

We bow our hearts in prayer: Dear Father in heaven, cleanse us once again from our sin. Wash us. And give us the blessedness You declare to us through Your Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Fellow Redeemed,

This last week, we celebrated the 500th Anniversary of what we recognize as the beginning of the Lutheran Reformation.

It was the Eve before the Feast of All Saints, and Dr. Luther knew many would come to that particular church (named All Saints' Church) the next day,

How fitting it was that his document, containing 95 theses, or statements, contending for the sainthood of Christians, would be hung that day at that place.

Those theses contended that God's penitent people were already declared innocent and absolved of their sins, already holy in God's sight, through Christ.

God's people are not to be given conditional forgiveness based on their works of satisfaction; even less on purchasing signed Papal papers to release them from having to perform those works of penance.

Today, we will hear what Jesus tells us about sainthood.

Much like in Luther's day, there is much that we need to clarify in our own minds.

We read as follows in Jesus' name:

And [Jesus] lifted up His eyes on His disciples, and said:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

"Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

"Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.

"Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

"Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets."^(ESV)

These are Your Words, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen. ^(John 17:17)

We heard just a moment ago, Jesus' pronouncement of the Beatitudes from St. Matthew 5.

I am sure that you picked up that while rather similar, these records are not identical.

Both of them declare blessings... and upon situations that we don't normally consider blessed; such as hungering and thirsting, weeping and mourning, being poor and persecuted.

But St. Luke records, not only Jesus' statements of blessing, but also statements of woe.

And just as shocking, He says "woe" upon what we would normally consider blessings; being rich, and full, and laughing, and being spoken well of.

So does God have anything against enjoying the company of others?

Is He angry with us if we have a good hearty meal with family and friends?

Does He hate rich people and want us all to be in poverty,
or to make ourselves monsters against the world, in order that we should be hated?
Even our children know that this is not a correct reading of Jesus' words.

Jesus is here speaking in parables, of a sort.

He is using earthly situations, to speak of spiritual and heavenly things.
So we need to recalibrate our ears and minds to recognize what the point of comparison is
between the earthly metaphors and the spiritual realities.

To be poor in this life, and "beggarly poor" according to the original Greek word,
is to be in a state of need and reliance on the charity and mercy of others.
And so the poverty that the Lord commends and even calls a blessing is one in self-reliance.
The poor come to God completely empty and beg only for His grace and mercy.
And Jesus shows them how richly God blesses them: though they had nothing,
they inherit the **kingdom of God**, and so possess everything.

Similarly, those who hunger are those who are constantly looking to be satisfied,
and even more, as they are filled, continue to increase in their desire for more.
This hunger, as Jesus pointed out in Matthew's text, is one for **righteousness**.
They are not satisfied with their own works of righteousness,
but are only satisfied with the complete righteousness given through Jesus' perfect life.

Those who weep now, are those who mourn over their own personal lack of righteousness.
They hate the sins that they commit and despise the sin that lives within their heart.
They weep and lament the lovelessness that they have shown their gracious God,
and find no reason to boast in their often selfishly-motivated acts of love for neighbor.
But they laugh & rejoice in the forgiveness, not only offered, but also given in Christ's name.

But of all of these blessings, I wonder if this last one is the most daunting for us,
for in it Jesus tells us, "**Blessed are you when people hate you
and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil.**"
Here Jesus is not speaking in figurative language, but I think you knew that already.

Now we know from the 8th Commandment, what a blessing a good reputation is.
But here, Jesus cries out that one is blessed if He endures not only a bad name,
but even the animosity and hostility of others...
But, here's the rub, this hatred of you is not because you deserve it, because you're a jerk.
Instead, it is "**on account of the Son of Man!**" Just because you bear Christ's name.
And so, it is not for the bad that you do that they hate you, but for the good that Christ gives.

This alone is baffling to us, but even more, Jesus tells us not to complain about this treatment,
but to rejoice in it, to leap for joy, not in spite of it, but because of it.
Not, of course, because they hate you and, therefore, Christ,
but because this is a sign that you are on the right track, for so they persecuted the prophets,
and Jesus Himself, and what you give up here for His sake, will never compare to your reward.

But is this you? As you heard these blessings did they comfort you, or cause you concern?

It is easy for us to find our satisfactions here, to be lured in by what our eyes see so often.

In a land and time when the allusion of being rich is relatively easy to attain with a few pre-qualified credit cards, the "pursuit of happiness" is its own reward.

We live in a time when we don't need to eat only when we are hungry, but even when we are full, and just idling around the house.

We consume entertainment and other pass-times, as if that is what we live for:

the next blockbuster, the next vacation, the next Netflix binge, the next sports contest.

Not that these things are wrong-in-and-of-themselves,

but Jesus pronounces woe on those who are spiritually satisfied by them,

who laugh at the portrayed immorality on the screen and find no offense in it,

who are more concerned about their reserved seating at the game or performance,

or the comfiness of their armchair and the size of their screen,

than about the seat regularly left vacant before the altar and pulpit,

who pay their cable bill but have nothing left to give in thanks for the talents

and treasures that the Lord has blessed them with.

For it often happens that those who are so blessed with earthly satisfactions and blessings here, consider that these are a sign of God's favor and that naturally, then, the same condition will follow them into eternity.

But where is Christ in this equation? Are we so rich that we don't need?

Are you so satisfied the way things are right now that you don't want Him?

Among your friends, is He an offense to you, so that you heed them more than Him, or speak nothing of Him for fear that they will mock you or hate you.

So Jesus warns us: Woe to those who are rich, satisfied, happy, and find their life of ease here more fulfilling and desirable than Christ.

For "all that satisfies now, will prove to be an absolute disappointment in the end." Lenski, p.356

When He comes to judge the living and the dead, all that once satisfied will perish, and those who followed them will too, into eternal damnation and torment.

But this woe, Jesus does not declare because He relishes that idea or looks forward to the day. He declares it to warn us and to show us the spiritual reality that we can't see with our eyes.

Your needs include, but more importantly extend, beyond the physical world.

Questions of your purpose on this earth won't be answered by your doings,

neither by overworking or over-indulging in food, leisure, or even self-denial.

Your guilt will not be satisfied by distractions or your own goodness.

You cannot earn that state of blessedness.

It is only given, through the one who is eternally blessed, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Your needs are only met and satisfied by Christ, who has come into this world to bless you.

He has suffered the needs and wants that you feel... the desire to belong,

and through His blood, He has made you part of a host too numerous to count,

the saints robed in white in the Revelation recorded by St. John in our Epistle Lesson.

You are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses... who have struggled in this life,

who were tempted and at times fell into worldly passions and pleasures,

but in His grace and mercy, Jesus called them back and cleansed them again in absolution.
Three of these witnesses we will specifically remember today,

Velzora Stark, Margarete McCallister, and Bennie Tolbert.

Each looked to Jesus **the founder and perfecter of our faith,**
who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame,
and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.

Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself,
so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.

...

As we do not listen to these beatitudes with a superficial ear,

so we should not look for satisfaction and contentment with a superficial eye.

We are not "blessed" simply by being poor, hungry, or mournful according to this life.

So don't empty your cupboards or bank accounts just to be poor and hungry...

or go out of your way to make yourself obnoxious to your neighbors.

Instead, empty yourself of any notion of self-reliance, any satisfaction in your own works,
any earthly joys that compete with spiritual truths.

In short, daily crucify your sinful flesh and its worldly lusts and desires,

so that it does not hinder your promised inheritance of God's Kingdom.

And contemplate over and over the Blessedness that the Lord pronounces upon you

who are in Christ and are satisfied only by His righteousness and in belonging to Him.

His declaration of 'Blessed'ness "intones again and again...

and sounds like the bells of heaven ringing down into this unblest world

from the cathedral spire of the kingdom that invites all men to enter." Lenski p.343f

*Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Ghost,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, forevermore. Amen.*

Soli Deo Gloria