

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
Pastor Troy Schreiner www.victorylutheran.org

Worship Series: *The Savior's Sermon*
Service Theme: *Trust in God's Strength*

Sermon Theme: "*Backwards*" *Blessedness* (January 29, 2023)
Matthew 5:1-12

"Blessed" is one of those words that gets thrown around pretty haphazardly these days. We've all heard someone share a laundry list of good things going on in their lives, and wrap it up with, "Oh, I'm just so unbelievably blessed." That word slips off our lips so easily about whatever makes us happy-- from major milestones like marriage to everyday occurrences like a good meal. So much so that in the language of social media, "**#blessed**" has replaced the period as the preferred punctuation to conclude our thoughts.

But while everyone from the Super Bowl MVP, to a recovering addict, to a mom whose baby finally slept through the night uses "blessed" to describe themselves, there's one thing that ties all the "blesseds" together. We call ourselves blessed whenever outwardly positive circumstances occur in our lives.

But you don't hear people gushing about how blessed they are when they've lost their job, or their health, or a loved one. People don't post #blessed when everything in life seems to be falling apart. That's because in our world, "blessedness" is viewed as contingent upon positive outward circumstances.

That isn't a new idea. The ancient Greek word, *makarios*, translated as "blessed," "happy," or "fortunate," was almost always connected to possessing outward physical good—be it wealth, fame, or power. And even the Jews thought that the wealthy and powerful were blessed by God, while the poor and suffering must be cursed by God.

That's why it must have shocked the crowds when Jesus used that same word *makarios* to call people "blessed" whom the world would

call cursed. It might be the most well-known sermon ever preached, the Savior's Sermon as we're calling it-- the Sermon on the Mount.

By this point, Jesus had called some disciples, and had begun his work of preaching, teaching, and healing around the Sea of Galilee, in Northern Israel. As word got around that this Jesus could heal people, and that he preached and taught with authority like no other teacher had, crowds from all over Israel and beyond flocked to see him.

So Jesus went up on a mountainside, in an acoustical setting where his voice could carry. He was surrounded by disciples—not just the 12, but a multitude of people who had begun following and learning from him-- and he began teaching them. These first 12 verses of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount are often called "***The Beatitudes***," from the Latin word *beati*, which means "blessed," because with each statement, Jesus teaches what it really means to be blessed.

But like I said earlier, Jesus must have shocked those disciples gathered on that mountainside. Because what Jesus calls "blessed" seems...well, backwards. Just listen to some of the types of people Jesus says are "*makarioi*," "blessed ones." "***Blessed are the poor in spirit; blessed are those who mourn; blessed are the meek; blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; blessed are the merciful; blessed are the pure in heart; blessed are the peacemakers; blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness; blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.***"

Sounds backwards, right? We think people are blessed who are wealthy, powerful, and influential. People who have everything they want in life; who make a difference in the world; who do whatever makes them feel happy. But what Jesus calls blessed seem like the exact opposite—not the wealthy, powerful, influencers who are happy with their outward physical circumstances; but those who are weak, or lacking in some way; those the world treats as pushovers or disrespected doormats.

So why would Jesus call people like that “blessed?” Let’s break down what Jesus says. In each Beatitude, Jesus says, “**Blessed are...**” then describes some quality about those people, followed by an explanation of why they are blessed.

There are a couple of ways that people explain the Beatitudes. Some read them with a moralistic viewpoint. I’ve even heard a preacher refer to the Beatitudes as the “Be-Attitudes.” Like Jesus is telling us, “These are the things you need to be, and the attitudes you need to have if you want to be blessed.” As if Jesus is dangling blessedness like a carrot on a stick and saying, “Just be more poor in spirit...just be more meek...just be more merciful...just be more of a peacemaker... and then I’ll bless you like the world defines blessedness.”

But that moralistic “be-attitudes” interpretation doesn’t make much sense when you consider who Jesus says are blessed. Look especially at Jesus’ first beatitude. “**Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**”

Being “poor in spirit” doesn’t sound very “blessed,” does it? And “poor” isn’t even the best translation. The Greek word literally means “beggar.” Beggars are blessed? Talk about backwards! So what does Jesus mean?

It’s important to note that Jesus says poor in spirit. He’s not saying that if you have physical wealth you can’t be blessed, nor is he saying that you’re only blessed if you have physical wealth. Rather, blessed are those who are beggars in spirit. Think about a beggar. Real beggars don’t sit on the street corner and rattle off a long list of all the good things they’ve done for which you should reward them. A beggar understands that they bring nothing to the table. A beggar understands that they’re completely dependent on the grace and mercy of another to supply what they don’t have and can’t supply for themselves. That’s why the Beatitudes aren’t Jesus telling us, “Do this, and you’ll be blessed.”

He’s telling us the exact opposite! Jesus says that people are blessed when they fully acknowledge that there’s spiritually nothing they can

bring to God to earn his love or blessing. People are blessed when they are spiritual beggars who know all they can do is throw themselves onto the grace and mercy of God, and trust in his strength! When Martin Luther died, they found a piece of paper in his pocket with a number of things written on it. But the last words written were, “**We are beggars, this is true.**”

And really, all the Beatitudes have that same basic idea—that those who are truly blessed are the ones who are weak, lacking, or deficient on their own, so that they have to trust in God’s strength and mercy. The “**poor in spirit.**” “**Those who mourn**”—and not just those who mourn the death of a loved one, but those who mourn their sin, their failure, the brokenness of this world, the ugly consequences of sin that we see and experience in and around us. “**The meek**”—not the bold ones who take power into their own hands and lord it over everyone else, but the meek, the passive, those the world likes to walk all over. “**Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,**” meaning those who have a deep desire for righteousness, but who know that we’re hungry, thirsty beggars who can only be satisfied and supplied by Christ’s righteousness. “**The merciful,**” those who don’t hang on to opportunities to lord power or revenge over those that have wronged them, but who forgive and leave justice in the Lord’s hands. “**The pure in heart,**” who strive to live not in the selfish desires of our sinful nature, but who strive to live with a pure heart according to God’s laws. And yet, beggars who know they need someone to purify their sin-stained hearts. “**The peacemakers,**” who don’t try to seize outward blessing by trying to intimidate and rule over everyone else, but who pursue peace because they trust that God is all the blessing they need. “**The persecuted, the insulted**” for their connection to Christ.

In every way, the ones Jesus calls blessed, are the ones the world wouldn’t. In every way, the ones who Jesus calls blessed are the ones who don’t rely on themselves, or their own strength, or their own actions, but who like helpless beggars bow down at God’s feet, totally dependent on him to be their strength and blessing!

That means the Beatitudes aren't Jesus saying, "Do these things and I'll bless you." Rather, the Beatitudes are Jesus saying, "You are blessed because of what I have done for you—no matter what."

With each statement of blessedness, Jesus includes the reason why those humble, lowly, dependent, "poor in spirit" beggars are blessed. ***"Theirs IS the kingdom of God."*** Not "will be yours once you've been and done all these things enough to receive it." No, right here, right now, even when your life feels like a blessedness void, those who trust in Christ as their Savior already possess the kingdom of God! ***"They will be comforted," "they will inherit the earth," "they will be filled," "they will be shown mercy," "they will see God," "they will be called children of God," "Great is their reward in heaven."***

Those are all the reasons that Jesus can call people blessed whose outward physical circumstances might not seem very blessed. Because those blessings aren't dependent on the person, their emotions, or their circumstances. They're dependent on Jesus.

They're certain promises of blessedness for all those who trust in God's strength because Jesus didn't stay on that mountainside preaching and teaching. He came down so that eventually he could climb up another hill where a cross awaited; another mountainside on which he would suffer and die for the sins of the world. He became weak, so he could be our strength. He gave up his power, so that he could be ours. He gave up his greatest blessings, so that he could be our greatest blessing.

When you look for blessings according to the world's standards, then your blessedness is temporary, fleeting, and dependent on everything falling your way. But when you find your blessing in Jesus, then no matter what's going on in your life—no matter how weak, or helpless, or hopeless or broken you feel—because the Lord is your strength, your helper, your eternal hope, the one who has made you whole, you are always blessed, no matter what!

And that's why in the New Testament, the Christian Church took that word ***Makarios***, and flipped its meaning upside down. No longer was

it blessedness associated with outward goods. Now, the word meant blessedness is the sense of the ultimate well-being and the distinctive spiritual joy of those who share in the salvation of the kingdom of God. Friends, you are makarios—you are the #blessed ones. Because the Lord is your strength.