answer.

God, however, doesn’t play to the majority, but to the truth,

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and the truth from His perspective is often 180° from the world's predetermined responses. He spoke this parable to arrest the attention of or call attention to the hypocrisy of those "which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others". Here was a whole group of people who were the focus of the Master's rebuke. They weren't bad people by the world's standards. In fact, they might well have won the "Evangelical of the Year" award at the local Bible church. They were morally upright and just in their dealings with others. When it came to spiritual disciplines, they had impeccable credentials. They not only prayed, they fasted, not once a week, but twice. Add to that the "mark of a spiritual man", they tithed. Hallelujah!

But note the serious accusation Jesus made that literally nullified all of those religious brownie points. They trusted in their own righteousness, thus what they were doing not only didn't make God happy, it broke His heart. As this one who typified the self-righteous, but self-centered crowd began to pray, you could see the problem. Or could you? He sounded so evangelically sound. He called to God's attention what a good boy he'd been, and you couldn't help but be impressed. (Unless you were God, that is.) He made it plain to God that He wanted Him to be aware of not only His outward theological expressions, but of his moral character as well. No wonder our wonder boy was at the top of his class. He was a religious standout. What a guy.

Look, however, at how he prayed. It says, "He prayed thus with himself." The literal meaning was: "He prayed these words to himself." He wasn't talking to God. He was pretending to be talking to God. He was praying to the audience. He was praying about himself to himself so others could hear. The focus of his so-called "prayer" was not God's holiness, but his. His focus was not God's righteousness, but his. His focus not God's supremacy, but his. The focus of his prayer was his own righteousness, because he did not truly understand the righteousness of God. If he had, he would have fallen on his face in utter grief over his sins and cried out to God for mercy and grace.

Enter the subject of his comparative study on holiness. Enter the man to whom he so righteously compared himself, thankful that he wasn't as other men were. Enter the lowly tax-collector. He was despised by the world and the church alike. This man could make a list of his friends on a postage stamp with room to spare. His spiritual credentials were in the negative category.

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He was what the church today might call unredeemable. He was a loser of the lowest order, a man who openly took advantage of others without a hint of guilt.

His prayer was a little simpler than the Pharisee's. He could not so much as look up, lest he dishonor God. Rather than give God a checklist of his goodness, he beat upon his chest as if to pummel himself for his sinfulness, and simply cried out to God for mercy. He was a sinner, but he knew it. The other man was also a sinner, but by comparing himself with the overt righteousness of others rather than the righteousness of God, He was able to satisfy a desire to be relatively holy rather than to worship the only one who is holy.

He was trusting in his own righteousness. He had become so satisfied with what he did, religiously, and with who he was in the church, he somehow thought God had caught the drift of it and was just as impressed as he was. The publican, meanwhile, had no standing in the kingdom. He was not only a nobody, his reputation was stained and his acceptability factor was zero. He had nothing to stand on as he stood before God, so feeling spiritually naked and religiously a failure, the only thing he could see as he gazed into the face of a holy God was his own sins. When you truly see your sins in the light of God's holiness, there are only two things to do: run and hide like Adam and Eve did, or cry out for mercy like David did.

The publican chose to do the latter. After all, who was he to even have an audience with a holy God? His prayer, "God, be merciful, to me, a sinner!" has thus become the cry of fallen man for generations. He sees self as self is, thus sees God as God is, and realizes his only hope is in God's mercy.

The Pharisee was confident in his "relative holiness". He was comparing his righteousness with these heathens. The publican was focusing on God's holiness because he was comparing his righteousness with God's.

There is the crux of being poor in spirit: seeing yourself in the light of who God is, rather than in the light of how you perceive yourself when compared to others. Grasp that and you begin to enter into the palace of God's grace at a level you may have never experienced.

This is the "Me Generation", and we have superimposed our supposed needs on our vision of who God is rather than

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superimposing who God is on our vision of our perceived needs. Now think about it. Are not most of our counseling sessions focused on sharing our needs, our problems, even our weaknesses? Is not much of our worship focused on making us feel spiritually satisfied? Is not much of our prayer time focused on our needs and our hurts and our fears, rather than on the majesty of His power and the tenderness of His mercy? Is not much of our preaching, teaching, and writing focused on resolving issues in our lives? That's not all bad. But once we have seen our problems, the solution is not in ourselves. The solution is in becoming so poor in spirit, so aware of our spiritual poverty apart from God's divine intervention, that we fall on our faces at the very thought of our sins, and cry out for mercy without a hint of self-righteousness.

That is why Jesus, as He sat on that mountainside teaching His disciples with multitudes of all sorts gathering around and listening, began building the foundation for a blissful, self-contained life of joy on this one crucial statement: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

This is where the "blessed" life begins. It begins with an attitude. It begins with a realization. Let's remind ourselves of what that phrase really means. We have already come to the conclusion that the word "blessed" or "*makarios*" means "self-contained joy". It is a kind of existence that is so controlled by God from the inside out that the circumstances of life that crowd their way in, trying to relieve us of that joy cannot affect it. It means that God really does have for each of us a whole new sphere of existence where inner peace and inner joy are so overwhelming that everything that ever happens to us only serves to amplify that joy. Nothing that happens can actually disturb it. It is exactly what Paul meant in II Corinthians when he said,

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new.
(II Corinthians 5:17 NKJV)

As one expositor wrote: "The old state of things has passed away; a new state of things has come into existence." In other words, all things are becoming new because a new order exists in the human heart capable of bringing it to pass. Those "all things" are the progressive expression of a state of blessedness that can only be the supernatural result of the work of a supernatural God. He does it all, but certain things must occur in our hearts

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for what He does to take effect. The first of those things is the process of becoming “poor in spirit”.

Becoming poor in spirit, however, is not an instant thing. It is a process, and like most spiritual procedures, it operates exactly the opposite from the world. From the world’s perspective, the more you achieve, the more recognition you gain, the more accolades you receive, the more significant you become. The most significant people in this world in the field of academics, athletics, science, or even religion, are the ones who have overtly achieved the most.

In the spirit realm, however, it is just the opposite. The more fruit you see borne, the more humble you ought to become. The more blessings you receive, the more in awe you ought to be that God could use the likes of you at all. Since God is the achiever, and we are only the vessels, and since He actually makes strength out of weakness, the more we see accomplished, spiritually, the less significant we ought to feel.

It all boils down to something called “Relative Insignificance”. The “blessed” man (the one with self-contained happiness that cannot be destroyed by external experiences) is the one who is “poor” spiritually, not the one who is rich. So overwhelmed is he or she that a holy God who framed the heavens would so much as call his or her name, so much as acknowledge his or her existence, let alone die for his or her sins, that this man or woman weeps with joy at the thought of God’s overwhelming love. The last thing he or she would do would be to see the things God is accomplishing in his or her life as something to share the glory for.

In real life, though, Satan despises that knowledge, so he has devised a reverse form of “Relative Insignificance”. His goal is that the believer measure his righteousness or spiritual value not by seeing it alongside God’s holiness and grace, but by using a religious system or a comparative sliding scale. This results in either the doing of certain things or the absence of certain external sins to be the yardsticks by which that person becomes spiritually significant.

Thus the world looks at the church and sees arrogance, self-promotion, advertised goodness, flamboyant demonstrations of worldly productions, and a gospel of condemnation not based on the reality of sin, but on the basis of perceived comparative

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righteousness that must sicken the heart of God. “Look at us!” the Christian community cries. So “look at us” they do. And what they see is a splintered, judgmental, condemning church whose conscious or unconscious goal seems to be to call attention to itself, its righteousness, its programs, and its facilities.

That’s blasphemy! The only thing the church is to call attention to is the person of God. The only thing the church has to offer the world is a Cross. The only thing the church is here to proclaim is grace. The only thing the world needs to see is a Savior, not a sanctuary. The world needs to see a Lord, not a program. The world needs to see a resurrected Christ, not a well-oiled human machine that is supposed to operate with such man-made efficiency that if God doesn’t show up, the show can go on.

Beloved, the only one who ought to be onstage is The Living God. It is what He has done that makes spiritual life a reality. What we have done is sin. We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God, and one man’s sins are no different than another’s. Sin is sin. Apart from grace, we stink. Our righteousness, the very best we can do, is as filthy rags in God’s sight as we see in Isaiah 64:6. When God sees the best we can do, He becomes ill at the stench. And that goes for the best we can do apart from Him, even as believers. The flesh profits nothing. Nothing is an amazing number. No matter what you do to it or with it, it still comes out to nothing.

That word “poor” is the key. Remember to make the “spiritual switch”. The reason God allows people to be “poor” physically is:

a) to demonstrate the concept of relativity as we read in Philippians 4:11-13 and

b) to demonstrate the reality of spiritual poverty in a way that the natural mind can grasp.

Look at some of the things the Bible says about physical poverty, and let’s make the spiritual switch. Let’s assume that if God wants us to be spiritually poor, He wants us to understand the parallels to worldly poverty, so He asks us:

1- Are you willing, if need be, to suffer humiliation without retaliation? Are you willing to take your place in the back row of humanity, if need be, knowing that you’ll have a front row seat in eternity? Or do you simply have to have recognition for your goodness or your works?

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My brothers, do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.

For if there should come into your assembly a man with gold rings, in fine apparel, and there should also come in a poor man in filthy clothes,

and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes and say to him, "You sit here in a good place," and say to the poor man, "You stand there," or, "Sit here at my footstool,"

have you not shown partiality among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?

Listen, my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?

But you have dishonored the poor man. Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts?

Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?

(James 2:1-7 NKJV)

We see in this passage that God is differentiating between how the world treats the poor and the rich and how God sees them. The portrait is one of physical poverty and extreme physical wealth. The focal point of the confrontation is the local church. The rich man comes in wearing new, expensive clothes, fancy jewelry. He is cleanly shaven and dressed like a king. The poor man comes in looking like a tramp. He has no fine clothes, no jewelry, nothing to call attention to his wealth, for he has none. He is humiliated even to walk in the room. All eyes turn and watch. Who is this beggar who dares to enter the sanctuary of the King? One of the King's children, that's who. The treatment is obvious. The poor man is told to know his place, "Here, sit on the floor." The rich man is invited to the seat of honor. Because of his spiritual insights? No. Because he's rich.

God says, "That's blasphemy!" Then we see this condemnation on the church and on organized religion in general, "You have despised the poor." Indeed. But the poor of this world have the best chance to become rich in the faith, the passage goes on. Why? Because their humiliation brings about relative insignificance. In this crowd, the poor man only qualifies as a nuisance to be tolerated, not a hero to be exalted. Ah, but blessed is the man whose spiritual poverty draws him to be aware of his need. The kingdom of heaven belongs to him.

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Poverty, physically, brings about humiliation and disgrace. It leads to a feeling of gross insignificance and need. Look at these other passages:

The wicked in his pride persecutes the poor; Let them be caught in the plots which they have devised.

(Psalm 10:2 NKJV)

He sits in the lurking places of the villages; in the secret places he murders the innocent; his eyes are secretly fixed on the helpless.

He lies in wait secretly, as a lion in his den; He lies in wait to catch the poor;

(Psalm 10:8,9 NKJV)

The poor man is hated even by his own neighbor, But the rich has many friends.

(Proverbs 14:20 NKJV)

All the brothers of the poor hate him; How much more do his friends go far from him! He may pursue them with words, yet they abandon him.

(Proverbs 19:7 NKJV)

Popularity doesn't follow poverty. Politicians may show up on their doorsteps with demonstrations of charity, but they aren't there looking for long-term relationships. Why? Poverty is humiliating, that's why. It means that to the world, you are a nobody who has nothing. The world isn't interested in nobodies. But God is. Make the spiritual switch. The word goes on and demonstrates God's love for the poor:

He who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, And He will pay back what he has given.

(Proverbs 19:17 NKJV)

I will abundantly bless her provision: I will satisfy her poor with bread.

(Psalm 132:15 NKJV)

I know that the Lord will maintain the cause of the afflicted, and justice for the poor.

(Psalm 140:12 NKJV)

He who oppresses the poor to increase his riches, And he who gives to the rich, will surely come to poverty.

(Proverbs 22:16 NKJV)

Do not rob the poor because he is poor, nor oppress the afflicted at the gate;

(Proverbs 22:22 NKJV)

The blind see and the lame walk; the lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear; the dead are raised up and the poor have the gospel preached to them.

(Matthew 11:5 NKJV)

Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."

(Matthew 19:21 NKJV)

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God will protect the rights of the poor. He will bring judgment to those who persecute them. He will champion the rights of those who bless the poor. It is a Scriptural principle. Why? Well, for several reasons.

1- Justice. It is not God's plan for man to take advantage of man because of his poverty because God has a hand in the blessing of man:

The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and lifts up.
(I Samuel 2:7 NKJV)

If God has a hand in causing or allowing poverty for the sake of teaching spiritual truth, then God has a broken heart when man takes advantage of that difference. But there is a second reason. When given Scriptural illustrations of Old Testament truths, we read:

Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come.

Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall.
(I Corinthians 10:11,12 NKJV)

These Old Testament principles and illustrations had a secondary purpose, to teach New Testament principles by illustrating spiritual truths with physical realities. That is what the parables were all about. Jesus said,

For you have the poor with you always (Mark 14:7 NKJV)

Why? As a living illustration of the humiliation and sense of dependence that poverty brings in the spirit realm.

The man or woman who is truly poor in spirit has the mindset of a poor man. He or she is willing to be wronged, to be taken advantage of, even to be publicly humiliated, and leave the results to God. For just as God is the champion of the poor, He has given the kingdom to the poor in spirit. Make certain that the pockets of pride in your life have been approached for what they are, rooms in your heart that have yet to be relinquished to the King.

2- Not only is the poor man willing to be humiliated (he often has no choice) he is forced to be dependent. He has to beg for his food. He has to live in a homeless shelter or in squalid conditions. He has to ask for help from the government, while those who need no help decry the fact that their taxes are being used so "wastefully". One thing is certain. Those crying the loudest

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have most likely never lived in a homeless shelter or begged for food. God understands the heart of the poor. He has sometimes withheld from them because they are His choicest prospects for kingdom greatness. Not only that, He has determined to use them to demonstrate that dependence, spiritually, is a healthy attribute.

It is not an embarrassment to have to cry out to God, “Oh, Dear Lord, save me. I am perishing!” It’s an honor. It’s not distasteful to weep before God as one who, apart from His intervention, has no hope. The Psalmist knew that well.

For He will deliver the needy when he cries, the poor also,
and him who has no helper. (Psalm 72:12 NKJV)

But I am poor and needy; yet the Lord thinks upon me. You
are my help and my deliverer; do not delay, O my God.
(Psalm 40:17 NKJV)

This poor man cried out, and the Lord heard him, and saved
him out of all his troubles. (Psalm 34:6 NKJV)

God knows that the poor man lives in a state of desperation. He can’t make it without help. So having been humiliated by his condition, he must throw himself on the mercy of someone else, or he shall perish in his poverty. He has no choice but to relinquish all personal claims to greatness just for the help of those who have what he needs, so he lays down his pride and his self-sufficient nature, and becomes like a little child, totally at the mercy of someone else.

Get it? That’s what God is after in your life and in mine. He wants us to have the mindset of a poor man. He wants us to humble ourselves and to rejoice over our need for humiliation because only then do we see ourselves as we really are: poverty-stricken of spirit and helpless apart from God. And seeing ourselves as we are, He then wants us, day by day, without losing that sense of humiliation, to cry out like little babies for the milk of the word, knowing that unless He feeds us, we perish, and unless He empowers us, we fail.

If those two qualities, humility and dependence are that important to God, so important that He literally says the kingdom belongs to those who lay hold of them, should we not be focusing our every moment on achieving that state of mind? Humility and dependence. It is an awareness that you are nothing apart from God and that you can do nothing apart from God. It is an

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awareness that actually grows as you grow more mature. Rather than glorying in your maturity, those very marks of God's grace upon your life stand rather as birthmarks of the King's ownership. If He has chosen to bless you or bless me spiritually, the very thought of those blessings ought to cause us to bow before His throne and like that poor man entering the sanctuary of God in James 2, we ought to be more than content to sit at the footstool of those whom God has chosen to use in our lives.

We don't need top billing. We don't need to be onstage. We don't need recognition for our ministries or our missions or our messages. Our hunger and thirst for recognition should only be satisfied when God is being praised and we are invisible to the eyes of those who experience His grace through us. Should we be seen, He is hidden. God forbid. That means that we don't need to tell others how we helped the poor at Christmas or sent money to that missionary or taught that class or shared that truth. We need to quietly retreat to the prayer closet and thank our God that He has allowed us and enabled us to enter into the blessing of His miracle-working grace. To Him be all the glory.

We need not carve out spiritual hierarchies so we can fit into one of the upper echelons. We love to categorize people based on their sins. We love to etch out the words "unforgivable" for certain offenses against God while claiming constant grace and mercy for besetting sins in our own lives that break His precious heart. Who are we to determine the gravity of another's sins or the condition of another's heart? Rather than praying for those who are struggling, we gossip or berate them or decry their lack of spirituality because they aren't like us. God help us. Have you ever wondered how gossip or a judgmental spirit rates in God's eyes?

We do these things, not always out of wrong motives, but often out of righteous indignation, or maybe self-righteous indignation. Nonetheless, we think that if we can set some standard for what is or isn't spiritual, we can fit ourselves into the spiritual category and then, by pointing at those who don't fit, consider our sins "relatively insignificant".

Go back to the log and beam principle. God judges us based on His righteousness, not the righteousness of those with whom we choose to compare ourselves. To Him, relative insignificance is when we see our worthiness relative to His, and having done

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that, the very last thing on our agenda ought to be comparing ourselves with others. What did He say about the publican in that opening illustration?

I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

(Luke 18:14 NKJV)

Why? Why would God clear the name of this greedy tax-collector and refuse to pour His grace on this religious leader? Because “Blessed are the poor in spirit”, that’s why. This self-righteous graduate of all the right schools was so enamored with his religious standing and so proud of his good works when compared with the likes of this lowly publican, that his one cry to God was one of thanksgiving that he wasn’t like this non-religious fool who stood next to him, eyes to the ground, heart broken. Indeed he wasn’t like him. The Pharisee was focused on his own righteousness. The publican was focused on his own sin.

That is what God is after. He wants you and He wants me to stop wallowing in our relative significance based on good works or overt goodness and He wants us to take on the mindset of a poor man. Totally humbled, totally dependent, totally at the mercy of a loving God.

Oh, we can hold on to our evangelical self-righteousness if we choose to. He’ll let us. Then, what will happen? Little by little, Beloved, we’ll just lose the combination to the heart of God. You see, the keys to the kingdom belong to the humble, broken-hearted, dependent, truly insignificant ones. You say, “Will we become increasingly aware of our humility?” I pray not. Humility surfaced is the outer edge of pride. Would it not be better if we were not only not aware of our humility, but not aware of ourselves at all? Wouldn’t it be wonderful if we became so enamored with God that all we saw was Him? Truly, the kingdom would be ours at last.

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To Become Poor in Spirit, at Last!

Oh, to forget about myself,
To lose myself in the Lord.
Oh, to focus the whole of my heart
On His nature and His Word.

Oh, to be so dependent,
That, until this life is past,
He becomes my life, and I
Become poor in spirit, at last.

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For Further Study and Application

1- Reread Luke 18:9-14. What qualities did God see in the publican that made his prayer acceptable? What qualities did God see in the Pharisee that broke His heart? Study your own personal prayer life, as well as how you pray in public. What is the focus of your heart: God's holiness or the sins of others? Do you ever use the sins of others as a covering for gossip when you "ask others to pray for so-and-so"? Why is that wrong?

2- What do you think verse 11 means when it says: "He prayed thus with himself"? Do you ever do that? How is that a temptation when we pray in public?

3- How does Satan confuse us into focusing on ourselves even as we think we are praying to God? What keys can you think of to help alert you to this self-focused thought pattern?

4- Why do we seem so drawn to measure our spirituality by comparing what we do or what we believe with those we consider less spiritual? In what way does that kind of thinking permeate your life?

5- How could the organized church today best deal with the dangers of becoming self-focused groups who are advertising their own goodness or their own programs?

6- Can you make the "Spiritual Switch" from physical poverty to being personally, spiritually, "poor in spirit"? Using a concordance, begin a personal study of the spiritual illustrations found in being physically poor.

7- As you grow in Christ, do you find yourself less dependent or more dependent on God, minute by minute? If the answer is "less" what do you think is happening? Ask God to open your eyes to His truth about becoming "poor in spirit". Thank Him in advance for doing so.

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