

Blessed are Who?
Matthew 5:1-12

Can anyone doubt that America is sharply divided? Some of us trust in government to keep us safe and solve our problems, while others aren't so sure. Some of us look to free markets to make our products and bring us prosperity, while others are skeptical of their fairness. Some think that ethnic differences are critical, while others focus on matters of character. Round and round we go, talking past one another, ignoring the many things all Americans have in common and, all too often, assuming the worst of those who disagree with us about what it really means to be free.

But all of these divisions fade into insignificance when compared to the yawning chasm that separates the world from the Kingdom of Christ. In fact, in the first few verses of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus makes it clear that the contrast between the two could not be more stark. For in these oh-so-familiar verses, Jesus turns all the wisdom of the world upside down, challenging all our common-sense notions of what it means to be blessed: to be successful and fortunate and happy.

For what is the world's recipe for happiness? Who are the people we tend to admire and emulate? Aren't we accustomed to thinking that the winners in this life are the confident and the self-assured? Don't we go to extraordinary lengths to build up our own self-esteem and that of our children? But Jesus contradicts all that with these words: Blessed are the poor in spirit.

But what does that mean? Are we supposed to hate ourselves? Are we supposed to go moping around in some sort of spiritual depression? No, but it does mean that our confidence needs to be properly placed. We should not be confident in ourselves, but in our God. We must not puff ourselves up with pride in our own abilities, but instead glory in the power of our God.

In short, the one who is poor in spirit is the one who acknowledges that God alone is God. The one who is poor in spirit does not insist on understanding everything. He does not insist on making his own rules. Instead, he humbles himself before God, the Creator Who rules over all the world and its fulness, over all who dwell in it. Thus, it is only natural that the reward for such humility is to be welcomed into God's kingdom.

And now perhaps we can see why Jesus begins with this blessing. For it is obvious that anyone whose heart is proud and hard will refuse to submit to God's authority. No, unless one has a broken and contrite heart before God, unless one is poor in spirit, he or she cannot truly be a subject of the King of Kings. And it is only such subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven who can ever hope to be truly blessed, truly happy.

Okay, so once we've humbled ourselves before the King, how will this affect our character? How will this change our outlook on life? Well, Jesus says that the subjects of the kingdom of Heaven are mourners, they are meek and they are hungry. But why would anyone want to be like that? How can such people possibly be considered to be blessed?

After all, that's what the TV evangelists would ask. There's no place in their mansions and Cadillacs and their private jets for mourning or meekness or hunger. They say God wants everyone to be healthy and wealthy, and millions of people all over the world tune in to hear their words, and send them the generous donations that make their lavish lifestyles possible. So why would Jesus say something so nonsensical? Why would he say that those who mourn are actually the blessed, the happy ones?

Because Christians know what the world has conveniently forgotten. We know what sin is at its core: rebellion against God. We know how sin hurts God, and we know the terrible penalty Jesus paid for our sins on the cross. Yet at the same time, we know that we continue to sin, as we fail to love God with all that we are and all that we have. We know that we fail to love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves. And because we know the seriousness of our sin and the pain that it brings to our Heavenly Father, we mourn our sins.

Now, none of this makes any sense to the world. After all, worldly people aren't aware that they are in rebellion against God. And when they do manage to feel guilty, they attempt to rationalize it away, trying to justify their sinful actions. Some blame their guilty feelings on us Christians, saying they only feel bad because we believe that what they are doing is wrong. Others go so far as to reject the very idea of sin, insisting that guilt is just aberrant psychology.

In contrast to all of this, Jesus insists that it is only those who mourn who shall be comforted. And why is that? Because it is only those who recognize our helplessness to save ourselves who can find rest in God's promise of forgiveness. It is only those who look to Christ alone as our Savior who can be sure that the penalty for our sins has been paid. That's why mourning and comfort go hand in hand. It is the awareness of our own unworthiness that shows us so clearly the magnitude of God's grace.

And is precisely because we mourn our sins that we go on to hunger and thirst for righteousness. We long not just to have Jesus' righteousness credited to our account. No, our gratitude for His grace makes us long to live righteous lives ourselves, to bring even our thoughts and feelings into line with God's perfect will. We don't just want to be forgiven of our sins. We want to be cleansed of them. And so the subjects of God's kingdom quite naturally hunger and thirst for righteousness.

But Jesus insists that this kind of hunger is actually a blessing – because of His promise that we shall be filled. For that's the good news: because of the perfect sacrifice of Christ on behalf of all those who humble themselves before Him, all those who trust in Him can be sure that when we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, not only to forgive our sins, but also to cleanse us of all unrighteousness. And so if we hunger and thirst to be righteous, if we long to live in accordance with God's will, we can be sure that God will satisfy us, not only with justification, the righteousness of Christ credited to our account, but with sanctification, the slow and steady process of making us more and more like Him.

And so it only makes sense that as we stare our sins in the face and mourn, and as we hunger and thirst to be truly righteous that we gain meekness. For such an honest look at ourselves convinces us kingdom subjects that we are nothing special. After all, we know all too well that we did not deserve to be saved. And so we do not insist on our own rights, because we know that all we deserve is damnation. We do not put ourselves ahead of others because we know that none of us are anything more than sinners saved by God's grace.

Yes, the world insists that we should grasp for greatness, that happiness comes by getting to the top, no matter how many others you have to push down on your way up. But Jesus makes it clear that it is the meek, those who are willing to be last, those who are willing to put others first just as He did – they are the ones who will end up inheriting the whole earth.

Well, how should these characteristics of kingdom subjects play themselves out in our lives? How should we express our sorrow for sin and our hunger for righteousness? How should we live out our humility and our meekness? Jesus says we will be merciful. We will be pure. And we will be peacemakers. In short, we will be like Jesus.

Okay, so what does it really mean to be merciful? Once again, it means not following the common-sense advice of the world. To the world, it is only practical to take advantage of our power or money or education or connections to gain an advantage over others. But we Christians know all too well that the merciful God we follow has held back His righteous judgment from falling on us. We know He will show us mercy on the day the King of Glory comes to judge the world, because Jesus our Savior is the One Who has died for us.

That's why we are determined to be merciful to one another. That's why we try to use the gifts God has given us to protect and nurture those who are weak and needy. For in doing so, we obey the second half of Jesus' Great Commandment: you shall love your neighbor as you love yourself.

And it is precisely in loving others that we take the next step down the road of blessing, the road of happiness: for those who trust and obey Jesus must not only be merciful, but must be pure in heart. And loving

others in such a self-sacrificial, unconditional way is a big part of what it means to be pure, to be separate from sin. After all, whenever we put others first, we have less room in our lives for the pride and the self-focus that lie at the root of all sin. Moreover, as we mourn our sins and as we humble ourselves before the One Who died so that we might be forgiven, we draw closer to God, loving Him more, and thus purifying ourselves by keeping the first half of the Great Commandment: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.

For what did Psalm 24 say this morning? “Who shall ascend into the hill of the LORD? or who shall stand in his holy place? He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart; who hath not lifted up his soul unto vanity, nor sworn deceitfully.” No, it’s no wonder that Jesus said, “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

But our purity of heart, our love for God and for others must not only be expressed in our personal deeds of mercy toward others. No, we must also be humble and meek enough to seek peace with everyone. If we have hurt others, we must be humble enough to confess our sin and make it right. If others have hurt us, we must be meek enough to forgive them as God has forgiven us. It is only those who make peace in this way who can truly be called, not only the followers of the Prince of Peace, but the sons and daughters of God Himself.

But even more important than the peace we make with each other is the peace we are called to make between God and man. For making this kind of peace necessarily involves obeying Jesus’ Great Commission: to make disciples of all nations.

And that means we must not be satisfied with our own salvation. We are not to be content with just being merciful and pure in our own lives. We are to tell all the world of God’s power and God’s love. We are to urge others to trust and obey Jesus just as we ourselves do, to join us as we look forward to the coming of the King of Glory, as we open wide the doors of our hearts to Him.

But if we do this, if we live such humble and peaceful lives, if we truly love others as Christ has loved us, the world will not only fail to understand us. As Jesus makes clear in verse 11, the world will revile us and persecute us and tell lies about us.

Why is this? If you are mourning your sins, those who do not believe in sin will laugh at you. They’ll call you a fool. If you are meek and merciful, others will confuse your forbearance with weakness and take advantage of you. They’ll call you a chump. If you are hungry to do God’s will and to be pure in heart, they may observe the difference in your lifestyle. But all too often they will feel threatened or even offended by your priorities. They will call you a narrow-minded Puritan or worse. No, subjects of the King of Glory should not expect kind treatment from those whose focus is solely on this world.

But it is our efforts to make peace that bring on an even greater condemnation. Yes, when we presume to speak of the world’s need for repentance and obedience, when we try to make peace between God and man, we are only following the example of our Lord. But that’s why we should not expect a reception different from that which the prophets received. For they spoke of sin and grace and were put in prison. Jesus spoke of sin and grace and was killed. So when we speak of sin and grace, we should not be surprised when the world calls us intolerant or bigoted. We should not be surprised when the world despises and rejects us just as it rejected Jesus.

But isn’t it interesting that the same blessing which is promised in verse 3 to those who are poor in spirit also comes in verse 10 to those who are persecuted? This should remind us of the connection between these two things: our need to preach faith and repentance with true humility, not imagining ourselves to be any better than those who hate us, not thinking of ourselves as superior to those who are still walking in darkness. But it should also remind us of the benefits of humility. For the reward of submitting to God’s authority with a humble heart is being welcomed into in His Kingdom. In the same way, the reward for suffering persecution today is enjoying all the fullness of God’s Kingdom, both today and forever more.

So, no matter what the world may think of us, let us strive to be poor in spirit. Let us mourn our sins and be hungry for greater righteousness. Let us be meek and merciful. Let us strive for purity and make peace between

man and God. For no matter what the world may say, following Jesus like this is the only way to true happiness. Giving ourselves completely to the One Who gave Himself up for us is the only way to be truly blessed.