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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Ash Wednesday, February 17th, 2021
Ascension Lutheran Church, Littleton, Colorado
Lenten Midweek, February 24th, 2021

Sermon: The Sermon on the Mount: Blessed Are *You*

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

Focus: We are blessed by Jesus' Word of promise.

Function: That they would have courage and hope for life.

Structure: Text-Application

Locus: "That I may be His own and live under Him in His kingdom and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness..." (SC, 2nd Article of Apostles' Creed).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen. In our Gospel reading today, Jesus helps us enter the Sermon on the Mount by way of the Beatitudes. That's what we call all those statements that begin "Blessed are the poor in spirit," "Blessed are the meek," "Blessed are the peacemakers," etc.

This past year has redefined how we understand what it means to be blessed. Before the pandemic, we felt blessed if we were able to spend some leisure time with our family, if we got along with our boss at work, if we weren't bullied at school, and if we had a little extra money after all our bills and investments. Now we know we are blessed if we have a job at all, if we can go to school in-person, if we're still breathing. In fact, less than a year ago, you were counted blessed if you could just find *toilet paper!* So much that we used to take for granted no longer seems a given. We recognize that we live by the hand of God. For when everything else we have is taken away, all we are left with is Jesus.

The beatitudes begin in the third person: "Blessed are *they*..." Yet towards the end, Jesus makes it personal and directs his words directly at us:

“Blessed are *you* when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matt. 5:11-12, ESV).¹

The word beatitude is a Latin word that means “blessed.” The Greek word (*μακάριος*, *makarios*) can also mean “happy.” But that makes the Beatitudes sound even more like oxymorons than our English word “blessed.” For example, “*Happy* are the poor in spirit” (5:3)? “*Happy* are those who mourn” (5:4)? *Happy* are *you* when you are persecuted for your faith?! That doesn’t make sense at all!

Some people will tell you that blessing is all a matter of perspective—of your *attitude*. Even now many Christians subscribe to the school of Norman Vincent Peale and his *Power of Positive Thinking*. If you stay positive and keep a good outlook, then good things will come your way. This is the practical application of Prince Hamlet’s keen observation that “There’s nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so” (Act II, scene ii). For people of this mindset, the Beatitudes are really “*Be Attitudes*,” examples of moral virtues that we should try to cultivate within ourselves. In other words, the so-called “*Be Attitudes*” teach us how we should act and be in our daily lives—and the kind of blessings that we can expect from God in return. In this regard, the “*Be Attitudes*” aren’t that different than the heretical prosperity “gospel” of Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyers, and others in the Word of Faith movement. In fact, it is no gospel at all (cf. Gal. 1:6-7).

The trouble with viewing the Beatitudes as virtues is that it turns Gospel into Law. The beatitudes are not ideals to attain or moral requirements to strive for. They are blessings conferred upon those of lowly status: the poor, the weak, the sorrowful, the merciful, and the persecuted. Thus, as disciples of Jesus, we enter into the Christian community through the Word of blessing that Jesus speaks upon us. His Word is living and active, creating the reality that he

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

speaks into being. Because Jesus calls you blessed, you *are* blessed, whether or not you feel like it.

Today I want to focus on just three of the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit” (v. 3), “Blessed are those who mourn” (v. 4), and “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (v. 6). Because it is Lent, the Church’s season for repentance, we should consider the ultimate reason for being poor in spirit, mournful, or lacking in righteousness: *sin*! Sin is human rebellion against God, his Word, and his ways. Sin gets in the way of our relationships with God and other people. It corrupts us to our very core. And unless God intervenes and *does something to us*, we are hopelessly, helplessly lost and destined for doom. That is the *opposite* of blessing.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (v. 3). Who are the poor in spirit? They are those who feel guilt and shame because of their sin. They recognize that they have nothing to offer to God. Nor do they hold anything over his head. God is not beholden to them because of their many good deeds. They know they are born in the poverty of sin, and they will die in the poverty of sin without God’s good gift of forgiveness. So God sent Jesus to die for their sins so he could give them *his* inheritance: the kingdom of heaven (or kingdom of God).² This is the great reversal of the Gospel: “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” (2 Cor. 8:9).

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (v. 4). In this world we mourn for all kinds of reasons: divorce, disease, addiction, and the death of loved ones (among others). People hurt us by their words and actions. In turn, we hurt others too. This causes

² See what Jesus says to “the blessed” on Judgment Day: “Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’ (Matt. 25:34).

broken relationships, broken bones, and broken lives—all of which are cause to mourn. But sin is the ultimate cause of all this sorrow, because pain and death came into the world through sin. Indeed, “the wages of sin is death...” (Rom. 6:23a; cf. Gen. 3:16-19). We are dust, and to dust we shall return. But the Good News for those who mourn their sin and the sin of others is that God promises to comfort those who mourn. Jesus comforts us with his Word of promise, his Word of forgiveness spoken from the cross. In heaven, “God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes” (Rev. 7:17). And indeed, even our sorrow can lead us to repentance so that we turn away from sin and return to God. “Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death” (2 Cor. 7:10, NIV).³

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (Matt. 5:6). Why do you get hungry or thirsty? Because you lack food or drink, and your body needs nourishment. Right? Why do we hunger and thirst for righteousness? Because we have no righteousness of our own. Righteousness (Greek: δικαιοσύνη, *dikaïosunē*) means being in right relationship with God. There are only two ways for this to happen: (1) either we live a perfectly good and obedient life, never breaking any of God’s commandments or doubting his Word; or (2) God must *make* us righteous. The first way is impossible. If we stumble at even *one* point of God’s Law, we’re guilty of breaking all of it, and, as Luther writes in the Catechism, “we daily sin much.”

None of us could ever do enough good and avoid enough evil in order to attain our own righteousness. And so we need a righteousness that is *not* our own, an “alien” righteousness that comes from *outside* of us (Latin: *extra nos*). We need God to make us righteous. And that is what he does because of Christ’s death on the cross. God declares us righteous—he *justifies*

³ All Scripture references marked NIV are from THE HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®, NIV® Copyright © 1984 by International Bible Society. For your own sake, never purchase or use the 2011 “translation,” which is a corruption of the Biblical text.

us—by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28). To be justified means that God declares you righteous and innocent of all sin—not because of who you are or what you’ve done or haven’t done, but simply and solely because of who God is and what God has done for us in Christ Jesus. To be justified means that God makes it “just as if I’d” never sinned. Because Jesus lived the perfect life we couldn’t live and died in order to give us *his* righteousness. And so we are satisfied because of the price and cost that Jesus paid on the cross.

Ultimately, you are blessed because of Christ’s death on the cross, which won for you the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Because of Jesus’ death and resurrection, you are blessed. Because Jesus died and rose again, you will inherit the kingdom, receive rich comfort, and be satisfied with God’s own righteousness. The Beatitudes don’t tell you how you ought to be. The Beatitudes remind you who are—and *whose* you are—because of Jesus. And that makes you *truly* blessed! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.