

Jesus Christ Is the True Blessing

Matthew 5:12

Sermon for the 4th Sunday after the Epiphany 2023 Rev. Ruberto Ek Yah,
Translated from Spanish by Pam Bridgehouse

May the mercy, grace, and peace of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be with each one of you. Amen.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing in Your sight,
O Lord, our Rock.

Today's readings, especially the second reading and the gospel, remind us that by sending His Son to save us from our sin, turned everything upside down. Things we may be inclined to call bad, in reality are good, and the things we might call good could be bad.

The God's blessings are hidden in the weak, common, and humble things of this world – the cross, water and the word, the bread and the wine. Let's think about the cross. When people hear "cross" it looks like something really bad. The cross is not a good thing. The cross only means suffering. The apostle Paul said, *For the message about Christ's death on the cross is nonsense to those who are being lost; but for us who are being saved it is God's power.* (1 Corinthians 1:18, GNT) Can you see it? In Christ Jesus God turns everything upside down. Many people today would tell us that the message of the cross is completely crazy. They can't believe that the work of salvation could be completed by the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, so they start adding on good works to help it along.

Besides, who could believe that God's victory over sin, death, and the devil was won by the shame and humiliation of public execution, that is to say the crucifixion of the beloved Son of God? Who in his right mind could make sense of the victory cries of this dying man? Who could believe the preaching of that dying man, Jesus? Who could believe what Jesus said: blessed are those who weep, or blessed are you when you are persecuted for following Jesus and believing what He said? Who could hope that the meek would inherit the earth?

In Christ, our world has been turned upside down. The beatitudes are just the opposite of what we expect to hear. This world thinks a person who is blessed is the one who never suffers; their life is all good.

The beatitudes are not attitudes to help you live better. They are not keys to happiness in this life. Rather they express the new reality for the children of God who, by virtue of the death and resurrection of Jesus, find God's blessings in the most unexpected and unnatural places and circumstances of life.

Let me see if I can illustrate the point of the beatitudes by contrasting them with their opposite. When I want to preach on a certain theme, I like to research it. The other day I was on line when suddenly I found what you might find a contemporary list of beatitudes. The list was written in a way that sounded good to the modern ear, not the other way around, as Jesus' beatitudes sound to us. Remember – sometimes what seems good is really bad.

The contemporary list of blessings says: *blessed are the rich because they have everything. Blessed are the comfortable because they will avoid pain. Blessings are the self-sufficient, for they don't wait for anything or depend on anyone else because they have everything they want, and they have it now. Blessed are those who don't worry about injustices experienced by others for they are happy with realistic expectations. Blessed are those who win the game, for they make the most of their advantages.* (cited from the internet)

The list goes on, but you get the idea. Just like Jesus' beatitudes the blessings are listed in the first part and the situation or condition is stated in the second part.

Let's look at the second on the list of contemporary blessings because it is quick and easy to illustrate: Blessed are the comfortable for they will avoid pain. The point is that whoever avoids pain is blessed because they feel comfortable.

Contrast that understanding with the Lord's blessings in the beatitudes. Jesus says, "*blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.*" The blessing Jesus talks about is a state of being that doesn't depend on eternal circumstances.

Let's apply it to each one of us. When you and I, as children of God, weep and mourn, we are blessed by God because He comforts us with His final victory over everything that afflicts us, mainly sin, death, and the devil.

The blessings, as you can see, are expressions of a new reality for the children of God who, by virtue of Jesus' death and resurrection, find God's blessings in places and circumstances where they are least expected and most unnatural.

This new understanding turns us upside down because it doesn't depend on us to be blessed, but rather begins with God and ends with God. It can be seen most clearly in the suffering of Jesus on the cross. Martin Luther, speaking of the cross of Jesus, teaches it as "The Theology of the cross" just as Saint Paul always teaches about the cross of Jesus. Let's read again what Paul says: *For the message about Christ's death on the cross is nonsense to those who are being lost; but for us who are being saved it is God's power.* (1 Corinthians 1:18, GNT)

Everything begins and ends with God. Today is fourth Sunday after the Epiphany, which means the manifestation of God that enlightens us with His Holy Spirit to see things as they really are, even though they may seem upside down.

Another blessing seen in humble things is our own baptism. I invite you to think about our baptism. There we were marked with the sign of the cross on our forehead and our heart to show that we were redeemed by the crucified Christ.

I also like to think of Martin Luther's illustration when he says, "*Every morning when you wash your face remember your baptism, remember the name in which you were baptized, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and ask God that today you would live an attitude of a true child of God.*"

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, listen. Every Christian is marked with the sign of the cross. You and I have received that mark but it is much more than that because Jesus tells us: *If anyone would follow me, He must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me.* (Matthew 16:25)

So, beloved in the Lord, following Jesus is not easy, and we should not lead people to think it is. Being marked with the sign of the cross makes us enemies of the devil, enemies of death, and even our own being. So when we suffer, when we are sick, even our victories and joys, God uses all of them in a mysterious way to fix our eyes on Jesus and His goodness and grace in our lives.

While we are carrying our crosses, we are obliged to look at our lives in a completely new way, even though it seems that we are upside down. Just as the cross of Jesus was shown to be a great victory of God over sin, death, and the devil, we hope to find God's victory in our lives where we would not normally expect to find it.

Any kind of suffering has been turned into the great enemy of human beings. That is why human beings made decisions to try to avoid suffering. But in the midst of such things we have God's promise. He says that He will do great things in our lives through suffering. As Saint Paul says in 2 Corinthians 12:9 *"My grace is all you need, for my power is greatest when you are weak."* *I am most happy, then, to be proud of my weaknesses, in order to feel the protection of Christ's power over me.* It is very clear that in the end God will work enormously in our life in the midst of what we are going through. We should not focus on ourselves when we are weak, but on the contrary, we should focus on Jesus and trust that He knows what to do and that His will is more important than our own.

This reminds me of what Paul says in Romans 5:3-5: *Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴ and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵ and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. (ESV)*

All of us children of God have the Holy Spirit who helps us understand the blessing, the beatitudes Jesus spoke, and what they really mean.

All of these blessings are accomplished in Jesus Christ. Christ was made poor for you and me to give us the inheritance of eternal life. Christ wept and kept on mourning for you and me, calling us to repentance. Christ made himself meek to obey God's will. Christ is the one who hungered and thirsted for righteousness to gain our forgiveness of sins. Christ is merciful because in spite of how evil we are, He loves us and has mercy on us. Christ is the pure of heart; because of His love for us He carried our sins and became sin in our place and thanks to His work on the cross, has reconciled us to the Father, and now gives us a peace that surpasses all human understanding. Christ was persecuted for coming and turning things upside down the things of this world. He was condemned and persecuted and all manner of evil was spoken against him for proclaiming God's truth.

Today when you get home, read the Beatitudes again and pay close attention to this new way of understanding and seeing Jesus in them. They won't be the same as the last time you read them.

And now give all honor and glory to God for giving us His only Son for our salvation. In His name. Amen.

May the peace of God that surpasses all human understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord and Savior. Amen.