

“Blessed”

*Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:1-3).*

This weekend, over 100 million people will watch the Super Bowl and whether you like football or not, it’s difficult to deny the cultural significance of this event. Super Bowl Sunday is a sacred day in American society and it’s a spectacle that would have made ancient Rome envious. The Super Bowl features some of the world’s biggest, strongest and fastest athletes. It’s played in the best stadiums located in our brightest cities. Super Bowl Sunday celebrates physical strength and honors financial power and in every way it is designed to showcase success. Thirty-second commercials sell for four million dollars, the halftime show will be a visual tribute to opulence and more than once this weekend we will hear some athlete or celebrity talk about how “blessed” they are to participate in such a fantastic event.

The term “blessed” is one of the most misunderstood and misused words in our cultural vocabulary and with Super Bowl Sunday looming in the background, today we find this word “blessed” coming straight from the mouth of Jesus...but the way He uses the word stands in blatant contrast to the way it’s used in the world and everything about today’s Gospel lesson challenges our natural and cultural understanding of what it means to be “blessed.”

As today’s Gospel reading opens, the ministry of Jesus has become a spectacle of its own. In chapter four Matthew writes, “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him” (Matthew 4:23-25).

Now it may not have been Super Bowl numbers, but many people had seen His power. They had watched Him drive out evil spirits, they had witnessed His miraculous healings and they had come out in droves to see and hear this miracle worker. Throughout the first four chapters of his Gospel, Matthew wrote about the Kingship of Jesus and the Kingdom of Heaven and now, by His actions, Jesus had demonstrated His authority and the crowds had flocked to see the King with their own eyes. This is the situation leading up to today’s text and, as our reading begins, we are told that when Jesus “saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down” (Matthew 5:1). This action was full of meaning because it was customary for the rabbis of the day to sit when instructing their students. This is what teachers did. So now, with the crowds gathered and eager to hear from this new King, He began to teach his disciples.

We call this portion of Matthew’s Gospel, “The Sermon on the Mount.” It starts with today’s reading here in chapter five and continues all the way through chapter seven. It’s one of the greatest and most well-known collections of teaching in all of Scripture and, as the crowds pressed in, ready to learn about the Kingdom of Heaven, nothing could have prepared them for what they heard next: “Blessed are the poor in spirit...blessed are those who mourn...blessed are the meek...blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness...blessed are the merciful...blessed are the pure in heart...blessed are the peacemakers...blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.” They had come to hear about the blessings of the Kingdom and yet, in listening to the words of their teacher, the “blessed” He was talking about didn’t look so good.

When I was a kid, recess was the highlight of my day and we would usually fill our thirty-minute break with an all-important game of basketball or football or kickball. And no matter which sport served as the game of the day, picking teams was a critical part of the process. Victory or defeat hung in the balance and so the best athletes were always chosen first and there was no room for the meek or the poor in spirit. These are not the kind of qualities that lead to victory and any leader worth his salt would tell you that the way to ensure success is to get the best people you can on your side. Whether it’s a professional football team or a large corporation or even a kickball game on the playground, when you get good people in place you will succeed.

So what in the world did Jesus mean by His definition of the “blessed?” In this unique introduction to the Sermon on the Mount Jesus was telling His disciples what life in the Kingdom was like and yet, by human standards, His words make absolutely no sense. The poor in the spirit? Those who mourn? The meek? Those who hunger and thirst? The persecuted? This doesn’t sound like the kind of people around which you would want to build *any* organization, let alone a kingdom, and yet these are precisely the people Christ calls.

One of things I want you to see in this text is that the first four blessings in the Beatitudes address the very people Jesus came to serve, “the poor in spirit...those who mourn...the meek...those who hunger and thirst for righteousness” (Matthew 5:3-6). These are people who have nothing to offer God. These are the spiritually bankrupt, the brokenhearted, the weak, and the people who see in themselves nothing but sin. And today, we need to seriously consider what Jesus said about the “blessed” in these four verses, because if we think that we can offer God a resume of good works and righteous acts that somehow qualify us for the Kingdom, then we will find ourselves on the outside looking in.

Here’s the truth: Christ came to save sinners. Christ came to redeem the ungodly and if we come to Him with anything in our hands in order to make ourselves seem worthy, then we have rejected our Savior. You see, these first four Beatitudes are a call to repentance and they *should* offend us because every one of us needs to recognize our situation before God and the result of an honest evaluation of our lives should break us!

Not sure what that means? Look at your life this week. Think about the people you manipulated. Think about the people you deceived. Consider how you put your own needs and your own agenda ahead of the clear needs of others. I’m not saying you weren’t nice about it! In fact, we’re all very good at disguising our sin. They may not have even realized what you were doing...but don’t think for second that God doesn’t know. And don’t think for a second that your hands are clean. You and I are poor, miserable sinners. That’s honest! We are helpless to help ourselves and the greatest threat to our salvation is the illusion that we are doing just fine on our own. When we take God’s Word seriously, and when we acknowledge our delusion for what it is, we are without excuse and we have no place to hide...and this place of spiritual poverty is exactly where God’s blessings begin.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” My friends, Christ came for sinners like us! Christ died for sinners like us! And in His resurrection from the dead sinners like us are given life! And that’s what it truly means to be blessed!

The second thing I want you to understand about today’s text is seen in the remaining beatitudes. Jesus said, “Blessed are the merciful...Blessed are the pure in heart...Blessed are the peacemakers...Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness... Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me” (Matthew 5:7-12). These are also important words for us to hear, because these words tell us that Jesus’ call to discipleship not only comforts and fills and saves sinners, but it also transforms of lives of those who are called. When Jesus joins men, women, and children to Himself, the *life of Christ* is also revealed in the lives of His disciples. It was true for Jesus’ disciples there on the mountain in Galilee and it is also true for the disciples of Jesus who make up His church today. The plain and simple truth is that life in the Kingdom looks different from life in the world! Forgiven and blessed with present and eternal citizenship in the Kingdom of Heaven, our lives are changed! We now show mercy where the world takes revenge; we purify our hearts by dwelling in the Word of Christ; as ambassadors of reconciliation, we now bring the message of peace to the lives we touch; we suffer for the sake of Christ’s righteousness; and we face the insults of the world and the reversals of life with a faith focused and fixed on the promises of God.

In the eyes of the world, the people of God look far from “blessed.” As Paul wrote in today’s second reading, “not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God” (I Corinthians 1:25-29). In the glow of Super Bowl Sunday, the things Paul describes here sound insane, but in Christ and through the eyes of faith, the Kingdom of Heaven is ours today and the blessings of God point us to a victorious life in His Kingdom that will never end. And that’s what it truly means to be blessed!

The Beatitudes are *not* a moral roadmap designed to lead us heaven. And the Sermon on Mount is *not* a list of demands promising blessings in return. No, the Beatitudes *bring* blessings because they come to us as requirements of righteousness already met in Jesus. He is the one who has fulfilled every demand of the Law. He is the one who has taken away our sin and the good news for us sinners is that Jesus Christ has come to comfort and to fill and to bring mercy and to reveal God and to make peace...and to give us the Kingdom. And He has given us the power to do the same. In Christ, you are blessed...and in Christ you will be a blessing to others no matter what the world says. Go in the peace of this promise and serve the Lord. Amen.

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