

Good Company

In the name of Jesus, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: In today's Gospel we heard what are known as the Nine Beatitudes. They are the familiar opening words of Jesus' famed Sermon on the Mount, and arguably some of the most profound, beautiful, and sublime words that have ever been spoken. As Christians, we are accustomed to hearing them – they show up in the lectionary at least once a year and sometimes twice. As a result, we may fail to notice just how radical they are. I mean look at them. They oppose and overthrow all conventional wisdom, proclaiming that the blessed of God are those whose lives on earth are everything people hope to avoid.

We don't want to be poor in spirit; we prefer to be confident and proud. We extol high self esteem as a virtue. We don't want to be mournful; we pursue happiness. Who wants to be meek? Nobody. We want to assert ourselves. We want everything our way. Merciful? Huh-uh. How's the saying go? "I don't get mad; I get even." We want people to fear our retribution. Don't mess with me or you'll pay for it. Oh, and persecuted; right, everyone wants that—not. Seriously, if you saw someone who actually met all these conditions: spiritually poor, sad, servile, unwilling to defend himself, always being picked on, slandered, and falsely accused – would you call such a person blessed? I don't think so. And yet Jesus does.

So we have to ask, how are we to understand the Beatitudes? Are they commands? Is Jesus telling us that these are the attributes we need to strive to develop in ourselves in order to be blessed by God? Some pastors and Bible teachers say exactly that. "Hey, you: be spiritually poor! And stop that laughing. Be mournful. How do you expect God to bless you when you're acting all happy like that? Get out there and find a way to get yourself persecuted for righteousness sake – and then you'll truly be blessed."

In response to such assertions, let me say this: if the Beatitudes are commands, then we're all in trouble, for none of us is able to keep them, nor by nature would any of us want to. Like I said before, they go against our very grain.

And if we take a closer look, we will see that they aren't presented as commands. Instead Jesus states them as matters of fact. This is the way things are. And, I might add, they aren't this way because we make them so but because God does. He does the blessing. And he creates in us the conditions that lead to his blessing.

The first four of the Beatitudes speak of the inner qualities of a person who is blessed by God. And in giving them to us Jesus employs the parallelism that is common in Hebrew poetry. We're used to poetry that based on meter and rhyme. The ancient Hebrew's poetry was based on presenting parallel thoughts. That is, an idea is stated and then restated using other words – other words that might further explain or illumine the first idea. That's what we have going on here. There's a connection between being poor in spirit and being meek, and again between being mournful and hungering and thirsting for righteousness.

Let's begin with that first pair of parallel ideas: spiritual poverty and meekness. What are they about and how do they lead to blessing? Simple: a person who is spiritually poor is one who knows that he stands before the Lord empty-handed. He has no good works or fine qualities to boast about. He has only his sin, his shame, and his great need. He's a beggar. A

few Sundays back we heard Jesus tell about two men who went to the temple to pray: a Pharisee and a tax collector. Both were spiritually poor; but only one of them knew it. The Pharisee thought he was rich in good works and pridefully presented them to the Lord. He went home still steeped in his sin. But the tax collector was ashamed of himself. And that made him humble. He stood with his face down, too embarrassed to lift up his eyes to the Lord. Instead he beat on his breast and begged for God's mercy and forgiveness. And he got it.

At the beginning of our service we did the same thing. We confessed that we are poor, miserable sinners who have constantly offended the Lord and justly deserve his punishment in time and eternity. We stood as beggars pleading for God's mercy and forgiveness for the sake of Jesus who suffered and died for us. And we got it. In the words of absolution we heard how Jesus himself has taken away our sin. Thus we are blessed. The kingdom of heaven is ours. In the resurrection we will inherit the new earth.

Now let's look at that second pair: being mournful and hungering and thirsting for righteousness. These both speak of a sense of dissatisfaction with the way things are at present. We normally associate mourning with death. It's the sadness and sorrow we feel when we grieve over a loved one who's died. That's included, but the mourning mentioned here is broader than that. It's like we sing in the Advent hymn *O Come Emmanuel* when speaking of captive Israel "that mourns in lonely exile here." It's the sense of sorrow and disgust with our lives in sin and all the effects of sin's curse: the way we can't truly love others as we ought to, can't be the people godly people we'd like to be, always falling short of the mark due to the sin nature that still indwells us. And, too struggling with all the effects of the fall: death, disease, pain, disappointment – the thorns and thistles of life. This is why we mourn.

And we will be comforted, Jesus says. Not just cheered up; though that's how we often use the word *comfort*, it's not the idea here. No, comfort comes from the Latin "com fortus" which means given strength. And by his Word and Spirit the Lord does exactly that for us: he gives us the strength and faith to endure the trials we face in this age.

And the flip side of being unhappy with the present is longing for something better – which is what hungering and thirsting for righteousness is all about. It's yearning for the coming time when the sin nature in us will be forever destroyed and we'll stand before the Lord as his children in sinless perfection, able at last to love him and everyone else. It's what we were created and redeemed for. And loving each other in God's perfect design will satisfy us endlessly for all eternity.

So, that's the first four Beatitudes which deal with inner attributes. The next three address qualities that show up in our interaction with others. First, merciful, which is forgiving those who sin against us. And there's something circular going on here. We can only show mercy to others in view of the mercy and forgiveness which we ourselves have received from the Lord. It's like in the parable Jesus tells about the man who was forgiven an impossibly large debt who then should have forgiven the much smaller debt of a fellow servant who owed him. That he didn't proved that he had no sense of appreciation or thankfulness for what his lord had done for him. So it is with us. We begin with our own debt of sin and the great lengths to which Jesus went to pay it for us. The more we understand and appreciate that, the more we are inclined to forgive those who by their sins hurt us – and the more we will actually mean the words we pray when we say, "Forgive us our trespasses *as we forgive those who trespass against us.*"

Next Jesus pronounces God's blessing on the pure in heart. This has to do with how we think about others. The sin nature in us always wants to think the worst. Pretending to be able to read minds, we ascribe evil motives to others. We're suspicious, untrusting, on guard. The new nature that God is nurturing in us isn't that way. It's ever hopeful, looking for the best in others, interpreting their actions with charity, trying to see things in a positive light, and putting the best construction on things. With respect to evil it's innocent.

And to the extent that through repentance the Lord destroys in us the old nature and breathes life into the new, we see God. We see him in his Word and Sacraments. We see him hidden in every act of kindness, every good work performed, and also in the needs of others. As Jesus says, when you give to the needy, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and so on, you did it for me. Ultimately, of course, we will see the Lord face to face, when he comes again and crowns us with life in his kingdom.

And that brings us to the third of this second set of Beatitudes: the peacemakers who will be called the sons of God. That only makes sense. The greatest peacemaker of all time is the only begotten Son of God. By his passion and death he brokered the reconciliation of God with rebellious mankind. He gives us God's peace. As he does, he makes us God's sons and daughters. And now we're in the family business of granting God's peace to others.

The sin nature in us thrives on conflict. It enjoys seeing people at odds with each other – even to the point of throwing fuel on the fire to escalate its severity. And for sins such as these we need to repent; repent so that we may live as sons and daughters of God and insert ourselves between those who are in conflict. That can be a tough place to be, because you're likely to get flak from both sides. Certainly that's what Jesus experienced when he was on the cross receiving the curses of both men and his heavenly Father. A child of God takes that risk, willing to suffer if need be in order to bring peace and forgiveness to parties in conflict.

And that leads nicely to the last pair of Beatitudes that describe how a person who lives according to the seven preceding will be treated by the world. You'll be persecuted. You'll be badmouthed. You'll be lied about. You'll be falsely accused. Just like Jesus was. Just like the prophets were. Just like the apostles and early Christians were. Just like the martyrs were – and still are.

But that puts you in some pretty good company, doesn't it? It puts you in the company of the saints on earth who struggle here below. It puts you in the company of angels, archangels, and blessed saints who stand before God's throne waving palm branches, who having finished their course in faith now rest from their labors. It puts you in the good company of Jesus to whom be our praise, honor, glory, and thanksgiving forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!