

# BLESSED

## Matthew 5:1-20

EPIPHANY 4

February 3, 2019

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This Fourth Sunday after Epiphany and the first Sunday in February, also known as Superbowl Sunday, we will remain after worship and gather downstairs in Fellowship Hall for lunch and for our annual Congregational Meeting.

Since the middle of the Advent Season, the Narrative Lectionary has provided us with a sequential reading of Matthew's Gospel, from the introduction of Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, to this morning's introductory reading of the Beatitudes, the opening of our Lord's greatest teaching, the Sermon on the Mount.

Unfortunately, our selected passages do not include a section which immediately follows last week's reading of the Temptation of Jesus in the wilderness.

That section begins with the inaugural message of Jesus' ministry,

***“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near”*** (4:17).

Jesus' preaching of the Kingdom's arrival is coupled with His healing and teaching, which draws large crowds and a few new disciples.

In Jesus, Matthew suggests that Isaiah's hope and promise are now coming true in His public ministry of preaching, healing, and teaching.

Matthew will organize the next section of his Gospel according to Jesus' three ministry activities.

Jesus opens His “Kingdom” sermon by announcing the reality of God's Kingdom as the reversal of fortune and the restoration of right values.

He continues by calling His followers both the ‘salt’ and the ‘light’ of the earth, as they live out their distinctive identities as God's new covenant community — the Church.

From Matthew's own introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, we learn about His first hearers:

***“When Jesus saw the crowds, He went up to the mountain, and after He sat down, His disciples came to Him.***

***Then He began to speak, and taught them, saying . . .”*** (5:12).

As stated, Jesus' disciples are the target audience of the Sermon on the Mount, while the crowds, mentioned at being present at both the beginning and the closing of the sermon, and, of course, the readers of Matthew's Gospel, are permitted to overhear the One who has already been identified as the Beloved Son of God.

As over-hearers of Jesus' most famous sermon, with its best known and loved passage, the Beatitudes, what are we to make of them?

What we have come to know as the Sermon on the Mount is a concise statement of Jesus'

teachings on how to live in the reality of God's present Kingdom, available to us now.

It concludes with a statement at the end of Chapter Seven (vv. 24-25), that all who hear and do what He says there will have a life that will stand up to everything.

That means a life for an eternity that has already begun with Jesus' Gospel message and mission of salvation by means of His cross and resurrection.

As outstanding thinkers before Him and after Him have done, Jesus deals with two major questions humanity always faces.

First, there is the question of which life is the good life.

What is the purpose for my life, and how can I fully live out that purpose?

Of course, Jesus will teach that life in the light and life of God will be the good life.

Jesus' description of, and the present availability of the Kingdom always keeps that basic truth before His students and His listeners.

But exactly who is and who is not assured of such a life was a subject of much confusion in Jesus' day, as it is today.

What came to be called the Beatitudes were given by Jesus to help to clarify this matter.

The second question Jesus deals with in His Sermon on the Mount concerns who is truly a good person.

Who has the kind of goodness found in Jesus, Himself, constituting a family likeness between God and His children?

This will be dealt with in the remainder of the Sermon, from Chapter Five, verse 20 to Chapter Seven, verse 27.

We will hear more from the Sermon on the Mount next week with the prayer that Jesus will teach His disciples to pray.

For today, we will concentrate on who, according to Jesus, has the good life.

The Beatitudes of Jesus drive home His answer to this question.

They are among the literary and religious treasures of both the Church and the human race.

Along with the Ten Commandments, the Twenty-third Psalm, the Lord's Prayer, and very few other passages from the Bible, the Beatitudes are acknowledged by almost everyone to be among the highest expressions of religious insight and moral inspiration.

We can savor them, affirm them, meditate upon them, and engrave them on plaques to adorn our walls.

But the major question will still remain:

How are we to live in response to them?

It will help us to know WHAT to do, and not what to do WITH the Beatitudes if we can discover what Jesus, Himself, was doing with them.

That should be the key to understanding them, for, after all, they are His Beatitudes and not ours to make of them what we will.

And since great teachers and leaders always have a coherent message that they develop in an orderly way, we should start with the premise that Jesus' teaching in the Beatitudes is a clarification, or development of His primary message for His Sermon and His life.

That message would have to do with the availability of the Kingdom of Heaven.

How, then, do they support His message to those gathered on the mount before Him, as well as those gathered in worship, like us?

In the previous chapter, to which I have already alluded, Matthew records Jesus proclaiming His basic message:

***“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near”*** (v 17).

Jesus demonstrates His message by meeting the desperate needs of the people around Him.

As a result, Matthew writes:

***“and they brought to Him all the sick, those who were afflicted with various diseases and pains, demoniacs, epileptics, and paralytics, and He cured them”*** (v. 24).

And we are also told that enormous crowds followed Him wherever He went.

Having ministered to the needs of the people crowding around Him, He desired to teach them, and moved to a higher position in the landscape — ***“up the mountain”*** like Moses before Him — where they could see and hear Him well.

I like to believe that Jesus used a basic teaching method of “show and tell” to make clear the extent to which the Kingdom is ***“near”*** to us.

There were directly before Him those who had just received healing from the Kingdom of Heaven through Him.

The context makes this clear.

Jesus could point out in the crowd those persons who were blessed because of the **“Kingdom among us.”**

The Person of God’s Son, the Messiah, Himself, is with us, and has just reached out through His voice, hands, and heart and touches them.

And so, those who were formally not fit or righteous before the law to participate in the gathered weekly synagogue or temple services to receive God’s blessings are now fit and righteous before God to do so.

They are now among us.

Think about it.

Most, if not all of His disciples, as well as many who have heard His words down to our age, needed Jesus’ blessings.

But, do most people really see the need for the blessings that Jesus offers?

This afternoon, millions of Americans, (and most of us), will congregate in family rooms and party venues, before tables piled with appetizers and beverages and televisions with large screens to watch, not only the gridiron battle between the Patriots and the Rams, but also to be amused by the commercials.

These will be bent on offering the ‘real’ good life in terms of what really counts in our culture — driving the most technological automobiles, having the most attractive bodies, and drinking the most satisfying alcohol.

In other words, we will be seeing and hearing the “business-as-usual” beatitudes that reveal how the world really operates and the values that are upheld:

**“Blessed are the rich in material things.**

**Blessed are those untouched by loss.**

**Blessed are the powerful.**

**Blessed are those who are realistic about righteousness, compromising at every turn.  
Blessed are those who demand and exact an eye for an eye.  
Blessed are the crafty and the opportunistic.  
Blessed are those bold enough to make war.  
Blessed are the athletes and celebrities, who, when they do good things, receive  
many accolades.  
Blessed are those who only follow the progressives. They are praised and adored.”**

So, beloved people of God, how are we to live in response to Jesus, ' and not the world's beatitudes?

First, the Beatitudes serve to clarify Jesus' basic message: the free availability of God's gracious rule to all humanity though reliance upon Jesus, Himself, the Person now loose in the world within, among, and through us.

Second, we seek not to become members only, who exist simply to receive God's blessings, but to become disciples, who faithfully and obediently serve the One who serves us — our teacher and master — Jesus the Christ.

Third, we become, as individuals and as a congregation, channels of God's blessings by testifying to others how God has touched us, and by sharing with those who, from a human point of view, see themselves beyond the possibility of God's blessings, the gifts that God bestows upon us in baptism.

We are to be servant disciples of His Kingdom.

Never forget that the religious system of Jesus' day left the multitudes out.

But it was Jesus who came and touched them and welcomed them into His Kingdom.

Like the sons and daughters of Abraham, we were blessed to be a blessing for others.

Jesus calls us to be a blessing for others by giving from the blessings the spiritual gifts we have received from our baptisms — to serve others in His name.

That, my beloved, is the Gospel of the Beatitudes.

That is the meaning of baptism, like Carlisle's, to enable us to become salt and light for the world.

AMEN