

### ***Blessings and Curses***

In the name of him from whom came out power to heal all those who touched him, dear friends in Christ: The healing miracles of Jesus were a huge draw for him. As we hear in today's Gospel, great multitudes flocked to him to be cured of their diseases and other afflictions, and to have unclean spirits driven out from them. It's a safe bet that many others who were perfectly healthy came also just to see these wondrous displays of power. Humans are always attracted to the spectacular. And it's good that so many did see Jesus perform these miracles. They confirmed that this man Jesus was far more than just any man, that he was indeed the promised Savior, God in flesh, come in mercy and power to rescue his people.

But it's precisely because we are drawn to the spectacular that we, like so many of those who flocked to Jesus back then, tend to forget that the healing miracles of Jesus were only a sideline to his main ministry – which was *teaching*. Jesus was primarily a religious *teacher*. He revealed, taught, and explained the Word of God. It's vital that we put the emphasis *there*. All of the people whom Jesus healed got sick again, or they were injured in accidents, or they went blind, deaf, lame. Eventually they all died – even the ones whom at one point he had raised from the dead. Ah, but the people he *taught*, those who held fast to his words and believed in him, they live even though they died. And their bodies now long since returned to dust will rise again on the Last Day and will live forever in the perfect Paradise of the New Creation because of the things he taught them. Judge for yourself then, which is more important? The fact that he healed a lot of people in time or that he taught us the Words of eternal life? The answer is obvious. And with that in mind we turn our full attention to the *content* of what Jesus taught – for in that is our life and salvation.

We have before us the opening verses of what in St. Luke's Gospel is known as the Sermon on the Plain. In these verses we hear clear echoes of the Beatitudes from the much better known Sermon on the Mount as it is recorded in St. Matthew's Gospel; but besides being shorter, there are two other significant differences. The first is that Matthew narrows the statements to spiritual concerns, whereas Luke is much broader. So where Matthew specifies "Blessed are the poor *in spirit*", in Luke it's just "Blessed are the poor". And where Matthew has "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*", in Luke it's simply "Blessed are the hungry". Luke is not excluding spiritual matters; he has Jesus including physical things as well. It makes sense: Jesus is concerned with both. our complete well being.

And there is a connection. Those who are poor financially have to look to charity to meet their needs. They know they depend on the kindness and generosity of others. So it's easier for them to see spiritually this way too, that the kingdom of God is theirs only as a free gift of God's grace. Likewise with hunger: if you have to line up at the soup kitchen to get something to satisfy the empty feeling in your stomach, it's easier for you to understand the same thing applies to your standing before the Lord – that when it comes to righteousness, I've got nothing. It can only be given to me by the Lord. I look to him to fill me up.

It's about trust. To whom are you looking for all that you need? To yourself, to your own powers and abilities? Or are looking to the Lord? Is your trust in him? This is basic first commandment stuff. As you learned in the catechism: What's the first commandment? You shall have no other gods. What does this mean? We should fear, love, and trust in God above all things. So, if you fear something more than you do the Lord, then that thing is your god. If you love something more than you do the Lord, that thing is your god. And – the one that gets us the worst – if you trust something more than you do the Lord, then that thing is your god. And what

you're most likely to trust in apart from the Lord is yourself. You make yourself your god; which is a pretty poor choice considering that there's an infinitely better alternative. Human beings make bad gods. Only the Lord will do. And he doesn't care for any competition.

That's why in addition to the blessings Jesus pronounces in the Sermon on the Plain are also the woes he declares on the rich, the full, and the laughing. This is the other big departure from the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. When Jesus says, "Woe to you", he means that you are under the curse of God. And well you should be because of your self-idolatry.

And please don't misunderstand. This doesn't mean you can't be rich, have plenty to eat, and laugh a lot and still be a faithful Christian. Jesus is speaking in generalities here, and in general we tend to make evaluations based on appearances. When you see someone who appears to be blessed with health, wealth, and happiness, the natural assumption is that the favor of God rests on that person. Likewise, when you see someone who is poor, starving, and piled upon with sorrows, it appears to you that the Lord is punishing that person. Jesus is saying it ain't necessarily so. In fact, we know that God brings hardships on us precisely to show us what pathetic gods we are when we place our trust in ourselves.

Part of what's going on here too is that Jesus is playing the long game. He's asking us to recognize that this life is merely the vestibule to the next where the real living begins. Or maybe it's better to think of it as the mud room: that room in the back of the house where you take off your muddy boots and filthy work clothes before going on into the main living area. The point is that we aren't staying here. But what happens here determines where you will be residing forever. This life is under the curse of sin. It's dirty, often hard, filled with trials and sadness; but it's only temporary. But a lot of folks live like this is all there is. They want their pleasures now. They want to live it up, play with their toys, enjoy the good things, and be happy all of the time. They see their success and happiness as signs of God's favor; but they are really worshipping the false god of self. They gain the world, but lose their souls. And their end is eternal destruction.

Those whose trust is in the Lord see the present for what it is. So it doesn't matter whether the Lord gives sunshine or rain (or snow), wealth or poverty, health or sickness, happiness or sorrow. Whatever he gives, he gives in his perfect wisdom so that we will learn all the more to trust in him and give him thanks – for all things: to satisfy our material needs and more importantly our spiritual needs, which he does by grace freely for the sake of Jesus our Savior, who gave his life for ours.

We set our sights on the future that Christ has earned for us; but that helps us even now in the present. In this fallen world hardship, sorrow, pain, loss—they come eventually to all. And when they do, those who have placed their trust in themselves don't know what to do. Their false god has failed them. As Jeremiah says, they are like a shrub in the desert. They have shallow roots. So, when the hot season comes, they dry up and die. But the person who trusts in the Lord is like that tree with deep roots planted by a stream. When the hot season comes and the stream dies up, there's still plenty of ground water down deep. The tree stays green and bears fruit. That person understands that the hot season – what appears to be a curse – is in fact a blessing, because by it the Lord destroys sinful trust in self and directs all faith and hope to him where it belongs.

Through such disguised blessings may the Lord increase our faith, so that each one of us may truly say, "I am trusting Thee, Lord Jesus; never let me fall. I am trusting Thee forever and for all." In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***