

"Blessed Are You" (Matthew 5:1-12)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Jesus saw "great crowds" (Mt 4:25) – some of whom came to hear Jesus (Mt 7:28) as they saw him sit down (as Rabbis typically did when they taught), his disciples also came to Him (Mt 5:1) and at this juncture in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus spoke *the very first* words of His public ministry; the very first words out of His mouth to reach all people (members of the crowd back then), as well as those already following Him (disciples = *mathetes* means "learner," or "hearer," and translates into one who follows); and these very first words are to the "crowds/all people" today; and to His present-day disciples like you...these are the very first words which mark Jesus' ministry, which reveal why Jesus came! What would they be? What words would set the entire tone and main content for His saving ministry and the reason for His coming into the world?

Jesus' first words are nine sentences ***declaring and imparting His blessing upon sinners***. These "blessed" (*markarioi*) statements proclaim and impart grace dear Christians, they are Gospel words! Much to our great shame, however, we treat them over-and-over again as Law words, as man-made, cause and effect words: "If you are this, then you are blessed." This is wrong and treats Jesus as a new Law-Giver. This false understanding implies that Moses once went up to the mountain for the first set of tablets called the Ten Commandments, and now Jesus goes up to this New Testament mountain to give us a new set of tablets, this time containing a more spiritual law in the Beatitudes.

So plain and simple: the words of grace and blessedness are mistreated as ethical prescriptions like these:

"If you are poor in spirit, then you will get the kingdom of heaven."

"If you mourn, then you will be comforted."

"If you are meek, then you will inherit the earth."

"If you hunger and thirst for righteousness, then you will be satisfied."

"If you are merciful, then you will receive mercy."

"If you are pure in heart, then you will see God."

"If you are a peacemaker, then you – with other faithful ones -- will be called sons of God."

Etc.

So again with this orientation -- and according to this misinformed view -- Jesus is teaching you and me how we can earn the kingdom of heaven. That is, He is teaching us

about how to train our attitudes. "I need to be more humble, more contrite, more righteous, more merciful, more pure, more apt to make peace...and if I am these, *then I shall be blessed.*"

But if this is anything "blessed," then it is a blessed catastrophe in interpretation and we totally misunderstand our Savior! If this were the case, then the true beauty of poor sinners beholding their gracious Savior – as they will also do in heaven (Rev. 7) and at the end of the world (1st John 3) – and receiving His free love and mercy is *denied* and *replaced* with a picture that isn't about beholding Jesus, but is a picture of beholding ourselves: looking upon ourselves, and our potential for moral improvement. This view, however, is an affront to everything that our Lord meant in starting His saving ministry with the nine declarations of "blessed."

Besides can you imagine the hypocrisy involved if we actually took the view that our sinful flesh *wants* to take? How lowly and humble do you make yourselves in service to others really? Perhaps there is a level of some sort of humility in how you treat others, but only when they are kind to you and especially if they agree with you! But how lowly and humble are you towards those who disagree? How lowly and humble are you to those you've determined ahead of time don't serve your lowliness and who do not deserve your humility? And how much do you hunger and thirst for righteousness when you hunger and thirst for the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions (1st John 2:16)? And how merciful are you towards those you've convinced yourself are not deserving of mercy so that you can be like the unforgiving servant who received mercy, but then tried to choke out of another servant what was owed him (Mt 18:21f)? How pure in heart are you when by nature you easily permit the things of this world to become the idols which command your time and energy? If this was the message of Jesus in the commencing His ministry, then He is surely a "Savior" we do not want to know; that is He would be no Savior at all, but only a new task-master intent on magnifying the misery of helpless sinners!

But the true Savior, the real Jesus began His great sermon with this portal of grace: *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."* This is a proclamation of universal grace to you sinner and to all sinners (like me and the rest of humanity). The "poor in spirit" is a description of the status of human beings, it is a description of what we are: spiritually deprived. The poor in spirit have not the spiritual resources to save themselves. On account of sin, they are spiritually bankrupt and lost; they are dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph 2:1). But in your lost and spiritually dead – spiritually poor – condition, Jesus comes and the very first words out of His mouth is to bless you! And there is but one reason: for YOURS is the kingdom of heaven. The first beatitude and the eighth beatitude are distinct from the 2nd through 7th beatitudes. The 2nd through 7th describe blessings to come in the future; but the 1st and 8th describe THE blessing that is

already yours: the kingdom of heaven is yours right now sinner! Why? Because the King of the kingdom has come FOR YOU! Jesus was presenting Himself back then as the Savior of sinners and Jesus is presenting Himself right now – right this moment – as the Savior of sinners. The King comes to you – as helpless as you are – to save you.

And this is the significance of the word “blessed,” it is not an attitude – like “be happy” – but a status: you’re saved! You’re rescued! You’re forgiven! You’re given the kingdom with all of its blessings in tow! Not because you’ve made yourself poor in spirit, but because Jesus came for what you already are: Jesus has come for sinners. This message is 100% unadulterated grace for sinners! It is the Good News that saves and blesses us while we were enslaved to the sin that made us spiritually bankrupt. You are blessed because Jesus comes for the helpless, period!

This blessing for sinners is true for all people, but the second beatitude describes what happens when it sinks in to become faith. When the sinner like you and me realizes that God is speaking to us and that we are forgiven, then we care about how we sin. We care because all of a sudden we realize how much Jesus has done for us and how much we don’t want to dishonor the Savior who has transferred us from the curse of sin which leads to death to the new life in Himself...we now care about whether we sin or not. O, it is true that no matter how much we try not to, we do, but still something is different for the disciple, you begin to hate sin, so much so that when you consider your soul, you feel contrition (you feel Godly sorrow) and you mourn over your own sin that remains before you, before others, and before God. It disturbs you, it bothers you, and you mourn. We can hear the echo of Saint Paul: “sinful man that I am who will save me from this body of death (Ro 7)?!” We know what he means and so we mourn. But this is not our work, this is God’s work through His Word and Sacrament and by the Holy Spirit who works through them.

This same relationship between beatitudes one and two is true of the relationship between beatitudes three and four. Blessed are the meek. God’s grace is given to the lowly, not because they seek lowliness or because they’ve tried to make themselves lowly, but because grace is given to those who are already lowly...they can’t help it...they are lowly in sin; this is their status, this is their plight, this is their curse. They are in need of deliverance. For such helpless ones, Jesus has come to bless! And He does! And He has! And He is so doing even now through His Word and Sacrament! And through this work, a life is produced: the disciple in faith begins to hunger and thirst for righteousness. This is not their own righteousness; it is not their trying to earn righteousness or to do righteous deeds, but it is the God-given desire of the lowly to be saved: they come to know that they need Jesus. That is, they hunger and thirst for Jesus Himself. That becomes the mark of the Christian: wanting Jesus...wanting His grace;

wanting His forgiveness, because we have no other help! This is why we thirst for Jesus body and blood for in the Sacrament, because we receive the grace we need to live. It is the only hope for the lowly! Luther said, "We have the clear assurance that God does not cast aside sinners, that is, those who recognize their sin and desire to come to their senses, who thirst for righteousness (AE 2:41)." Just remember that the righteousness that we are talking about is God's forgiveness for you and me!

The relationship between the pairs of beatitudes is inverted for 5 & 6 and then 7 & 8. Those pure in heart (beatitude 6) are those who are said to be pure not for anything they do, not for anything they are, but on account of the True God they behold, the true Lord of grace: He makes them pure! As a result – having been on the saving end of mercy and mercy poured out – they begin to show mercy (beatitude 5). That is just the way it is and thus we pray this way every time we pray the Lord's Prayer: "forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us." This is the life of the Christian ONLY and SOLELY on account of being FLOODED with forgiveness from God in and through Christ. The mark of the disciple is the overflow of mercy. Never do we do this perfectly; always does our sinful flesh interfere...but the transformation of the disciple is overflowing with mercy, Christ's mercy overflows.

The same inversion is true for beatitude 7 & 8. Those who are persecuted (beatitude 8; this is their status) are those who are led to proclaim and to share God's peace which is known solely through the Gospel of Christ (beatitude 7). Here we must be careful because whereas all disciples know the status of spiritual poverty and lowliness, etc., not all disciples know the same degree of persecution. However, it is nevertheless true as our confessions state, "Troubles are not always punishments for certain past deeds, but they are God's works, intended for our benefit, and that God's power might be made more apparent in our weakness." (Ap XIIB 63)" The troubles – the persecutions – lead us only to be even more blessed, because we are led to hold to Jesus not less, but even more!

The last beatitude brings the hypothetical "they" and "those" from the first eight beatitudes to the definitive and personal "you" in verse 11 and it leads us again to the promise of eternal life to you (disciples) that is very much a reward, but one which must be properly understood: "We confess that eternal life is a reward; it is something due because of the promise, not because of our merits (Ap V 242)."

We need these words dear Christians, because in them we are taught the realistic understanding of what happens in this life. In this world the saints suffer...they are poor in spirit, they mourn, they are lowly, they hunger and thirst for righteousness, and they are persecuted, but when they behold Christ – as you behold Christ – then something

else invades this life and this leads us to the ONLY TWO COMMANDS in our Gospel today. Only after this stunning presentation of God's grace does Jesus command: "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven." This is why we rejoice even as we mourn; this is why we are glad even while we are lowly...great is our reward in Christ; great is our hope; and great is what our loved ones in Christ who have since gone to heaven have at this moment! This is so great that when Christ commands it, it is a command that is driven by the Gospel...how can we not rejoice? How can we not be glad? Since Jesus has come to us poor sinners, the kingdom of heaven is ours!