

“Blessed”

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:3).

Next Sunday, 126 million people will watch the Super Bowl. Right or wrong, like it or not, Super Bowl Sunday has assumed an almost sacred status in American society. It’s a spectacle that features some of the world’s biggest, strongest, and fastest athletes, and it’s played in the best stadiums and brightest cities. Super Bowl Sunday celebrates physical strength, honors financial power, and in every way, it is designed to showcase success. And, I expect that more than once next weekend, we will hear an athlete, entertainer, coach, or commentator tell the world how “blessed” they are to participate in such a spectacular event.

“Blessed” is a loaded word, and one that is wildly misunderstood in our cultural vocabulary. It’s ironic that with Super Bowl Sunday looming large in the collective consciousness of our country, today, we find this word “blessed” coming straight from the mouth of Jesus. But the way He uses the word stands in stark contrast to the way it’s used in the world. In fact, 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 its own kind of spectacle. It may not have been Super Bowl numbers, but a multitude had heard about His miracles, and now they had come out in droves to see this miracle worker 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,” and began to teach his disciples.

We call this portion of Matthew’s Gospel, “The Sermon on the Mount,” and starting with today’s reading and continuing through chapter seven, it’s one of the greatest collections of teaching in Scripture. Yet with His disciples sitting at the feet of their rabbi, 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.” They had come to hear about the blessings of the Kingdom and yet, the “blessed” Jesus was talking about didn’t sound very attractive.

In His introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was telling His disciples what life in the Kingdom was like, and by human standards, His words made absolutely no sense. The poor in the spirit? Those who mourn? The meek? The hungry, thirsty, and persecuted? These are not the kind of people you would want for *any* organization, let alone a kingdom, and yet these are precisely the people Christ calls. Look again. The first four groups named in the Beatitudes describe the very people Jesus came to serve – the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – and these are people who have nothing to offer God. These are the spiritually bankrupt, broken, and weak, and people who see in themselves nothing but sin. And today, we need to seriously consider what Jesus says in these words about the “blessed”, because if we think that our good works and righteous resume somehow qualify us for the Kingdom, then we will find ourselves on the outside looking in.

The truth is, Christ came to save sinners. Christ came to redeem the ungodly and unworthy, and if we come to Him with anything in our hands to make ourselves seem attractive to God, we are actually driving away the Savior of sinners. 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 results of this honest evaluation of our lives should lay us low.

If you're not sure what that means, just look at your life over the last week. Think about the people you manipulated. Think about the people you deceived. Consider how you put your own needs ahead of the obvious needs of others. They may not have even realized what you were doing, but don't think for a second that God didn't notice. And don't think for a second that your hands are clean. You and I are – as we say in the confession – poor, miserable sinners. That's honest. That's the truth! And, to make matters worse, we are helpless to help ourselves, and the greatest threat to our salvation is the illusion that we are doing 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 it is here, this place of spiritual poverty, that 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! That's what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like, and that's what it truly means to be blessed!

The second thing I want you to understand about today's reading relates to the remaining beatitudes. Jesus continued, “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). My friends, these are also important words for us to hear, because these words tell us that Jesus' call to faith and discipleship not only comforts and fills and saves sinners, but it also transforms the lives of the people He saves. 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 sit at His feet 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 now changed! Now, we show mercy where the world seeks revenge; now, we purify our hearts by dwelling in the Word of Christ; now, as ambassadors of reconciliation, we bring the message of peace to the lives of those around us; and now, we suffer for the sake of Christ's righteousness; and now, we face the insults and injustice of this life with a faith fixed on *the promises of God for all people*, no matter what their status in the eyes of the world may be.

In the eyes of the world, the people of God look far from blessed. “But,” Paul writes, “God chose what is foolish in the (world's eyes) 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 Cor. 1:25-29). In the run-up to Super Bowl Sunday, the things Paul describes here sound insane and inept, but in Christ, and through the eyes of faith, this is a picture of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Beatitudes are *not* a moral roadmap designed to lead us to heaven. And the Sermon on the 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 us today to comfort and to fill, to bring mercy and to reveal God, to make peace, and to give us the Kingdom. And He has given us the power to do the same. Today, in Christ, you are blessed. And in Christ, you will be a blessing to others, no matter what the world says. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you today, and all God's people say, “Amen.”

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