

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

Jesus began His great Sermon on the Mount that spans three chapters in St. Matthew by telling the poor in spirit, the mourning, the meek, those hungering and thirsting after righteousness, that they are blessed. Even those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake are blessed, He said. Indeed, *“theirs is the kingdom of heaven”* (Matt. 5:5, 10).

Clearly, Godly blessedness is not easily discerned. Are Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos blessed for the money they have or the businesses they run? Are Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin blessed for the power they wield? Are Patrick Mahomes and Jalen Hurts blessed for the athletic prowess they display? Are Taylor Swift and Beyoncé blessed for the celebrity they enjoy? By worldly standards, surely, but not by God's standard. God is not impressed by such externalities.

No, Godly blessedness is cloaked in mystery, in things unseen, in low and despised things, in weakness ... we might say in opposites — in *“things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,”* as St. Paul said (1 Cor. 1:28). That's why Godly blessedness must be revealed to us. Who would seek blessedness in poverty of spirit, in mourning, in meekness? This is folly to us according to our natural self. But Jesus has taught it, and the Holy Spirit has led us to realize and recognize how blessed we are, for *“we have received ... the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God,”* *“impart[ed] ... in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.”*

Even more foolish is the thought that the all-powerful God of the universe, the creator of all things, could insert Himself as a creature into creation, that He could put Himself under the Law, that He might fulfill the Law for us, that He could subject Himself to the death of the cross bearing the sins of the world, and that He could by this death redeem the world. This *“word of the cross”* is utter foolishness, say those who have not this Spirit, yet we preach it with reckless abandon — not in *“lofty speech or wisdom”* but we preach *“nothing ... except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”* We boast in nothing *“except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to [us], and [we] to the world”* (Gal. 6:14). And we know that by this preaching God's power is being wielded for our salvation.

We believe it and the kingdom of heaven is ours. We believe it, and we are saved — *“by grace through faith,”* not by our *“own doing,”* *“not a result of [our] works.”* *“[I]t is the gift of God”* (Eph. 2:8-9). Wearing Christ's righteousness, which is ours as a gift, by baptism and faith (Gal. 3:26-27), is the only way our righteousness will exceed that of the Pharisees and scribes. It's the only way we will *“enter the kingdom of heaven.”*

On the other hand, although “*we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law*” (Rom. 3:28), we do not “*overthrow the law by this faith. ... On the contrary, we uphold the law*” (Rom. 3:31). That’s why Jesus says as He ends His Beatitudes: “*You are the salt of the earth*”; “*You are the light of the world.*” These words convey an expectation of Jesus’ disciples — that they will be doing good works. This is what we confess: “it is God’s will, order, and command that believers should walk in good works” (Formula of Concord Solid Declaration, Article IV:7). Moreover, these works are not those born out of our own will or good intentions, but “[t]ruly good works are ... those that God Himself has prescribed and commanded in His Word” (FCSD, IV:7). That’s why our faith upholds the law; it’s why when others see our good works, they are meant to “*give glory*” not to us, but “*to [our] Father who is in heaven*”; because our good works are done at His bidding to His glory. Of course, that may mean we need to do something, say something, wear something, that they might know that we are Christians.

For these works must emanate from faith for them to be good — from our status as members of the kingdom of heaven. To be sure, unbelievers can do outwardly good things, “works [that] are commendable before the world and [even] rewarded by God in this world with temporal blessings.” “Nevertheless, [because] they do not come from true faith, in God’s sight [these works] are sins, that is, stained with sin, and are regarded by God as sins and impure because of the corrupt nature [of the doer] and because the person is not reconciled with God” (FCSD, IV:8). As St. Paul says, “*whatever does not proceed from faith is sin*” (Rom. 14:23).

Thus, we confess: “Faith must be the mother and source of works that are truly good and well pleasing to God.” “A person must first be accepted by God, for the sake of Christ alone, if that person’s works are to please Him” (FCSD, IV:8-9). These two things make a work good in God’s eyes: first that they proceed from faith, and second that they are done in accordance with God’s holy law (see *Luther’s Small Catechism and Explanation*, question 191).

Such good works can be grandiose, to be sure. But they need not be. Salt and light are rather ordinary things, and they do what they were created to do. Salt does not seek praise for seasoning food; and light doesn’t expect plaudits for lighting the house. So, it is for us, “[God’s] *workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works*” (Eph. 2:10). Let us seize the opportunities God places before us to do good to others (Gal. 6:10). Most often, as Professor Jeff Gibbs says, the “good works of Jesus’ disciples will be carried out in their ‘ordinary’ vocations” (Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 1:1-11:1*, p. 261). And as Luther observed: the “servant girl ... [w]ith her tidy work, for which she receives support and wages” gains “a treasure of good works” (Large Catechism, Part I:145).

On the other hand, Gibbs continues, “[t]hose works and those lives . . . are to be *extraordinary* Jesus’ disciples are called to lives of *remarkable* purity, faithfulness, piety, love, and generosity.” Our lives should not be indistinguishable from unbelievers, he says, writing: “Christians are [not] to live in their vocations *in ordinary ways*, that is, in the same way as non-Christians do. . . . Jesus’ disciples are called to be *extraordinary* husbands and wives, *remarkable* neighbors and employees, *powerful* friends and citizens. Their deeds and their words, in the power of faith and the Spirit, will be like salt, like light in the darkness” (Gibbs, 262). It is said that this is how the early Christians turned the pagan world around them into Christendom — by the extraordinary love of neighbor they displayed. Dear friends, we’re living again in a pagan world. Let us act as extraordinary Christians, that the Spirit may not be quenched, but that Christ may again be heard (1 Thess. 5:14-22).

The Lutheran confessors got the bad rap that they forbade good works (Augsburg Confession, Article XX: 1), and, to be sure, some Lutherans got the idea that good works were not a necessary part of being a Christian. Later, some even said, “Good works are harmful to salvation” (FCSD, IV:3). These are false. Lutherans do not forbid good works but teach, with Jesus, that we are to be salt and light in the world, letting our good works shine forth to the glory of God the Father. God commands our good works, and our neighbors need them. They are the necessary fruit of a tree made good by Christ. “It is necessary to do good works commanded by God [Ephesians 2:10], because of God’s will,” we confess (AC, VI:1).

But let us not misunderstand the word “necessary.” Our works contribute nothing to our salvation. We cannot rely on them to merit anything before God. We are saved by grace through faith alone; our citizenship in the kingdom of heaven is totally a gift of God received by faith. Even as Christians, working to do God’s law, when all is said and done, and we “*have done all that [we] were commanded,*” we are to “*say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’*” (Luke 17:10).

Therefore, God grant us to rejoice in Christ and the blessed gift of His kingdom. And God grant us to live the life He calls us to, as true disciples, distinguishing ourselves from the world around us. God grant that we may be recognized as extraordinary, remarkable, powerful Christians in those domains that the Lord has placed us — in the home, at work, at play, in church and outside church, that when others see our good works, they may give glory to the Father who is in heaven and, hopefully, join us in the blessed life of Christ’s disciples.

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