

Epiphany 4, January 29 2023

Paradoxical Blessings the Beatitudes

Sermon Theme: Blessed are the poor in spirit.

Text: Matthew 5:1–12

Other Lessons: Micah 6:1–8; Psalm 15; 1 Corinthians 1:18–31

Theme: Heaven's Great Reward

Goal: That hearers be encouraged to live victoriously.

Happiness is the theme of the Psalm tied to the Beatitudes—a righteous person is pictured by the psalmist, and he is distinct from those who are evil. The *Old Testament Reading* reminds the children of Israel of God's special care and provision through many generations as the Lord presents his case against Israel and reminds them of his unfailing care.

Weakness, powerlessness, and even seeming foolishness comprise the *modus operandi* as God works his way with the world in the cross of Christ. And so Paul in the *Epistle* chooses a style of speaking and living that matches God's—his manner of speech is foolish to human wisdom, for it suits God to use such ways. Paul's emphasis is on God's doing, not ours, not our abilities, but God's ability.

In the *Gospel*, the section of the Sermon on the Mount known as the Beatitudes, Jesus describes a disciple. He underscores his specialness or blessedness. Translators through the years have dealt differently with the Greek word *makarios*, and no one translation seems absolute. Attempts have included blessed, happy, lucky, and fortunate. I would like to suggest another—congratulations to. This translation clearly denotes some special recognition is due and is conferred because of the relationship of the saints with their God, and it is initiated by him.

Each of the Beatitudes begins with a congratulatory fact and then explains why the congratulations are due: "Congratulations to the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The first four Beatitudes (vv 3–6) depict a state of need—a condition of incompleteness or emptiness. Needs are met and lives filled in relationship to God. The "poor in spirit," "those who mourn," "the meek," and those who continue to search for "righteousness" lifestyles can find these filled only by God, not by the world. These verses present the problems fulfilled by God.

The next three verses (7–9) present the process in presenting the active, positive qualities of God's saints. "Merciful," "single-minded," and "peacemaking" are qualities mirrored in the life of our Savior. These are the fruit identifying the disciple, the fruit by which they are identified.

Finally, the reward is presented. The prize has been won and is awarded to the faithful. There is reason to celebrate. Despite earthly difficulty and disappointments faced by all the faithful throughout all generations, the reward is theirs, and they are to be congratulated—the prize is theirs. An outline follows the verses: problem, process, prize, and is placed in the Epiphany context.

Have you ever been "blessed" with something you didn't necessarily consider a blessing—red hair, freckles, greater than average height? At first sight, that's how one might see the blessings in the Sermon on the Mount: *Blessed* are those who are poor, who mourn, who are meek, who hunger and thirst, who are persecuted, reviled, and slandered. Blessed? But that's paradoxical! (Which means, according to Webster's dictionary, that it seems contradictory, unbelievable, or absurd, and yet it is, or may be, actually true in fact.)

Our goal today is to hear the paradoxical preaching of our Lord Jesus Christ himself, so that we may know and appreciate the truly needed blessings of God even though they may be paradoxical and unappealing from a worldly point of view. Here's Jesus' paradox:

The readings for this Lord's Day remind us that our happiness is a gift from God. It is his good pleasure to give us the Kingdom. The Old Testament Reading calls to memory God's constant provision for his people despite their attitude or deeds. The Psalm reminds us of the uniqueness of the child of God, distinct from the world and happy in relationship to God.

The Epistle shares the simple truth that the ways of the world are not always God's ways. He chooses weakness and ways that seem powerless and foolish to accomplish his mission, yet he achieves his mission. By his grace we are saved, his gift, not our doing (Eph 2:5, 8). Congratulations, you've won!

The Gospel, which begins Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, is called the Beatitudes or blessed statements, which identify the faithful and ascribe certain virtues to them. It is interesting that Moses delivered the Law on Mount Sinai, and Jesus here shares the Gospel on a high hill on the northern shores of the Sea of Galilee. Moses taught the children of Israel the Law, and Jesus taught and teaches his disciples the Gospel.

These statements have been translated in a variety of ways through the centuries, always emphasizing the act of God to create a mood of celebration and reward for the faithful. The reward is never understood to be deserved or earned, but always given like a prize. Words used to share this meaning have included blessed, happy, lucky, fortunate, and one I'd like to share this day, congratulations. Listen to the reading again, inserting the phrase congratulations to in each of these statements.

Congratulations to those who know . . .

Congratulations to those who mourn . . .

Congratulations to those who are humble . . .

Congratulations to those who seek God's will . . . These first four focus attention on God's ability to complete us, to fill the emptiness in our lives. They underscore that life in this world is often problematic. They remind us that we often fall short of God's expectations, yet congratulations are in order because God has seen our need and fulfilled it. He has done for us what we could not do for ourselves.

Congratulations to those who are merciful . . . Congratulations to the purposeful . . . Congratulations to the peacemakers . . .

In what sense does Jesus mean each of the words he uses to describe the blessed?

The poor in spirit

By "poor in spirit, we understand Jesus to mean **not** having one's heart, mind, and soul saturated with worldly treasures of prosperity, success, good times, earthly goods, riches, and power.

"*Poor in spirit*" means that we remain beggars before God, as poor guests who find ourselves for a time living with resources not really our own. (Note Mt 6:21: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also"; note also our liturgical mind-set as poor beggars crying out to God in our great need: "Kyrie eleison.") Lord Have Mercy.

"*Those who mourn*" We mourn when we see in the world and our heart so much wickedness, arrogance, contempt, and blasphemy of God and his Word (from AE 21:17–22).

"*The meek*" We are meek in putting up with circumstances, giving in to others, yielding, listening, excusing them (from AE 21:22–25).

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (v 6). To hunger and thirst is to give unceasing attention to the accomplishment and maintenance of what is right, especially in every station of life (from AE 21:26–29). (Note the distinction presented in the study above between forensic righteousness and Christian good works.)

The merciful" (v 7). The merciful are those who deal with others in a friendly and gentle manner, patiently tolerating and enduring faults or weaknesses, gladly forgiving the sinful and frail (from AE 21:29–32).

The pure in heart" (v 8). A pure heart is cleansed of its own peculiar ideas and filled with what God says in his Word in order to consider everything in a Christian godly way (from AE 21:32–39).

The peacemakers" (v 9). We are peacemakers in giving help and counsel on the side of peace as much as possible and putting the best construction on everything by being a reconciler and mediator (from AE 21:39–44). "Those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake" (vv 10–11), reviled and slandered,

especially, for example, regarding our doctrine and practice (from AE 21:44–50).

In what sense does Jesus mean “blessed”?

“Blessed” means made, pronounced, or considered happy, fortunate, favored, prosperous, enviable, or praised in the sight of God and his kingdom versus that of the world.

All that is what we are because Jesus died for us! The new men or women inside us rejoice because they know Christ’s cross has given us this blessed status before God.

Therefore, Jesus means this blessing to be paradoxical because of the two different perspectives.

We are truly blessed because we have the spiritual treasures of God’s kingdom: forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. These are treasures, though despised by the world, that we have by grace through faith for the sake of Christ and are manifested by Christian good works and fruits of faith.

These three remind us of the virtues of God’s people—they become marks of the disciples. “By their fruit you will recognize them”. Active, positive qualities abound from God’s people—a desire to care for and about one another, a desire to serve rather than be served, a singleness of purpose that it is God’s will that all people be saved and that he has created and made us his church to serve this purpose, the desire to build up rather than tear down, the willingness to cover one another’s sins rather than expose them. In Dr. Luther’s words, we are “to put the best construction on everything,” to be peace-loving and peace-promoting.

Finally, congratulations when you are under fire or at odds with the world. You’re in good company because that’s what has happened to so many who have been before you, but congratulations, indeed, for the prize is yours. Heaven is your reward. You can say with St. Paul as he wrote to Timothy, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all those who have longed for his appearing” (2 Tim 4:7–8).

In this Epiphany season, we bask in the glow of the knowledge of God’s desire that all people come to him. We are reminded that we are the people of God; that God has made us who and what we are, and that the prize is ours. Is it a prize to hoard or a prize to share? We know the answer. May we revel in God’s grace, identifying his empowerment and sharing the prize. Congratulations, you’re a winner!