

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

“Blessed!” “Blessed!” “Blessed!” The word tolls from Jesus’ mouth like church bells tolling forth from our steeple, inviting sinners to gather here and meet their Savior. *“Blessed!”* It’s a wonderful word of comfort and joy, a word of promise. The Biblical meaning is much more than a simple “happy” because of material prosperity. To be blessed as Jesus preaches it is to share in God’s salvation. It’s to rejoice in the reign and rule of Christ. It’s to anticipate in hope what is yet to be.

Jesus’ preaching had begun to draw a crowd. We might think that odd. What is it about preaching, *“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”* (Matt. 4:17), that was drawing them? We don’t like the preaching of repentance. Repentance implies error, transgression, sin, guilt. It means admitting that wrong, and that’s not popular. But repentance also implies crying out in faith to God for His grace, for the forgiveness of sins. Surely preaching repentance is a necessary part of *“proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom”* (Matt. 4:23), for Jesus would another time say, *“unless you repent, you will all likewise perish”* (Luke 13:3). Explaining the word repentance, one lectionary stated that repentance is the “prerequisite for attaining the Kgd. of God in the preaching of John the Baptist and Jesus” (BDAG, 512).

For those of us who truly believe, then, repentance becomes a way of life — that’s how Luther explained Jesus’ call to repent — that “he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance” (*Luther’s Works*, 31:25).

Today, then, as He begins preaching His famous “Sermon on the Mount,” Jesus is describing those who have heeded His call to repent: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”* For those who repent and look to Christ, the kingdom of heaven is not just near; it has become a present reality. *“Theirs IS the kingdom.”* The blessing of Almighty God is already upon them.

This blessedness is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Yours is the kingdom of heaven. You live now under the reign of Christ in His kingdom. You know these words of Luther well, that “God’s kingdom comes when He gives us His Holy Spirit, so that, by His grace, we believe His holy word, and lead Godly lives” even now, “here in time,” Luther says, “and there in eternity.” (Small Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, 3rd Petition).

Jesus here does not mention faith at all, and yet, I submit that faith in Christ Jesus permeates all of these Beatitudes, starting with the *“poor in spirit.”* It’s not a faith or hope in some temporal material prosperity. That’s what the world calls being blessed. The blessedness of Jesus contained in these Beatitudes, however, is

a faith in the promise that *“if we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him”* (2. Tim. 2:11-12).

And doesn't dying with Christ imply a poverty of spirit that happens “by daily contrition and repentance,” drowning “the Old Adam in us” in the remembrance of our Baptisms, along “with all sins and evil desires,” “that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever” (Small Catechism, Baptism, Fourth Part)? Isn't this the humility that truly marks the life of a Christian? Jesus reminds us, *“everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted”* (Luke 18:14). Or as St. Peter exhorts us: *“Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, ... Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you”* (1 Pet. 5:5). In our Old Testament lesson, the prophet Micah instructs us as to what the Lord says is good, and it has nothing to do with mammon or power or wisdom. Rather it's the faith that *“[does] justice, and [loves] kindness, and [walks] humbly with [our] God”* (Micah 6:8).

Indeed, isn't this the humility shown us by our Lord Himself, a humility that we are called to imitate? As St. Paul says: *“Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross”* (Phil. 2:5-8). Isn't this the humility that God Himself exalts ... in Christ as the first fruits and then in us? Isn't it there on the cross, as we see our Savior, meek and lowly, submitting Himself to the supposed folly of mortal death, that we hear the promise of His kingdom to a condemned sinner? *“Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. And [Jesus] said to him, ‘Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise’”* (Luke 23:42-43).

St. Paul says: *“Have this mind among yourselves”* (Phil. 2:5). *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”*

But in this present reality, there is the promise of more yet to come, for those who in repentance are poor in spirit also acknowledge their wretchedness (James 4:9). They mourn and weep in sorrow for their sins ... but they shall be comforted, their tears wiped away (Isa. 25:8).

Those who humbly repent of their sins are, in the example of Jesus, meek and lowly ... and they are promised an inheritance. *“The King will say to [them], ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world’”* (Matt. 25:34). These are the ones who will have shown mercy: *“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you*

gave me drink” and so forth (Matt. 25:35); they will receive mercy: *“the righteous [shall enter] into eternal life”* (Matt. 25:46).

The poor in spirit find their hope not in their own deeds, but in Christ. They hunger and thirst for the righteousness that comes by faith, a righteousness that is theirs in the forgiveness of their sins, and so, they are promised a seat at the eternal banquet table of the Lord. They will sit at a *“feast of rich food”* and *“well-aged wine”* (Isa. 25:6); they will be satisfied; they will never hunger or thirst any more (Rev. 7:16), as these whose hands have been made clean, whose hearts have been made pure ... these who not only lived in the reconciliation that Christ won, but who lived as ambassadors of Christ appealing for the peace that passes understanding (2 Cor. 5:19-20; Phil. 4:7) ... these will sit with the Son as sons of God at His heavenly table.

These promises keep the faithful pressing *“on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus”* (Phil. 3:14), while experiencing the kingdom even now. For citizenship in God’s kingdom (Phil. 3:20) implies not just poverty of spirit, but promises persecution for the sake of this righteousness we seek in Christ. We will be hated because the world hates Christ. The world hates us because we have been chosen out of the world. The world persecutes us because Christ Himself was persecuted (John 15:18-20).

Still, Jesus has told us in advance that we might be prepared for it: *“In the world you will have tribulation.”* And He still calls us blessed, and so we are for He also says, *“take heart; I have overcome the world”* (John 16:33). St. Paul reminds us: *“the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us”* (Rom. 8:18). And with Luther we sing: *“And take they our life, Goods, fame, child, and wife, Though these all be gone, Our vict’ry has been won; The Kingdom ours remaineth”* (LSB656:4). Yes, we hear Jesus’ mouth toll our blessings even in the midst of reviling and persecutions and evil lies, for ours is *“the kingdom of heaven,”* and He promises even more: *“great is our reward in heaven.”*

May the Lord build us up and bless us in repentance, in faith in what is ours, and in hope for what lies ahead. And God grant us patience to wait for what is unseen but is most sure, the redemption of our bodies, for so we are blessed in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:23-25).

In the name of the Father and of the ✝ Son and of the Holy Spirit.