

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
January 29, 2017
Matthew 5:1-12
“Blessed? Yeah Right”

You don't want to be that guy, do you? I'm talking about those who take a good, hard look at themselves and don't like what they see at all. They see only moral bankruptcy, a poverty of spirit that makes them say, “There's nothing good within me.” That's a sad state of affairs, to say the least, to measure yourself and find yourself so wanting. What do you call a person like that?

How about “blessed”? After all, when it comes to spiritual poverty, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” He's talking about the one who, by the grace of God, confesses the truth of his sinfulness—the one who says, “I've got nothing, nothing in me that stands up before God. All of my righteousness is nothing more than filthy rags. Therefore I will cling to Christ instead.” So, that makes you the one who is poor in spirit, yes? By the grace of God, yes. But the world and sinful flesh look and say, “How awful to feel so bad about yourself. How terrible to have such a poor sense of self-worth. You really should give yourself some more credit. You can't go through life daily confessing your sin—what a downer!” And so you're tempted to think you've got some good apart from Christ. You're tempted to take some of the glory that belongs to Christ and give it to yourself instead— you want to bless yourself. But when you bless yourself, it's just a delusion. When Jesus blesses you, He speaks life into you.

So He says that you are blessed because you confess your poverty of spirit, your need for grace. You are blessed all the more because you know that Jesus suffered the ultimate poverty of spirit in your place on the cross, suffering the judgment for your sin. And because Jesus blesses you with the salvation He has won, yours is the kingdom of heaven.

If you are the one who mourns, Jesus speaks to you here. No one likes to mourn. Mourning and grief preach another poverty, when you are robbed of one you love, when you're given to suffer their absence and the loneliness it brings. We dread such times of mourning, for they make our days long and painful. The world looks at those who suffer grief and says, “Don't want to be like them!”

But what does Jesus say? He says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Though you will at times be given to mourn, Jesus says that you are blessed. What is the alternative to mourning? Not mourning, of course—and in this world, that means trivializing death as just “a part of life” rather than as the wages of sin. The one who denies sin and its wages will by no means be prepared for his own death, his own judgment; so he faces not just the death of his body, but of his soul. That's the curse of sin.

But that is not for you. The world dreads grief, and goodness knows you do not welcome it; but unlike so many, you know that you are still blessed. You're blessed because Jesus has already

endured your death for your sin, and for all those who have died in the faith before you. You know that, because Jesus speaks life to you, death and mourning are not the end. You will be comforted.

Few are excited about meekness, either. The meek guy is the one who always lets other people go first, who's last in line and gets the smallest piece of cake—if there's any left at all. People might respect those who are meek, but that doesn't mean they want to be like them. Meek people don't get as far as they could in life or career, because they're too busy holding the door open for others, too occupied with serving others. If that's you, you'll be tempted to view it as a flaw. If you want to get to the top of the heap, meek people are good for stepping on. Meekness is not a character strength for those in pursuit of power: it's a curse.

Jesus says, "Blessed are the meek." The one who is blessedly meek is the one who has been set free from the tyranny of time and self-worship. Those who are set free from sin know that they are set free to serve, to love their neighbor. They know that God's plan isn't that man go around once, seize all the goodies he can for himself and then return to the dust. According to God's will, the only-begotten Son of God became the Servant of all and went to cross, meekly like a lamb led to sacrifice. He did so to deliver the world from sin. By the grace of God, you know this, and so you are blessed. Where you resent meekness and service to others, you confess it and rejoice in Jesus' meek service to you. For His sake, you will inherit the earth—not this sinful, dying one, but the new one that God creates on the Last Day.

Do you see a pattern developing yet?

It is the same with those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and perhaps even more evident. There will those who revel in sin and consider themselves liberated in it, and there will be those who find their sins to be comfortable like an old pair of shoes. That's not for you, for you've been set free from sin. But there will be sins that especially tempt you—sins that are a struggle to resist. Resisting them means tossing and turning at night, beating your head against the wall. It seems like it would be easier just to give in. As long as you resist them, life is a dogfight between flesh and spirit, and it doesn't feel good; but if you give in, you're going to feel worse. So you resist, even though it hurts. This is a bit of hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

If that's your lot, you could use some encouragement, and you won't get it from the world. The world does not count you as blessed. Rather, the world says that you're being tortured by false guilt, by shame imposed upon you by the Church and others. You should, urge many, just give in and do whatever you want to do. When is it ever a blessing to be hungry and thirsty? Why spend your life struggling against temptation instead of giving in? That hardly looks like one living a blessed life.

But Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied." Even if some sin would make you feel better and satisfied in the meantime, it's designed to leave you empty and condemned to hell for eternity. So where you must struggle

hard to resist the sin, you give thanks to God for the strength to fight; and should you give in, you confess that sin because Christ has forgiveness for you. Your faith is hungry for the righteousness He bestows upon you with the forgiveness of sins—the forgiveness He won by hungering and thirsting in your place, all the way to the cross.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.” Mercy is compassion and patience, especially toward enemies. It’s quite opposed to the killer instinct that a competitive world demands, and the desire to be merciful is perceived by many as a sign of weakness. It’s not that you should be putting your enemies to death by the sword, but rather that it seems a waste of time to be looking out for them. Let them take care of themselves—you take care of you. Who goes out of his way to help people who hate you anyway, who would only spit in your face if you tried?

Christ does. While we were yet sinners—enemies of God, Christ died for us. Rather than take care of Himself, He mercifully died in your place. Set free from the sin of selfish self-preservation, you’re set free to be merciful to others. So Jesus says, “Blessed are you,” and please note: you’re not blessed because you show mercy. Rather, you’re so blessed already with grace and freedom to serve that you can now be merciful to others; and you do so with the comfort that the Lord will continue to be merciful to you.

“Blessed are the pure in heart,” says Jesus, and that gets the world sneering right away. Purity of mind and heart and body are all punchlines and objects of mockery. If you pursue purity, you’re not having fun. You’ve got to loosen up, get off your high horse, live a little. Consider the treatment of young men and women who elect to save themselves for marriage: the world will mock them relentlessly. And if purity of body is difficult, purity of mind is harder still—and purity of the heart is even more impossible yet. So the world gives up and calls any pursuit of purity boring, repressive, even futile. You’ll be tempted to be fed up with purity.

But Jesus calls it blessed. He calls you blessed—not because you can purify your own heart, but because by faith you confess that you cannot. As you hunger for righteousness, you also long for a pure heart that does not betray your Lord and seek after sin. Jesus calls you blessed, because you know that He is pure in heart, yet He went to the cross and died for all of your impurity in order to redeem you. Because you’re forgiven for His sake, you are blessed: where impurity would cast you into outer darkness, you will see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” says Jesus. This is for you if you’re sick of trying to repair a damaged relationship, tired of trying to bring two sides together, frustrated that your prayers are not heard. What a grueling grind it is to make peace in this world. This is a world that’s big on respect, enemy lists, choosing sides and leaving people in the dust. You know what you’re going to get for trying to make peace between people, or between you and others? Not always a great return for your efforts, because bitterness and resentment are quick to slam the door. You’ll want to give up on the peacemaking thing. But Jesus calls peacemakers “blessed.” You’re blessed because the Son of God has already made peace between you and His Father in heaven, by no less than His Sacrifice on the cross. He’s turned you from stranger and enemy of

God to “citizen of the Kingdom,” to “son of God and heir of heaven.” You’re set free from the sin that divided you from God, and that is the peace you first speak to others. Where you grow weary of trying to make peace, you confess the discouragement and rejoice that Christ does not tire of making peace with you.

A couple of beatitudes remain: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake;” and “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.” The world does not see those under persecution as blessed. The world will divide the persecuted into two camps—either victims who need to be delivered, or people who had it coming. But blessed? Certainly not. Jesus, however, says that those who are persecuted for His sake are blessed. The persecution is not the blessing—persecution is how sinners ultimately react against the gospel, to silence its proclamation by making the price of uttering it steep. But if you are persecuted as a child of God, you are blessed. You’re blessed with a faith that doesn’t give in to the threats and pressures of sinful man. You’re blessed with heaven and the great rewards that await. You’re blessed because Jesus Himself already endured the persecution of sinners on Calvary in order to deliver you from sin.

Do you see the pattern throughout these beatitudes? One commonality in all the Beatitudes is this: what Jesus calls “blessed,” the world does not. Ask the world the question, “Which of these people are blessed: the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted or the reviled?” The world’s response will be, “Is this a trick question?” Or, at best, the world might say, “Those people are blessed because they’re scoring points with God,” but that’s not right, either. The world doesn’t consider such people blessed.

Why? In part, because the world has no hope: if this life is all there is, then any of these circumstances hurts the one life you get. Thus hopeless, sinful flesh doesn’t see such people as blessed. And that’s important, because your sinful flesh remains. And when you suffer any of the above situations, your sinful flesh will be preaching to you that you clearly are no longer blessed by God.

But you have hope. You have hope because, by faith, you know that Jesus calls you blessed.

You’re blessed because Jesus speaks His life-giving blessing of absolution into your ears. He doesn’t sugar-coat reality. It’s true that life isn’t fair, that there will be suffering, that good deeds will often go unrewarded or even punished. It’s true that purity and righteousness don’t come easy or naturally to you because you were born a sinner. But it’s also true that you are blessed, and you are blessed because Christ forgives you. You will face various difficult circumstances and troubles, but the blessing is that they have an end. You do not. You are blessed with eternal life because Christ has died for you and Christ is risen for you. He promises His presence now, to strengthen you with grace and keep you in the faith; and He promises that He will raise you up to everlasting life.

All of these blessings are yours in Christ, because Christ has fulfilled every last one of them to give them to you. For now, they're seen by faith. That's the other thing these beatitudes have in common: they're seen only by faith. You don't always see God's blessings by looking around you, especially when you are brought low. That is why you remain firmly focused on the cross, on Christ's sacrifice for you. It's why you daily confess your sin and rejoice in His forgiveness: for if you are forgiven, all of these blessings are yours. You'll see.

These beatitudes are the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, and we'll be hearing portions of it for the next several weeks. Remember its place in the Gospel of Matthew: it follows right after last week's Gospel lesson, where Jesus was healing all sorts of people—both Jews and Gentiles—and preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins. His indiscriminate healing of all sorts of people raised the question, "Who is this Messiah here for?" The answer: "For all." What Jesus taught by those miracles, He now teaches in the beatitudes. "The Messiah comes to bring the blessings of God? Who is He here for? Who has He come to bless?" Not the powerful, the ambitious, the successful by human standards, the ones who trust in themselves and look only for worldly blessings. Not for just one people or another. He is here to bring light to those who dwell in darkness. He is here to bring life to the dead, grace to sinners.

He is here to bring the blessings of God to Jews. To Gentiles. To you. And He brings all of God's blessings to you by His death in your place on that cross. In other words, blessed are you: because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen