

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

When are you really blessed?

More and more people were hearing about Jesus, more and more people were coming to look for Jesus. They had heard what Jesus was doing, as he healed the sick and helped people in their needs. Now they wanted to find out what Jesus was all about.

Jesus had been telling them that the Kingdom of heaven was coming, the Kingdom of heaven was coming to earth. Jesus was bringing the Kingdom of heaven to earth.

So what was this kingdom like? What did it mean to live in this kingdom?

Where is the kingdom of heaven today? Is it up there? Is it also down here? What does it look like?

Are you citizens of the kingdom of heaven?

Hey, come and follow me.

Matthew tells the story of Jesus going up a mountainside, calling his disciples to himself, and teaching them. His teaching is what we now call the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew does not tell us where this mount is but the traditional belief is that the Sermon on the Mount was given on the slopes leading up from the lake.

If you go to Israel, to Galilee, this is the place that they will show you as the site of the Sermon on the Mount. There is a church built there, a rather beautiful church in a lovely garden, called the Church of the Beatitudes.

It's a beautiful, peaceful setting. And the Sermon on the Mount gives us some of the best known and most loved words that Jesus ever spoke. Among them are the opening words that we heard as our Gospel today. We know these words as the Beatitudes, which means the Blessings.

Jesus talks about being blessed. Blessing means sharing in the goodness of God, receiving the gifts of God.

Yet, when we listen to what Jesus says about being blessed, it is hugely challenging. That's because Jesus' idea of what being blessed means and our idea of what being blessed means are hugely different from each other.

You have probably been told to count your blessings. Maybe you have told others to count their blessings. OK – count your blessings. What are the blessings you have, that you really appreciate...?

Now let's see what blessings Jesus talks about when he talks about your blessings.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

Are you blessed when you are poor?

We like to think that the things we have make us rich. Or we don't expect to be rich, but we do like to be comfortable. The opportunity to live a comfortable life; that is a blessing.

We don't want to be poor. Sometimes people have to put up with being poor, but it is not a blessing. Yet Jesus says: “Blessed are the poor.”

OK...he says: “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” So he is talking about spiritual things, not material things.

Do you want to be spiritually poor? I think we want even more to be spiritually rich, to have a spiritual life where we feel wonderfully exalted.

Jesus says: "Blessed are the poor in spirit." You are blessed when you have nothing, when you come with nothing, because then you are ready to receive everything that God wants to give you. You are blessed when you let go of all your own spirituality, and you live in the grace of God.

You are blessed when you have nothing, nothing of your own and when you rely on God for everything; when you rely on God for every spiritual gift.

And what does God give you?

"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

God gives you a place in the kingdom of heaven. This means that you receive life from God, life that is full and free, life that is lived with God.

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted."

Count your blessings. Surely the greatest blessings are the people in your life, people who belong to you and you belong to them, people whom you love, people who love you.

How can you be blessed when you lose someone who is a blessing? How can you be blessed, when you mourn such a loss?

Jesus says you are blessed even in the face of loss and tragedy. You are blessed by his presence and by his promise. He has promised to be with you—when your need is greatest, his gift is even greater.

You will be blessed, even when you mourn great loss. You will be comforted, covered with the grace of your loving Father.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

We are taught that we have to be strong, that we have to be assertive, that we have to stand up for ourselves. We like to believe that we are blessed when we can make our own way in the world, when we can stand up for our rights, when we can get what we deserve.

Jesus says: "Blessed are the meek." Meek is not weak. But meekness is a different sort of strength.

Being meek is being strong enough that you do not have to prove how strong and tough you are. Being meek is being strong enough to forget about yourself, and give of yourself for the sake of others. Being meek is being more concerned about caring about the rights and the needs of others, than your own rights and your own needs.

"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth."

Blessed are you when you are meek, when you are prepared to give up what you think is yours, because God will give you much more. You will inherit the earth. Your life on earth will be rich and fulfilling, because you will be living as citizens of heaven even while you are living on earth.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."

None of us like to be hungry. None of us like to be thirsty. Hunger tells us that we need food. Thirst tells us that we need something to drink. Hunger and thirst are fine, as long as we can eat and drink when we need to eat and drink.

And most of us eat and drink much more than we need. We eat and drink to savor the richness of taste, to enjoy food and drink to the fullest.

There is another kind of hunger and another kind of thirst. It is spiritual hunger and spiritual thirst. It is feeling that deep need for spiritual nourishment and spiritual fulfillment.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness.”

We might try to convince ourselves that we have enough righteousness, that we are good enough to satisfy ourselves and to satisfy others, and to satisfy God. But then we are living a lie, and our blessing is an illusion.

You are blessed when you come to God with complete honesty, knowing that you need righteousness from God, knowing that you need God to forgive your sins and make you whole and healthy and strong. When you come to God with that need, and when you come to God with that faith, then you will be filled, and you will be blessed.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

We like to think that blessings are all the things that make life good for ourselves. And we are pretty good at complaining when we think life is not fair. We are quick to blame someone, anyone, and maybe we blame God if life does not give us what we think we deserve.

Mercy is knowing and understanding the needs of others, and forgetting about our own needs and wants. Mercy is being prepared to give of ourselves for the sake of others. Mercy is sacrificing ourselves, and what is ours, rather than being worried about getting for ourselves.

Blessed are you when you are merciful. Blessed are you when your heart and mind are tuned to other people, people who are close to you and people who might be far away, but people who have great needs, physical needs, are politically oppressed and in danger, and suffer from spiritual emptiness.

When you see those needs, when you feel those needs, when you respond to those needs—that is mercy. And when your heart and mind are tuned into the needs of others, somehow your needs don't seem so urgent at all.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.”

Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive God's own mercy, the mercy of forgiveness and the mercy of pain and anguish relieved, the mercy of being loved and supported. When you are merciful you are committing yourself to the mercy of God, and God gives mercy richly and fully.

“Blessed are the pure in heart for they will see God.”

We like to think that we are smart and sophisticated, and being smart and sophisticated means that we can see and do whatever we like. We think that we can play with all sorts of things that are evil, because that is what is flaunted in our world. We like to think that makes us clever and wise, and that if we are smart enough these things won't do us any damage.

Jesus says: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.”

When we fill our minds with all sorts of experiences to prove that we are mature and that we can handle them, we lose sight of what is really precious and enriching. We lose sight of God.

When we hear the word of God and focus on what is good and holy, even in the middle of the most demanding and degrading sights, then we learn to see God in every situation, and we are blessed as we seek the will of God everywhere, always.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

We all want peace. But we also want things to be done our way.

We want to hold control. We want others to serve our purposes.

We generate conflict, in our own personal life and at every level right up to international power-plays and wars.

It takes great wisdom but also great will power to become a peace maker, to overcome the conflicts in your own life, and to work with others to overcome conflicts in their life. It means sacrifice. It means forgiveness. It means understanding life is more than getting your own way.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.”

God is the great peacemaker, breaking down the hatred and rebellion that people throw against him, and leading people to reconciliation and restored relationships. Peacemakers are children of God, for they are learning from God, and following in the footsteps of their heavenly Father.

Making peace is a vital part of Christian life. Learn how to be a Christian peacemaker.

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

I don't like pain. I don't like to be rejected. How can you be blessed when you are being persecuted?

Being persecuted is not a blessing. But being persecuted can show that you have a blessing which is much greater, a blessing that no one can take from you, no matter how much they try.

Christians have been persecuted, and Christians are still being persecuted, when they stand up for their faith. Persecutors think that they can enforce their will, and destroy Christian faith by using ridicule, threats, pain, violence, and even death.

Jesus says that you are blessed even when you are persecuted. That's because righteousness, the gift from the righteous God, is stronger and more precious than any persecution.

People might turn against you, and take away your property and your comfort, your reputation, your freedom, even your life. What have you got left?

“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs.”

Those persecuted because of righteousness have the kingdom of heaven. That is God's gift, and no one can take that away. That is the greatest blessing.

So Jesus teaches us about being blessed, about being *really* blessed.

He strips away so many things that we think are blessings. He shows us the blessings that go much deeper, blessings that are much more precious, the blessings of living with God in the kingdom of heaven.

Do you still want to protest: “But I don't want to let go of all the blessings that I want”?

Look at Jesus, look at the way he lived. He was poor in spirit, dependent on his heavenly Father. He suffered great loss, and great deprivation. He was pure in heart, and merciful, and meek. He was persecuted, to the point of the cross. He gave it all away for the sake of bringing peace.

When are you blessed? You are blessed when you are with Jesus. May you share his blessings in the kingdom of heaven, now and forever. Amen.