

# De Sales

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## SPIRITUALITY CENTER

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*"Poor in Spirit... Rich in Heart"*



Mary D. Ford

The Sermon on the Mount is the first of five great discourses in the Gospel of Matthew. Jesus begins this discourse with the well-known Beatitudes, the first of which is: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God."

The placement of this Beatitude before all others underscores the importance of the question: What does it mean to be poor in spirit?

Francis de Sales offered this reflection on this first of the Beatitudes in his Introduction to the Devout Life: "Whatever riches and all other transitory things you may possess, you must keep your heart free from the slightest affection for them. Your heart may be surrounded by riches; however, riches must never master your heart."

The Gentleman Saint offers this practical image to explain this virtue: "There is a difference between *possessing* poison and *being* poisoned. Pharmacists keep almost every kind of poison in stock for use in various situations; yet, they are not themselves poisoned because the poison is merely in their shops, not in their bodies. So, too, you can possess riches without being poisoned by them if you keep them in your

home, your purse or your wallet, but not in your heart."

Failing to live a spirit of poverty is like having a fever, Francis suggested. We can be sure that we are indeed suffering from this fever when we (1) "lovingly, ardently and anxiously desire to possess goods that we do not have; and (2) when we "are strongly attached to the goods that we already possess; when we set our hearts on them, always having them in our thoughts, and fear losing them with a strong, anxious fear."

Consider the parable of the "Rich Fool" in the Gospel of Luke (12: 13-21). A rich man with a bumper crop has a problem: his barns cannot accommodate the yield. His solution? He plans to tear down his barns and build bigger ones that will hold all of his good fortune.

Of course, the only thing that surpasses this man's wealth, so goes the parable, is his foolishness: God takes his life that very night.

The rich man is not condemned because he had filled his *barns* with riches; he is condemned because he had filled his *heart* with his riches. He was so consumed and self-absorbed with his good fortune that when he was

trying to decide how to dispose of it, he never considered a simpler and more virtuous option: to share it with others. Francis de Sales puts it this way: "I willingly grant that you may take care to increase your wealth and resources, provided this is done not only justly but properly and charitably."

What does poverty of spirit look like? Francis offers this advice: "Do not have a full and explicit desire for wealth you do not have. Do not set your heart deeply on what you already possess. Don't grieve long over losses you incur. Then you will have some grounds to believe that although you may be rich in effect you are not such in affection. Poor—and consequently, blessed—will you be because your greatest possession is the Kingdom of God."

A word to the wealthy...and the wise: the best way to avoid being anxious about getting what you want or losing what you have is to be generous to others.

Therein lies the secret of the poor in spirit, pursuing richness of mind and heart, a wealth that, in the eyes of God, enriches now—and forever—in the Kingdom of God.