

The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany
St. Matthew 5:1-12

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

My dearly sainted father professor, whom many see as the human epitome of the Gospel, myself included, would often ask this question with regard to a Biblical text, especially in preparation for preaching or teaching: "How does this text give us Jesus?" With a text like this, it's a good idea to ask Dr. Norman Nagel's question: "How do the Beatitudes give us Jesus?" It is Jesus speaking them, part of His Sermon on the Mount, so how does Jesus give Himself to you in this text?

The simple answer is found right at the end where Jesus proclaims to His listeners, and you can include yourselves in that bunch, "Blessed are you..."

It might not be evident that He is speaking to those to whom He has given faith. And again, you can include yourselves in that bunch. "Blessed are you," Jesus says, "when a bunch of really bad things happen to you **because of Me**—because of Me, because of what you are in me; you can rejoice in the midst of these bad things, in the very face of these bad things, because you are being numbered among the prophets who were before you and persecuted before you, who spoke of Me, and were blessed because of Me." "Blessed are you," Jesus says, "because of Me." No one can be blessed unless they are numbered among the faithful—unless they are among those who have received and not rejected the faith God has to give, a faith which clings to the Christ and the great work He has accomplished for the salvation of the world by His death on the cross. No one can be blessed, except because of Christ, and that blessing can only be received from and through Christ.

Of course, then, the corollary to Dr. Nagel's question is, "What gets in the way of the text giving us Jesus?"

Once again, the simple answer is found right at the end of today's text: **you!** No, not they who revile you and persecute you and speak all manner of evil about you. The blessing is still there in spite of them. No, **you** get in the way of the blessing.

You see, there is that part of you who likes to take the Word of God and make it say something it doesn't. Normally, this part is referred to as Old Adam, as if one could compartmentalize him, point to a part of your body and say, "This part is Old Adam." Sadly, that's not the case, for if it were, it would be something one could easily have removed, especially if the non-Old Adam part were much larger and could compensate, biologically, for the removal of the Old Adam part. No, your Old Adam infects all of you, and you participate in his scheming and lying and twisting of the truth. His sin is your sin. He gets in the way—that is to say, you get in the way—of this text (any text, really) giving you Jesus.

This happens by Old Adam hearing gospel and twisting it into law, and this typically some sort of manageable law. It's the type of thing you can find happening in churches all over the world when they seek to scratch itching ears (cf. 2 Timothy 4:3); congregations more concerned about putting butts in pews and dollars in the plate than the Word of God in the listeners' ears. In so doing, that which is sweet and comforting—the Word of grace and truth—is turned into something you must do if you want to please God and receive from Him a reward—receive from Him a blessing.

Today's text is no different, and is, perhaps, a prime example and target of this twisting. For in today's text, the sweet and comforting Word of Grace and Truth speaks,

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

Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy.
Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God.
Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.
Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake.

In short, and as simply stated earlier, "Blessed are you...for My sake."

But Old Adam hears it, and twists it to hear it according to the law:

To be blessed and receive the kingdom of heaven, be poor in spirit.
To be blessed and comforted, be exceedingly mournful.
To be blessed and inherit the earth, be meek and let it have no end.
To be blessed and filled, hunger and thirst for righteousness to the point of starving for it.
To be blessed and receive mercy, be merciful—more than than you wish to receive.
To be blessed and see God, be pure in heart.
To be blessed and called a son of God (or a child of God if you wish to be politically correct and culturally relevant), be a peacemaker.
To be blessed and receive the kingdom of heaven, be righteous and forcefully so, so as to be persecuted for it, reviled for it, so that all kinds of evil are spoken against you because of it.

In other words, in order to be blessed, there is a measuring stick to live up to, an eight- or twelve-step program to follow. And if it is followed, then one can be assured of receiving God's blessing and the gifts He has to give.

The problem with this is two-fold.

For one, it creates a false sense of pride: "Look how blessed I am because how poor in spirit I am," or, "how mournful I am," or, "how meek I am," (how ironic) or, "how merciful I am," etc. It turns you into the Pharisee who went into the temple to pray, and there thanked God that he was not like other, contemptible men. (cf. Luke 18:9-12)

For another, it does away with Christ. Or, as has been said already, it gets in the way of the text giving you Jesus. After all, if you can be blessed by God simply by being poor in spirit, mournful, meek, merciful, peacemaking, etc., what need do you have for the Christ as Mediator and Redemption? If you can be blessed simply by your own work, why do you need Jesus to give you blessing? Jesus is in the text giving Himself to you, and you say, "No thanks, I got it covered."

It can be said that you can be saved (that you can be blessed) by obedience to the Law of God. But, it has to be perfect obedience; one little slip-up, intentional or otherwise, and your through. There is no wiggle room nor any middle ground—do it all precisely and perfectly from beginning to end, backward and forward, for your entire life and in your entire person, and you have saved yourself. The sad truth to this two-fold problem is that one can never be sure how poor in spirit is enough, how meek is enough, or if one has been perfectly pure in heart (even a little impurity is still impurity—99.999% pure is still .001% impure). One can never be sure that they "have it covered." Therefore, no one can be sure that by their keeping of the law—that by their attempt at keeping the law—they have God's blessing. There is no eight- or twelve-step program that can assure anyone that they have God's favor.

No, the sweet and comforting Word of grace and truth is twisted into something that ultimately leaves the hearer empty. It takes the Word of hope and removes the hope.

No, dear hearers, here is the truth. “Blessed are you...because of Me,” as Jesus proclaimed. The sweet and comforting Word of grace and truth is that God is at work in His Son despite “them” getting in the way and reviling, persecuting, and speaking all manner of evil against you, and He is still at work in His Son despite you getting in the way of the text giving you Jesus. Old Adam may twist the Word of Truth into some sort of manageable law, but it still remains the Word of Truth as originally given, and does exactly what God intends it to do. (cf. Isaiah 55:11)

And it is the Word of Truth which proclaims this: you cannot perfectly keep the entire Law of God. You cannot and will not be perfectly poor in spirit, mournful, meek, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, pure in heart, or peaceful. You cannot and will not be perfectly righteous. That is the Word of Truth of God’s Law, which always accuses you—yeah Old Adam...**you**—of being the sinner that you are. And, thanks be to God, the Word of Truth continues, “God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.” (Galatians 4:4-5)

So, if through Him you been redeemed and have received the adoption as sons, then He must have perfectly been a peacemaker. The Word of God reveals, as St. Paul declares, that, “[W]hile we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life” (cf. Romans 5:10); the Word of God reveals that and so much more. For Christ was perfectly mournful, perfectly meek and humble, perfectly pure in heart, perfectly merciful. He was reviled and persecuted, as His prophets before Him were. And all of it was for you, born under the law, to redeem you and give to you the adoption as sons. In Him is the kingdom of heaven yours; in Him is your comfort, your fill of righteousness, your mercy; in Him do you see God—His love for you, His blessing for you.

Christ has come to live and die for you; live perfectly obedient and subject to His own Law for you, and die for your perfect disobedience and insubordination to His Law. He has come that your Old Adam would by daily contrition and repentance drown, be done away with, be removed, die with all sins and evil lusts, so that daily a new man would come forth and live before God in righteousness and purity forever. This He has done for you—this is Jesus giving Himself to you; or, as He said it, “Blessed are you...because of Me.” In other words, you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.