

FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Matthew 5:1-12

Blessed are you!

Do these things and you'll get into heaven. Isn't that how many read these verses, as a list of salvation chores? Isn't that how we're tempted to read them? So let's read them that way, and see if we've earned ourselves heaven. Keep in mind, however, that these are not onetime deeds Christ discusses. These are ongoing actions that characterize our lives.

Be poor in spirit. Literally, be pitiful and inferior in spirit. Surrender your desires rights for the benefit of others. Esteem lesser individuals more highly than yourself. Be poor in spirit before God, knowing you are unworthy of His blessing. Be poor in spirit always and in every way, and then, and only then, the kingdom of heaven will be yours.

Mourn. Do not mourn for your own selfish troubles; mourn for the suffering and loss of others, for the price so many pay for their faith. Mourn over your sins, knowing that with them you have slapped your crucified God in the face and spat upon His favor. Mourn always and in every way, and then, and only then, you will be comforted.

Be meek. Be meek like the Son of God, God Himself, who never used His deity as an excuse for showboating or privilege. Be considerate of the wishes or weaknesses of others. Be more concerned with the struggles of your neighbor than your own. Correct and advise others with the humility of Christian concern and not with the zeal of hypocrisy. Be meek always and in every way, and then, and only then, you will inherit the earth.

Hunger and thirst for righteousness. Spend more hours seeking righteousness in Word and Sacrament than pursuing fun and earthly treasure. Feed your soul better than your stomach. Take not only your daily bread from God, but the daily Bread of Life. The gospel is for the hungry and thirsty soul, not the complacent. Don't kind of want righteousness. Hunger and thirst for it. Hunger and thirst for righteousness always and in every way, and then, and only then, you will be filled.

Be merciful. Do not give others what they deserve, but rather what they least deserve. Notice the needs of those around you. Genuinely inquire about, contemplate, and intercede in prayer for them. Be merciful always and in every way, and then, and only then, you will be shown mercy.

Be pure in heart, without hypocrisy or pretense. Keep impure thoughts from your mind, impure actions from your fingers, and impure destinations from your feet. Let purity select your television and radio programs. Let purity guide your jokes and your speech. Let purity decide your living arrangements and how far you push the proverbial envelope behind closed doors. Be pure always and in every way, and then, and only then, you will see God.

Be a peacemaker. Sow harmony at home. Heal hurt in your classroom. Forgive those who do not ask forgiveness. Assume the best about those who show their worst. Serve those who lord their position or preferences over you. Surrender your opinion and pride to bring harmony. Do not insist you are right, even though you are, in trivial matters. Pass up chances to say, "I told you so." Unclench your hands to let go of grudges. Be a peacemaker always and in every way, and then, and only then, you will be called sons of God.

Be persecuted. That doesn't mean being teased for something you brought on yourself, but being shamed for no other reason than your confession of Christ, for the gospel message. Do not avoid situations where you could be persecuted. When you were confirmed you pledged yourself to the Scriptures and Lutheran Confessions even unto death. Read them. Confess them. Live by them, even when the life they advocate is contrary to the culture or your own personal comfort. Be persecuted, really persecuted, and then, and only then, you will be heirs of the kingdom of heaven.

World Magazine reported yesterday: "A 2,000-ton pile of cow manure measuring 100 feet long, 30 feet high, and 50 feet wide, has been on fire for three months in a row at Midwest Feeding Co. near Lincoln, Neb., even after several attempts have been made to douse it. The dung pile is the by-product of a massive operation to fatten as many as 12,000 cows for the market. The smoke wafts for miles." If you are wondering what that smells like, it smells a lot like our attempts to keep these beatitudes. If manure can burn for three months without ceasing, how much better kindling should we, even more unpleasant because of our sins, provide for the fires of hell, especially when we, like that cattle, have been stuffed with filth for the slaughter? Let us not detach this portion of the Sermon on the Mount from the rest. This is the same sermon and the same chapter where Jesus clearly declares, "*Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.*" He explains this means doing the right thing with the right intentions all the time. We can never live up to that standard. You know that. I know that. Jesus knew that. So why preach all this?

Jesus preached all this because Jesus did all this, and He did it all perfectly, with the right intentions and at the right time all the time. He was poor in spirit, seeking no earthly kingdom for Himself but a better kingdom for us: the kingdom of heaven. He not only mourned for the suffering and sadness of others, but He did something about it, taking our flesh to take away our sin, the cause of so much of our mourning. He was meek, riding into Jerusalem on a colt, on the foal of a donkey, to be condemned by men He was Lord over, to die a death He had every right to refuse and defy. He hungered and thirsted for righteousness, and not only His own, but ours, which He obtained for us in His death and resurrection and offers to us in Word and Sacrament. He was merciful, taking what we deserved to give us what we do not deserve. He was pure in heart, which made His sacrifice acceptable to the Father and, thus, meritorious for us. He was a peacemaker, making real peace, and not the passing and shallow peace of the world. He brought peace with God, which breeds peace in every aspect of our life, even in suffering and trial. He was persecuted with every ounce of hatred the human heart could muster, and He was abused for nothing more than becoming man to rescue us from death.

Christ has been and done all these things. He has kept the beatitudes, and, in so doing, has become the One who beatifies, taking upon Himself our curses and administering to us His blessings. In so doing, He has done what was before impossible: He has empowered us to be what He was: blessed. In His grace, He has moved us, hardheaded wretches that we are, to be and do the things described in our text. Blessed are you, blessed beyond all measure. Never let go of your blessing by never letting go of Christ. Come, you hungry and thirsty souls, eat and drink your Righteousness, and by His blessing, bring blessing to your world. Amen.