

Blessed

Matthew 5:1-12

Are you blessed? We say we're blessed when we get a promotion. Maybe your kids said they were blessed when they came home Tuesday night with a bag full of candy, or maybe you said you were blessed when you saw what they got. Maybe you felt blessed by the ISU victory over TCU last weekend, or by the friends you got to see because it was homecoming. Maybe you feel blessed when you get a good report from your doctor. Maybe you feel blessed when you get that internship with the company you've wanted to work for.

Most of the time, we say we're blessed only when good things are happening. But what about when bad things are happening? What about when your children don't listen? What about when your noisy neighbors keep you up all night? What about when your favorite team loses? What about when the test results aren't that good? What about when you struggle to find a job that uses your degree? What about those days when nothing seems to go right, when your computer won't work and your car acts up? Are you blessed then?

We all seek to be blessed, yet it seems few people seem to have reached such a goal. Happiness is a goal that we all strive for, but when that goal is reached, or when we think we've reached it, we realize that there is always something else that would make us even happier and more truly blessed. The Declaration of Independence says that we all have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, but it doesn't guarantee that we will ever actually catch happiness.

When Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount, he begins with what we've come to know as the Beatitudes, because each sentence begins with blessed, and the Latin word for blessing is *beatitudo*. The Greek word that Matthew uses is *makarios*, which means happy, having a full life, free from normal cares and worries. But the people Jesus is talking to, and the people he is talking about, sure don't seem blessed or happy. Those who are poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who are meek, those who are persecuted are not our usual candidates for happiness or blessedness.

This shows us that Jesus' definition of what it means to be blessed doesn't depend on us or what is happening around us. These "happiness" sayings of Jesus – the

Beatitudes – present us with a whole new idea of what it means to be blessed. True happiness, true blessedness comes not from our circumstances, but has to do with knowing God, belonging to God's Kingdom, and being a part of God's family.

In the middle of all the difficulties we have living out our Christian faith in our daily lives; when we are sad and sorrowful; when we are despondent and depressed; when others reject and ridicule us for our faith or for sticking up for what we believe is right; when we try to show mercy and love or bring about peace and we are told it's none of our business; God meets us, he forgives us, he comforts us, he strengthens us, he helps us endure, he gives us the courage to move on. He reminds us of our Baptism into the crucified and risen Christ, that we belong to Him for Christ's sake. In such circumstances our "weaknesses" become occasions for Christ's strengthening word of encouragement and his promising word of grace. This same kind of blessedness enabled Paul to write to the Philippians from his jail cell, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (4:4).

The blessedness comes not because of what we do, but because of what God does for us. In a world where we want to be independent, the Beatitudes invite us to recognize our dependence on God. The Beatitudes are declarations of salvation to those who place their trust in God. The persons blessed are the "humble," those who have realized their helplessness and know the desperate need for grace alone.

When we hear the Beatitudes today, as we celebrate All Saints' Day, when we remember those who have died in the last year, we look ahead to those who are fully living in the blessedness of Jesus. But Jesus doesn't just give the Beatitudes as a blessing for the future. Jesus is speaking in the present tense. They are blessed now. And so are we.

The Beatitudes anticipate the new age not yet realized, when God will bring about his universal rule at the end of history. The Beatitudes do not promote earthly, secular standards. In fact, each beatitude is an attack on such standards. Nevertheless, the Beatitudes do declare to those who are receptive to God and his will that they

already are “blessed,” and they do describe virtues which Christians should put into practice. They should practice these things not for the sake of reward, but because they know that these virtues describe the life which God wants among people, the life which will be in the world to come. In that sense, we can see them as Be-attitudes, as a guide to following Christ and entering into the life of being a disciple.

Jesus didn't just preach the Beatitudes. He lived them out. He mourned the death of Lazarus, and comforted everyone by raising him from the dead. He hungered and thirsted for righteousness, and was able to defeat the devil and his temptations. Jesus was persecuted for righteousness' sake, taking on the sins of the world on the cross. He was reviled and falsely accused, all so we could be blessed.

Because of what Jesus did, you are blessed, too. One of my pastor friends pointed out that when we read most of the Beatitudes, Jesus is talking in the third person, blessed are “they.” But in the last one, Jesus switches to the second person, blessed are “you.” Blessed are you! At the end, the Beatitudes become personal. Instead of speaking about “them,” Jesus speaks to “you”! You are blessed, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ! You are blessed because you are the disciples of Jesus. Jesus speaks blessing upon you. Even if you are poor in spirit, mourning, or meek, you are blessed. Even if you are hungry and thirsty, for righteousness or for food and drink, you are blessed. Even if you are in need of mercy and a purified heart, you are blessed. If you are a peacemaker or persecuted, you are blessed. They are promises that Jesus makes with authority. You are blessed. You are blessed no matter what happens in your life. You are blessed because Jesus died on the cross to forgive your sins. You are blessed because Christ Jesus rose from the dead. You are blessed because Christ will come again. You are blessed because Jesus calls you his disciples and calls you blessed. That's a blessing this world can never take away.

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