

Whose is the Kingdom of Heaven?

Jesus opened the door of His Sermon on the Mount saying, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Before we accomplish anything else in the sermon, we have to grasp this profound statement. Before we will treat others the way we want to be treated, before we will judge and teach appropriately, before we will mourn, before we will be merciful, before we will serve the Lord so He will be seen and not us, before we will do any of it, we have to be poor in spirit.

This statement turned the understanding of Jesus’ hearers on its head. How could the poor work their way into a kingdom? These Jews were no strangers to buying citizenship. Do you remember the story of Paul’s imprisonment in **Acts 22**?

Having been accosted by the Jews, the Romans grabbed Paul out of the crowd. Paul was allowed to address the crowd, but upon mentioning that the Lord sent him to the Gentiles, the Jews would no longer listen. The Roman commander decided to interrogate Paul by scourging. But Paul asked, “Is it lawful for you to flog a man who is a Roman citizen and uncondemned?” (**Acts 22:25**, ESV). When Paul told the commander he was indeed a Roman, the commander’s response was, “I bought this citizenship for a large sum” (**Acts 22:28**, ESV).

The Jews understood this. They could be part of the Roman kingdom if they were rich enough. If they could scrape together enough money they could be Romans. But how many of them could scrape together that much money? They were poor. They could beg and plead, but without enough money, they would never be Romans.

Jesus explained, “It is not the wealthy who enter my kingdom. Only those who are poor enter.” Only those who recognize they cannot pay their way in enter. Only those who realize their poverty and come to God without trying to offer something but simply to beg for mercy will enter.

We cannot pay our way into God’s kingdom. We cannot earn our way in. No matter what we have done, God never owes us anything. At our best, we are only unworthy slaves who are doing what we should have done all along (**Luke 17:10**).

Yes, we confess Christ, turn from our sins, get baptized, devote ourselves to the apostle’s teaching, to prayer, to fellowship, and to the breaking of bread because we hunger and thirst for righteousness. We know without this we will not be satisfied with righteousness. However, God does not owe us heaven for any of this. We have nothing to offer. Our righteousness is filthy rags (**Isaiah 64:6**). What are we to do?

The Roman kingdom would go to any who could afford it. Christ’s kingdom goes to those who know they can’t. It goes to those who quit trying to pay their way in and simply beg for God’s mercy.

—Edwin L. Crozier