



THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT: Lesson 2

THE BEATITUDES—God’s Plan for a Transformed Heart and Life

Prayer:

Beloved Heavenly Father,

In the miracle of the Resurrection of Your Son, You brought us into a New Creation, a creation in which New Covenant believers are called to a “new birth” which, through our baptism in the death and resurrection of Your Son, we are able to enter in to a state of divine grace—called to be “perfect”, as You are perfect, Father. This call to perfection is the transforming of hearts, lives, and souls into beings of complete oneness with the life of the Most Holy Trinity—a perfection which is **impossible** on a purely human level. Please send us Your Holy Spirit, Father, to guide us as we study the teachings of Christ in the Law of the New Covenant. We pray in the Name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, Amen.

“Lord, I believe; help my unbelief. [...]. My heart has assured me and reassured me that the Gospel of Jesus Christ must be a divine reality. The Sermon on the Mount cannot be a mere human production. This belief enters into the very depth of my conscience. The whole history of man proves it.” Daniel Webster [Life of Daniel Webster, Curtis, page 684].

“You shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.” Matthew 5:48

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The Old Covenant Law of Moses was meant to teach and prepare the holy people of God for the coming of the Messiah. The holy prophets of God promised that the coming of the Messiah would usher in a new age in which a new covenant would be formed between God and His people and a new law would be written on their hearts [Jeremiah 31:31-34]. The Sermon on the Mount begins with the introduction of this “new law”—the Beatitudes or Blessings of the New Covenant Law. It is the Son of God’s spiritual plan for a radical transformation of hearts and lives. The Beatitudes are God’s New Covenant Law marking the road map or stairway that lights the path to heaven. Like any road map there is a beginning point of the journey and a destination at the end of the journey, and like a stairway one step must be achieved in faith and obedience before stepping out in faith and obedience to the next. But this plan is more than a stairway or a road map to an intimate relationship with God on our journey of faith. Empowered by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost and applied through the Sacraments of the Catholic Church, the Beatitudes, as the Law of the New Covenant people of the Resurrected Christ, are the very hinges on which our moral and spiritual lives as Christian believers must turn. But



this is a plan that cannot be achieved on a human level—only through the filling and indwelling of the Holy Spirit can this blessedness be empowered and celebrated in the life of the New Covenant Church. *“For what is impossible for man (human beings) is possible for God.”* Luke 18:27

Jesus was traveling the length and breadth of the Galilee calling for repentance and proclaiming the “good news” that the Kingdom of God is close at hand [Matthew 4:17]. He had been curing all kinds of diseases and infirmities among the people, and He had been teaching in the synagogues on the Sabbath. Every first century village and town in Judea, in the Galilee, and wherever the people of God lived throughout the gentile world, had a synagogue where the word of God was studied and discussed, but the sacrifices to God, according to the Law of the Sinai Covenant, took place only at Yahweh’s great bronze Sacrificial Altar at the Temple in Jerusalem. Prior to the preaching of the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain, in His own village synagogue of Nazareth during the Sabbath, Jesus read from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah [61:1-2], announcing that Isaiah’s prophecy is fulfilled in Him:

*“The Spirit of the Lord God is on me, for he has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to **proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favor of the Lord.**”* Luke 4:18-19 [New Jerusalem translation]

The Old Covenant people interpreted this passage from the 8th century prophet Isaiah as a promise of the deliverance of Israel from her exile in Babylon as a “year of Jubilee” in which the Covenant people would experience a “new exodus” out of Babylon and a new restoration just as in a holy Jubilee year, a special year of grace that Israel was to keep under the Sinai Covenant. Unfortunately, when the time for the return from exile came, Isaiah’s promise was only partially fulfilled because so few Jews returned to their ancestral lands in Judah. In quoting this passage from the book of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus is proclaiming a time of divine favor or grace—a divine Jubilee in which the prophet “greater than Moses” will inaugurate a “new exodus”.

Question: Both a Sabbath year and a Jubilee year were years that offered special mercy to the poor. What was the significance of a Sabbath year and a Jubilee year and when were they celebrated? See Exodus 23:10-11; Leviticus 25: 1-55; 27:16-25; Numbers 36:4; Deuteronomy 15:1-15.

Answer:

- The Sabbath year: Every seventh year was to be a Sabbath year in which the land was to remain “at rest” with no planting and no harvest. The produce that did grow was to be left in the fields and in the orchards and vineyards to be available to everyone including the poor and the wild beasts that had no other source of food



[Exodus 23:10-11; Lev 25:1-7]. In addition, all debts were to be forgiven [Deuteronomy 15:2], and all Israelite slaves were to be released from bondage [Deuteronomy 15: 12-18]. [Also see Nehemiah 10:32 and 1 Maccabees 6:49 & 53].

- The Jubilee year: However, after every “7 weeks of years” [7x7= 49] there was to be proclaimed a year of abundant grace—a Jubilee year—the Jubilee year was to be celebrated every 50th year and was intended to be a special year of grace which was to be “sacred and proclaim **the liberation** of all the country’s inhabitants [Leviticus 25:10].” The Jubilee was announced by the blowing of the curved ram’s horn trumpet—the shofar [shophar], throughout the land on the Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur [Leviticus 25:8-10]. In addition to the special grace offered during a Sabbath year, in a Jubilee all land was to be returned to the original owner [Leviticus 25:13]. According to the Sinai Covenant a Jubilee year proclaimed every 50th year was a time in which Israel was to relive the Exodus experience by showing the same mercy to each other that God had showed to them during the Exodus from Egypt.

Note: The word “jubilee” comes from the Hebrew word for ram’s horn, *yovel* or *yobel*. Literally this 50th year would be what we would count as the 49th year. There was no concept of a 0-place value and so the counting of years began from the previous Jubilee year and continued to the seventh Sabbatical year [see Leviticus 25:1-7] which was the new Jubilee of liberation.

Question: The Isaiah passage speaks of the “glad tidiness” or “good news” of a “release” or “liberation”: “to proclaim liberty to captives...” In addition to the land being put to “rest” as in a Sabbath year, what 3 “releases” or “liberations” were the Israelites obligated to keep in a Jubilee year and how are these requirements connected with the Isaiah passage? What connection is there between the “releases” or “liberations” of the Jubilee year and the Exodus liberation? See Leviticus 25:1-7 & Deuteronomy 15:1-15 for Sabbath year obligations that are also part of Jubilee year obligations.

Answer: In a Jubilee year as in a Sabbath year the land was to lie fallow [Leviticus 25:11-12; 18-22], debts were to be forgiven and Israelite slaves were to be freed but in addition the Jubilee year was to become in essence a reenactment of the Exodus experience in which Yahweh paid the debt of the death of the firstborn with the sacrifice of the lamb, freed Israel from bondage in Egypt, and gave the Children of Israel the Promised Land. These 3 liberations were to be re-experienced in the Jubilee year as Israelites offered the same mercy to all those living in the Promised Land:

Jubilee Liberation	Exodus Liberation
1. the redemption of the land in which all land debts forgiven [Leviticus 25:13-17]	1. God redeemed the “firstborn” of Israel [Exodus 12:1-34]



2. all Israelite slaves are to be freed [Leviticus 25:35-55]	2. God freed Israel from slavery in Egypt [Exodus 12:37-51]
3. the land would revert to the tribal family entrusted with that portion of the Promised Land [Leviticus 25:23-34]	3. God gave Israel the Promised Land [Joshua 3-4].

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Question: Are there any sacrifices associate with the Jubilee year celebration? What was the social impact of obedience to the requirements of a Jubilee year?

Answer: Yes, for the wealthy there was financial loss/sacrifice, but by the very nature of this celebration God intended that the material blessings that came from living in the Promised Land be shared equally among His Covenant people. The Jubilee year was established to help preserve social and economic equilibrium. Unfortunately, like the requirements of the Sabbath year, the Israelites who had the power and influence quickly abandoned their covenant obligations to both the Sabbath year and the Jubilee.

In the 6th century BC when Judah is faced with annihilation by the Babylonian Army, King Zedekiah called the people to repentance and proclaimed a Jubilee year [only a king could proclaim a Jubilee]. This desperate measure came after decades of neglecting the Sabbath year and Jubilee year obligations. However, the people’s repentance was not sincere. The Jews released their slaves and forgave all debts and then immediately changed their minds and recovered the slaves and re-enacted the debts [see Jeremiah 34:8-16]! It is for this reason that Yahweh sets the length of time of the Babylonian captivity at 70 years; Israel owed Yahweh 10 Sabbath years they did not keep—10 x 7 [every 7th year a Sabbath year] = 70 years of captivity and exile [see 2 Chronicles 36:21].

Question: During the transformation of Jesus into His glory at the Mount of Transfiguration, Jesus meets with the Old Testament prophets Moses and Elijah who have returned to consult with Jesus concerning His “departure”, or in Greek His “exodus,” *“And behold, two men were conversing with him, Moses and Elijah, who appeared in glory and spoke of his exodus that he was gong to accomplish in Jerusalem.”* Luke 9:30-31. What is the “liberation” that Jesus would bring about in the “new exodus”?

Answer:

Liberation	Fulfilled in Christ
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1. The debt of the curses incurred for failing to keep the Old Covenant Law were forgiven	Galatians 3:13 <i>“Christ ransomed us from the curse of the law by becoming a cursed for us, for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree..’”</i>
2. He freed us from slavery to sin and death	Romans 6:6 <i>“We know that our old self was crucified with him, so that our sinful body might be done away with, that we might no longer be in slavery to sin.”</i>
3. Through His death, burial, and Resurrection we received the promise of eternal life in the true Promised Land, the Kingdom of Heaven.	Luke 23:42-43 <i>“Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your Kingdom.’ He replied to him, ‘Amen, I say to you. Today you will be with me in Paradise.’”</i>

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This passage from Isaiah chapter 61 is read in Jewish Synagogues today in remembrance of the promised Jubilee year in the return from exile. In the first Exodus Yahweh liberated the captive Israelites from slavery in Egypt, worked many miracles to strengthen the faith of the people of Israel who would become His Covenant people at Mount Sinai, and led them into the Promised Land. That Sabbath day at the Synagogue of Nazareth Jesus is proclaiming that He is the Anointed One prophesized in the Isaiah passage and He is announcing an eschatological Jubilee of God the Son. During this divine Jubilee [which will last 3 years] Jesus will work many miracles to strengthen the faith of the people of Israel who He is calling into a new covenant and ultimately, through His sacrificial death, burial and resurrection, He will forgive the debt of sin, including the debt imposed under the curses of the Old Covenant [Leviticus 26:14-46; Deuteronomy 28:15-69] which He will take upon Himself. His sacrificial death on the Cross will free all mankind from bondage to sin; and through His sacrifice the way to the Promised Land of heaven will be opened! See CCC# 554, 1026, 1151

Jesus made this announcement in His hometown of Nazareth in the region called the Galilee in what had been northern Israel. However, in the 1st century AD this land was the Roman Province of the Galilee ruled by the ethnarch Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great. It is from the Galilee that Jesus would begin His declaration of liberation. He



could not have chosen a better area for the headquarters of His ministry. This was the first area of the Promised Land where the Assyrian Army had begun the dismantling of the nation of Israel in the 8th century BC, taking the tribes of the Galilee away into exile. Now Jesus would begin His restoration of Israel from this very area [Matthew 4:14-16; Isaiah 8:23-9:1; 2 Kings 15:29-30] where the exile of the tribes of Zebulun and Naphtali had taken place in 732BC as they began their journey out of Israel and into the lands occupied by Assyria to the east. The Bible does not mention the return of these 10 Northern tribes, although we know from the New Testament that a small, faithful remnant, loyal to the Temple in Jerusalem did return to occupy the area surrounding the Sea of Galilee.

Question: What town was Jesus' headquarters and what importance did it have historically in the exile of the tribes of the Galilee? See Matthew 4:12-13.

Answer: Capernaum, Jesus headquarters in the Galilee, was on the border of what had been the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali.

Question: What is the connection between the area of the Galilee and the 8th century BC prophet Isaiah's prophecies of the restoration of Israel? See Isaiah 8:23-9:6/7.

Answer: It is the territory in which the prophet Isaiah had prophesied that the Messiah, the son of David, would begin the restoration of Israel.

However, this area was not only an area of historical and prophetic importance in the restoration of Israel as promised by the Old Testament prophets; it also had strategic importance. The ancient imperial highway known as the Via Maris, the "Way of the Sea" was the strategic trade link between Egypt and Syria, passing through the Galilee and making this region the crossroads between the two continents of Africa and Asia. Most Jews and Israelites traveling from their towns and villages in the northern Diaspora to Jerusalem to keep the sacred annual pilgrim feasts of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost [or Feast of Weeks], and Tabernacles [or Shelters] took this route through the Galilee—Jesus didn't have to travel far to find crowds; they were coming to Him.

Question: Does Isaiah mention this route specifically in his prophecies? See Isaiah 8:23/9:1.

Answer: Yes he does. "Via Maris" is Latin for "Way of the Sea" and Isaiah used this very name in Isaiah 8:23 to identify this ancient road dating back to the time before the building of the great pyramids of Egypt [in some Bible translations cited as 9:1].

Early in His ministry Jesus' fame had spread and large crowds were following Him everywhere, coming from the towns and villages around the Galilee, from the Greek culture towns and villages to the southeast of Galilee across the Jordan River known as the Decapolis [Greek for the "10 cities"], from Syria to the north, to the south from Jerusalem, Judea, and even from as far away as the Transjordan—including the south-



eastern side of the Jordan River known as Perea [Matthew 4:24-25]. Just three kilometers to the west of the village of Capernaum, the home fishing port of the brothers Peter, Andrew, and their partners in the fishing trade, James and John Zebedee, is the village of Tabgha. This village sits along the shores of the Sea of Galilee and behind it is the highest hill in the area, today known as the Mount of Beatitudes. The Mount of Beatitudes dips as it nears the sea, the terrain creating the curved half circle shape of a natural Roman or Greek theater.

One fine morning, seeing the crowds moving toward Him, Jesus withdrew up the slope of this “holy mountain” overlooking the Sea of Galilee

Question: When Jesus withdrew from the crowds up onto the hillside who are the men who came to Him to receive His teaching? See Matthew 5:1 and Luke 6:12-16.

Answer: His disciples and Apostles.

In this teaching of the blessings of the New Covenant Jesus began to prepare His Apostles and disciples for the second great Pentecost which would result in the birth and salvation of the New Covenant people through baptism by water and the spirit [John chapter 3]. In the Beatitudes Jesus does not promise salvation to an ethnic group of people who exhibit these qualities of faith of poverty of spirit, or pure hearts or those who encounter persecution in their quest for holiness. These blessings are not promised to different people but these blessings are instead the spiritual demands made on everyone who answers the call to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. **The call of the Beatitudes is to fulfill all the blessings and to reap all the promises.** We must also keep in mind that the Beatitudes have an eschatological fulfillment. They promise eternal blessedness and salvation but not in this world. This is a promised blessing that was not possible under the sacramental system of the Old Covenant Church. See Catechism of the Catholic Church #1716-1724.

“BLESSED ARE THE POOR IN SPIRIT”

*“The fool has said in his heart,
‘There is no God.’
Their deeds are corrupt and vile,
not one of them does right.
Yahweh looks down from heaven
at the children of Adam.
To see if a single one is wise,
a single one seeks God.”
Psalms 14:1-2*



Matthew 5:1 & 2: *“When he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain, and after he had sat down, his disciples came to him. He began to teach them, saying ‘Blessed are the poor in spirit’...”*

The word Jesus uses for “poor”, *ptochos* in the original Greek, means “poor” but not as in “pauper”—one who works for a living but cannot rise above the poverty level [= *penes* in the Greek]. Instead the Greek word *ptochos* [pto-khos] is better translated as “beggar”, one who is completely dependant on someone else for support. In this blessing Jesus is teaching His disciples that the first step on the stairway to heaven is to admit that you cannot make it on your own—in this life or in the next. We are “poor in spirit”, we are not self-sufficient—we admit our dependence on God and that we need Him in our lives rejecting our natural desire for a “self-sufficient spirit”.

In order to understand the significance of Jesus’ statement it might be helpful to look at incidents in Sacred Scripture when men and women rejected or failed to acknowledge their dependence on God.

Please read Genesis 2:16-17; 3:1-5

Question: What was the first sin committed by our first parents in the Garden of Eden? What was the goal and desire of Adam and Eve in yielding to this temptation and what was the result?

Answer: Satan, the prince of liars, lured Adam and Eve with the lie that they wouldn’t die if they ate from the forbidden tree. Satan told them, *“the moment you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods who know what is good and what is bad.”* Satan, the serpent-deceiver, failed to add that even though death would not be immediate they would indeed experience not only physical but spiritual death—the end of their immortality and separation from their intimate fellowship with God. And so, influenced by the serpent, their goal and desire was to be like gods in deciding for themselves what was good and what was evil. When they ate from the Tree of Knowledge they were usurping the sovereign authority of God to decide for them what was good and what was evil. The result was that they declared their independence and rejected guidance from God in their desire to be self-sufficient. This was the first sin—Adam and Eve’s failure to remain “poor in spirit” and dependant upon God. It was the first sin and is in essence the root of all future sins when men and women, lacking faith in God, attempt to make decisions of right and wrong based on their own desires and their own conscience. See CCC# 397-8

Consider the Story of the Rich Young Ruler in his encounter with Jesus the Messiah in Matthew chapter 19:16-22. Here is a wealthy young man who has everything he could possibly want materially in his life but after listening to Jesus, the Master’s spiritual teachings have troubled the young man. He can control everything that happens to him



in this life but what about the next life after his death? And so he questions Jesus about what he must do to achieve eternal life.

“Now someone approached him and said, ‘Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?’ He answered him, ‘Why do you ask me about the good? There is only One who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.’ He asked him, ‘Which ones?’ And Jesus replied, ‘You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother’; and ‘you shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ The young man said to him, ‘All of these I have observed. What do I still lack?’ Jesus said to him, ‘If you wish to be perfect, go sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.’ When the young man heard this statement, he went away sad, for he had many possessions.”

Question: What was the young man’s problem—what prevented him from following Jesus?

Answer: The young man’s problem wasn’t his great wealth; the problem was his enormous ego. After the young man sadly turned away, Jesus turned to His disciples and said [Matthew 19:23-26], *“Amen, I say to you, it will be hard for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”* When the disciples heard this they were greatly astonished and said, *‘Who then can be saved?’* Jesus looked at them and said, *‘For human beings this is impossible, but for God all things are possible.’”*

The disciples were astonished. In the way they had come to interpret the promised blessings of the Old Covenant wealth was considered a sign of God’s blessing, and now Jesus had told them that this material blessing could be a great hindrance to salvation.

Question: Why does Jesus tell them wealth can be a curse instead of a blessing? Why does He use the analogy of the camel and the needle?

Answer: At the time Jesus lived people were either extremely wealthy or extremely poor. There was really no social group comparable to what we call the “middle class”. The problem with wealth is that it gives a false sense of control over one’s destiny creating the illusion that one’s fate rests entirely in one’s own hands instead of in God’s hands. Wealth can become the “god” a rich man worships, destroying his relationship with the One True God. In this case wealth, instead of being a blessing, becomes a trap that makes it nearly impossible for a wealthy person to place himself or herself in the hands of God—making heaven possible to obtain only if “a camel could pass through the eye of a needle”.



The Greek word in the text is *kamlon*, which is the accusative form of *kamlos*. This word means “camel” and can also mean “pack animal.” However, Jesus is speaking in Aramaic and the Aramaic equivalent is the word *gamlo*. The word camel / *gamlo* in Aramaic, however, has a double meaning. It is also the word for the thick rope made from camel’s hair which was resistant to rot and which was used by fisherman. Bar-Bahlul, a 10th century Aramaic lexicographer, identified *gamlo* as “*a thick robe which is used to bind ships.*” Speaking to His Apostles, many of whom were familiar with such a rope, Jesus is using hyperbole and may be comparing the impossibility of the thick camel hair rope passing through the tiny hole in the end of a needle with the wealthy attaining salvation.

It would indeed be impossible for a large rope/ *gamlo* to pass through the eye of a needle, and this interpretation of Jesus’ statement gives no hope of eternity for the wealthy without the mercy of God! However, another story is told, but often disputed by modern scholars, that may help to illustrate the significance of Jesus’ statement concerning the difficulty of the rich in obtaining salvation compared to a camel passing through the “eye of a needle.” At the time that Jesus lived the walls of Jerusalem had 8 large gates. At night the great doors of all the gates were closed and barred at sunset. However, one smaller door, within the Damascus gate, was left guarded and could be opened so a late traveler might enter. But it was only a small door—only the height of a man. As the story goes, this door was called the “Eye of the needle.” You can see such a small door in the large gate in Jerusalem today. Although it is too small for a caravan camel to walk through, it is still possible for a camel to pass through the door but only if it can crawl through on its knees. Yes, it is hard but it is not impossible—with God nothing is impossible! This is the same way we must approach God—with humility, acknowledging our weakness and our need—coming to Him on our knees to surrender all of ourselves to Him in childlike faith. In Matthew 18: 1-4 the disciples asked Jesus who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven? *“He called a child over, placed it in their midst, and said, ‘Amen, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one child such as this in my name receives me.’* [A literal gate known as “the eye of the needle” is disputed by modern scholars because no written evidence has been found to identify the existence of such a gate by this name in ancient Jerusalem. Whether Jesus is speaking of a large rope or a small gate His meaning is clear—with out the mercy and grace of God the wealthy cannot obtain salvation].

Question: Why does Jesus use this example of a little child in Matthew 18:1-4? What characterizes a child’s relationship with a parent?

Answer: A child is completely trusting, a child is completely dependant, and a child looks only to his parent for his care and wellbeing.



Question: How then can one achieve this blessing of “poverty of spirit”? How can a child’s relationship with his parent be compared with our relationship with God?

Answer: This is a blessing that cannot be achieved on a human level. This blessedness of “poverty of spirit” can only be achieved through our utter and complete dependence on God—turning to Him in childlike faith as we “die to self and live for Christ.” We must exhibit childlike spirituality in our “poverty of spirit” relationship with God

Compare the Rich young ruler’s encounter with Jesus to Simon Peter’s experience in Matthew 14:22-31 after the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000: *“Then he made the disciples get into the boat and precede him to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. After doing so, he went up on the mountain by himself to pray. When it was evening he was there alone. Meanwhile the boat, already a few miles offshore, was being tossed about by the waves, for the wind was against it. During the fourth watch of the night, he came toward them, walking on the sea. When the disciples saw him walking on the sea they were terrified. ‘It is a ghost,’ they said, and they cried out in fear. At once [Jesus] spoke to them, ‘Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid.’ Peter said to him in reply, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’ He said, ‘Come.’ Peter got out of the boat and began to walk on the water toward Jesus. But when he saw how [strong] the wind was he became frightened; and, beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ Immediately Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him, and said to him, ‘O you of little faith, why did you doubt?’”*

Note: the fourth watch was from 3AM to Dawn.

Question: What was Adam and Eve’s sin in Eden? Yes they were disobedient but their disobedience was more than a simply physical desire for the fruit. What was the fruit of their desire?

Answer: It was: *“You will be like gods knowing good from evil”*; usurping God’s sovereignty— rejecting poverty of spirit.”

Question: What was Israel’s sin that led to the conquest and exile of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the Assyrians and the conquest and exile of the Southern Kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians?

Answer: The Old Covenant people did not remain faithful in “poverty of spirit”. Yahweh sent them into exile to teach them to be “poor in spirit” and to turn back to Him in childlike faith [see CCC 709-716]

Question: Now compare the wealthy young man’s response to Christ with Peter’s actions when he began to sink into the raging sea. What was Peter’s immediate action? Did he turn to swim back to the boat when he began to sink? What was the wealthy young man’s sin?



Answer: Peter did not hesitate but immediately reached out and called on Jesus to save him. He freely acknowledged his need for Jesus but the rich young man suffered from the false sense of control that his wealth gave him. This is the sin of self-sufficiency. His wealth helped to provide for his every physical and material need and so he became blind to the truth that although he was materially wealthy, he was spiritually impoverished. It wasn't that his wealth was evil, but his wealth, which came from God as everything comes from God, must not be more important to him than his relationship with God. He had to be willing to place his need for God before his material wealth. It was a test he did not pass. He feared losing his wealth more than he feared the possibility of losing the gift of eternal life. The simple truth is that like Peter we must admit that we cannot make it on our own—we need God. We cannot buy our salvation or even work to earn it. Instead we must accept God's gift and make it our own. We must respond to the reality of who Christ is and who we are. The result will be that we realize we simply cannot make it to heaven on our own. We surrender and become "poor in spirit" and like Peter in childlike faith we become ready to reach out to take the Master's hand in the storm of life.

In our spiritual walk we must strive to be like Peter, admitting "poverty of spirit" and constantly reaching out for Christ. It is this first blessing which identifies and defines our relationship with God; placing us on our knees before the throne of our Lord. It is first step on the path to heaven.

And if we achieve this blessedness the promise is:

FOR THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN

"Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Amen, I say to you, whoever does not accept the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it." Mark 10: 14b-15

On the Resurrection side of Salvation History it is often difficult for us to image the impact Jesus' words and teachings had on 1st century AD Israelites and Jews. We are very familiar with the terms which describe Jesus as the "Lamb of God", and concepts like the essential elements of the New Law instituted by Jesus Christ and communicated to New Covenant believers in invisible grace and in visible sanctification through the Sacraments which are necessary for our salvation. But how often do we realize that this statement by John the Baptist that Jesus is the "Lamb of God" identifies Jesus of Nazareth as a human sacrifice—a shocking statement to the crowd assembled on the banks of the Jordan River that day. We fail to understand that for 1st century AD Israelites, those descended from the 12 sons of Israel—or those tribes who were members of the Northern Kingdom of Israel [see John 1:44-47] and 1st century AD Jews, members of the tribe of Judah—or the tribes of Benjamin and Judah which



formed the Southern Kingdom of Judah, that many of Jesus' teachings were earth shattering and until the miracle of the Resurrection and the coming of God the Holy Spirit at the second great Pentecost, beyond their understanding.

Note: In ancient times every Jew was an Israelite but not every Israelite was a Jew. Today, however, the modern State of Israel makes no distinction between being a Jew and a citizen of the State of Israel.

The term "Kingdom of Heaven" is unique to St. Matthew. Matthew was the only Apostle inspired to write a Gospel who was schooled in the Law as a member of the Old Covenant Levitical priesthood. Biblical scholars have suggested that Matthew's preference for the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" reflects a devout 1st century Old Covenant tradition to avoid using the Divine Name. Old Testament Bible scrolls found at Qumran, known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, reflect this tradition by substituting the four Hebrew consonants which represent God's Divine, Covenant name, Yahweh [YHWH] with four dots [****] or substituting the Divine Name by the use of the Hebrew word ADONAI. This ancient tradition is carried over today in some Christian Bible translations, like the New American Bible translation, by replacing the Divine Name with the word "lord" written all in capital letters, "LORD", when the literal translation is "Yahweh", and in Jewish writings today even the word god when referring to the One True God is often rendered G_D. Matthew uses the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" thirty times but it is obvious that in Matthew the phrase "Kingdom of Heaven" could also be understood to be "Kingdom of God" which is used in the other books of the New Testament and which is also found in the Books of the Old Testament prophets.

Question: How do we, as New Covenant believers, come to inherit the Kingdom of Heaven/God?

Answer: Through the Sacrament of Baptism.

We understand that our inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven as an adult is first dependant upon our response to God's grace by our faith which is followed by rebirth through "water and the spirit" of baptism when we cease to be children of the family of Adam and become children in the family of God. For those born into the Church and baptized as infants by their parents, their journey has already begun with their rebirth in Christian baptism, but that is only the first step on the journey to salvation. But what did the 1st century disciples understand about the Kingdom of God from the writings of the Old Testament prophets?

The Old Testament expresses the dwelling of Yahweh in terms of a royal court where Yahweh sits enthroned ruling and judging men, nations, and all of creation similar to the way earthly kings rule their kingdoms [see Job 38-39; Psalms 22:27-28; 47; 95-99; 104; 145; 147; Isaiah 45:1-13; Jeremiah 1-11; Ezekiel 12-16; Daniel 4:3, 17, 34-35; Jonah 1-



4; Amos 1:3-4:13; Tobit 13:1-2;]. Sometimes men are even allowed to come into Yahweh's presence and view the heavenly court:

- Moses is taken from Mount Sinai into the royal heavenly court to view the sacred furniture in the heavenly Temple in order to duplicate them in the earthly Tabernacle [Exodus 25:10-27:21; 30:1-31:11], to be instructed in the vestments for the ministerial priesthood [Exodus 28:1-43]; to be instructed in the consecration and investiture of the priesthood, the order of the daily sacrifice for the people, and the Sabbath worship [Exodus 29:1-46; 31:12-17]; and to receive the 10 Commandments [Exodus 31:18].
- At the ratification of the Sinai Covenant Moses, Aaron and his sons, and seventy elders of Israel eat a sacrificial meal at the foot of Yahweh's throne and behold the God of Israel, *"Under his feet there appeared to be sapphire tile work, as clear as the sky itself. Yet he did not smite these chosen Israelites. After gazing on God, they could still eat and drink."* [Exodus 24:1-11]
- Isaiah is among those few great prophets who are called up to heaven and into the heavenly court: *"In the year king Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple. Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings: with two they veiled their faces, with two they veiled their feet, and with two they hovered aloft. 'Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD [Yahweh] of hosts!' they cried one to the other. 'All the earth is filled with his glory.'"* [Note: King Uzziah died circa 740BC; this is a vision also witnessed by the Prophet St. John in the Book of Revelation].
- Ezekiel the 6th century BC prophet also experiences a vision of the heavenly court: *"I looked and saw in the firmament above the cherubim what appeared to be a sapphire stone; something like a throne could be seen upon it."* Ezekiel 10:1 (in New A. after 10:17)

But the phrase "Kingdom of God" appears most often in the writings of the Old Testament prophets and concerns prophecies that look forward to the coming of the Messiah when Yahweh's rule will extend over all earthly nations when the Messiah will establish His earthly kingdom as in the Book of the Prophet Daniel: *"In the lifetime of those kings the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed or delivered up to another people; rather, it will break in pieces all these kingdoms and put an end to them, and it shall stand forever."* [Daniel 2:44] This is a promised 5th kingdom that will succeed 4 previous earthly kingdoms which can be identified historically as the Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman Empires, with the "intermarriage" alliance [Daniel 2:43] being Rome's union with Judea as a Roman province. In the days of the Apostles, suffering under Roman rule, it would have been their fondest hope that Rome was the prophesized 4th kingdom which the Messiah, according to Daniel's prophecy, would destroy, establishing His own everlasting Kingdom of God on earth.



The earthly Messianic kingdom is what every Jew and Israelite hoped and prayed for, and yet we

Understand that we become inheritors the Kingdom of God upon our baptism. Perhaps Mark chapter 10 which links the coming of the Kingdom as the disciples and Apostles understood it to be from the writings of the prophets, and Jesus reference to His baptism linked together with His Passion, will help us understand what the Apostles understood about the promise of the Kingdom of God and what Jesus meant when He spoke of the Kingdom of God.

Please read Mark 10:35-45: The Ambition of James and John

Question: This passage begins with what request from Sts. James and John Zebedee?

Answer: They request that when Jesus comes into His kingdom that they be allowed to sit at His right and left hand in the throne room of the kingdom.

Usually Biblical interpreters address this passage as an example of the Apostles' complete misunderstanding of Jesus' mission. However, in light of the teachings of the prophets, with which the disciples and Apostles were completely familiar, this was a request that was presumptuous but not unsupported by what they understood about the Messianic kingdom. Their request is probably linked to the vision of the Prophet Daniel in Daniel chapter 7, a passage which describes the Messiah using Jesus' favorite title for Himself: "Son of Man". Please read Daniel 7:9-22.

Question: What kind of Messiah is pictured in Daniel's vision in 7:13-14?

Answer: A Messiah who has the appearance of a man but who is a divine Messiah who will receive from God "*dominion, glory, and kingship; nations and peoples of every language serve him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion...*" In other words, an earthly kingdom of the type already prophesized by Daniel in chapter 2—an earthly kingdom like the one God established for Israel in the time of King David.

Question: The Prophet Daniel is troubled by the visions he has received, especially the visions of the "beasts" in 7:1-8. Daniel approaches one of the heavenly beings in the heavenly court and asks the meaning of his vision. What does the heavenly being tell Daniel in 7:17?

Answer: The beasts represent 4 earthly kingdoms but they will be conquered and the "Holy ones" of God who shall receive the authority to rule.

Question: Who would the Apostles interpret these "Holy ones" who belong to the Messiah to be?

Answer: Probably themselves.



In Daniel 7:19-22 Daniel's vision reveals a period of tribulation for the "Holy ones" of God until God brought down judgment against the oppressors and the "Holy ones" possess the kingdom. Elaborating on this period of tribulation Daniel is told in 7:23-27 that this powerful 4th kingdom will conquer the known world with its confederation of 10 kings [Rome controlled 10 provinces and client kingdoms in the first century AD]. After a period of intense tribulation of 3 ½ years, kingship and dominion will be given to the *"holy people of the Most High, whose kingdom shall be everlasting: all dominions shall serve and obey him."*

Question: How is it likely that James and John interpreted these passages in light of what Jesus promises them in Matthew 19:28 and Luke 22:30 that the Apostles will judge the 12 tribes of Israel?

Answer: They understood that these passages would be fulfilled in Jesus the Son of Man and that they, as the "holy ones" of the Messiah would sit in judgment with Him in the promised Kingdom of God. It is likely that James and John were speaking of judgment when they asked to sit at Jesus' right and left and not of a divine banquet; in a divine banquet they would be reclining [see John 13:23].

Question: Returning to Mark chapter 10, what is Jesus' response to the Zebedee brother's request? Does He rebuke them for making a foolish request or for misunderstanding the meaning of the Kingdom? What does He ask them in return?

Answer: He does not rebuke them. Instead he tells them they do not know what they are asking and asks them the question *"Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"*

Question: What baptism is Jesus referring to and what is the "cup"?

Answer: In the Old Testament the metaphor of "drinking the cup" is used to refer to God's judgment whether drinking the cup of God's wrath or the cup of suffering. In Jesus' case it is both; it is to be expressed in divine judgment on sin that Jesus the Lamb of God is to expiate on behalf of the guilty [see Isaiah 53:5 and Mark 14:24]. Jesus' baptism is not the baptism He received from John. John's baptism of repentance was to prepare Israel to receive the Messiah. Jesus submitted to John's baptism as an example for believers and John's baptism signified His anointing as Messiah by the Holy Spirit. The baptism of which Jesus speaks in this passage is to be His crucifixion and death for the salvation of humanity [see Luke 12:50].

Question: Jesus tells the Zebedee brothers that the authority of assigning places of honor in His Kingdom is reserved to God the Father, however what does He tell them is necessary for them to have a share in His glory? See Mark 10:39-40.

Answer: Sharing in the glory of the kingdom must involve a share in Jesus' sufferings.



Question: Is this a warning for us as well— that to become inheritors of the Kingdom of Heaven through our baptism we must also have a share in His suffering? What statement of Jesus supports this concept of sharing in His suffering? See Matthew 10:38; 16:24; Mark 8:34; 10:21; Luke 9:23; 14:27.

Answer: In each of the Synoptic Gospels Jesus repeats the doctrine of uniting with Him in suffering twice. For example:

- Mark 8:34-35 Jesus *“summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, ‘Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.’”*
- Luke 9:22-23 Jesus tells the disciples, *“The Son of Man must suffer greatly and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.’ Then he said to all, “If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.”*

Question: When we surrender ourselves to Christ, why does He save us? Is there anything we can do to earn our salvation?

Answer: When we surrender ourselves to Christ we discover that He does not save us because of anything we have done but instead He saves us because of what He has done for us when He surrendered His life on the Cross at Calvary. His death on the Cross was His Baptism in blood which makes possible our Baptism through water and the spirit.

Question: What takes place when one receives the Sacrament of Baptism? See John chapter 4 & CCC# 405; 1212-14; 1227-28; 1265.

Answer: Through the sacrament of baptism we have received "new life" in Christ—we have died to sin and we have been raised to a new life in Christ, having been forgiven original sin [and all other previous sins if baptized as an adult], and the promise that if we persevere in faith we shall receive the gift of eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven [CCC# 1213, 1214, 1227-28]. We cannot work to achieve our own salvation; only a heartless and indifferent or uncaring God would sell such a precious gift—only a loving Father does for his children what they are unable to do for themselves. In Romans 8:3 St. Paul teaches *“For what the law was powerless to do God did for us.”* God’s gift of heaven is granted to the victor who has persevered in faith—*“To the victor I will give the right to eat from the tree of life that is in the garden of God [Revelation 2:7b].”* But it is a gift that is not awarded to the “victor” upon conquest but instead it is a gift awarded upon our complete surrender—our “poverty of spirit”. The first step in your journey toward salvation is to surrendering your life to God humbly in childlike faith and your reward will be as God’s child you will inherit the Father’s Kingdom—His Kingdom of Heaven and eternal life, and His Kingdom of Heaven on earth, the Kingdom that the prophet Daniel prophesized would succeed all earthly kingdoms, the Kingdom of the



New Israel, the Universal Catholic Church. This is the earthly kingdom that guides and prepares us to inherit the eternal Kingdom of the Father.

Question: Wasn't the inheritance of the heavenly kingdom available to the Old Covenant Children of God?

Answer: No it was not. The gates of heaven were closed until the perfect sacrifice for sins could be offered [see CCC # 536; 1026 and Hebrews 9:8-10]. The animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant Church could not forgive sins but could only “cover” sins. They were an imperfect and temporary measure to prevent eternal death—eternal separation from God. The sacrifices of animals for sins was so imperfect in fact, that animal blood sacrifice could only be offered for unintentional sins [see Numbers 15:22-31]; only the perfect sacrifice of Christ could atone for intentional sins. In Jesus' infinite mercy—even for his executioners, His cry from the Cross was *“Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing.”* [Luke 23:34]. Even if those responsible for His death did not come to claim His blood in forgiveness, their sin would be judged as unintentional sin and for that small window of time until the Old Covenant would come to an end in the destruction of the Temple in 70AD [see Hebrews 9:8-10], these men would have recompense to forgiveness under the old system of repentance and sacrifice for unintentional sin.

After Jesus' perfect sacrifice on the Cross, He descended into the depths of the grave and released the captives imprisoned there: *“Christ himself died once and for all for sins, the upright for the sake of the guilty, to lead us to God. In the body he was put to death, in the spirit he was raised to life, and in the spirit he went to preach to the spirits in prison. They refused to believe long ago, while God patiently waited to receive them, in Noah's time when the ark was being built. In it only a few, that is eight souls, were saved through water. It is the baptism corresponding to this water which saves you now—not the washing off of physical dirt but the pledge of a good conscience given to God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has entered heaven and is at God's right hand, which angles, ruling forces and powers subject to him.”* 1 Peter 3:18-22. [For more passages concerning the descent of Christ to Hades, or the grave, between His death and Resurrection see Matthew 12:40; Acts 2:24, 31; Romans 10:7; Ephesians 4:9; Hebrews 13:20].

It was through our Baptism that we ceased to be a child of Adam and instead became reborn as a child of God. It is through that rebirth that the inheritance of the Kingdom of our Father is ours—the Kingdom of heaven:

- *“For those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of adoption, through which we cry, Abba, ‘Father!’ The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit*



that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ..." Romans 8:14-17].

- *"But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born under the law, to ransom those under the law, so that we might receive adoption. As proof that you are children, God sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying out, 'Abba, Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God." Galatians 4:4-7*

It was this divine son/daughter-ship that was lost to our original parents in their fall from grace in the Garden of Eden when they became dis-graced and dispossessed of the "kingdom". It is this eternal kingdom that has now been restored to those who are reborn into the family of God. From the Fall of Adam until Jesus' Resurrection and Ascension to the right hand of the Father the gates of heaven were closed [see Hebrews 9:8-10; CCC# 1026]. But Jesus came not only as the new Moses leading the "new exodus" out of bondage to sin and death but also as the new Joshua [the Greek name *Iesous*, from which we get the English word "Jesus" is from the ancient Hebrew *Yahshua*, or in the 1st century *Yehoshua* or Joshua], leading the "new exodus" into the Promised land. He threw open the gates of heaven, His perfect sacrifice for our sins having been accepted by God the Father, so that when the Apostle John was called up to the heavenly throne room in Revelation 4:1, the door to heaven stood open: *"Then, in my vision, I saw a door open in heaven..."* It is through this door that we have the promise, if we persevere in faith, that we will enter and claim the Kingdom of heaven as our home.

Questions for group discussion:

Question: Do you feel you are self-sufficient and can handle life's struggles on your own or do you acknowledge "poverty of spirit" and turn to God in the struggles and well as in the joys that life can bring. Give some examples.

Question: Can you think of some strategies that would be helpful in our daily walk that will remind us of our need to acknowledge our childlike spirituality and "poverty of spirit"?

Question: What are the dangers in trusting to one's conscience in determining right from wrong? Can a conscience be completely trusted or can a human conscience become damaged and untrustworthy through exposure to sin?

Question: Do you yield to "poverty of spirit" and the sovereignty of God in the teachings handed down by Christ to St. Peter and the Apostles and through them to their successors, the Pope and the Bishops who form the Magisterium of the Holy Roman Catholic Church? Do you follow and support the doctrines and dogmas of the Church



or do you pick and choose, deciding for yourself what is “good and what is evil” in the matters of birth control, abortion, the covenant obligations of worshiping on the Lord’s Day and all Holy Days, the perpetual Virginity of Mary, and celebration the Sacraments of the Church?

Question: What are the dangers associated with deciding for ourselves which dogmas and doctrines are acceptable or not acceptable? In doing so are we following Jesus or are we following another example? Whose child do we become when we decide for ourselves good vs. evil?

Question: Why is this blessing of “property of spirit” absolutely necessary to achieve before one can continue with the other blessings Jesus has promised us?

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