

Fourth Sunday after Epiphany – January 29, 2017
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Matthew 5:1-12 (NIV)

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, 2) and he began to teach them. He said: 3) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4) Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5) Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6) Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. 7) Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. 8) Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9) Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. 10) Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11) "Blessed are you when people insult you, 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, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

The words of this morning's text are a most precious treasure. All of Scripture is indeed a wonderful treasure but here we have a sermon from the mouth our Lord and Savior himself. These are words directed to his beloved disciples – to those who believed in him – to Christians. These words have often been misused and abused by those who see them as a formula for becoming a Christian. They turn the Lord's pronouncements of blessings in a set of rules – impossible rules – for men to follow and so by their actions received the Lord's blessings. Jesus was not setting down rules in this portion of his sermon on the mount. He was describing the life of the Christian – the life lived by faith. Because this life puts the Christian at odds with the ways of the world Jesus wishes to impress upon us that this is a life of blessing so that we do not despair and abandon our faith in him.

The words of this text are often called the Beatitudes – statements of blessing. They are a tremendous comfort and encouragement to Christians. Today's sermon will introduce us to these wonderful words of our Savior in part by considering some of the comments that Martin Luther made about these words. It is my prayer that you see yourself as a person blessed by Christ and that you will be encouraged to persevere in your life of faith by these words of your Savior. Jesus says:

Theme: Blessed is the person ...

- 1. Who looks to Christ for salvation (3-6)**
- 2. Whose life imitates Jesus (7-9)**
- 3. Who suffers for the Savior's sake (10-12)**

Jesus begins by reminding us that those who look to Christ for salvation are blessed. **"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 4) Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. 5) Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. 6) Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.**

Notice In the first half of each of these verses Jesus describes the life of the Christian. In the second half he announces his blessing.

Blessed are the poor in spirit. The world wants nothing to do with poverty even spiritual poverty. But we willingly confess our poverty as we acknowledge our sins and our unworthiness in God's sight. We are compelled by the Law of God to admit that our best efforts fall far short of what God requires of us. We are spiritually poor. We have nothing to offer God in exchange for our salvation. So how do we qualify for the kingdom of heaven? We don't look to ourselves. In our poverty we look to Christ. He lived a life of perfect obedience to God's law for us. He took

the sins of the world on himself and was punished in our place. The Father gives us credit for Jesus perfect righteousness. And so the poor who have come to God with an empty vessel become rich.

Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the Tax collector explains this beatitude to us. (Lk 18:9-14) The Pharisee stood before God and prayed about himself: **'God, I thank you that I am not like other men--robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector.** He was counting on his own works to gain the kingdom of heaven. The tax collector came before God and confessed his spiritual poverty. **He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'** Jesus then announced: **"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."**

Together with the hymn writer we confess: **Not the labors of my hands Can fulfill thy law's demands...Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to thy cross I cling.**

And as we make this confession we rejoice in the blessing our Savior has announced to us: **Yours is the kingdom of heaven.** Through the gift of faith God has given us his blessings of forgiveness and eternal life with Christ. These are ours today. St. Paul reminds us (1 Timothy 4:8) **godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.**

Luther said, **A man is called "spiritually poor," not because he has no money or anything of his own, but because he does not covet it or set his comfort and trust upon it as though it were his kingdom of heaven. So also a man is said to "mourn and be sorrowful"—not if his head is always drooping and his face is always sour and never smiling; but if he does not depend upon having a good time and living it up, the way the world does, which yearns for nothing but having sheer joy and fun here, revels in it, and neither thinks nor cares about the state of God or men...For what is the highest thing that men want? To have joy and happiness and to be without trouble. It does not want to endure hunger, trouble, dishonor, unpopularity, injustice, and violence; and it calls "blessed" those who can avoid all these things. Now Christ turns the page and says exactly the opposite; He says, "Blessed are those who mourn."** Why are Jesus' disciples sad and filled with mourning? Surely our own sins fill us with grief. But we know that those sins have been taken away from us by Christ. We are comforted by him. But there is more as Luther explains.

Daily, whenever [Christians] look at the world, they must see and feel in their heart so much wickedness, arrogance, contempt, and blasphemy of God and His Word, so much sorrow and sadness, which the devil causes in both the spiritual and the secular realm. Therefore simply begin to be a Christian, and you will soon find out what it means to mourn and be sorrowful. If you can do nothing else, then get married, settle down, and make a living in faith. Love the Word of God, and do what is required of you in your station. Then you will experience, both from your neighbors and in your own household, that things will not go as you might wish. You will be hindered and hemmed in on every side, so that you will suffer enough and see enough to make your heart sad.

[Jesus] wants to warn against those who seek to escape all mourning and to have nothing but fun and all their comfort here. And He wants to teach His Christians, when things go badly for them and they have to mourn, to know that it is God's good pleasure and then to accept it cheerfully and not to curse or rage or despair as though their God did not want to be gracious.

Jesus continues: **Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.** The meek are gentle and patient. They do not insist on their rights without consideration for others. They endure mistreatment without retaliation. Like Jesus they leave the matter of vengeance in God's hands. Once again this is not the way of the world thinks yet Jesus promises them the earth as an inheritance. It is for the sake of Christians that the earth is preserved even now. God directs the affairs of the nations for the benefit of his Church. God makes all things work together for the good of those

who love him. And when Christ returns in glory and provides us with glorified bodies we will enjoy a share of eternal glory in the new heavens the new earth which will replace this sin infested evil world. Luther reminds us: **This sermon is intended only for those who are Christians, who believe and know that they have their treasure in heaven, where it is secure for them and cannot be taken away: Hence they must have enough here, too, even though they do not have treasuries and pockets full of golden coins. Since you know this, why let your joy be disturbed and taken away? Why rob yourself of this magnificent promise?**

Finally Jesus describes those who look to him for salvation as **those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.** Declared righteous through faith in Christ, we will desire to follow Christ in all our actions as well as our attitudes to glorify our Savior God. When we remember that this message is for those who already are enjoying the righteousness of Christ we realize that Jesus is describing Christians as individuals who are eager to live righteous and God pleasing lives. They are concerned about sharing the righteousness of Christ with the world. It is our desire to have good relationships with each other. We have the desire to work with all our might to promote the general welfare of our fellow man with all of our deeds and words. By our example, we will reflect the righteousness of Christ.

We trust that, when we put spiritual things first, that our heavenly Father will keep his promise to provide us with everything we need for this body and life. We will be filled.

Jesus is the bread of life and the living water he provides will satisfy our spiritual hunger. Therefore we will gladly use the Gospel in Word and Sacrament which he offers us. We'll use that Word in our homes as a part of our daily routines. We'll gladly gather together with our brothers and sisters in Christ to hear the word of God. We'll look forward to each and every opportunity to feast on the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper. And each day we will thank God for the blessing of our baptism which joined us to Christ. We are content knowing that our sins are forgiven and that we will stand among the righteous on the last day.

These are the blessings that Jesus pronounces upon those who look to Christ for salvation. As I have already suggested those who look to Jesus for salvation will also have the desire imitate his life. Jesus reminds us that the person whose life imitates Jesus is blessed.

7) Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. 8) Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. 9) Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.

Jesus himself provides us with the most wonderful example of showing mercy. In his mercy, he came to seek and to save those who were lost. He forgave their sins. And Jesus also showed his mercy as he helped those in need. This prompted Luther to explain: **Now, this is the one aspect of mercy, that one gladly forgives the sinful and the frail. The other is to do good also to those who are outwardly poor or in need of help;**

In his parable of the Good Samaritan Jesus pictures for us a man of mercy – one who acted to help in time of need regardless of the circumstances. As the Scriptures make it clear brothers and sisters in Christ will do whatever they can to offer assistance to our fellow believers but we will also seek to be merciful even to our enemies. Mercy is more than an attitude. It is actions. 1 John 3:18 reminds us, **Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.**

And the Lord will bless us by showing mercy to us. Luther explains: **“It is well with you who are merciful. For you will find pure mercy in turn, both here and hereafter, and a mercy which inexpressibly surpasses all human kindness and mercy.” There is no comparison between our mercy and God's, nor between our possessions and the eternal possessions in the kingdom of heaven. So pleased is He with our kindness to our neighbor that for one penny He promises us a hundred thousand gold pieces if we have need of them, and for a drink of water, the kingdom of heaven.**

Another characteristic of Jesus was his pure heart. He came to do the Father's will. Jesus announces this blessing to those who follow him with a pure heart. **Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.** Once again, Luther provides some interesting insights when he writes: **What is meant by a "pure heart" is this: one that is watching and pondering what God says and replacing its own ideas with the Word of God. Now you have the meaning of "pure heart": it is one that functions completely on the basis of the pure Word of God. What is their reward, what does He promise to them? It is this: "They shall see God." ... but what does it mean to "see God"? ... this is what it is: if you have a true faith that Christ is your Savior, then you see immediately that you have a gracious God. For faith leads you up and opens up the heart and will of God for you. There you see sheer, superabundant grace and love. That is exactly what it means "to see God," not with physical eyes, with which no one can see Him in this life, but with faith, which sees His fatherly, friendly heart, where there is no anger or displeasure.**

Jesus is also known as the Prince of Peace. He is the one who brings us peace with God and encourages us to live at peace with one another even as he warns us that his teachings will bring divisions even among families. Christians will make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace (Eph 4:3) and to live at peace with all men. (Heb 12:14) Jesus says: **Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.** Indeed this is the great love that God has lavished on us that we are Sons of God. And as we follow Christ others will recognize this. We will reveal ourselves as Christians by our peacemaking attitudes and actions.

So far we have been treating almost all the elements of a Christian's way of life and the spiritual fruits under these two points: first [that he looks to Jesus for salvation], that in his own person he is poor, troubled, miserable, needy, and hungry; second, [that he imitates the life of Christ] that in relation to others he is a useful, kind, merciful, and peaceable man, who does nothing but good works. Now Jesus adds the last thought: how Christians will be treated in this world. Although they are full of good works, even toward their enemies...the only reward they receive from the world is that they are persecuted and run the risk of losing his body, his life, and everything. Yet this is also a blessing as Jesus assures us in our text: **Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11) "Blessed are you when people insult you, 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, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

Just as Jesus and the OT prophets who spoke of him were persecuted so all who follow Jesus can expect to suffer at the hands of the unbelieving world. Finally the worst the world can do to us is to put us to death as they did, Christ. But as the apostle Paul reminds us for the Christian this is a gain for then he will be with Christ which is better by far. What a wonderful gift Christ has prepared for us therefore do not lose heart if you are called upon to suffer because of Christ. Rejoice in the promises of your Lord he is faithful and will not let you suffer more than you can bear. His promises and his blessings will fill you with rejoicing even in times of suffering.

It is my prayer that you see yourself as a person blessed by Christ and that you will be encouraged to persevere in your life of faith by these words of your Savior we have discussed today. Jesus says:

Theme: Blessed is the person ...

- 1. Who looks to Christ for salvation (3-6)**
- 2. Whose life imitates Jesus (7-9)**
- 3. Who suffers for the Savior's sake (10-12)**