

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

January 29, 2017

Matthew 5:1-12 (EHV) – ¹ When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up onto a mountain. When he sat down, his disciples came to him. ² He opened his mouth and began to teach them. He said these things: ³ “Blessed are the poor in spirit, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are those who mourn, because they will be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the gentle, because they will inherit the earth. ⁶ Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, because they will be filled. ⁷ Blessed are the merciful, because they will receive mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart, because they will see God. ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers, because they will be called sons of God. ¹⁰ Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹ “Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven. In fact, that is how they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

Introduction

Found missing. Military intelligence. Same difference. Good grief. New and improved. Clearly misunderstood. Microsoft Works. All of those phrases have something in common. They’re listed among the top 45 oxymorons on a certain web page. An oxymoron is a fancy name for a contradiction in terms. How can something be both new and improved? It’s either one or the other. When is grief ever good? Why are there interstate highways in Hawaii? Is there such a thing as government organization? We laugh, probably because we say those sorts of things all the time.

Theme: Blessed Are Those Who Follow in Jesus’ Footsteps.

Our sermon text this morning contains a few phrases that people might classify as oxymorons. “**Blessed are those who mourn**” isn’t all that different from “Good grief,” is it?

The theme of Epiphany is Jesus revealing himself as more than a mere human being. Sometimes he reveals his divinity by speaking words of wisdom that man could never come up with. Our text is an example of truths that only God could speak. Man doesn’t see any blessing in mourning and meekness and a peacemaker being persecuted. Only God could teach us why we can rejoice in those situations because of our relationship to Jesus. And only God could point us to the blessings which are promised to Jesus’ suffering followers. We also remember that Jesus is often revealed to the world through *our* attitudes and actions. So, as we study the Beatitudes this morning, let’s entitle the sermon: **BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO FOLLOW IN JESUS’ FOOTSTEPS.** They’re blessed **in their attitude toward God**, and they’re blessed **in their actions toward others**.

Part I: Blessed in their attitude toward God.

The Beatitudes are some of the most *well-known* verses in the Bible. Many people list them as one of their *favorite* parts. They might say that they sum up the message of the gospel. But that really isn’t the case. The Beatitudes are basically a message of law. They have nothing to do with Jesus accomplishing our salvation, but they encourage people to behave in a certain manner. So, as law, they serve two functions for believers: they can show us how we fail to live up to what God requires of his people (the law as a mirror) or they can show us how God’s people can live in thankfulness for his gift of salvation (the law as a guideline). As we work our way through the text, we need to remember that Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount was delivered **to his disciples**.

So, as Jesus’ modern-day disciples, how can we follow in his footsteps in our attitude toward God? “**Blessed are the poor in spirit, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, because they will be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, because they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, because they will be filled.**” Again, Jesus is often revealed to the world through our attitudes and actions.

The people of this world love to view themselves as being important. They love to feel pride in themselves and in their accomplishments. The people of God's kingdom are different. They view themselves as poor within their souls and in their relationship to God. The word used for "poor" points to those who are beggars. That's how those in the kingdom regard themselves. They know they're helpless, completely unable to offer anything to God that would please him. All they have to offer is sins, sins, and more sins. And so we come before God as beggars. Crushed by the knowledge of our sins, we simply beg for grace and mercy. These poor are the penitent. To most people, it's shameful to confess that you're helpless and unworthy. But Jesus calls us blessed. Why? Because ours is the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' kingdom is his rule within our hearts. And when he enters our hearts through faith, we're rich because he showers on us blessings like pardon, peace, comfort, joy, and hope. When Martin Luther died, a scrap of paper was found in his pocket with these words written on it: "*Hoc est verum. Wir sind alle Bettler* – This is true: We are all beggars." How true! We come before God with nothing, and he gives us everything.

Tears are a way of life. And there are hundreds of things that can bring tears to the eyes of God's people. The Bible never said our lives would be easy. In fact, "**We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.**" Mourning also goes hand in hand with being poor in spirit. Because of our sins, we see separation from God and his blessings. We grieve as we see our sins. But this is a blessing, because our grief is removed by our Lord's forgiveness. When will that comfort come? In heaven? Why wait that long? Comfort comes as soon as God says to us, "**Take heart, your sins are forgiven.**" And as to the troubles and hardships, Jesus cheers and sustains us with his constant presence. We're told that our sufferings won't begin to compare to the glory that will be revealed in us.

The world despises the meek and gentle and instead praises those who let nothing stand in their way in order to get what they want. How Jesus' enemies criticized him for his humility! We who follow in Jesus' footsteps gladly put on an attitude of gentleness. We have that virtue through the gospel, which declared us to be acceptable to and honored by God for the sake of Christ. How can we possibly think and act as though we're something on our own account? The gentle inherit the earth. How can this be? Doesn't it seem like the nice guys always finish last? We need to remember that God has placed all things in heaven and on earth under Jesus' control. In Christ, God has made us co-heirs with Christ, and that includes things in the present as well as in the future.

Hunger and thirst, of course, express a strong desire for something. Jesus describes the members of his kingdom as having a craving for righteousness. This righteousness can only be a righteousness which comes entirely from God. This is God's righteousness in Christ. On the basis of what Christ did and suffered, God could and did pronounce guilty sinners righteous. Christ fulfilled the law perfectly for us, and he bore its full penalty for us. Then the holy God announced the verdict: "INNOCENT!" This craving for forgiveness and righteousness will be satisfied daily, in full, without any if's or but's.

Transition

We follow in Jesus' footsteps in our attitude toward God. Jesus also reveals himself through us in our actions toward others.

Part II: Blessed in their actions toward others.

“Blessed are the merciful, because they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, because they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, because they will be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

The only way we can act properly toward other people is because of the way God acted toward us – which we’ve just finished describing in part one of the sermon. We became merciful when we came to faith in Jesus. Being merciful toward others means being concerned about the needs, adversities, and sufferings that we see, and then going into action to relieve the needy, the suffering, and the distressed neighbor. The merciful will receive mercy. From whom? From God, of course. What a gracious God he is! First he showed us his great mercy in Christ, setting us free from the guilt and damnation of our sins. In bringing us to trust in his mercy, he at once gave us merciful hearts. Then he blesses us for showing mercy toward others. Simply amazing!

To be pure in heart means to be sincere in what we do. It means that we act single-mindedly in our dealings with others. For example, the Christian doesn’t help someone, at the same time thinking that what he’s doing makes him look good in the eyes of others. That would be insincere and double-minded. Purity of heart is found only in those who are justified and sanctified by God. And our Savior makes the promise that we will see God. And what a promise that is! We’ll actually be in the presence of our God! Paul made the comment, **“Now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.”** And John said, **“We shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.”**

Throughout the New Testament the members of God’s kingdom are encouraged to strive for peace. To love peace and to pursue it is natural for Christ’s followers, for the Prince of peace has established peace with God and brought peace to our troubled souls. As Jesus brought peace to us, we want to pass it on to others. Isaiah calls those who spread the gospel, **“messengers of peace, whose feet are beautiful in God’s sight.”** As we show ourselves to be peacemakers, God through his Word acknowledges and approves of us as his sons and daughters. What an amazing incentive to be active, humble pursuers of peace!

Of course, even as we try to make peace, the world will hate us in return. We’ll be persecuted and insulted and slandered because God has credited the righteousness won by Christ to us – in other words, because we’re believers. But we don’t hide our faith. We confess it. Our way of life gives evidence to it. And Jesus promises that, what seems to be a curse, is actually a blessing. Persecution shows that we possess the kingdom of heaven. Persecution unites us to the prophets who’ve gone on before us. What we go through now is something to rejoice about because our heavenly reward of God’s grace is great. So we gladly bear the cross of Christ.

Conclusion

According to the world around us, the life of a Christian is often an oxymoron. But what the world looks at as negative things, we view as positives, because Jesus gives us a new perspective on our life of faith. We suffer trials and tribulations now because the crown of glory awaits us. We follow in the footsteps of Jesus because he redeemed us with his own precious, holy blood. Good grief! What more could you want? Amen.