

Blessings are found in unlikely places

—Matthew 5:1-6

Most people today don't know what the Bible says. Most people don't know what Jesus teaches. Sadly, many people who consider themselves Christians and sincerely trust Jesus as their Savior from sin haven't actually read the Bible to know what it says. So if you don't know what Scripture actually says, where do you get your religious beliefs from? People pick a church because it feels good, but they often don't know how to fact-check what the church teaches, and they keep going because they like the vibe and they like what they hear. But if we don't square what we hear with what Scripture actually says, we're still in the dark. And most people in today's world don't even have pastors and teachers. So where do they get their religious beliefs? From television. From what their parents told them. From friends and peer groups. From society around them. From their own reason. But because they don't know what the Bible actually says, they might *think* they're believing correctly but are way off. We hear phrases like, "God helps those who help themselves." Or "We do our best, and God does the rest." Or "Follow the Golden Rule to get to heaven." Or "You have to invite Jesus into your heart to be saved." Or "You get what's coming to you; what goes around comes around (good/bad Karma)" And there are many more religious phrases that embody philosophies that sound very reasonable and attractive, but they are flat out wrong. Eternally deadly wrong! And that is why so many people are driving full-speed down the freeway to hell, and they don't even know it. Scripture actually does say, "There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death" (Proverbs 14:12).

Left to ourselves, listening to our own reason and learning from the world around us, we would never come up with what Jesus teaches us today. These words of Jesus that begin his Sermon on the Mount are called the *Beatitudes*, from the Latin word *beatus*, meaning "Blessed." These Beatitudes are so counterintuitive, so unlikely, that we would never come up with these things on our own. We need some Christian education; we need Jesus to teach us. That's right: Christian education is not just about Lutheran schools and Sunday school for children. Christian education is for me and for you and for everyone who is a disciple of Jesus Christ, who listens and learns from the Master.

This morning, let's set aside our reason and the way we think things should be, and let's let Jesus teach us about the way the things of God really are. Let's start with the word that comes up more than any other word today in Jesus' teaching: "Blessed." We like the word "blessed." We can buy wall hangings at The Home Store or Hobby Lobby that say, "Blessed." We look at our lives surrounded by abundance, nice homes, nice furniture, nice cars, friends and family, and we consider ourselves "blessed"—and all of those things are blessings. But Jesus doesn't mention any of those things today in his list of "blessed." We push back from the table at Thanksgiving, bellies full, and we consider ourselves "blessed"—and good, healthy food is a blessing. But Jesus doesn't mention food and drink today in his list of "blessed." The price of gold and silver reaches record highs, Nvidia and Microsoft stock goes through the stratosphere, and your 401(k) is fatter than ever—and those are blessings. But Jesus doesn't include material wealth in his list today of what it means to be "blessed."

That's because being blessed in the way Jesus defines it has nothing to do with whether or not you're surrounded by stuff and your garage is so full you have no room to park your car. "Blessed" according to Jesus is the state of your soul. The word in Jesus' sermon here in Matthew 5 is *makarios* (μακαριος). It means "happy" or "content" or perhaps better, "fulfilled." It's not about having a full stomach or a full garage or a full bank account. It's about having a full heart. You can enjoy luxury, prosperity, abundance, but if you're stressed, anxious, fearful, and frustrated, then you're not "blessed" in the way Jesus teaches here. Being truly blessed is not about having more of this material world. It's about having real peace with God.

Now that we know what "blessed" means, let's see how Jesus brings us there. He says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven." It's no coincidence that Jesus starts here because everything else flows from this one. Being poor in spirit means having a spirit of humility—and not just humility that says, "That person is smarter or better looking than I am," or "It wasn't me, it was a team effort," or "I try to learn from my mistakes." Poor in spirit is humility before God. It is recognizing that you are completely helpless before God. We have sinned against him. We have no excuses; we are guilty. Without his grace, I am damned. Without his forgiveness and righteousness, you will be cast into eternal fire. Why? Because that is exactly what we have earned from God with our sin, our selfishness, and our rebellion. "The wages of sin is death" (Romans 6:23). And I have sinned. No excuses. No deflecting or pointing fingers or laying blame. Just an open acknowledgement that we have nothing to offer God that he should reward us, nothing to give that he should repay us. Being poor in spirit means falling completely on God's mercy, with no other hope.

We need Christian education to teach us and our children this. If Jesus didn't teach us and God's Word didn't convict us, we would go through life thinking, "I'm a pretty good person. God must be pretty happy with me." Remember from before? "There is a way that appears to be right, but in the end it leads to death" (Proverbs 14:12). The Bible from cover to cover is filled with this message. "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6). God doesn't want the sacrifices we bring; he doesn't need our cows or our sheep or our great big, generous checks. "The sacrifices God wants are a broken spirit. A broken and crushed heart, O God, you will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.
Naked come to Thee for dress, helpless look to Thee for grace.
Foul I to the fountain fly. Wash me, Savior, or I die.

Being poor in spirit means realizing we desperately need a Savior, and a Savior is exactly what God gives us. He's the one speaking to us, Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, the Son of God. If we were just crushed in spirit (end of story) that would leave us without hope and still without heaven, but Jesus says, "Theirs is the kingdom of heaven." That's because the one speaking opened the kingdom of heaven to the poor in spirit who trust him. I'm going to jump down to verse 6: "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, because they will be filled." Again, let's understand correctly what Jesus is saying. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness doesn't mean, "I really want to try to do the right thing and be a good person." Hungering and thirsting for righteousness means that we crave the goodness and perfection that only God can give us. Not the goodness that we produce from within but the goodness that comes to us from without. Jesus Christ is the Righteous One. Jesus Christ is our perfect Substitute. Jesus Christ is the one who kept all the commandments in our place. Jesus Christ is the one who gives us garments of righteousness and clothes us with his righteousness. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness is hungering and thirsting for Jesus! Jesus, Jesus, only Jesus can my heartfelt longing still. Trusting in Jesus, clinging to Jesus, hungering and thirsting for Jesus, your hunger and thirst are filled. We crave Jesus, and Jesus satisfies the deepest cravings of our soul. Jesus comes to you with healing. He wraps you up in his own perfection, dresses you in his own obedience, and he says, "Your sins are forgiven! You are righteous! You are in Christ, and Christ is in you!" You crave righteousness, the kind of righteousness that lets you stand tall before God your Father and boast in Christ? You hunger for Jesus, the Bread of Life, and thirst for his living water that refreshes your soul? Jesus does not leave us starving. He doesn't leave us hungry and thirsting. He satisfies our hunger and slakes our thirst with himself!

Now Jesus' definition of "blessed" is starting to click. When we are fulfilled in Christ, our fulfillment is complete. The ups and downs of this life, the sorrows, the good-byes, the tears and tribulations, the hurts and the heartaches, they all fade in light of the unchanging eternal picture that Jesus paints for us. "Blessed are those who mourn, because they will be comforted."

I look at the world around me, and I mourn because it is decayed and corrupted by sin. I look at my own sinful nature that persists within me, and I mourn because I still disobey God and grieve him. I look at my physical body, and I mourn because it's aging and deteriorating. You lose a dear loved one, and you mourn because you can't hold their hand and embrace them anymore. But Jesus blesses us with a promise: "Blessed are those who mourn, because they will be comforted." To those who are grieved by their sins and trust Jesus for righteousness, Jesus promises heaven, eternal life, immortality. This world is not our home; we're just pilgrims and strangers here, and we're just passing through. Jesus promises that he is coming back to take us to be with him in glory. He will reunite us with our dear loved ones who have fallen asleep in the Lord. He promises to take us out of this dark world to himself in that place where there is no more mourning or crying or death or pain, where the old order of things will have passed away, and where God will wipe away every tear from our eyes.

When we have this perspective—an eternal perspective—we can understand what Jesus means when he says, "Blessed are the gentle, because they will inherit the earth." Worldly leaders wield physical power and assert their authority over people. They conquer with bombs and missiles and drones. Ambitious leaders rise to the top by grabbing what they can get. There's no place for gentleness or meekness in that way of thinking. The world says you don't get ahead by letting people step on you. But being gentle is not being a doormat. Being gentle is the ultimate strength. It is the boldness that comes from the firm conviction that you belong to Christ, and you already possess all the strength of Christ and the treasures of heaven. Being gentle means you would rather give grace than take revenge. Being gentle means that you would rather forgive than retaliate. "Blessed are the gentle, because they will inherit the earth." The world gains influence and dominance through bombs and bullets. As a Christian, you win hearts with Christ's gentle love.

We could spend a whole sermon studying each one of these "Blessed" statements and a whole lifetime appropriating the truth of each statement. We've gone very quickly through just a few of these Beatitudes, and one thing is clear: These blessings are not found anywhere the world teaches us to look. Blessings are found in unlikely places. We enjoy these blessings only in Jesus. Amen.