

BLESSED BY GOD

Matthew 5:1-12

We've all heard those "good news-bad news" jokes.

Doctor: I have some good news and bad news.

Patient: Ok, well... Give me the good news first.

Doctor: You have 24-Hours to live.

Patient: How is that good news?!? What's the bad news then??

Doctor: I've been trying to call you since yesterday.

But there are also real life "bad news—good news" events. You come to an 8 AM class for a test. You were up late cramming for it. Then you see a notice on the door to the classroom that says, "Dr. Jones is ill today. The Chem 171 test for today has been postponed until next week." No test today!

That's good news. You have grace time to better prepare for the test. But that could also be bad news for you if you have two other big tests next week. It would be better for you to have taken the chemistry test and have it out of your mind when you cram for those other tests. And it can be frustrating to have stayed up late and then dragged yourself out of bed only to find that the test is not this morning. The good news isn't so good.

How, then, do we see the words Jesus said to begin His famous "Sermon on the Mount"? Jesus says blessed are the poor in spirit, the meek, those who are mourning, those who hunger and thirst, and those who are persecuted. To those people His words can seem very precious. But if our lives are pretty much in order, then those words can be unsettling. We can almost wonder that the only way to truly receive God's blessings is if we are down and out, if we don't have our act together, and if our lives are messed up. Think about it. Do we want to be mourning, poor, and persecuted so that we can be blessed? And if we aren't, does that mean that we truly aren't blessed?

What further complicates things is when we consider that the word, "blessed" can also be translated, "happy." How can anyone in their right mind be happy in suffering, poverty, and persecution? How can that be a blessing?

The words of our text were chosen as the Gospel lesson for All Saints Day, which we celebrate today. All Saints was originally set up to remember those who were killed because they were Christians. We call those people "martyrs." What often comes to our minds are the people who were thrown to the lions' den and the gladiators. They died, not screaming in panic, but in joy, celebrating that they had the honor to die for their faith in Christ. We also think of saints like Peter and Paul who boldly preached Christ, even though they were tortured, imprisoned, and killed because of it. I have had people ask me about the symbols around the clock in our lounge. Those symbols represent the apostles of Jesus. There is a symbol with a set of keys and an up-side-down cross. It is the symbol for Peter. The keys represent how Jesus

said to Peter and all of us that He has given us the keys of the Kingdom—the power to forgive or not to forgive sins. The up-side-down cross reflects how, according to tradition, Peter died. He insisted that the cross he was nailed to be put up-side-down, because he did not consider himself worthy to die the way Jesus died. Those saints’ lives, and even more their deaths, seem to show the fulfillment of Jesus’ Beatitudes—“Happy are you when men revile and persecute you.” But do we want that? Would we ourselves be happy in the face of persecution? Would we consider that blessed? Would we consider them or any who mourn their loss happy?

We could say that many of the stories of saints like Peter and Paul are garnished with tradition. Many of those stories probably are. But in our own age people still die rejoicing in the face of persecution and suffering. More people lost their faith for the Christian faith in the 20th century than all the previous 19 centuries combined. The 21st century doesn’t seem any better. One in seven Christians live under some form of persecution. Over 62% of people in the world live in places with restrictions of religious beliefs. Nala is a Christian who had to flee his home country of Somalia in East Africa. He says, “When I got home, the men in my family were waiting for me. They beat me and took my mobile phone and they locked me up in a room. They said, ‘We have heard that you are corrupted,’ but they have never once used the word ‘Christian.’” But is that what we are looking for? Do we see happiness in that? Do we want to be “blessed?”

During the Middle Ages people sought happiness by trying to deny themselves the pleasures of life. They went to monasteries so that they could be poor, hungry, and meek. That way they felt that God would bless them. Is that what we should do—seek happiness by renouncing wealth, looking for persecution, and by making ourselves as meek and poor as we can? Is that how we become blessed?



Lutheran scholar Martin Franzman said of Matthew’s Gospel that it is the Gospel of “extreme cases.” What Matthew is most extreme about is God’s grace. Right after the Sermon on the Mount Matthew’s Gospel tells us in chapter 8 that Jesus healed three “extreme case” people—a leper who was considered hopeless and outcast by the Old Testament law, a Gentile’s servant, and a woman (in those days a woman was considered a second-class person). Jesus’ actions reflect the extreme nature of the promise He gives in the Beatitudes. God’s blessings have no limitations—He reaches out to even the most extremely hopeless. And

because God is extreme, the acceptance and love that He wants to work in us is extreme. As God's grace has no limits, we too can remove the limits to the love and acceptance we show to others. That is what it means to be blessed.

Since God's grace has no limits, then we can see what Jesus is trying to tell us in the Beatitudes. Happiness doesn't come from extreme wealth or extreme poverty, from a smooth-sailing life or one burdened with pain. Happiness and blessedness are not what we find or gain. They are what God gives to us.

Notice the groups that Jesus lists in the Beatitudes—"the poor in spirit," "those who mourn," "the meek," "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." These aren't just any poor, meek, or hungry. These are all categories listed in the Old Testament. These are people who looked for comfort in God's chosen Savior, the Messiah. They are those who centered their lives on God's promises.

Jesus isn't saying, "Become poor, be meek, and find something to mourn about so that you can be truly blessed." No, since Christ has come into our lives, then we can be truly happy and blessed in all situations—even the "extreme cases." As Paul said in Philippians, "I have learned in whatever state I am to be content. I know how to be abused and I know how to abound; in all and any circumstance I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in Him who strengthens me."

We close our worship services with what we call the "Benediction." That word means "to speak a blessing." The two benedictions we normally use are, "The Lord bless you and keep you . . ." and "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ . . ." If you look at either of those blessings, the English sounds a little strange. It may seem a lot more comfortable saying, "May the Lord bless you and keep you . . ." and "May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ . . ." You might remember Red Skelton closing his TV show with the words, "And may God bless." What we are saying then is that we hope God will bless us. But when the pastor says the Benediction, he faces the congregation. He says, "The Lord bless you," not, "The Lord bless us." It is not his blessing to the people, but God's. If I were to say to you, "May it go well with you," I would have to use the word, "may." I can't say for certain that it will. But when God speaks His blessing to us, it is never "may." That is why Jesus said in the Beatitudes, "Blessed," not "May you be blessed." Are we blessed? Yes we are because that is what God promises to us. The same God who definitely sent His Son to die for us on the cross is the God who definitely blessed us.

"Am I blessed?" That is no longer the question for us. The question is now, "Do I want that blessing?" If I don't want God at the center of my life, then Jesus' Beatitudes are a threat to us. They make me squirm. They make me feel unsettled. But when God is at the center, then Jesus promises to us in all situations, in even the "extreme cases", that He will be with us. He will bless us. That is the real happiness—not that I always walk around with a smile on my face, but that my life is centered on God. God bless you.