

Sermon Draft

Text: Matthew 5:1–12

Sermon: “Blessed”

On All Saints’ Day, we rejoice that God has called his Church out of this world and that we are members of that Church. We, too, belong to the communion of saints that has no beginning and no end, because it finds its true being as “the one holy communion, the mystical body” of Christ who sanctifies it, as the Collect for today reminds us. And in that communion, we are helped by hearing examples of how God graciously works in and through the lives of saints who came before us, so that we might also lead our own godly lives as God’s children here on earth.

In general, humans pursue happiness. It is everyone’s hope that with some effort and by making good and right choices, one will be rewarded in this lifetime with happiness. Usually that state of happiness is measured by worldly standards, by the wealth of material possessions one has: a huge house, many cars, a full bank account, and other luxurious things.

And as the person looks around and sees what he has, he might draw the conclusion, “Look, I must be truly blessed.”

In the company of Jesus, the disciples hear their master talking a different language. They are told that those who are poor in spirit, those who are meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, and those who suffer, who are persecuted and insulted such people will be blessed. Jesus describes a group for whom things do not appear to be going well here on earth, and yet, while they may not find earthly happiness, they will still be rewarded. Jesus promises His believers that they shall be blessed.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied” (vs 3–6).

What we hear in the Beatitudes is something that goes contrary to our expectations. That explains the astonished reaction of the crowd later on at the end of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (7:28).

For who would want to belong to the group Jesus is speaking about, to be counted as one among the mourners, the meek, and the thirsty? But Jesus' words are to be understood eschatologically. God's rule is in the future but has already begun. His kingdom is very near, and yet still outstanding (Mark 9:1). Thus, the promises have an eschatological meaning that, with the coming of the last Day, a new world emerges.

The first four beatitudes are pointing to a hope of a new heaven and earth where righteousness is found (2 Peter 3:13). This hope has huge implications for the present. For in Jesus, God is already here, and blessed are those who can see that (Matthew 13:16–17).

Though the full presence of Christ still remains hidden, already during his life on earth he invited the poor, the downtrodden, the meek, those who thirst for righteousness to his table. True, they were not yet sitting at the great banquet in heaven, but they were his guests and in his company. They were with him who was as poor as they were and who made himself the chief sinner on the cross.

To the eyes of natural man, God remains hidden, but blessed are those who recognize him in Christ through faith and with the right inner disposition. The key here is that they have recognized not what they bring to the table, but that they are in great need for his help. Help me, O Lord, for I am in great need.

We should avoid the mistake of presenting these beatitudes as demands or requirements that have to be first fulfilled before one has any chances with the Lord. That would turn these verses into Law. What we need to realize is that our situation is described precisely as Jesus presents them here. God comes to those who realize their need: the destitute, who lack all the qualities that merit God's mercy. Christ has become for them their righteousness (1 Corinthians 1:30).

He comes to those who mourn and those who yearn for righteousness, which they do not display on their own. Christ's message is clear: We don't have to be a hero, not a person of success and achievement. If we truly need him, which we all do then he will come to us and bless us.

Only those who have the Spirit, who are in God, can do what verses 7–9 are talking about: ***“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.”***

The external life of practicing love to the neighbor of which these three beatitudes speak can only come from within or by being with and in God. And in that state of being, love flows from us toward our neighbor. God’s mercy to us becomes our mercy to others. Our pure hearts are expressed in honesty and integrity. We seek and promote peace for others here on earth. These verses speak of people to whom God has come and has renewed and equipped them through his Spirit.

We might interpret verse 7; ***“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy”*** as if God shows his mercy only to those who have shown it first. But exactly the opposite applies; because God has shown mercy to us, because we have received it from him, we are placed in such a state in which mercy rules among us.

God's mercy declares us free from God's judgment, and so we who have been acquitted no longer judge others. God lets mercy rule instead of demanding righteousness, and so it cannot be any different for us in our relation to others. The same applies to those who seek peace: ***"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God"*** (v 9). Peacemaking begins with God establishing peace through Christ, and we then promote peace, trying to bury hatred and anger in all areas of life, in marriage, in families, and at church. Those who do so are called sons of God, that is, possessors of salvation.

Especially those who are pure of heart will see God (v 8). In the biblical world, "heart" stands for the entire person, his inner being. Thus, purity is not just an external act done hypocritically (15:2), for ***"out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person"*** (15:19–20). "Purity" covers a broad field to think about what is good and pure, to support life, to be faithful in marriage, to respect our neighbor's property, and to show concern for the well-being of others. Such people will see God.

Thus, being blessed means two things: both to receive and to become. To live from God's mercy makes us merciful; to be purified through Word and Sacrament makes us pure toward others; to live in peace with God makes us peacemakers.

Stated a different way, a life under God endows us with newly found abilities to work for the good of our neighbor. We receive mercy, purity, and peace, and we show them to others. Much of what we do falls short, and so we live continuously by God's mercy and grace, him purifying us and renewing the peace.

But already here and now, we can be called blessed possessors of heavenly things. We are blessed because we have found access to God; ***“Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God.”*** (Romans 5:2), we will see God at the fulfillment of all things; ***“Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”*** (1 John 3:2)

And we are conformed to Christ; ***“Since we have the same spirit of faith according to what has been written, ‘I believed, and so I spoke, we also believe, and so we also speak, knowing that he who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and bring us with you into his presence. For it is all for your sake, so that as grace extends to more and more people it may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God.’”*** (2 Corinthians 4:13–18).

The fact that Christians should be considered blessed is often not corroborated from experience; it must be believed, since now it still remains hidden and only transparent through faith. This applies especially to the last beatitudes: ***“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 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”*** (vs 10–12).

The Church is hidden under the cross, and God reveals himself in the earthly things, human and lowly. That is also how it was with Christ's earthly life, his suffering, and his death on the cross. The blessed possess a wisdom that the world does not have, for they see and recognize in the cross God's glory at work. The glory of God remains hidden in him and becomes apparent only through faith.

The same applies to the Church here on earth. It is a Church Militant, struggling, suffering, and subjected to persecution. Persecution is a mark of those who are in God (John 15:19). Belonging to Christ brings rewards but also suffering.

The Lord does not promise peace in the life of his disciples, for where they follow their Lord's will, angry consciences will oppose, even persecute, them. But to those who follow their Lord, even to the point of death, comes the promise of the blessing "theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The Lord himself truly represents the one who was persecuted to the point of his death on the cross, and even on the cross, while hanging there, he was insulted.

Our suffering and persecution pales in comparison to his, and yet, where it occurs in our lives, the reward of glory, that blessing, will be ours.

What we've heard in our text is that the disciples must reflect or reveal their Lord himself through their attitude and in their actions. We must become imitators of him here on earth. We must seize upon the opportunity to testify in word and deed to our Savior. But then in doing so, our own failures will abound. Will we as Jesus' followers endure to the end? Yes, we will, because our Lord has assured us, all his suffering followers, of the blessing of eternal life.

Amen