

“BLESSED ARE THOSE TRANSFORMED BY GRACE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Matthew 5:1-12

Introduction.

Yesterday we finished our two weeks of Serve at Home. Five teams worked five shifts at four work sites and accomplished a prodigious amount of work and left behind a bunch of blessings. My thanks go to our Serve volunteers who organized and coordinated all this work, and to our congregation who responded so well and did so much. As Molly said, “What an awesome church.” Glory to God.

Why do we do things like Serve? Jesus said it is more blessed to serve than to be served and He set that example for all of us. We serve because we want to be Christ-followers. During these past two weeks you noticed the email devotionals were prepared by the Serve volunteers and followed the Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are Jesus’ definition of what a Christ-follower is.

These eight beatitudes are a bold declaration of what it means to be a Christian and how we can be supremely happy, of how we can live a supremely blessed life. These Beatitudes test and challenge the reality of our Christianity and our views of what will make us happy.

There are several lessons that can be drawn from the Beatitudes. Let’s consider five this morning.

The First lesson is the meaning of blessed. Remember Jesus is the one who decides who is blessed. He declares what true blessing and happiness and riches are.

Notice the contrast between the mind of Christ and the common opinions of the world. The way of Jesus is completely at odds with the way of the world. With each Beatitude the gulf widens between Christ’s followers and the world (see Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 121). Jesus says the mark of His followers is they are nothing like the world.

Poverty, hunger, sorrow and persecution are the very things we all try to avoid. Riches, fun, popularity are all the things we try to get. The problem is the very life our Lord blesses is the very life we don’t want; and the very life our Lord says is ruin, is the life we admire and want to imitate (see Ryle, *Luke, I*, p. 179-180).

Jesus is standing against everything we know and experience in this life. He is turning the world upside down. He is saying that if you measure your happiness by the world's standards you will end up unhappy, you are on the wrong path, a path that leads to destruction and ruin.

But if you are poor in spirit and full of sorrow for your sin and humbled by it and suffer from others because of all of this, don't be discouraged or feel like a failure or believe that your life is nothing. The path you are on is narrow and hard but it leads to great reward and happiness.

Let me put it more starkly. How many of us would be willing to trade places with a billionaire, maybe like Bill Gates? You get his billions, you get his house, and you get his soul. And he comes here and sits in worship where you are sitting, he gets what little you may have in comparison, but he gets your soul? Would you trade your eternity to gain his earthly? What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose His soul?

Why do so many of us seek the living among the dead? He is not here, He is risen. Our blessing and hope and riches are in heaven. Store up riches there, set your soul there, seat yourself with Christ in the heavenlies. If Christ is your treasure, you have everything.

God has purposefully put an emptiness and a longing into our souls such that nothing in this life can satisfy it. That longing and desire is for Him, and no amount of stuff will fill it. True blessing will always have the stamp of eternity on it.

That is the first lesson, the Christian life really is diametrically opposed to the world. Don't waste your life pursuing things that don't matter in eternity.

When Covid passes, what will you set your soul on, what will you go back to? What won't you go back to?

In the words of Henry Scougal, "the worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love."

The Second lesson from the Beatitudes is where the blessings start. Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes and the Beatitudes begin with a confession of the true condition of our hearts which is spiritual poverty. The beginning of the Christian life starts with a declaration of bankruptcy.

Jesus places a huge priority on the condition of our hearts. Our inclination is to look on the externals, on the behavior, but God looks on the heart.

We all know how easy it is to be a hypocrite, to be one thing on the outside and another thing on the inside. The externals of Christianity can be faked and some of us are doing just that. One of the great dangers of growing up in a Christian subculture like Lynden, WA is that we can all learn to imitate the acceptable forms and behaviors of godliness but have none of the power, none of the life and vitality of a true faith.

The Beatitudes are clear about our desperate need for help. We all have a heart condition and Jesus comes to do radical surgery and He starts with a total heart transplant. We need a new heart.

Our sin is a huge offense against the holiness, righteousness and glory of God. We have rebelled against the God of the universe. We have incurred the wrath of the holy God; we have become children of the devil.

A Christian is a person in whom the Holy Spirit is stirring up conviction about our sins and is bringing us to see them as they really are and causing us increasingly to mourn them, hate them, abhor them, give them up and turn from them.

Before Him we are bankrupt, spiritually broke and broken.

If you want to boast, boast in your weaknesses and shortcomings. Do you realize your weaknesses are one of your greatest gifts to your family and your church? That is where God's grace shines brightest. That's what Paul boasted about to the church in Corinth.

Do you want to live a life blessed by God? It starts in our hearts.

Do you want success and happiness in life? It starts with humble repentance.

Do you want spiritual health and vitality? It flows from a heart hungry and thirsty for God.

Do you want good marriage and a strong family? It begins with humble, godly men and women.

Do you want the very best that life can give? It starts with this prayer.

Psalm 51:10-12 Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

11 Cast me not away from your presence, and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

12 Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and uphold me with a willing spirit.

The Third lesson from the Beatitudes is what blessed is based on. The Christian life is a life of amazing grace. The Kingdom of God not achieved or accomplished, it is received. Are you clear that the only reason you and I are here today is because of grace, because of a gift that was given to us? Are you clear in your mind that there is nothing about why we are here today that has to do with merit or work or effort; it has nothing to do with you and everything to do with Christ?

Without grace the truth of the very first Beatitude will bounce off us like a cotton ball. But with grace the truth of the first Beatitude will penetrate our hearts and bring us to our knees.

We must become new men and women with new hearts, new creatures in Christ, the old things passing away and all things becoming new, but this is only possible by His grace, it can only come about by the gracious activity of the Father, by the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit.

The poor in spirit and the sorrowful and the humble and the hungry really can make no claim on God. They come empty handed, they come to ask and beg; not to give but to receive. We come empty and leave full. The kingdom of God is only something that God can give.

I Corinthians 15:10 By the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.

Don't be a stranger to God's grace. Pray for it, seek it, embrace it, acknowledge your complete and absolute dependence on it. Love it, sing of it, worship Him for it. Know your need for it and know everyone else's need for it. So be generous in giving it.

Pray for facemask grace. For those who wear them, for those who don't, for those who tell others what to do. Give grace. And wear them with grace.

II Corinthians 9:8 God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

Serving is a response to the grace we have already received.

The Fourth Lesson, there is an interconnectedness to all the Beatitudes, each tree makes up a very important forest.

Did you notice that the two of the Beatitudes promise the same reward? Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven and blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for there is the kingdom of heaven. It's like parentheses, it's all inclusive, this is a whole. Everything in between is a description of the blessings of the kingdom of God and the characteristics of a person who is so blessed.

Did you notice the flow of the beatitudes? They move from the heart to the hands, from the internal to the external. To truly see our sin is to hate it and grieve over it and be

humbled by it before God and men. This person deeply desires to be other than he is and to replace his sin with righteousness, Christ-likeness.

Then the Beatitudes turn outward toward others. Those who have received so much mercy will then be merciful. Their dealings with others will reflect Christ, they will have integrity and honesty and deal with others from a pure heart. They have peace with God and are able to make peace among others. They all fit together and flow from one to the next.

The Beatitudes are not a buffet line where you get to choose this one and that one and skip over the ones you don't like or don't care for the taste. They are a package deal, not a series of options.

By the working of God's grace by His Spirit and Word all these graces are to be in every follower of Christ. Not perfectly present, but increasingly present. Each is a piece in a larger puzzle which gives us the picture of a mature disciple of Christ. When the power of God is at work in a man or a woman, this is what that power will look like.

The Beatitudes are the door through which we enter the Christian life and into Christ's service. Grace comes before requirements; the heart comes before the hands.

So much of Christianity has been turned into formulas or programs or self-helps. The Ten Secrets to a better marriage, the five stages of dealing with grief, the six steps to child-rearing. But this all misses that marriage, family, child-rearing, finances, relationships, job satisfaction all flow from godly character, from our heart. If we get our hearts right before God, the rest will fall into place, but if our hearts are bad or hard or dark nothing else will be right.

Go for the heart. That is where the real hope and help is. The flow of the Christian life is first godly character, a heart that is being transformed by the grace of God.

The Fifth Lesson is a warning. Beware when our lives are transformed by grace we will see what the world's response is to those who are so blessed. We will be treated the way Jesus was treated, the way people are treated who are out of step with the ways of the world and who convict the conscience of sinners. But if you endure on earth then in heaven you will be treated the way Jesus is treated there.

The life transformed by grace responds to persecution far different than the world does. They respond with grace, humility, peace, patience. They are even able to be persecuted and retain joy, not returning evil for evil.

What is our response to the world after the world has responded to us in persecution? The changed heart of a Christian motivates us to be salt and light, even to love our enemies and to do good to all for the sake of the Father who has been so good to us. Christian character has a very positive influence on the world right around us.

Application and Conclusion:

What is your heart most set on? What do you think would give you the most happiness and contentment? What is on your top-eight list? Now test your heart, examine your thinking against this list of eight blessings. This is Jesus invitation to receive His blessing by being transformed by His grace.

What do you call your children to aspire to? What do you say a Christ-follower is and does? For those of you who are single and aspire to be married, what are the traits you are looking for in a spouse? Are any of the Beatitudes on the list?

I beg you all, do not set any standard for your life lower than this standard that Jesus gives to you to follow. This is the highest and the best, don't settle for anything else.

And to the extent that we do not measure up, that is the extent of our prayers. Make it your daily prayer that what Jesus has said, He will also accomplish for you.

Philippians 1:6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Prayer: Dear Jesus, teach us and feed us as you did your disciples so long ago. Speak to us of things that are true and real and lasting. Enlighten our hearts to your words, your commands. Enable us to hear and obey. We know that your commands are never grievous or burdensome or onerous. In fact, all that you command you also by your grace and power enable us to do. So give us cheerful obedient hearts. Let the joy of your salvation be our strength to do all that you command us to do. Jesus be our greatest hearts desire, be our greatest love, be our hearts true home.