

On My Account

4afterEpiphany

Pastor Josh Frazee

Matt. 5:1-12

Grace, peace, and mercy be to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

The time has come—a time I have been dreading. Preaching on the Beatitudes. It is not that I cannot or should not preach on them. It's that they are so well known because they have been preached on so many times before. In addition, you all have your own Bibles to read them in your own homes. It has been that way since Luther and his use of Guttenberg's printing press. In fact, Luther himself was wary of his hearers becoming complacent to the preaching of the Beatitudes. Here is what is recorded in the twenty-first volume of Luther's works: "now since it is so common that everyone has it written in a book and can read it every day, no one thinks of it as anything special or precious. Yes, we grow sated and neglect it, as if it had been spoken by some shoemaker rather than the High Majesty of heaven. Therefore it is in punishment for our ingratitude and neglect that we get so little out of it and never feel nor taste what a treasure, power, and might there is in the words of Christ. But whoever has the grace to recognize it as the Word of God rather than the word of man, will also think of it more highly and dearly, and will never grow sick and tired of it."

Luther continues writing about how the Jews of Jesus' day, and even every other religion on earth, would see the opposite of the words of the Beatitudes being the truth. In other words, because of the promises of God about a Promised Land, the Jews in Jesus' day and even today many preach and teach that it is in having plenty that shows God's favor. Luther writes specifically: "In short, this is the greatest and most universal belief or religion on earth." But Jesus' first words of teaching here in Matthew point to just the opposite. It is not wealth and righteousness which show God's favor, and being right with Him. "That is why," Luther wrote, "(Jesus) preaches a totally new sermon here for the Christians: If they are a failure, if they have to suffer poverty and do without riches, power, honor, and good days, they will still be blessed and have not a temporal reward, but a different, eternal one; they will have enough in the kingdom of heaven."¹

Luther knew that this idea would beg the question: does that mean we must all be physically poor, to which he answers "No." Jesus said the poor, but not in physical means, but the "poor in spirit." Luther would go on to say how each of the Beatitudes are fruits of the Holy Spirit, embodied by those already made to be Christians. So if they are fruits of the Spirit, they follow the proclamation of the Gospel, which follows the Law. To put it in straightforward language, Luther is saying that the Beatitudes show that we cannot possibly live them of ourselves, that Christ has done so for us, and that He has sent us His Holy Spirit so that we might begin living these ways ourselves. Just take a look at our text.

Verse 1

Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit...those who mourn...are the meek...those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...the merciful...the pure in heart...the peacemakers...those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."

Jesus delivers a long list of ways in which someone might be deemed "blessed" by God. Yet these ways are not, as Luther put it, "the highest thing that men want, (which is) to have joy and happiness and to be without trouble. Now Christ turns the page and says exactly the opposite; He calls 'blessed' those who sorrow

¹ Luther, M. (1999). *Luther's works, vol. 21: The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat*. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 21, p. 12). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

and mourn. Thus throughout, all these statements are aimed and directed against the world's way of thinking, the way it would like to have things.”

Luther would continue, as was his way, with many words. You might think of the time his barber asked him a question and Luther responded with a quote-unquote “short” thirty-odd page book. Yet these words on the Beatitudes were all good and were backed by Scripture, as Scripture backs up Scripture, until he finally makes the point that we should not expect to be “blessed” in the next life without suffering in this one. After all, we are living, speaking, teaching, and preaching in the devil's realm, in the devil's kingdom here on earth. Until Christ returns, Satan will resist the work of the spread of the Gospel—even making it appear to the world that to persecute or kill Christians is pleasing to God.

But again, Luther is writing this work to Christians. That means he is writing to those who have been rightly condemned by the Law, that they have not lived as God has commanded, who rightly saw that they would be eternally condemned of their own works, no matter how good they might appear. Luther was writing to us—to you and to me. We know that our own works cannot save us. They could not before we came to Jesus; and they cannot now. But again, Luther was writing to Christians—to us, to you and to me—because we have received the good news of the Gospel, that God has given us salvation through a different means: His own Son, Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, for you and for me.

Verse 2

So now, believing and trusting in God's deliverance through His Son's work of being crucified and rising again, Luther encourages us to look again at Jesus' words of the Beatitudes—not as ones still thinking we can appease God with our works, but as ones called to bear the name of His Son. How can we expect to live perfect lives without suffering, when Jesus, God's own Son, was rejected, His name was defamed, and He was crucified as a criminal, with the world watching in approval?

Jesus said here in His Beatitudes: “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

You and I are called to bear Jesus' name, Christ, as Christians. Others not only might but will revile us as we bear that name. Yet those in the world also suffer while pretending to be strong enough to stand the trials of this life, or ignoring their trials and the trials of others by immersing themselves and hiding their eyes in the treasures God has given them here and now.

Anyone who has taught or spoken God's Word for a length of time knows that reviling and persecution will come. It may be in different amounts or different ways, yet it will come. Here, in these United States, we consider it hard when our neighbors and colleagues accuse us of being less intelligent for believing that a child is made at conception or that the universe was made in six days. That is certainly persecution, as is standing for God's Word concerning all manner of ways His Law teaches us is the perfect way to live, or live with one another. Yet we should not ignore that our persecutions are not the same or as severe as our brothers' and sisters' across the ocean. In other nations, bearing the name Christian means worrying that you might be put to death as a service to the government and people of the nation. And that's not just for an hour, or a couple hours, or a day, or a couple days, or even a week—that's for every single day of their lives, unless something happens to permit the freedom to worship as Christians that we have here in these United States.

Verse 3

But as mentioned earlier, while the rest of the world might enjoy and hide in their gifts now, the Day is coming when they will not be able to. Luther wrote that “In the world it is impossible to avoid all suffering. And for the sake of the Gospel, as we have said, there must be some suffering: it reinforces the faithful and advances them to their promised comfort, joy, and bliss, and it punishes...the wicked despisers and enemies of the Gospel.”

Jesus concludes: “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

And this is how Luther begins his conclusion to this section: “So far Christ has been equipping and preparing His Christians to live and suffer in the world, especially those who are to hold public office in Christendom. Even apart from this, however, every Christian should be ready at all times to take a stand, by himself if necessary, to confess his Lord and to represent his faith, always being armed against the world, the devil, the sects, and whatever else may be lined up against him. Now He (that is Jesus) goes on. He commits the office to them and teaches them how to carry it out; later on He will also put into their mouths what and how they are to preach.”

What is more, Christ is teaching all how to live and suffer, and to “serve and help other people.”

Is that not the Christian life? We love because we have first been loved in Christ Jesus our Lord. Before conversion to Christ, we had no power to do good or to carry it out. Now He has sent us His Spirit so that we can - not only believe the Gospel of how He has saved us, but also live through suffering with the joy of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit will keep us in that Truth until we finally arrive on that Day when the suffering will end and only the joy of the Gospel will be left—that same joy of the Gospel the Spirit won't let us let go of here in the midst of our suffering. On Jesus' account and in His Name. Amen.