

Epiphany 4
St. Matthew 5:1-12
January 29th, 2017
St. George's Bolton
Fr. Chris

The Blessing of Holiness

Poor in spirit; those who mourn; those who are meek; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; those who are merciful; those who are pure in heart; those who are peace makers; those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake; those who are persecuted and reviled for God's sake.

These are the qualities of holiness. These are the marks of good people. These are the character aspects of righteous people, people of faith. These are they who are blessed according to Jesus.

This short paragraph is known as the beatitudes. They appear only twice in the four Gospels, once in Matthew and once in Luke. The Beatitudes in Luke focus on those who are struck by social needs, who live in poverty, hunger, and so on. They are a call to action for Christians of means, and a promise to the down-trodden that they will not be forgotten by God.

The version, which we read from Matthew's Gospel this morning, are known as the "spiritual beatitudes" and are about the qualities which can be noted in the spiritual life.

So what does it mean to be *poor in spirit*? To be poor in spirit is to empathize with those who are poor, and to adopt a life which is poor in things and rich in spirit. Those who live simply, who embrace a minimalistic life find many blessings when they

shed the needless possessions they have collected and put them to good use helping others, sharing their bounty with those who are less fortunate. Jesus said, "Go sell what you have and give to the poor," to the rich man who queried him about what he must do to be saved. And the rich man went away from Jesus with sadness because he had many possessions and perhaps did not wish to let go of them. *But* at some point, we must let go of everything we own, and those things will become the property of others, or perhaps our prized "stuff" which we have hoarded for many seasons, protected and carried throughout life will find a new home in a dumpster, tossed there by people who were hired to clean out our repositories of material goods. What we don't have to let go of is our collection of friends and loved ones. This is what makes one rich, and this is one way we can live on in the memories and hearts of others after we are gone.

So Poverty of Spirit is about the quality of our life, one in which we own what we have, and not one in which we are owned by our possessions. We are freed up to live instead of being slaves to consumerism and debt.

The meek are blessed because they embrace humility instead of being full of themselves. Instead of being impressed with themselves, they notice and are impressed by the gifts and goodness of others around them. Instead of feeling that the pleasure is yours to know them, they find pleasure in knowing you. Meek does not mean they are doormats who can be walked all over, for they will stand up and speak out for justice and righteousness.

Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are not concerned with self-interest, but always embrace the interest of God. And what is that interest? Read Matthew's Gospel chapter 25. *"As you did it to the least of these, you did it to*

me.”They struggle tirelessly all the day long, all of their lives to think of and minister to others and advocate for justice and those in need of basic comforts. They are the Martin Luther King Jr.’s and the Mother Teresa’s and the Dorothy Day’s and an army of others who succeeded in their Godly mission without ever calling attention to themselves.

Those who are merciful are they who pass on the gift which God has given to them. God loves us and is patient with us and has mercy upon us and shows us great kindness. I know firsthand of God’s mercy which I have tasted often myself, and am baffled by God’s generosity with me. If God can show me such mercy and forgive my egregious sins, surely I can show mercy on others and forgive them. This sounds easier to say or write down, but it is much harder to do. Our hearts must change to truly love others as we have been loved, I have found, before we can forgive others and that forgiveness and mercy starts with loving the parties who have trespassed against us with the love with which we are loved. When we can do that, we will find out just how blessed we are.

Those who are pure in heart are blessed. What does it mean to be pure in heart? What do you think? People who are pure of heart exude a simple goodness and kindness to which we are drawn and this goodness is experienced by us as a blessing. This purity of heart comes directly from their hearts where they harbor no ill will, but rather the love and goodness of God that has touched their lives. People who are pure of heart do not have enemies, but are always thinking of others and are always seeing God’s face in them. They live the doctrine of the *Alter Christus*, that is, that everyone I meet is another Christ to me, and I should look for Jesus’ presence in the face of everyone I meet. *Go read Matthew chapter 25!*

The Peacemakers are blessed by Jesus. They are not Neville

Chamberlains who seek peace at any cost. We do not make peace with evil and injustice, but we can make peace with those who *differ* from us or *disagree* with us or those who have *distressed* us and trespassed against us. Peacemakers are they who build bridges between us, and help us to see the divide is possible to be overcome, that we will not fall into it and perish if we make peace with others, our opponents and enemies. Conflict can purify us if it opens our eyes to a deeper or other truth in front of us, but peace is the blessing which always follows it. Blessed are they who enable peace to flourish.

Finally, Jesus mentions those who are persecuted. Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness or God's sake. These are they who risk all to stand up courageously for justice and what is right. These are they who stand up for Jesus, not wincing, whining, or ducking for cover when the going gets tough or critical. Better a fool for Christ, than a fool who denies God in the face of the least resistance or opposition. What is your belief worth if you are not willing to stand up and be counted for it? And there have been many, even in our lifetime who have done so, at their own peril. If the day ever comes when you are called upon to do so, pray for strength and courage of character in the face of persecution.

A preacher [Robert Schuller] once called these the "*Be-Attitudes*," and I must admit he was right coining the term. You see, it is not just a word of Latin origin, but rather an active verb that points Christians as to how we are to *be* in the world. We are called to aspire to and embody the *Be-Attitudes* of Jesus' sermon. These are the qualities of a blessed, happy and satisfying life, walking in the way of Jesus.

Blessed are you if these words of our Lord describe you.
Blessed will your life be. And blessed will be the lives of those

around you. AMEN.