

## **Matthew 5:1-12**

### **Blessed are the persecuted**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The Bible often declares that certain people are blessed. The most well-known of these is probably today's gospel reading from Matthew chapter five, the beatitudes. But this word blessed also appears at the start of several psalms, and a few other places as well. Some bible translations use the word 'happy' instead, but this can give the impression of something shallow and fleeting. The idea here is one of being truly content, of knowing you are in a right relationship with God. And so, it's somewhat surprising how Jesus uses this in the beatitudes. He declares that the poor in spirit, the bereaved, the meek, and even the persecuted are blessed, are truly happy, truly content. Usually, in this world, you've got to have 'stuff' to be considered blessed. Perhaps a bit of fame and fortune, and surely, you'd be happy, truly content.

Christ proclaims something quite different. The things that the world might consider so important cannot really satisfy anyone. But poor, humble, and desperate people are blessed because of what God is doing in their lives. And there's actually more to it than that. In Revelation 14:13, it says that those who die in the Lord are blessed.

So, we have, blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who mourn, and blessed are those who die in the Lord. The God of life, who created everything living thing, declares blessing upon the dead. At first, this might seem completely backwards. Death is the enemy, the consequence of sin, of God's creation rebelling against him. But the scriptures testify that death is not the end. Jesus himself declared at the tomb of Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha:

I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.

(John 11:25-26, NRSV)

Death is not part of God's good creation, and indeed not all who die are blessed. God only declares blessed those people who die in a right relationship with him. Such people have life that never ends. They have a place in heaven and a permanent home in the New Jerusalem.

Because of this, we also get passages like Psalm 116:15 which says: "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his faithful ones." We even get St Paul, in his letter to the church in Philippi, declaring: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). He knows that his life in this world is bound up in Christ, which means that death is not a great thing to be feared.

In this epistle to the Philippian Christians, Paul encourages the church in Christ-like living. He writes this from prison in Rome and knows his own suffering is happening for a reason. "What has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel", Paul says (Philippians 1:12). Up to this time, Paul had already suffered much in his missionary journeys. He was beaten, stoned, hated and derided, shipwrecked, and now imprisoned. But Paul found joy in his afflictions, because they had strengthened his faith greatly and allowed him to serve as a strong witness for Christ. Preaching and living out the Word of God was Paul's highest goal, and all these events had provided him with ample opportunities to do this.

As Christians, our whole lives are to bring glory to God, and Paul had the assurance that, even in his suffering, he was accomplishing that goal — 'to live is Christ'. But, as we see in the second part of the verse, Paul knew that his death would bring glory to God as well. And not only that, but it would also be the time when his faith would come to fruition and he would live with his Saviour forever—'to die is gain'.

Paul even wrote that he longed for the day when death would bring him face to face with Jesus. And I think we can all understand this to some extent. We know that heaven will be far better than our earthly life for we will be present with our Saviour Jesus in a place devoid of sin, sickness, and death. And so, we can be thankful for those who have already passed through death into eternal life. And today, All Saints Day, is one opportunity we have to do that.

Originally this day was meant for those who died for the faith. Those who became martyrs, not renouncing their faith in Christ Jesus even when threatened with death. 'Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven'. As early as the second century there were annual commemoration days for these saints. The purpose of the day was to remember the testimony to faith in Christ that the saints gave with their lives and in their deaths.

Through the persecutions of the early centuries so many Christians were killed because of their faith, that churches in different areas began setting aside a single day of the church year dedicated to all the saints and martyrs together. Initially, certain martyrs in the early church got their own special day, but so many were killed for the faith that that couldn't continue. And over the centuries this one day has settled on November 1<sup>st</sup>, and has shifted to become a day to remember all those who have gone before us in the faith.

In our Lutheran tradition, we have lost a bit of that focus because of the proximity to Reformation day. But this was actually quite a deliberate thing. The university church in Wittenberg where Luther taught was named All Saints' Church. And this church was one of the largest repositories of relics outside of Rome. Relics being the supposed bones of certain martyrs, and pieces of the cross of Jesus, and stuff like that. Many of those relics would be put on display on All Saints' Day in All Saints' Church in Wittenberg. And indulgences would be granted to those who came to the Church to view the relics of the saints on that day.

So Luther quite deliberately chose the night before to post his 95 theses. This was All Saints' Eve or All Hallows Eve to use the older English phrase that has since been contracted to 'Halloween'. Most people only know All Hallows Eve as Halloween, a time to dress up as a witch or devil or ghost, and get stupid amounts of candy (to use the American term). Like all good things from God, we find ways to mess it up. This night that was meant to be about thanking God for his grace towards those who have gone before us in the faith had, in Luther's time, become all about making money for a corrupt papacy, and in our day has become just another highly commercialised event all about making money for big business. Neither one honours the saints. Neither one recognises that those who are persecuted for the faith are indeed blessed. Neither one recognises that those who die in the Lord are also blessed.

My prayer today is that you would indeed honour the saints who have gone before us. That you would thank God for their life, for his grace toward them, his gift of faith, and the eternal life they now have in him. And as you do so, may realise that you too are blessed by God. You belong to the communion of saints that will forever dwell with the Lord, continually singing his praises. You are precious in the Lord's sight, a blessed and loved child of God. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding, keep your hearts and minds safe in the risen Lord Jesus. Amen.