

# Blessed Are You!

Psalm 1:1-6, Matthew 5:1-12

October 10, 1999

This is one of the most backward things I have ever heard of! What Jesus says here stands against everything we believe, everything we know, everything we see, and everything we can observe to be true by looking not only at our own lives but also at the world around us. The poor are not blessed. The mourners are not comforted. The meek inherit nothing. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are not satisfied. The merciful are used. The pure in heart are dismissed. The peacemakers are rejected. And the persecuted are simply persecuted. What in the world is Jesus talking about here? And what has it got to do with us today?

We are dealing with something out at the very edges of life, at the boundaries of human experience, where nothing we think we know here holds true anymore and where we encounter a reality larger than ourselves, qualitatively different from us, radically other. And then we carry that—that what? new knowledge? new insight? or at least, that promise—we carry that back into our day to day experience, and everything is changed. Nothing is ever the same again. Nothing is as it first appears.

When we do that, a new honesty prevails. This life is not all there is. What we do here takes place within a larger context. That reality shapes this one. So the rich here may be more comfortable but are not necessarily blessed. Surely there is no one who has not suffered loss; if there are any who do not mourn our losses, they must be numb and scarcely human. The proud, the arrogant, and the vain parade their strengths and virtues, but they are always looking over their shoulders. The merciless are accursed, despised, cut off from humanity. The impure of heart are blind, spiraling downward, and do not even know it. The warmongers live by the sword but also die by the sword.

The question for us today is, How do we move from our first perceptions here—the poor are *not* blessed—to the promises from beyond the boundaries—“Blessed *are* the poor...”—, and then back to our lives here, but to lives that are made forever new and different? How can we do that this morning?

The way we do that is by hearing and believing the word of our living Lord Jesus Christ. None of these promises, none of these blessings, none of these Beatitudes (which is the Latin word for blessings), none of these makes sense apart from Jesus Christ. None of them is true apart from Jesus Christ. He alone is the guarantor of the promises. Not only does he speak the word, not only does he communicate the message, but also he alone provides the blessing, he alone fulfills

the promise, he alone is the one in whose presence all of these things come to pass and so are true.

How can this be? Behind Jesus Christ stands the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Behind Jesus Christ stands the Lord God Almighty, who created the heaven and the earth and all that is in them, who called the people of Israel as his very own, and who sustains, judges, and redeems us. Behind Jesus Christ stands the God and Father of Jesus Christ, who not only sent Jesus to be with us, but who also raised Jesus Christ from the dead. Apart from this truth and reality—the truth and reality of God, the truth and reality of the resurrection, and therefore the truth and reality of the living Lord Jesus Christ—, apart from this the promises would not only be senseless but would be lies and falsehoods. He alone makes them true.

So, How do we move from our first perceptions here—the poor are *not* blessed—, to the promises from beyond the boundaries—“Blessed *are* the poor...”—, and then back to our lives here, but to lives that are made forever new and different? How can we do that this morning?

Unlike the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes do not tell us or even ask us to do anything. Unlike the Great Commandment—love God, and love neighbor—these do not provide instruction for the Christian life. There is a place for all of that, but this is not the place. The Beatitudes are pure gospel. They are pure gift. The Beatitudes are the announcement of, the promise of, and therefore the creation of, new realities that are not dependent upon the response of the hearers but that instead are dependent solely upon the one giving the blessings, the one making the promises, the one creating the new realities, the one living Lord Jesus Christ. They are true because he says them. They come true in his presence and by his grace alone. Would you like to see that happen today, in your own life?

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The poor in spirit are those who have lost all self-confidence, all self-reliance, and all self-esteem. They have been beaten down by the world. They have no hope for the future. And yet, these are the ones whom Jesus blesses, the first ones he blesses, and these are the ones to whom he promises the kingdom of heaven. Why? Partly because it is his to give, but even more because the poor in spirit are ripe for salvation. They have no where else to turn. They have no where else to go. They have no other hope. By way of contrast, the proud and the arrogant do not even know of their own need for salvation. They have no awareness of being lost. To them the gospel makes no sense, because they imagine that they have no need of it. Thus, they disdain the gospel as a crutch for the weak and needy. But the poor in spirit are the ones for whom Christ came. They are the ones with whom he identified when he became the most poor in spirit on the cross and cried out, “My

God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” They are the ones to whom he yet today promises the kingdom of heaven. Are you among their number?

Note that what the world around us teaches as the great solution to all our problems, the increasing of self-esteem, is regarded by the gospel of Jesus Christ as the very evil from which we need to be saved. I told you that these things are backward from the world in which we live. According to the Christian faith, increasing self-esteem moves us farther and farther away from the goal, deeper and deeper into the self-centeredness from which Christ died in order to save us. Do not be taken in by the lies and falsehoods of the world. Stand fast against the evil one. It is not the self-confident whom Christ came to bless. It is the poor in spirit, those who have exhausted all their own resources and have no where else to turn, who are blessed by Jesus Christ. It is the empty-handed who receive the gift. Is this blessing yours today?

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Who among us has not mourned, and mourned deeply, and mourned so that we thought our mourning would never end? When we lose our loved ones, there is nothing else we can do but mourn. We mourn for those who were but are no longer. We mourn for what might have been but is not. But Jesus Christ, who was dead himself and who now is alive forevermore, comforts even us with the good news of his resurrection being the promise of our own and of those whom we love. This blessing does not have to tell us to mourn. We are already there. And for those of us who do mourn, there is comfort here in the presence of the living Lord Jesus Christ. Is this blessing yours today?

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” This is more ridiculous than all the rest. We believe that those with the smartest bombs shall inherit the earth, or at least what is left of it. But who has been more meek than Jesus himself, who did not object to his unwarranted arrest, who did not protest his false conviction, and who did not object to his wrongful execution? And yet, at the end of the gospel he is the one literally on top of the mountain, saying, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” He can and will deliver on his promises, including this one. Is this blessing yours today?

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” Who, more than Jesus, has hungered and thirsted for the righteousness of God? Who has claimed less for himself and more for God? And yet, who has done more than Jesus, through his hunger and thirst, to establish and promote the righteousness of God? It is those who have learned the hard way, through suffering and tears, through guilt and anguish, that there is no health or righteousness in us, it is those who therefore hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God and who are

ready to receive God's blessing, it is those who shall be satisfied. Maybe hearing this has made you hungry and thirsty. Is this blessing yours today?

"Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." It is Jesus Christ who has compassion and mercy on the weak, the poor, the sick, the lonely, the outcast, the downtrodden, the sinners, and the dying. This goes against the way of the world. And yet, it is Jesus Christ who has received the mercy of God in his resurrection from the dead to new and everlasting life. This, like all the Beatitudes, has already come true in him. Surely the same blessings shall come true for those upon whom he places them. Surely these promises are true even for us. Is this blessing yours today?

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God." This is remarkable. Nowhere in this world can we see God directly. We can see hints and evidences of God. We can see the traces of God's working. But we cannot see God directly. Only the Son of God has seen God. But now, this has been promised to those from whom all distraction and all ambition has been removed. The ones unaffected by, and not infected by, the world shall see God. Is this blessing yours today?

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God." When Jesus was struck, he did not strike back. When he was injured, he did not injure. When war was waged against him, he did not even defend himself. Jesus sought the peace of God, and in so doing he died. And yet, he is the Son of God. And those who would follow his way, choosing suffering over self-defense, making peace instead of war, shall also be called sons of God. Is this blessing yours today?

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That is an interesting qualifier. It suggests that some people might deserve to be persecuted for other reasons. But the topic here has to do with those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. It has to do with those who suffer wrong because they stand up for, and therefore fall with, what is right. Again, who has done this more than Jesus Christ on the cross? And he has been given the whole kingdom of heaven! So shall those who stand and fall with him, despite what the world thinks about them, so shall they receive the kingdom of heaven. Is this blessing yours today?

"Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you." How did he know? This is the last Beatitude, and it is the only one which turns from the abstraction of the third person reference to the direct second person address, "you." And it does it six times: "Blessed are *you* when men revile *you* and persecute *you* and utter all kinds of evil against *you* falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for *your* reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were

before *you*.” I suppose that if you have made it through the first eight Beatitudes and are still around to listen, this one must apply.

What can we say? The students should expect no better than their master. The disciples can anticipate the same treatment as their Christ. The church today, to the extent that it is faithful to the gospel of Jesus Christ, to the extent that it proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ, to the extent that it believes and teaches and tries to live by the gospel of Jesus Christ, the true church will be reviled, persecuted, and have all kinds of evil uttered against it falsely on account of Jesus Christ. This should never surprise us. This should never disappoint us. It puts us in direct continuity with the prophets of old. It puts us in a straight line with the first apostles. It conforms us to the suffering Christ, and it confirms exactly what Jesus said would happen to us. Is this blessing ours today? If so, let us rejoice and be glad. In fact, if this reviling and persecuting and uttering evil falsely were not happening, we would have to question everything we are doing.

You can see that the Beatitudes are the most backward thing I have ever heard of! What Jesus says here stands against everything we believe, everything we know, everything we see, and everything we can observe to be true by looking not only at our own lives but also at the world around us. So we do have a choice to make today. We are dealing with something out at the very edges of life, at the boundaries of human experience, where nothing we think we know here holds true anymore and where we encounter a reality larger than ourselves, qualitatively different from us, radically other. And then we carry that promise back into our day to day experience, and everything is changed. This life is not all there is. What we do here takes place within a larger context. That reality shapes this one.

So the Beatitudes are pure gospel. They are pure gift. They are the announcement of, the promise of, and therefore the creation of, new realities that are not dependent upon the response of the hearers but that instead are dependent solely upon the one giving the blessings, the one making the promises, the one creating the new realities, the one living Lord Jesus Christ. They are true because he says them. They are true because he lives them. They come true in his presence and by his grace alone. Here they are for us. Are these of interest to you? Are these what you want out of your life? Do we dare to claim these blessings as ours today?

*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

## **Blessed Are You!**

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