

The Feast of All Saints (transferred)  
3 November, Anno Domini 2019  
St. Matthew 5:1-12  
Pr. Kurt Ulmer

In the Name of the Father, and of the +Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

“Blessed are those who appear in every way as though they aren’t blessed at all.” The Beatitudes hardly sound like the preaching of those who would have their hearers lusting after some kind of prosperous or comfortable life. Instead, Jesus begins His public ministry turning reason and appearance on their heads, declaring that the kingdom of heaven belongs to those who take no stock in the things of this world, those who are filled with sorrow at the wickedness that surrounds them and the wickedness that they grapple with in their own weak and broken flesh. This world - its wealth, its pleasures, its happiness - is not the home or the hope of those to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs.

Though it may be our first reaction to hear the Beatitudes as Law, another list of things that we must be in order to be rewarded by God, the Beatitudes are actually given by Christ as the first expression of the Gospel. They are words of comfort for the brokenhearted and distressed, for those filled with sorrow, for those whose consciences are weighed down by guilt, for those who desperately hunger for mercy from God. They are words of promise for those who hate their life in this world, filled as it is with death and tears, loss and persecution, constant trial and temptation. The Lord calls such people blessed. That’s not Law. That’s no burden for those already burdened with guilt and despair. That is a breathe of fresh air! That is hope and peace where there was once none. That is life.

The Beatitudes are life because they are first about Jesus. When Jesus began His preaching He declared “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” The kingdom of heaven is here among us, with us, in the person and work of Jesus whose life was exactly the life described in Beatitudes. By every earthly measure His life was neither blessed nor successful. Instead, just as it is written in the prophet Isaiah “he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief...we esteemed him (not blessed but) stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted.” Men hated Him, cursed Him, mocked Him, and even accused Him of doing the devil’s work! All this for healing the sick and proclaiming good news to the poor. Blessed is He.

Jesus truly was poor in spirit, claiming nothing before God, not counting equality with God a thing to be grasped. He mourned the death that sin had wreaked on His once-undefiled creation. In perfect meekness and humility Jesus sought no advantage or gain for Himself, pouring out His own Blood to redeem the life of those who had rejected Him. As the appointed sin-bearer, our Savior was filled with a constant hunger and thirst for the righteousness of God, a hunger that was finally met as His death was accepted and He was vindicated by resurrection. No one could be counted more merciful than the one who prayed from the cross "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The pure heart of Christ was never filled with deceit or jealousy or unrighteous anger. His motives, His Words, and His actions were always free from sin. By His cross, Jesus has made peace between God and man, receiving in His flesh the punishment for our sin. And none have tasted the bitter persecution of those who hate God's righteousness than the one who is the very source and means of that righteousness.

These are not simply abstract descriptions of Jesus. They describe the very nature and character of God who in Christ has reconciled the world to Himself. And in describing Jesus, the Beatitudes also describe those who are Baptized into Jesus. Thus the Beatitudes speak not only of Jesus but also His Church. And all who believe in Jesus, all who behold in Him the mercy and goodness of God and are not offended by His humility and weakness, upon these God has graciously bestowed His kingdom. Jesus said "Blessed are all who are not offended by Me." These are the saints. These are the ones whom the apostle John is given to see in his vision of what is yet to come. These are the blessed ones who rest eternally from their labors and sing the praises of God and His Christ.

But notice how the saints are described. They are the ones who are coming OUT of the great tribulation. Their lives were not always filled with rest. They were in the midst of tribulation. They suffered and mourned. They wept and bore their crosses. They endured their time of sorrow and labor. By the grace of God they persevered through temptation and persecution. They weren't perfect but their trust was in the Lord Jesus who had come to show mercy to sinners. In their earthly life they were constantly hounded by the devil and hated by the world because they sought after the righteousness of God which is in Christ Jesus. They freely confessed that they deserved no part in God's kingdom on account of their own unrighteousness. But they had washed their sin-soaked clothing in the Blood of the Lamb and now wore the royal robes of the sons of God. They sought no earthly glory or gain. They desired no more than their daily bread and were glad to press their unrighteous wealth into service of their Father's kingdom. They longed for God's kingdom and having persevered to the end, their Shepherd brought them

through death into everlasting life. There they will enjoy forever the peace and rest of Christ.

And those who enjoy that rest now surround you on every side as a great cloud of witnesses, beckoning you and encouraging you so that in the midst of your sorrow you would not lose hope or seek to escape the inglorious life of faith in this world. Your faith in Jesus is not in vain. All the saints who have passed before you attest to it. Not only Abraham and Isaac and David but also parents and grandparents, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, friends and neighbors who have fallen asleep confessing Christ as their Savior - these all surround you, attesting with their voices and their lives to the faithfulness of Christ. Even this day, as we gather around the altar of the Lamb we gather with them, with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven around our King. Though they have been transferred to the Church Triumphant and we remain for now in the Church Militant, we still have one and the same Lord, one faith, one Baptism, one God and Father who is over all and through all and in all and who binds us all together into one in the mystical Body of His Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Blessed be His glorious Name forever and ever! As One triumphant Church we gather to receive life from our Lord and sing the praises of the one who in great humility took our sinful flesh upon Himself and offered Himself as the atoning sacrifice for our sin.

The saints in heaven are truly blessed. So are you. So are all whose hope and trust are in the blessed One who has come in the Name of the Lord, bringing salvation and healing in His wings. Though you mourn and your spirit is weighed down with sorrow and anxiousness, though each day seems to bring with it fresh tribulation and heartache, though the world attacks and hates everything you believe and hold most dear and is filled with all kinds of darkness and evil, take heart. You are blessed. You belong to Christ and He has given to you His kingdom of mercy and peace and rest. It is yours now. You are no less blessed than the saints in heaven at this very hour. Jesus is with you, bearing your sin and sorrows. It is His cross and His suffering that you share. And the end of His cross and suffering is eternal life. You don't see it now but you will together with all the saints. Like them you have washed your robes and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb in Holy Baptism. Like you, they were sustained in their pilgrimage by the Word of God which daily held before them His gracious promises and the mercy of Jesus. Like you they were strengthened on the way by the heavenly food of Holy Communion, assuring them of the forgiveness of all their sins and granting them a participation in the resurrection life of Jesus.

But if you want to flee the life of the cross and avoid the suffering of those who follow Christ, if you hunger and thirst for the things of this world rather than the things of the kingdom of heaven, then the kingdom of heaven will be taken from you. You cannot love this world and love God. To follow Christ and be a citizen of the kingdom of heaven is to turn your back on the kingdom of this world, to despise its wisdom and its pleasure. It is to walk in meekness and humility, to seek peace, to crucify the flesh, to call upon the Name of Lord in ever need and receive Him in faith. All things which the world despises as utter foolishness. It is to suffer persecution because you trust in a righteousness that is given in Christ rather than a righteousness of your own making. It is to see the ways and wisdom of the world as true foolishness leading only to death. It is to follow Christ to the cross and despise its shame because only the cross gives birth to the empty tomb.

The saints who have preceded us in death now rest. One glorious day we will join them. One day we will lay aside the cross forever and our eyes will behold the crucified and risen Lord in all His glory. And in that day the one, holy, Christian, and apostolic Church will raise its voice in never-ending songs of joy and thanksgiving and praise to the Lamb who is worthy of all glory, honor, blessing, and praise. Blessed be His holy Name now and forever.

In the Name of +Jesus.