

# BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN

Matthew 5:1-12

All Saints' Day (Observed)

November 5, 2017

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for All Saints' Day comes from *The Gospel According to Matthew*, chapter 5, verses 1 through 12. It is on page 683 of the pew Bible. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Matthew 5, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>1</sup> Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

<sup>2</sup> And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

<sup>3</sup> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>4</sup> "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

<sup>5</sup> "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

<sup>6</sup> "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

<sup>7</sup> "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

<sup>8</sup> "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

<sup>9</sup> "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

<sup>10</sup> "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

<sup>11</sup> "Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

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

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Dear saints, this morning we remember those saints who have gone before us into glory. We thank God for them. We thank him for the faith he granted to them in this life. We thank him for a blessed end—that is, that they fell asleep in Jesus Christ. And we look forward to the glorious day of Jesus' return and the resurrection of the dead.

When we call them saints, we don't mean they were perfect. A saint is simply a holy person—someone set apart by God. Saints are those people who have been purified by the blood of Jesus Christ. So I can say that I'm a saint. You can say that you're a saint. And it has nothing to do with our good works. Instead, it has everything to do with Jesus' death and resurrection on our behalf.

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So it might be fun during the coffee time to walk up to one another and say, “Good morning Saint Ruby,” or, “Good morning Saint A.J.” You can do that because we have been washed by the blood of the lamb.

The Apostle Paul had this practice where, in almost all of his letters, he addressed the congregation he was writing to as “the saints who are in Ephesus” (Eph. 1:1) or “the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi” (Phil. 1:1). And it didn’t mean they had become perfect in their behavior. It simply meant they were called by God and cleansed by the blood of Jesus. That’s what it means to be a saint.

So on All Saints’ Day, we don’t remember people who were perfect. And we certainly don’t worship the saints. We also don’t pray to them. Instead, we remember them, and we worship God. We give thanks for the salvation he gave to them—the same salvation he has given to us.

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Within this last year from our congregation we remember Norma, Robert, and Red, who fell asleep in Jesus Christ. I know that many of you also think of parents, siblings, nieces, nephews, or other family and friends who joined the Church Triumphant. And it doesn’t have to be from this last year either. You may still be mourning the loss of a spouse or a child or another close relative or friend. There are some losses that never completely heal, at least, not on this side of the Resurrection. The mourning changes, but it may not go away. So it’s okay to mourn, even for the rest of your life. Just know that we find comfort in the Word of God, and especially in the promises of Jesus Christ.

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So this morning we consider the promises Jesus makes at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount.

Now let’s be honest. Jesus says some really weird stuff in this text. He says some things that just don’t seem to be true. Now, certainly, we like that Jesus is pronouncing blessings. And that’s not so weird. We understand enough about Jesus to recognize that he’s in the business of blessing people. But Jesus pronounces blessings in the places we least expect to find them. “**Blessed are the poor in spirit**” (5:3). “**Blessed are those who mourn**” (5:4). “**Blessed are the meek**” (5:5). He even says, “**Blessed are those who are persecuted**” (5:10). Doesn’t Jesus know? That’s just not the way the world works.

We call these blessings “The Beatitudes.” But the world’s beatitudes are quite different. When we look at the way things actually work in this world, we might say, “Blessed are the rich, for they pretty much already have a kingdom.” Or, “Blessed are those who have happy and healthy families, for they have nothing to mourn about.” Instead of saying, “**Blessed are the meek,**” the world says, “Blessed are the ambitious, for they will earn everything they want.” Or, “Blessed are those who are respected and honored”—as opposed to those who are *persecuted*—“for they will have a satisfying life.” The world sees blessings in the obvious places. The world sees blessings where things seem to be going pretty well. But Jesus pronounces blessings where we least expect to find them. Jesus pronounces blessings where we see nothing but poverty, pain, humiliation, unrighteousness, suffering, and even death. That’s kind of weird.

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There are two basic kinds of beatitudes here. First, there are the “state of being” beatitudes. That is, Jesus simply pronounces blessings upon those who are low: “the poor in spirit” (5:3), “those who mourn” (5:4), “the meek” (5:5), and “those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (5:6). These are simply a state of being. They don’t describe any virtue for which a person will be rewarded. If anything, the blessings come because of a lack of virtue, which is kind of weird, but that’s the way God works.

Then the second kind are the virtue beatitudes. Jesus pronounces blessings on the “merciful” (5:7), “the pure in heart” (5:8), and “the peacemakers” (5:9). These are virtues that God desires to be exhibited in our lives. But notice that they’re still not commandments. Jesus doesn’t say, “Be merciful in order to receive mercy.” For one thing, that wouldn’t be mercy. Mercy is never earned. If you do something to earn it, it can’t be mercy. But also notice the structure of the blessings. It’s the same as the state of being beatitudes. They are all promises. Jesus doesn’t say, “In order to get this blessing, do this first.” Everything is stated as a promise.

Then the last two beatitudes—the ones about being persecuted (5:10-12)—are sort of a combination of a state of being and a virtue. Being persecuted is a state of being. You don’t do anything; it’s something that happens to you. But it is virtuous to patiently endure it. And if you are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, that righteousness is, of course, a virtue.

So we have a couple different kinds of beatitudes, but one thing is the same in all of them: they are all promises. The only commandments in this text are, “Rejoice and be glad” (5:12). Those, by the way, are happy commandments, especially when Jesus gives us all the reason we need to “rejoice and be glad.” There are lots of difficult commandments later on in “The Sermon on the Mount,” but not really in the first part. And that’s important to recognize. It begins with pure promise.

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But we are tempted by our human nature to turn these blessings into commandments. *In order to be blessed, I need to do x, y, and z.* So most sermons on the beatitudes tend to turn them into the “attitudes” I need to have in order to be blessed. Now, that might make some sense if we’re talking about being merciful, pure in heart, or a peacemaker. We can understand how those virtues could merit a blessing. But that’s not what Jesus says. And the whole concept becomes ridiculous when we apply that logic to persecution, or mourning, or being poor in spirit. *If I want to inherit the kingdom of heaven, I’m going to have to go out and find someone to persecute me.* That’s absurd. Or, *in order to be comforted, I first have to find something to mourn about.* The whole thing becomes quite ridiculous.

But Holy Scripture is actually much easier to understand. If you want to know what Jesus really means in the beatitudes, ask one simple question: *What does Jesus say?* Because what he says is exactly what he means. It really is that simple. All Jesus does is pronounce blessings. And he pronounces blessings in the places we least expect to find them. And this is marvelous.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (5:3). He’s not talking about those who are poor in the wallet, but those who are poor in spirit. This is much worse than economic poverty. This is spiritual poverty. These are those who have nothing—absolutely nothing—when they stand before God. But theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Jesus is literally saying that those people who have absolutely nothing really have everything. That sounds crazy, right? Those who have nothing have everything. How is that possible? It’s because the

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kingdom of heaven has come near them in Jesus Christ (4:17). The kingdom of heaven is given, as a pure gift, to those who cannot earn it.

Or how about this one: **“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied”** (5:6). Now why are they hungering and thirsting for righteousness? It’s because they don’t have any. Hungering and thirsting for righteousness is not a virtue beatitude. It’s a state of being beatitude, and it’s a rather sorry state of being. Think about this: if you have a glass of water, you don’t thirst for water, because if you were thirsty, you would drink the water and not be thirsty anymore. The only people who thirst for water are people who don’t have any water. So it is not the righteous who hunger and thirst for righteousness, but the unrighteous—those who have absolutely nothing going for them in the righteousness department. If they have anything going for them, it’s simply this: they realize they are unrighteous. They are aware of the fact they have nothing going for them. So what does Jesus promise them? He promises that **“they shall be satisfied”** (5:6). The unrighteous will be filled up with righteousness. They will no longer hunger and thirst for it, because they will have it. Jesus gives his own righteousness to weary sinners who have no righteousness of their own.

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And then it is only after the poor in spirit eventually receive Jesus’ righteousness that the virtues of mercy, purity, and peace begin to appear in their lives. You see, there’s an order of progression in the beatitudes. First the poor in spirit receive the Kingdom. The unrighteous are satisfied with righteousness. Then, and only then, do the virtues begin to appear. The beatitudes are pure promise. And this is marvelous.

These are blessings that come to us for one simple reason: Jesus showed up. That’s it. The Son of God took on human flesh. He took on our sorry state of being. He exhibited every kind of virtue. And he was even persecuted and killed for it. This is what he did to grant us the kingdom of heaven. This is what he did to bestow his righteousness upon us as a gift. And so we are blessed forever.

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Now there’s one beatitude I want to spend a little more time on. Since we are observing All Saints’ Day and remembering those who have fallen asleep in Jesus Christ, we hear Jesus’ promise, **“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”** (5:4).

Where is our comfort? How are the mourners blessed? Every comfort and every blessing is in Jesus Christ. We are comforted by the fact that God’s saints have fallen asleep in Jesus Christ. They are secure in him. They are those saints who stand before the throne of God in heaven, clothed in white robes, because they have been washed in the blood of the lamb (Rev. 7:9, 14). And it gets better, because their bodies will not sleep forever. Just like anyone who lies down to take a nap, we expect them to wake up. And they will. Christ has ascended into heaven, and he is returning again. When he returns, he will raise the dead, as if awakening them from a deep sleep. He will raise the dead and transform all of his believing saints into his perfect image. **“What we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is”** (1 John 3:2).

We take comfort, then, in the promise that all of God’s believing saints—and that includes us if we do not remain alive until then—we take comfort in the promise that the dead will be raised, and all of God’s believing saints will be transformed. And we will be together for all eternity in the presence of our savior. This is our comfort.

Now this is still some time off in the future. No one knows how long, and sometimes we get tired of waiting. But as we wait for that day, God has given us a foretaste of this glorious reunion—a sort of appetizer. I'm talking about the Lord's Supper. When we receive the body and blood of Jesus Christ, it's not just Jesus whom we have union with. We also have union with everyone else who is united with Jesus Christ. Think of the term "Holy Communion," and break the word "communion" down into its two parts: *common union*. That's what this sacrament is. It is a *common union* with Jesus Christ. You see, it's not just you who has union with Jesus Christ in this sacrament. This isn't a little me-and-Jesus moment. It's a me-and-Jesus-and-everyone-else-who-has-union-with-him moment.

When we break bread, we do it together. We all eat of the same bread and drink of the same cup. So we are one body with one another (1 Cor. 10:16-17). When you come to this communion railing, think of this: you are united with all the other sinner-saints kneeling here. Whether you like it or not—and I hope you do like it, because there isn't really anything you can do about it. Whether you like it or not, you are united with all these other people who are united to Jesus Christ. We're not united directly with one another. That's the thing about Christian unity: it's always mediated through Jesus. But through Jesus, we are, most certainly, one body together. This union is most clearly expressed and created through Holy Communion.

But it goes a step or two farther. It's not merely those sinner-saints you see here whom you are united with. What about those Christians in other cities, or on the other side of the world? Are they partaking of a different Christ? Or are they eating the same body and blood you and I are about to eat? It is the same, for there is only one Christ, and he is not limited by space. Nor is he limited by time. So even those saints who have entered into glory—they partook of the same Christ while they lived on earth. And this is the same Christ whom we are about to partake of. So it is true. It is absolutely true that when we eat Christ's body and drink his blood we are united—here and now—with every other saint who has ever been united with Jesus Christ. We are not united with them directly, but we are united with them through Jesus Christ.

When we partake of our Lord's body and blood, we are united with every other saint who has ever partaken of that same body and blood, whether it's your grandparents, your parents, your spouse, your children, or Martin Luther, Saint Augustine, Saint Paul, or any other saint in Jesus Christ. This is because there is one Christ. He is both God and man. So he has human flesh and blood. But, unlike us, that human flesh and blood is not limited by time and space. It is present everywhere he promises for it to be.

This union we have with the departed saints isn't something we can feel. We believe it by faith, because we cannot experience it. But even though we cannot experience it, this is a true and eternal union.

So just think about this when you come to Holy Communion. You eat and drink the very same body and blood of Christ that every other saint in the history of the Church ate and drank. The same blood that washed their robes and made them white is the blood that washes yours. It secures our eternal redemption. It is the guarantee that we shall be raised ... together. **"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted"** (5:4). Amen.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.