

God Bless You

January 29, 2023

Matthew 5:1-12

American culture has some rather strange practices. For example, we are one of the few cultures where people eat corn. In most other parts of the world, corn is reserved as pig feed, not fit for human consumption. Another example would be our usage of Fahrenheit instead of Celsius. We could tell someone from another part of the world, "It averages about 32 in January," and they'd look at us like that's a luxury. For those that don't have the conversion memorized, 32°C is roughly 90°F. However, no practice in our culture is perhaps stranger than saying "God bless you" or simply "Bless you" when someone sneezes. Then again, I'm a little biased. I have a sneeze that is so violent, it involves full body movement. It's so loud that, when I've been outside to let the dog do his business, multiple dogs within a certain radius have started barking. I confess, I am sometimes responsible for the "twilight bark" simply because I got a little tickle in my nose. That said, having a sneeze that is that loud and that violent, courtesy of my parents, I don't feel "blessed" when I sneeze. It hurts for me to sneeze. Then again, the practice originated from the belief that, when a person sneezes, they're expelling their soul and that blessing the person prevents the Devil from taking hold of their soul during expulsion. That "soul expulsion" thought might explain why my sneezes burn sometimes, but I digress.

More often than not, we hear the words "bless," "blessings," or "blessed," and we have a particular definition in our minds. Our minds have made "blessings" synonymous to "good fortune" or "luck." A person wins the lottery, and we think, "What a blessing that would be to be like them." We see our favorite movie or music star on the big screen or live, and we can't help but think, "They're so blessed to have such skill." This idea that blessings fall upon those who are fortunate (stars, lottery winners, etc.) is further backed by a phrase that is unfortunately used all too often in trying to comfort someone: "Count your blessings." I could do a whole lesson on why you should never use that phrase again, but we'll save that can of worms for another time. Regardless, those who are blessed are those who have had good fortune, whom the universe has favored for whatever reason. This definition, perhaps not surprisingly, doesn't sit well with Jesus. So, like most of the status quo of his time, he flips it on its head, actually blessing a few different groupings of people, each unique in their own way.

The first group Jesus blesses are those that seem to need God's loving embrace the most. "Blessed are the poor in spirit." "Blessed are those who mourn." "Blessed are the meek." Here, we have Jesus addressing the crowd, saying that those who are blessed are actually not the rich and powerful, those people idolize and try to emulate, but rather, the underdogs and the marginalized. Regardless of which of these groups we pick to analyze in-depth, there is an inherent lack of boastfulness to all of them. None of them flaunts their poverty, their grief, their meekness. No one, when impoverished (whether in spirit or otherwise), mourning, or powerless, celebrates that difficult hand dealt to them. However, Paul enlightens Jesus' message here in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God." As opposed to the

rich, the happy, those with power, who risk being boastful; the meek, the grieving, the impoverished, and those like them do not boast of their situation. However, because of their situation, they are more apt to be reliant upon God for having their needs met, and this is what Jesus confirms as being the case. The poor in spirit, *theirs* is the Kingdom of Heaven. The mourning will find comfort. The meek (i.e. those willing to stand up to opposition), *they* shall inherit the earth. These are groups that, if they boast, they boast not because of what they already have, but because of what the Lord our God has provided for them. They boast not *to* the Lord, but rather, *in* the Lord. Jesus doesn't stop here, though.

Next, Jesus issues blessings towards those who best-embodiment the qualities of a Child of God. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." "Blessed are the merciful." "Blessed are the pure in heart." "Blessed are the peacemakers." What is a merciful person or one who is pure in heart except someone who loves kindness? If someone is a peacemaker, can we not assume that, with every ounce of their being, they aim to do justice? Those who thirst and hunger for righteousness, is it not presumable that they walk humbly with their God? These blessings are not hollow blessings, but rather are backed by Micah 6:8, which reads, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Very truly, these middle verses reflect for us instructions given in the Old Testament on what God expects from us, instructions on how to be "fruit of the kingdom" as Matthew later calls them. So, thus far, Jesus has blessed not only those for whom God provides but those who best exhibit what it is to be a Child of God.

The last group Jesus blesses are those who are persecuted either "because of righteousness" or "on [Jesus'] account." Here, Jesus is talking about the potential for adverse effects for being a part of either of the two previous groups. The world does not yet understand Jesus' thoughts and teachings, meaning those who follow Christ's teachings and the belief that "the last shall be first" might lead to claims of heresy. What's important to note, though, is, at the end of v. 12, he mentions how this too was the case of the prophets. They preached the Word of God to people who didn't always want to hear it and in some cases went to great lengths to silence that Word. However, this is meant as a reassurance that the reward for suffering such persecution will "be great in Heaven." This is a reassurance that, though they might not get positive reactions, they nonetheless are doing the right thing and therefore can find peace in that fact alone.

Thus, blessings befall not the fortunate, but the unfortunate; not those who have an easy life, but those who have a righteous life; not those who are famous, but those who are infamous for doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with their God. To have God's blessing does not mean an easy path to walk. In fact, all these people Jesus blesses have rough roads ahead of them. So, one more blessing we might add to this list as a nice summation: Blessed are those whose strength is in the Lord, for they shall never grow weary. To that I say, "God bless you, everyone." With that, let all people say, "Amen."