Matthew 5:1-12

4 Epiphany A + February 5, 2014
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Beatitudes and Blessings

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 5: “Blessed are you.” This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

“Blessed are the poor in spirit,” says Jesus. Who wants to be poor in spirit? It doesn’t sound inviting, but like someone who has terrible self-worth. Then by the grace of God, you realize, “Exactly!” Apart from Jesus, you have no worth at all thanks to sin. So you confess that you’re a sinner in need of God’s grace; and the Lord says, “Blessed are you, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are those who mourn,” says Jesus. Again, really? No one likes to mourn: mourning is about loss, often death. People avoid mourning at all costs: that’s why so many are quick to ignore death and work hard to pretend it’s not there. Part of that pretending is to deny the problem of sin, because death is the wages of sin. And Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn”—who acknowledge sin and the loss of all that it brings? Who wants to mourn? By the grace of God, you realize you do. To acknowledge sin and death is to acknowledge reality. So you acknowledge—confess—that sin before God, and you hear Him speak forgiveness and life. He says, “Blessed are you, for you will be comforted.”

“Blessed are the meek,” says Jesus. But meekness doesn’t pay well. The meek guy is the one who lets other people go first, who’s last in line and gets stuck with the small piece of cake. People might respect those who are meek, but that doesn’t mean they want to be like them. 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. But Jesus says, “Blessed are the meek,” and you say, “Amen!” Why? Because the one who is meek is set free from the tyranny of sin and self-preservation. Knowing that you have all good things in Christ—most of all grace and life that lasts forever, you’re set free to serve others as Jesus has served you. So Jesus says, “Blessed are you, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.”

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,” says Jesus. No one likes to be hungry and thirsty. It means that you don’t have food and drink. It means that you lack what you need, and you and I want to have what we need. So how is it good to hunger and thirst for righteousness? You’ve got this one: you need righteousness from the Lord. The alternative is self-righteousness, which is to say, “I don’t need Jesus because I’m not a sinner.” By the grace of God, you know better. You know that you’re sinful and need the Lord to make you holy. Knowing your need, you say, “I’m hungry.” You confess your lack of righteousness, and you rejoice in the certainty that Jesus has died and is risen to make you holy in His sight. So Jesus says to you, “Blessed are you, for you will be satisfied: I’ll pour into you every last bit of righteousness so that you are sinless and holy before My Father in heaven.”

“Blessed are the merciful,” says Jesus. Mercy is often as unpopular as meekness, especially when it’s mercy towards enemies—and it will be by the end of the chapter. The natural course of action is for you to take care of you, and let them worry about them—preferably far away. Why would it be a blessing to be merciful? You know why: if you are not merciful, then you’re unmerciful. If you’re unmerciful, you’re operating without love for others. That means you’re not repentant and you’re resisting God’s mercy for you. But by the grace of God, you know better. You know that while you were an enemy of God, Christ mercifully died for you. Your mercy is only a reflection of His mercy to you. You repent of your lack of mercy, and you rejoice to hear Jesus say, “Blessed are you, for you shall receive mercy.”

“Blessed are the pure in heart,” says Jesus—yet another virtue for which the world has no use. The world mocks purity in any form and tries to defile it. It may not be high up on your list of favorites
either: not because you’re immoral, but because you know how impossible purity is to achieve. You don’t start out your day saying, “I’m going to finish today pure and holy;” no, realistically you’re probably down to, “I’m going to try my best.” Your best, of course, isn’t good enough: if it’s not pure, it’s impure and unholy. But by the grace of God, you’ve got the hang of these beatitudes by now. You examine yourself and you confess your impurities—you confess your sins; and you rejoice that Jesus declares you forgiven, pure and holy for His sake. Thus He says to you, “Blessed are you, for you shall see God.”

“Blessed are the peacemakers,” says Jesus. 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. Even if you want peace, you know you can become sick of trying to repair a damaged relationship, tired of trying to bring two sides together, frustrated that your prayers are not heard. Now Jesus comes along and calls peacemakers “blessed.” But it’s true—for you! 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. By the grace of God, knowing that your sin is what destroys this peace with God, you confess it and rejoice in God’s grace; and Jesus declares to you, “Blessed are you, for you are a child of God.”

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.” Persecution doesn’t sound like a blessing: nobody prays, “Dear Lord, bless me with persecution.” But Jesus says, “Blessed are those who are persecuted.” By the grace of God, you know why: if you are persecuted as a child of God, you are blessed with a faith that trusts in Him and 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.

So go the Beatitudes. Jesus is telling you that in Him, you’re already blessed. He’s telling you that all these are God’s gifts to you with the forgiveness He bestows on you now.

It’s tough to hold onto that, because it doesn’t make sense to the world or your own sinful flesh. 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 might well 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. In fact, though, that’s the other great temptation for you—to believe that this is a checklist for earning God’s favor: in other words, you’ll inherit the kingdom of heaven if and when you’re “poor in spirit” enough. That wouldn’t be a blessing, because that would reduce these blessings to future goals that are way beyond your reach.

But you are blessed now. You’re blessed because Jesus speaks His life-giving blessing of absolution into your ears. 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. You don’t always see God’s blessings by looking around you, especially when you are brought low. But you will live to see them, because you’ll live forever. 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. So blessed are you indeed, 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