

The Paradoxes of Jesus' Teaching

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Our Savior's Way Lutheran Church

Pastor Dave Labuhn

There is a story about a young couple who were very talented musicians who got married. For their honeymoon, they decided to go to the City of Vienna in Austria. Vienna is associated with a lot of music and musicians, so this seemed like an ideal place to go. They found a hotel off the Simmeringer Haupt Strasse, not far from the main cemetery, where great musicians including Ludwig von Beethoven happened to be buried. Both of them loved the music of Beethoven especially his *Fifth Symphony*.

On the first night of their stay, they were awakened by an extraordinary noise. Both of them sat straight up in bed when they heard this strange noise. They listened carefully and realized the sounds they were hearing were Beethoven's *Symphony Number 5* being played backwards. Had they not studied music, they would never have come to this conclusion. Suddenly, the music stopped, and the young couple fell asleep.

The next night, the same thing happened. After falling asleep, they were awakened to the same sounds—Beethoven's *5th Symphony* being played backward. Once, again, after a short while, the music stopped, and they fell asleep.

But on the third night, when they were awakened again, they decided to investigate. They went into the hall of the hotel and followed the sound of music. They realized it was coming from downstairs. Nervously, they walked down the stairs and the sound grew louder, but it was not coming from inside the hotel it was coming from outside. They walked through the hotel doors and out into the street. Once outside, they realized the sounds were coming from the cemetery near their hotel. Cautiously, they approached the cemetery, lit only by the streetlights, and entered through the main gate, now more anxious and curious than ever. The music seemed to be coming from one of the

graves. They followed the sound as the music was much more recognizable. It was clearly Beethoven's *5th Symphony* being played backwards, and it was coming from the grave of the master musician himself, Ludwig von Beethoven. Approaching the gravesite, they peered at the grave, and what do you imagine they saw? You guessed it. It was Beethoven "decomposing!"

As in the case of that young couple, God sends his word to us, and He wants us to listen carefully. When He calls us by that Word and sometimes, His Word is confusing and seems to be the opposite of what we think it should be, like a symphony playing backward. That is the case this morning in the Gospel reading.

Thus far in this Epiphany Season, we have seen several events showing manifestation or appearance of God in the Flesh—Jesus. One was the announcement by John the Baptist that Jesus was the "Lamb (the sacrifice) of God" who would take away the sin of the whole world. Another was Jesus' Baptism with the entire Trinity present, where God the Father spoke of His pleasure and acceptance of Jesus, and the Holy Spirit descended on Him in the form of a dove.

And last week reflected Jesus' powerful call to His disciples, and today, Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee as He preaches a sermon to his disciples. You may have thought my sermons were long. Jesus' sermon extends for three chapters of the Book of Matthew. If your Bible prints Jesus' words in red, you will find page after page of the Jesus' words in this sermon in red in your Bibles.

This Sermon is often called the "Sermon on the Mount." However, there were no mountains as we understand them in Galilee, just some low hills. It might better be called the "Sermon on the Plain," and that is what it is called in the Gospel of Luke, who describes the place for this sermon as level. We know that St. Matthew directed his Gospel mainly to his fellow Jews, so he may have been trying to portray Jesus a second Moses, who delivered the Law from a Mountain, Mount Sinai. And, although there seems to have been throngs of people present in both Gospels, Jesus directs His sermon, His teaching, to His disciples.

He opens each of His teaching points with the word, “Blessed.” The word “bless” is translated from the Greek word “*makarios*.” Translators through the years have given a variety of meanings for this Greek word “*makarios*.” No one translation seems to capture perfectly the meaning of the word. It can mean blessed, happy, lucky, and fortunate. You could even say it means “to offer congratulations to someone.”

The intent of the word is clearly to denote some special recognition that is due to the person who receives it. In this case, the recognition comes from God Himself, through Jesus for those who follow Him, His disciples, His saints in heaven and on earth, you and me.

Because the statements all start with the word “Blessed,” these statements are called *the Beatitudes*. That word comes from the Latin word “*beatitudo*,” which means “blessedness.” Not just blessed, but a state of happiness or well-being that goes beyond that meaning to a powerful meaning of “divine joy and perfect happiness.” So, Jesus is teaching some truths about what God sees as worthy of joy, happiness and contentment. Is anyone here not interested in being happy or joyful or content? Well, then, listen closely to what Jesus says.

First, have you ever been “blessed” with something you did not necessarily consider a blessing—such beautiful curly hair, or freckles, or being really tall or ...? And, you think to yourself, “If you only knew...” Because sometimes, what appears to be blessing to one person often is not to a person who has it. It is just the opposite. Having curly hair on a damp day or being teased because you have freckles or trying to squeeze in to the rear seat of a compact car when you have greater than average height or even comfortable wealth can seem like a “curse.” Blessed? No! I wish I was not! And that is a paradox, something that is the reverse of what it might appear to be. It makes something that seems true turn out to be a contradiction of the truth. It is backwards like Beethoven “decomposing.”

That is what Jesus teaches in these several statements at the opening of His very long sermon. He uses the word “blessed” for something that does not seem to be. He turns things upside down.

In the first four verses (vv. 3-6), Jesus describes human conditions of incompleteness of emptiness. He says you are blessed—you should be joyful if you are poor in spirit, in mourning, meek, and hungry and thirsty. Who sees any of these as a blessing? Of course, when we look in terms of our physical life, they are the opposite of being blessings. But when we look at them in terms of our spiritual life, they are indeed blessings. Jesus is telling us to look at things with our spiritual eyes.

If we see that we are blessed, according to Martin Luther, when we have worldly treasures of prosperity, success, good times, earthly goods, riches, and power, if we make these our idols and greedily try to seek them, then we are the opposite of blessed. We are cursed. But in our world, these are the things people value. People strive for that kind of comfort and assurance. Jesus says no.

If you look at things through spiritual eyes, if you see that you are morally bankrupt, poor beggars, destitute before God because of who you are and what we have done, then you are blessed. And that really sums up all the rest of the Beatitudes and the whole Sermon on the Mount according to Martin Luther. Later in Matthew 6:21, Jesus says: “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” And that is the implication of the “*Kyrie eleison.*” We come to God, hat in hand, begging, “Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy” like poor beggars crying out to God in great spiritual need.

So, let us think in those terms for the next beatitudes. Mourning is not a blessing unless we mourn spiritually. And for what should we mourn? We should mourn for what we see in the world with so much wickedness—a man beaten and kicked to death for no apparent reason, a nation being devastated with its people being cruelly maimed and killed for greed and vengeance, a world where arrogance and contempt and blasphemy of God and His Word is common in place and clearly evident without shame. And that applies to us as well: the sin, wickedness, arrogance, contempt, and blasphemy of God and His Word is in our hearts too. When we grieve this spiritual death of God’s Will and Law, we acknowledge Him and lament the need for repentance and

forgiveness. God sees that kind of mourning as “the beginning of wisdom.”

When we step back from our desire to be in charge, to be in control, to be on top, to be better than everyone else, to have the power, to be the top dog, which are promoted and honored in our society, we get to look with spiritual eyes and see that God honors meekness. God blesses those who forgive the sins of others and those who patiently put up with circumstances and allow Him to be in charge. God blesses those who give in to others in deference to them as children of the Father, yielding, listening, excusing as He has with each of us. Those who hunger and thirst spiritually strive and yearn for the accomplishment and maintenance of what is right. They seek and desire God’s righteousness in this world and especially in their lives and their station of life. So, Jesus says for poverty, grief, humility, starvation, and dehydration in our spiritual lives, we are blessed. And the blessings come as the kingdom of heaven, contentment, earthly solace, and fulfillment.

The second step of becoming a saint in the catholic faith is beatification. In the next verses (vv. 7-9), Jesus teaches that process by presenting the active, positive qualities of God’s saints. “Merciful,” “single-minded,” and “peacemaking” are the qualities mirrored in the life of our Savior. These are the “fruit” that identify a disciple of Jesus. These traits should mark us as followers of Jesus, the traits that are blessed. The next verses of *the Beatitudes* depict these qualities as a sort of beatification of the saints of God. Jesus describes the qualities of the saints of God as they fulfill the process of becoming saints.

They show mercy to others. In their dealings with others, they are kind, friendly, and gentle. They are patient and tolerant. They endure the faults or weaknesses of those around them just as God does for them. And they gladly forgive the sins and frailties of others just as they have been forgiven. In this process of becoming saints of God, they develop the purity in their hearts. They are single-minded. They focus on God and obedience to Him. They are not seduced or turned aside by other idols in this world. They have a pure heart that is cleansed of its own self-serving ideas. They are filled with what God says in His Word,

which makes it possible for them to consider everything in a Christian, godly manner. And they are peacemakers. Instead of causing quarrels, hostility, dissention, conflict, and division, they seek the opposite by creating and fostering harmony, unity, agreement, understanding, and concord. They work to put the best construction on everything by being reconcilers and mediators. These people receive God's mercy, the presence of God in their lives and are viewed as true followers of their Savior, the Prince of Peace, not Satan, who is the Prince of Lies. They show they are true disciples by showing the Fruit of the Spirit. They live lives that imitate Jesus, and they act in His stead.

Jesus concludes with a chilling announcement. Despite being blessed for all these spiritual qualities, the world, the people around these saints of God, will persecute them for the very qualities that make them blessed. The world is upside down in this regard. The values of the world are the opposite of the values sought by God. The world values the opposite of what Jesus taught. The world devalues the Law of God. As a consequence, Jesus says the saints of God will be reviled and persecuted for the good they do by those who espouse the evil. But the saints of God, those who are blessed, will look with spiritual eyes and see the differences between this physical world and the spiritual world of heaven. The saints who are beatified recognize the clever, raging, wicked ways of Satan, who will stop at nothing in his attacks against God's kingdom and its divine truth. Satan makes the saints of God, who are the children of God, his enemies. So, we should not expect to be treated any differently by Satan and his agents than how he treated Jesus whenever he could use his power against him. But we know that Jesus has defeated Satan. Satan is only temporary as is this world.

Consequently, Jesus says, "do not fear or be concerned about being ridiculed, persecuted, and shunned as faithful servants and followers of Jesus. This world is not the end of all. This world is temporal and temporary. This world is for a short time. The end of all is Heaven, and Heaven is permanent and everlasting.

St. John made a concise statement about all this. He said, "Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world and the

things of the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desire of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.” (1 John 2:15-17)

“Blessed” can mean made, pronounced, or considered happy, fortunate, favored, prosperous, enviable, or praised in the sight of God and His kingdom versus that of the world. And all that is what we are as children of God and saints in His kingdom. Because Jesus died for us! And we have been buried with him in our Baptism just as little Julia was today in her baptism. We have become new men and new women inside ourselves spiritually, and we continue to grow being spiritually focused on the end, the prize that is to come. So listening to Jesus, we rejoice, we are happy, we are cheerful, we are content, we are thankful because we know Christ’s cross has given us a blessed status before God. By our faith in Jesus, we are beatified saints of God even while we are still sinners striving to obey God, which is a paradox that we are saints and sinners at the same time.

These teachings of Jesus are paradoxes in and of themselves as is the paradox in the way they are viewed in our lives. It is a paradox that we are truly blessed with the spiritual treasures of God’s kingdom: forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. But, at the same time, these treasures that we have by grace through faith in Christ Jesus and are shown by our works of mercy, which are the fruit of faith, are cursed and despised by the world.

Yet, despite the earthly difficulties and disappointments faced by all the faithfuls throughout all generations, the reward was theirs, and is ours, and they were, and we will be congratulated—the prize was theirs; it will be ours.

The paradox of Jesus’ teaching applies in our lives too. Jesus proclaims the results of His kingdom at work, true heavenly happiness, to us. But we have one foot perpetually stuck in the viewpoint, the ways, the attractions, the fascination, the temptations, of this world. And our other foot is stepping into the perfect, loving, compassionate, refuge of

the realms of Christ's kingdom. Simultaneously, we think and act contrary to the will of God in Christ Jesus, and we seek His paradoxical preaching to perpetuate its power in us. We behave one way, despite our best efforts not to, and seek a transformation in our lives from being blessed by the ways of the world to being truly blessed in the ways of heaven.

Jesus set the parameters for us. He gives us opportunities to show His love and mercy to others. He shows us the way to be blessed and become saints in His kingdom. He tells us not to worry about the threats to living our lives as children of God. He tells us the end, the end spiritually, that is heaven.

The reward of this end was clearly described by St. Paul when he wrote to Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all those who have longed for his appearing" (2 Tim 4:7–8).

May you hear the words of Jesus today. May you hear God speaking to you, and may it cause you to listen carefully. Instead of admiring ruthless success, learn to admire humble service. Instead of admiring the getting things and luxury, learn to admire simplicity in your life. Instead of seeing things through temporal eyes, see things through spiritual eyes. Instead of hearing everything "the normal way," listen to the paradox of spiritual things being played "backward." Hear the music and seek it out. Recognize that God plays it backward, in a form of paradox, and gives you the life eternal.

In the name of the Father who made us, the Son who saved us and the Holy Spirit who blesses and shapes us. Amen.