We are almost halfway in the season of Lent. This is a time of deep reflection of our mortality and God’s life-giving grace through Jesus Christ. Lent is a time to remember we are far from being perfect; however, even as we continue to struggle to listen to God and do what God says, we know we are loved without preconditions or limitations.

Jesus offers an incredible insight into this in his Sermon of the Mount in Matthew 5:3, he says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

What does this mean? Let us be honest. It is hard to make sense of this Scripture. In the world, we consider that the fortunate ones are those with lots of disposable income, not the poor.

When I was a kid, we didn’t have much; we were poor. But I didn’t know that; I was happy and content with what we had. But as I grew up, I noticed that other people had more stuff and realized that I was poor. I began to learn the sacrifice my family made to stretch the little money we had to make it through the end of the month, paying rent and bills, buying food, and just providing for our family’s basic needs.

My point here is that being poor doesn’t feel like a blessing. (So, I don’t know where Jesus is going with this. Actually, I do, but we will get there shortly.)

Now, on the other side of the coin, it can also be implied that being rich is a curse. If Jesus is saying that being poor is a blessing, then the opposite ought to be true too, right?

I don’t understand how Jesus could be saying any of this. It just doesn’t make sense that God would say: if you want to be blessed, you need to be poor; if you are rich, abandon all hope for you are cursed.

There has to be another explanation to Jesus’ declaration of “blessed are the poor in spirit.”

The key to properly interpret this text is on the word “spirit.” It does not say “poor” as lacking wealth but poor in a spiritual manner. One may immediately think that being “poor in spirit” refers to lack of spiritual health, perhaps even being a bad person. But this does not make sense either. How can God promise blessings when we are careless about our spiritual wellbeing?

This is what I believe “poor in spirit” means: to know our place before God. We know we are “poor in spirit” when we know we are far from perfect and learn that everything we have is because of God’s mercy, not because we are better than others.

If anything, we may even question God’s favor over us saying, “Why do you keep insisting on being with me? Don’t you know what I have done? I am not worthy of you, of any of your blessings. How can you be so good to me? But I am overwhelmed by your grace. I am all yours if you want me.”

Being “poor in spirit” is not about lacking stuff or being careless about your spiritual life, but about the honest assessment of our need for God. This happens, for example, in the moment when we learn how much God has forgiven us and how vast God’s grace and mercy is for us, and we understand how much more we need God’s mercy and grace—hence being poor.

Therefore, Jesus is talking about people that realize how much they don’t deserve God’s grace. Yet, they know God covers them with limitless grace, so they give themselves to God wholly, without reservations, and become utterly dependent upon God.

In this way, to be *poor in spirit* is to be *rich in the spirit*. It is a paradox. (A paradox is a seemingly self-contradictory statement or proposition that when explained may prove to be true. Examples: “If I know one thing, it's that I know nothing.” “This is the beginning of the end.”)

So, as a paradox, this statement of Jesus means that the more we have of God, the more we realize how much more we lack of God. The more we experience God’s grace, the more we may question why and how we are recipients of it, but that is the key ingredient to become grateful for the blessings as opposed to entitled: “I don’t deserve your love, thank you for wanting me the way you do!”

There is a story that Jesus told that perfectly exemplifies this teaching. He told this story to people who were confident in their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else. Listen to Luke 18:9-14,

Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ “But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ “I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

In this story, we read about two persons: a Pharisee and a Tax Collector. The Pharisees were the people who give the appearance of living good, clean lives. The tax collectors were people who intimidated others out of their money.

Now, both of them came to church, for it says that “they went to the temple to pray.” The Pharisee prayed this way: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men – robbers, evildoers, adulterers – or even like this tax collector.” Maybe we can sum up his prayer this way: “I thank you, God, that there’s nothing wrong with me.” Maybe he was right! He was a good citizen. He obeyed the law, lived a moral and upright life. He even did the religious things you were supposed to do – he gave ten percent of his income to the church, and he even fasted twice a week. Really, there’s wasn’t much wrong with him in the eyes of the people.

Then, we have the Tax Collector, praying the opposite prayer of that of the Pharisee. He knew that he did not deserve God’s favor. Jesus said of him, “the tax collector stood at a distance,” meaning that he wouldn’t even walk up to the front of the temple or look up to heaven. He was so ashamed of his sin that he beat his breast, saying, “God have mercy on me, a sinner.” This is not an eloquent or long prayer; he is not trying to convince God of anything or making an argument of why who should be forgiven and blessed—as the Pharisee did. But it is this man that Jesus says went home blessed, not because he was better, but because he recognized his spiritual need.

In life, this happens to us too. Sometimes we are like the Pharisee, thinking we are better than others or boasting about how fulfilled we are or that we are more deserving of God’s blessing because we have earned it—the entitlement mentality. But that is precisely the problem, which is the opposite of being “poor in spirit,” and it is more like “being prideful in spirit.”

Do you see what’s going on? Jesus is warning against religious pride and arrogance but encouraging humility and confession. And what we learn is that we are not blessed because we do something religious; the blessing is not in the "going to church or learning to say beautiful prayers" but in the willingness to give ourselves to God. You are not blessed because you are better than others. You are blessed because you love God and are faithful to him.

Here is the bottom line: I believe that many times the reason why we lack God’s blessings is because we are so full of ourselves that there is no more room left for God to work in and through us. We may think we have earned God’s favor and have everything figured out, but we are ungrateful and arrogant in reality.

My friends, being “poor in spirit,” is about being humble, knowing that everything we are, have, and do is because of the grace of God in us. The moment we think we are more than others or are worth more than others or deserve more than others, that is the moment we lose ourselves. In the same way, the moment we forget how undeserving we are of God’s blessing and we become ungrateful of the grace bestowed upon us, we lose ourselves too.

This is the invitation today: as we continue to observe Lent, let us do so with a poor spirit, that is, with honest self-examination, remembering how fragile we are and how much we need of God in our lives, knowing we are loved just the way we are, and being grateful for that love. And don’t stop making room for God in your life. There is so much more, infinity more goodness and blessings for you and your family.

Amen.