



# Good News for the Poor in Spirit

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In Jesus's mountainside talk in Matthew 5, Jesus speaks to powerless people. He has just finished going through Galilee teaching and healing “every disease and sickness among the people” (Matt. 4:23), and so needy ones continue to pursue Jesus wherever he goes. What they get right now is his attention. When he sees them, Jesus sits down. He speaks to the listeners about their suffering and its relationship to the kingdom of God. He surprises them by saying that poverty of spirit, mourning, and meekness have given them blessings. He suggests that their suffering and powerlessness can create kingdom characteristics—a merciful heart, purity, and the desire to make peace. Jesus compares these powerless people to the revered prophets of the past, warning them that they may be persecuted as well (Matt. 5:3–12).

Jesus praises the poor. He sees the blessings that have come, or will come, to them—blessings they could never have laid claim upon in their misery. He wants his new disciples, some of whom have left secure lives to follow Jesus, to understand the dignity, character, and compassion that can be forged from powerlessness, and to understand how the kingdom of God appears. It's as though Jesus were saying to his disciples, “Really look at these people. See what I see and *be that*.”



By Susan  
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Harrison

***Jesus Uses  
His Power  
to Relieve  
Suffering,  
Including  
Death and  
Oppression***



Given my reading of the Sermon on the Mount, can I conclude that suffering and powerlessness are blessings? Are we to seek them out in order to obtain “the Beatitudes”? The results of suffering can yield kingdom character traits, but powerlessness, loss, agony, oppression, and death are not from God. How do I know? The gospels show that Jesus used his power to heal, save, restore, and resurrect from the dead. He empowered the least powerful, including women.

For example, in Luke’s gospel (7:11–15), Jesus merely observes a woman crying in the middle of a funeral for her only son. She does not notice Jesus, and she does not know enough about him to ask for anything. Yet, Jesus approaches her in her intense grief and says, “Don’t cry.” His heart goes out to her, as he may imagine his own mother’s grief at his death. He knows that this widow will be alone and destitute without her son. So, Jesus uses his power: he raises the man from the dead. Jesus wants to relieve the woman’s pain. He is not interested in her spiritual growth via suffering; he desires to bless her with the return of her beloved son.

There is hardly a greater imaginable power than to resurrect the dead. Jesus uses it again with a twelve-year-old girl, who is the daughter of a synagogue leader. The man is so desperate that, embracing the shame of a servant, he falls to the ground and begs Jesus to come to his house to heal his daughter. Jesus

responds to the ruler’s pain by pressing through the crowd to get to the dying daughter. While being “almost crushed” by so many people, Jesus mysteriously claims that someone has touched him, and says he knows this because “power” has gone out from him. The woman who experienced healing only by touching Jesus’s cloak falls at his feet, ashamed and afraid. Jesus renames her as God’s own Daughter—and publicly lauds her faith. Then he moves on to the home of the now-grieving parents, as their daughter has died. Amidst weeping and the mocking laughter of unbelief, he resurrects the young girl. In this dual story of healing and resurrection (Luke 8:40–56), Jesus’s power seems to ooze out of him, it is so palpable, real, and effective. His power moves toward the suffering, to relieve it, wherever he finds it, or whenever the hurting ones find him.

Jesus’s power to relieve oppression points to Jesus’s authority, a byproduct of power. The crowds often recognize the authority of Jesus’s words (e.g. Luke 4:32), but his authority is most evident when he confronts demons, because the demons know exactly who he is and must submit to his power. In the synagogue in Luke 4, a man possessed by an evil spirit cries out, “Go away! What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!” Jesus commands, “Come out of him!” And the demon immediately exits (Luke 4: 31–37). Jesus uses his power-as-authority to confront and dismantle that which inflicts pain, in order to restore and heal human beings.

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### **Jesus Uses His Power to Advocate for Women**

Jesus not only speaks with authority to evil beings, he also uses his voice to speak powerfully for those to whom no one listens. On a Sabbath, while he is in the respected and powerful position of speaking in the synagogue, Jesus notices a bent-over woman who can barely return his gaze (Luke 13:10–17). He sees this woman as he saw the crowds that day on the mountain when he spoke of kingdom values with his disciples. He discerns her poverty of spirit, and the kingdom that is truly hers. Calling her forth, he blesses her with the freedom, dignity, and beauty of a tall stature. Then, when the synagogue leader rebukes her implicitly for receiving healing on a Sabbath, Jesus defends her right to be healed as a “Daughter of Abraham.” The title “Son of Abraham” would normally describe male Jews, so Jesus radically includes the woman, and all women, in God’s kingdom.

Luke records other occasions where Jesus advocates for women, such as when a woman came into Simon the Pharisee’s house, where Jesus dined, with a jar of expensive perfume for Jesus in her hands (7:36–50). Jesus hears Simon’s unspoken accusations against

both himself and the woman. He takes the opportunity to preach a mini-Beatitudes sermon to Simon, telling him: *be like this woman*. Jesus begins his long boast of the woman as a superior hostess to Jesus, as one who has greater love for God than Simon does, and as one who is forgiven for her sins. When he is done, he turns to the woman herself: “Your sins are forgiven... your faith has saved you... go in peace.” He heals the woman with the assurance that all is well with her spiritually, causing the guests to acknowledge that her sins are indeed forgiven (“Who is this who even forgives sins?” Luke 7:49).

In Luke 10:38–42, Jesus advocates for Mary to Martha—but also to his male disciples who may have been echoing Martha’s thoughts. Martha has a complaint about Mary taking the position of a disciple at the cost of leaving Martha alone to do the women’s work: “Tell her to help me!” she says. Jesus still cares for Martha and her feelings (“You are worried and upset about many things”—we call this reflective listening today), yet Jesus tells Martha, Mary, and the men that Mary has chosen the better path, that of a listening, learning disciple of Christ, no different from the men who also choose Christ. Jesus defends Mary and her assumption of discipleship, to all who are present.

In Luke 21:1–4, Jesus also sees authentic discipleship in a woman, this time in a widow with clearly very little money. What could have been a moment of shame for a woman giving less than a penny to the temple treasury becomes a time of historical significance: Jesus commemorates her generous, faith-filled act not only to the male disciples but also, through Luke, to Bible-readers throughout time.



### **Jesus Rejects Aggressive Power**

Jesus obviously wields power in a way that most of us do not. (When was the last time you raised the dead?) In fact, many of us feel powerless without a metaphorical weapon—a deadly glance, thought, or word. Sometimes in our worst moments we have even gotten physical with our attempt at power—a grab of a child or push of a spouse, or other physical outbursts that we may recall with anguish. We cannot make people do what we would like them to do, which can be intensely frustrating.

Jesus couldn’t always influence people to do what he wished either. He found that his power to compel people to believe in him, and to love him, was limited by the people themselves. But Jesus allowed it. He didn’t reach for the weapons of aggression to hammer

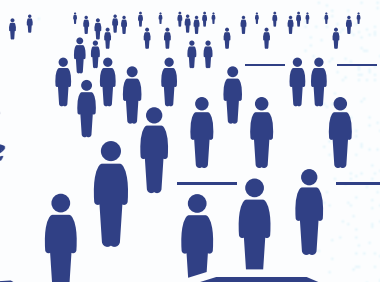
the world into the kingdom. Instead, he spoke the truth, but when people had made up their minds to crucify him, he even quit speaking (Matt. 27:11–14).

Despite Jesus's non-violent approach to power, there is an example in the gospels of Jesus getting physical. Jesus drove out both buyers and sellers of doves and livestock, in the temple outer courts. Some have pointed this out as an example of Jesus's approval of situational aggression or violence. Given that Mark places his account of “the cleansing of the temple” between the beginning and ending parts of the story about Jesus cursing the fig tree (Mark 11:12–26), Jesus

seems to be cursing the false religion and injustice of the temple, with his actions. At the same time, he adjusts the focus of his followers from his own actions to their specific calling. When his object lesson about the fig tree had to do with faith, he was perhaps saying that God will take care of those who act unjustly. We do not have to actively curse our enemies, and we do in fact have to forgive them (Mark 11:25). Jesus, as God, can act authoritatively in judgment of those living out a false religion of hypocrisy and injustice. We, his followers, can have faith in God to “move the mountain” (versus obliterating it), while returning again and again to a spirit of forgiveness.

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**But  
Meanwhile,  
How Do We  
Do Justice?**

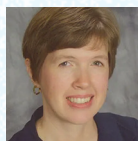


We live in the twenty-first century, in metaphorical temples where divisions continue. In Jesus' time, Gentiles and women were subject to segregation in the temple, and, in many ways, these discriminatory practices of the temple continue through the modern church.

But what is different in this time and place is that many women obtain power in the world, and even occasionally the church. I have often struggled with power—both my own and others'. How do I obtain it, yet still use it humbly for service? How do I use my gifts and see myself as a powerful human being in the church? The words “women” and “power” have come to be seen as mutually exclusive in the church, if power is even accepted as positive. However, power is the stuff of God's kingdom—“the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power” (1 Cor. 4:20). Power comes in a variety of forms to humans. Skill, knowledge, competence, articulateness, persuasiveness, status, degrees, privilege, authority—not to mention the charismatic gifts and the fruit of

the Spirit—are all forms of power that God can use for the kingdom. The real challenge is staying aware of power differences and the potential for injustice that comes from that difference. We also must continue to see the blessedness that Jesus saw in the powerless crowds when he gave the Sermon on the Mount. And, just as Jesus admonished his disciples to use power to humbly serve rather than lord over others (Matt. 20:20–28), so we must do the same.

Within the church, women and men have the challenge of being called to speak the truth about oppression and injustice against women and girls, and to act and advocate on their behalf, as Jesus did. As we follow Jesus in this way, we will often feel as Jesus may have when he spoke—rejected. Yet, Jesus told his disciples to leave a town if they were rejected, to shake the dust off their feet (Mark 6:7–11). If religious leaders don't listen, we can freely leave, and seek out a church community where we are respected and heard. We aren't called to make believers out of those committed to a false religion of injustice. We are called to have faith in God's power, to forgive those who hurt us, and to use our power for healing, justice, and service to the powerless—just as Jesus did.



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