

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

GOOD NEWS FOR THE POOR
Matthew 11:2-6; Advent 3A; December 13-14, 2025

When John heard in prison about the deeds of the Christ, he sent word by his disciples and said to Him, “Are You the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

[GREETING]

John the Baptist was in prison for denouncing Herod the Tetrarch for marrying his brother’s wife. Prison was his reward for faithfully preaching repentance and baptism in preparation for the coming Christ. John had no real prospect of being released as Jesus was increasing in fame and popularity. John was questioning what was going on. If Jesus was Christ the King, then why was he languishing in prison under King Herod? Everything John had heard about Jesus seemed to indicate that He was the Son of David, the long-promised Messiah, the Christ, but John’s personal experience was creating doubt in his mind. If he, God’s “advance man,” was not being saved, what kind of Savior was Jesus? John’s question to Jesus: **“Are You the One who is to come, or shall we look for another?”**

Are there things going on in your life that are making you wonder if Jesus is the One for you? It’s probably not prison with a likely death sentence that John faced, but it could be something just as serious as a death that has occurred or is coming soon. It might be a health crisis for you or a loved one, or a chronic condition that won’t get better, only worse. It might be a strained or broken relationship with your spouse, children, or other family members. (Are you going to have to fake being happy again this year when you are together to celebrate Christmas?) It might be something financial: job insecurity or loss, too little income and too many expenses as everything costs more, debts that are coming due, or not enough saved for retirement. God has promised to take care of His own and you are waiting for Him to deliver on His promises before everything in your life comes crashing down in disaster.

Since you are in church, it is my assumption that you have not given up hope in Christ as your Savior. Those who have quit coming to church don’t seem to put much stock in Jesus as their Savior.

Jesus responded to John by summarizing what the prophets, especially Isaiah, had said the coming Messiah would do. **“Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.”** Jesus ended with an allusion to Isaiah 61 but omitting some key phrases, something John might have wondered about. **“The LORD has anointed Me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent Me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners”** (61:1). If God’s Christ was sent to free prisoners, what was John doing still in his dark prison cell facing death for being faithful in his preaching?

Jesus summarized what He was doing as, **“the poor have good news preached to them.”** What good news-gospel do the poor want to hear? Poor prisoners, like John, want to hear they are being set free. Those in poor health want to hear they are being healed. The dying want to hear that they are going to live. The financially poor want to hear that their needs will be met. But more than just hearing the promise of these things, the poor want these promises kept. As the saying goes, “Talk is cheap; actions speak louder than words.”

We know that John the Baptist never made it out of prison alive. Herod had his head chopped off to fulfill a promise he made to the daughter of his wife, who, shall we say, pleased Herod greatly when she danced for him. The good news of what Jesus was doing for others did not save John from the chopping block (Mt 14:1-12).

We hear Jesus’ promises and what He did for others in their times of need. Christians look to God in Christ for salvation. We pray for it, hope for it, and trust it will come in time because God is good and gracious. But, like John, we might not receive in time the help for whatever it is we need saving from. When we are suffering, what happens to faith when it appears like God has failed us?

We need to remember and understand what Jesus said to John. **“Blessed is the one who is not offended by Me.”**

Rev. Anthony T. Bertram

The word for “offended” literally is “scandalized” in Greek and describes a trap or snare that kills its prey. To be offended by Jesus’ apparent failure to save us is to lose our faith in Him. In contrast to being offended is to be “blessed,” to keep our faith in God in the face of losing everything, even our lives, while waiting for rescue. Jesus’ first beatitude defines what means to be “blessed.” **“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”** (Mt 5:3).

If what Jesus says here is true – and it is – then Christians need to look at our lives and what is happening to us in a completely different way than the world around us. The biblical word for this is “repent,” which literally means to “change our minds.” To repent of our sins is to realize how bad they are and turn away from them. Faith means changing our mind on what it means to be poor in God’s kingdom.

One change of mind we all need is to stop thinking that being “rich” in worldly terms is our goal, but understand that we are all “poor,” a poverty that is going to work out for our good in God’s kingdom.

Before going into what it means to be God’s **“blessed poor,”** we need to understand that Jesus does not condemn worldly wealth as something evil. God blesses some people with lots of money, and God blesses others with very little money. God does not treat us equally in worldly terms but gives us what He thinks we need in this life, not necessarily what we think we need or want.

All Christians are the **“poor in spirit”** in the kingdom of heaven. We always come before God in poverty and want. This is true for both our physical and spiritual lives before God.

In terms of physical life, whether we are strong or weak, healthy or sick, successful or failures, safe and secure or in danger and at risk, lots of money or no money, we are all equal when we die. Death is the great equalizer, as Job noted when he was told he had lost everything: all his children, all his wealth and possessions.

“Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (1:20).

We are also poor in terms of our spiritual lives. We confess our sins admitting our spiritual poverty. “I [am] a poor miserable sinner.” We beg God “for the sake of the holy, innocent, bitter sufferings and death of [His] beloved Son, Jesus Christ, be gracious and merciful to [us] poor, sinful beings” (*LSB* 184). The Bible Verse our parochial school children focused on last week was Romans 7:18, which reminds us of our physical and spiritual poverty. **“For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out.”** We are so spiritually poor that we have nothing we can claim that is ours that won’t condemn us to hell. Even the good we try to do, we fail to do. We are spiritually and physically poor. We are totally reliant on God’s riches of forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

If Jesus had been all talk and no action we would be hopelessly lost in our poverty. One of my favorite Bible verses is 2 Corinthians 8:9. **“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you by His poverty might become rich.”** Every Christmas we are reminded of the poor and humble beginning God’s Son had in this world. Jesus was born in a barn, not the palace of a rich king; Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, an animal feeding trough, not on a pillow-top mattress of a royal crib.

Jesus’ poverty continued throughout His life to the extreme of being stripped naked and nailed to the cross to die a criminal and was imprisoned in a dark tomb. Jesus took the poverty of our sins and gave us the riches of His grace and forgiveness. Jesus was wounded for our transgressions to heal us of all that ails us. Jesus was abandoned to die alone on the cross so we could be brought into God’s family forever. Jesus broke the chains of death that imprisoned Him to free us from the prison-house of sin and death and give us life forever.

Jesus did what He said: **“The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them. And blessed is the one who is not offended by Me.”**

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”
Amen.