

Sunday, November 6, 2022 – All Saints’ Day

Matthew 5:1-12 (ESV) – “Blessed Are They…”

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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

“Looking at His disciples, [Jesus] said, ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven.’” Thus far our text.

It seems like Jesus in our passage here is giving us a “laundry list” of characteristics of the Christian life, and contrasting traits of the unbelievers’ existence. After all, we are all about supporting those who cannot help themselves. We send humanitarian aid to countries that we are even technically at war with; we as a nation try to ease the suffering of all of our citizens and the people of the world. This is because of a compassion and a desire to be merciful that is built into our human natures – we know instinctively that these things are God-pleasing. After all, we argue that those who are meek, or nice to their neighbors, or lacking in material goods, are “deserving” of something better. Or, conversely, we say that those who are abundantly blessed in this life ought to be made to suffer a little bit in the life to come, right? This is kind of like the theory of Robin Hood, isn’t it? We want to steal from the rich, and give to the poor.

These thoughts are indeed God-pleasing, and are consistent with His love for us, at least the parts about wanting the less fortunate to be provided for, and for lovers of wealth to be

reminded of the fickleness of their earthly bounty. But, where we get ourselves into trouble is when we start placing ourselves on this spectrum of good and evil, and base our position on our abundance, or lack thereof, of good works. Our works profit us nothing – except the fires of hell. We don't deserve the favor of God; rather, we merit His wrath. So, what is Jesus getting at with the Beatitudes He recounts in our passage? Let's take a look at them, and delve a little bit deeper into what He wants us to profit from this study of this portion of His Word.

Matthew, in his Gospel, gives a greater and more detailed list of “do's and don'ts” while Luke gives a shorter one; but Luke gives the other side of the coin, to focus the picture, with the Woes. In both passages of Scripture, Jesus reminds us that the riches of this life don't profit anything in the world to come; in fact, they sometimes get in the way. Remember the rich man not getting into heaven, and how it was easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle? The same principle applies here. It isn't that God doesn't like rich people, or that He wants to punish us for being “successful.” Rather, the riches of this world often breed arrogance and a false belief that we don't need God anymore to provide for our needs. It isn't money that ultimately condemns us; it is the LOVE of money that is troublesome and dangerous. Or, to put it another way, we covet the things of this world more when we are well-off than when we are poor. Some would say it's because the rich have more to lose than poor people. Others would say that if you've never had a lot of worldly riches, then you don't know what you are missing. The truth of the matter is that, regardless of the motivation, anything that we fear, love, or trust more than God Himself is a false God for us, and thus we are in danger of sinning against the First Commandment, or many others, for that matter. That's why those who are poor are blessed by God – they will receive their reward in heaven, because they don't cling to the riches of this world. The same goes for those who are hungry, both physically and spiritually. If we don't

have enough food to survive on our own, we are more apt to trust in God, because we don't have anywhere else to turn. But, we are also likely to look forward to heaven with clearer eyes. The same is true in the spiritual realm – if we are hungry for the Word of God, rather than filled with “enough” to get us by, then the kingdom of heaven will be a wonderful reward for us.

Jesus also reminds us that those who weep and mourn in this life will laugh in heaven. We weep and mourn because we are knowledgeable about our sinful natures; we regret the fact that we cannot please God, nor reform our sinfulness. We echo St. Paul, when he states that he is a wretched man, unable to escape the sinful nature that clings to him like glue. The devil continues to work on us, and makes us ever more sinfully inclined, when we actually desire to do God's will more and more. But, when we get to heaven, we will shout for joy; we will laugh without abandon, because we will be freed from this sinful nature that entangles us and holds us back. No longer will we want to sin ever again – we will be freed from the temptations of this sinful world. Rather, we will be in heaven, and our only desires will be for the things of God. If we are weeping over our sinfulness, then the object of our hope (the freedom from the sinful nature) will be ours in heaven.

Furthermore, Jesus tells us that those who are persecuted in this life for the sake of Christ will receive the kingdom of God. We are never promised that this life will be easy; in fact, we are told that it will be very difficult. But, we know that the world to come, in heaven, will make up for any difficulties that we might encounter on this earth. Paul says that the sufferings of this life aren't worth comparing to the surpassing greatness of heaven. That's what keeps us going in this world, isn't it? The knowledge is very comforting that things are better in heaven.

But, things aren't that good for us, are they? We aren't weak, or poor, or weeping over our sinfulness; rather, we are more closely related to those that Jesus pronounces woes over. We

have been blessed beyond our ability to comprehend how much, and yet we squander God's blessings to us. We live in one of the most prosperous countries in the world, with all of the material resources that one could wish for, and yet we want more! The advertisers on television and in the newspapers have caught on to this rash of buying craziness, and have convinced us that not only do we want more things, but that we NEED them. Think of how we have transformed the Christmas season, a time to celebrate God's gifts to us, into a time when we rush around, trying to buy more and more gifts for each other, until the greatest Gift of all time is almost completely obscured. That's the way of this world, and us right along with it! How many of us are starving in the gutter? Probably few if any of us. We should be thanking God for this, but we don't. Rather, we grumble, along with the Israelites, that the food and drink that God has provided us with is too boring, too blah, and is too ordinary. Rather than helping out those in need, we hoard our resources to ourselves, to hopefully provide for our own needs when the proverbial rainy day reaches our household. God tell us that if we don't repent of this unthankfulness, that the time to come after this life is over won't be filled with plenty, but with great need. If we don't repent of our sins, our sinfulness, then they will be held against us, and we will receive the punishment that our sins deserve. Without true contrition and confession, we will be sent to the fires of hell, where God's absence is complete.

We live as if this world was the end-all goal of human existence. We laugh at the gross sinfulness of the world around us, and explain it away by saying, "Well, that's just human nature." Rather than being beacons of light to show God's ways to a world that is mired in sinfulness and strife, we become part of the problem rather than part of the solution. This is because it is much easier to be part of the sinful world, and participate in the open rebellion, rather than to be speakers of the truth to the world. We don't want to stick out in a crowd, by not

participating in the gross sinfulness of the world. That's because we are more concerned with other people's opinions of us, than with God's opinion of us. We'd much rather have a stress-free, well-provided-for life on this earth, and worry about the eternal consequences later.

At this point, we might rightfully think that we are doomed to destruction. After all, there isn't one positive characteristic that can be used to describe us; there isn't one negative trait that doesn't apply to each of our lives. The point of the Beatitudes is two-fold, and one has already been accomplished by our cursory reading so far. We don't measure up to God's Law, and without repentance, we will have the horrible torture of hell to look forward to at the end of our earthly lives. There is nothing that we can do about this open rebellion against God – the harder we try to live a Godly life, the more we will fail. That's because we are fighting more than just our own impulses that want us to sin against God in thought, word and deed. This is a spiritual fight, and the second-most-powerful force in the entire universe, the devil, is actively enrolled to keep us from obeying God's will.

But, the second point of the Beatitudes is this – we have One that has fulfilled every tenet of the Law in our stead, and Who died and rose again to apply His merits to our miserable lives. Christ lived a perfect life, without sin, and died an innocent death on the cross of Calvary in our behalf. He didn't have to do this – He could have written us off forever. But, the love of the Father for us His children wouldn't let this be the case. The only way for our sins to be removed was through Christ coming in our stead. Even though it was painful beyond what we can understand, Christ did this for us, and made our salvation come about. When we get to the point of sorrow for our sins, and realize that there is nothing that we can do about our sinfulness, we flee for refuge to the arms of our loving Father, through the Son, Jesus Christ, and His merits on our behalf. We live a life of contrition and repentance, and trust in the mercy of God to forgive

our sins. He does just that, and removes them from us forever. There are still earthly consequences for our sins, but the eternal guilt is gone forever.

Because of the faith in Christ in our hearts, which is a product of the Holy Spirit's work there in Baptism, we are grateful to God for His salvation, and want to please Him with our good works. These works don't merit our salvation; only Christ's blood and righteous suffering, death and resurrection cause this to come about. But, through faith in Christ, and the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts, we are enabled to do that which is pleasing in God's sight, by His urging, and His authorship. The prescriptions of the law aren't for us to earn our way into heaven, then. Rather, they are descriptive of what is pleasing to God, and what is not pleasing to Him, and gradually inform and conform our lives to His image, until they are perfected when we get to heaven. Rather than having all of us denounce our money, our possessions, our good standing in society, God would have us do so in a figurative sense, and have us renounce our allegiance to them over and above our love for Him alone. We aren't called to sell all that we have and give it to the poor; rather, we are to be prepared to do so, if necessary, rather than renounce the name of Christ which has been placed upon us in Holy Baptism. We aren't to seek out suffering and persecution, or hold on to it as a "badge of honor", but rather expect that it probably will come for holding true to the truth of God's Word, and trust in Him unconditionally for the fortitude and the strength to survive it.

The fact that Christ kept the Law perfectly in our stead, and embodied all of the Beatitudes, and avoided all of the Woes, during His earthly life, changes our entire outlook on life. No longer are we preoccupied with trying to "earn" our way into heaven, thinking that our works are what reward or punish us. If we were left with this as our own outlook, we would fail every time, because of the sinful nature, and thus would be led to either arrogance or despair.

But, Christ kept the Law, and made it so that the rewards that Jesus spoke of will come to us, and the punishments will be kept far away from us. This happens because of God the Father's love for us, which sent Jesus to die on the cross in our stead, and the Holy Spirit working in our hearts to produce faith in this alone as the cause of our salvation. Even though we are not deserving of the good things to come in heaven, we have the promise that they will be ours, because of Christ's work, and not ours. Thanks be to God for coming to us, and gradually changing us into the image that He wants us to have, solely by His power. Let us then continue to do good works, in keeping with God's will, so that the love that God has shown us may be reflected back to Him and toward our neighbor. We pray that we would be driven to repentance, and then the forgiveness and absolution would come swiftly, so that we can live lives renewed and have hearts strengthened and encouraged by God's steadfast love for us. Amen.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Savior and Lord. Amen.