**February 5, 2023 Matthew 5:1-12**

***Blessed***

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:1-12 NRSV

*(1)When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. (2)Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: (3)"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (4)"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. (5)"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. (6)"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (7)"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. (8)"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. (9)"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. (10)"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (11)"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. (12)Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

**Notes:**

1. We experience the Kingdom of God when we look to God as the source of ***blessings***.
   1. We find ***blessings*** when we are in the presence of God.
   2. The Beatitudes turn our world ***upside*** ***down***.
2. Are you ***blessed***?
   1. What is a ***blessing***?
   2. With God, what appears to be ***misfortune*** can be a blessing in ***disguise***.
      1. *(24)Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. (25)Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; (26)on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; (27)in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. 2 Corinthians 11:24-27 NRSV*
3. Paul saw his ***thorn*** in the ***flesh*** as a blessing,
   * 1. *(9)[God] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 2 Corinthians 12:9 NRSV*”
   1. When the Lord ***reigns***, the proud are ***humbled***, the foolish are seen to be ***wise***, and the weak are made to be ***strong***.
   2. God, and ***God*** ***alone***, is the source of strength and hope*(3)… we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, (4)and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, (5)and hope does not disappoint us. (5)and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. Romans 5:3-5 NRSV*
4. Turn a curse into a blessing, not by living in ***denial***, but by living by ***faith***.
   1. We often bring about our own misfortune by the ***poor*** ***choices*** that we make.
   2. God shows his mercy by giving us what we ***need***,

*I asked God for strength that I might achieve;*

*I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.*

*I asked God for health that I might do greater things;*

*I was given infirmity that I might do better things.*

*I asked for riches that I might be happy;*

*I was given poverty that I might be wise.*

*I asked for power that I might have the praise of men;*

*I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.*

*I asked for all things that I might enjoy life;*

*I was given life that I might enjoy all things.*

*I got nothing that I asked for, but everything I hoped for.*

*Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.*

*I am among all men, most richly blessed.*

1. Are you ***blessed***?
   1. Allow the Lord to pour his blessings ***upon*** each of us,
   2. Be faithful to His ***purposes***, set before us.

**Script:**

One of the perks of being the chaplain at the fire company is the fact that I am able to use the fitness center for free. There is a pretty consistent group of regulars who seem to be there each morning as I walk in. Most of them are older and I am guessing they have silver sneakers memberships. Each of them has a regular routine they follow. Some use the treadmills and cardio equipment; others who come to just lift weights; and then there are those who mix it up with the weight machines. The place is reminiscent of Cheer’s. As people walk in the doors somebody or several people shout out the name of the person entering. It seems like it’s the place where everybody knows your name, and if they don’t know they will ask. I remember one particular person who, when asked how she was, would always answer, “blessed.” Over the years I have heard others respond to my inquiry in a similar fashion, “blessed,” or “I am blessed,” and even sometimes, “I am truly blessed.”

But I have wondered what do they really mean when they say they are truly blessed. What would it take for you to answer “blessed?” My hunch is that when we talk about being blessed, we are talking about such things as having good health, being financially sound, doing well in your social circle, a loving family and friends, a secure environment, and maybe even being comfortable with their place in life. In other words, they are experiencing good fortune. But you don’t usually hear people answer the question, “how are you?” with “I am blessed.” Especially when they are having a bad day, or when they are suffering some sort of hardship or inconvenience. We think of blessings as the positive side of life.

Well today we are going to look to the Sermon on the Mount; and more specifically at the beatitudes. As we hear these words today, listen carefully, because what Jesus claims is blessed is not what we would normally imagine. But these words point us to the Kingdom of God, and the reality of what it takes for us to enter in and be a part of it. Stand with me as we share in the reading of Matthew 5:1-12.

*(1)When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. (2)Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: (3)"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (4)"Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. (5)"Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. (6)"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (7)"Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. (8)"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. (9)"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. (10)"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (11)"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. (12)Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. Matthew 5:1-12 NRSV*

These verses point us to a different reality. Life in the Kingdom of God is what we experience when we look to God as the source of blessings. We do not find blessings in the circumstances of the moment, but in the moments we are in the presence of God. It is only from the perspective of God’s reign that it makes sense that the meek will inherit the earth. We expect the aggressive to inherit the world. and we rarely see the poor in spirit winning God’s favor for in our world it is the high spirited persons who get the attention. We only see those that mourn and lament over the injustices of life being comforted, not those who are content with the way things are. The *Beatitudes* turn our world upside down. The beatitudes throw cold water in the face of our self-righteousness and self-indulgences. The beatitudes remind us that, only when the Lord is the Lord of your life, will you be happy and content. We find only eight of them, and I have read where some have compared them to the *Whitman’s Sampler* of the Kingdom of God.

So one must ask, “*Are you blessed?*” Don’t be so quick to respond; what seems like a blessing may actually prove to be your demise. If you were to win the Powerball sweepstakes, you would feel pretty fortunate, until you see all of the headache that come with it. I have read articles of lottery winners, who in hindsight, wish they would have never bought the ticket. Then again, what seems like a stroke of bad luck, may turn out to be a blessing. For instance, nobody likes to lose a job, but the loss of a job may actually lead you to find your true calling in life. You see, the things we see as blessings initially, could very easily result in a curse; while the things we shy away from and see as curses, may actually result in a blessing.

This brings me to a question. What is a blessing? It all depends on whether you are looking to God or to the circumstances of the moment. Apart from God, what appears to be a blessing can be your undoing, and with God, what appears to be misfortune can be a blessing in disguise. Nobody knew this better than Paul. In 2 Corinthians 11 he writes about the hardships of his journeys.

He says, “*(24)Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. (25)Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; (26)on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; (27)in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. 2 Corinthians 11:24-27 NRSV*”

He goes on to talk about what he refers to a “*thorn in his flesh*”. He said that he prayed three times for the Lord to take it away, but nothing ever changed. Some would look at this thorn n the flesh as a curse or misfortune. But Paul saw it as a blessing, saying, “*(9)[God] said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’ So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. 2 Corinthians 12:9 NRSV*”

Paul wants us to understand that when the Lord reigns, the proud are humbled, the foolish are seen to be wise, and the weak are made to be strong. This is what it means to be blessed; to know that God, and God alone, is the source of your strength, hope, and abilities. That is what he is talking about when he says to the Romans: *(3)… we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, (4)and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, (5)and hope does not disappoint us. (5)and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. Romans 5:3-5 NRSV*

So the question emerges again; “Are you Blessed?” If I were to visit with Ray Carson, his answer would be yes, without a shadow of a doubt. Many of you know Ray but some better than others. Ray is a simple, down to earth man. He never worked in a job with an elite status. He never traveled the world in search of adventure. He just married the woman of his dreams, supplied for the needs of his family the best he could, and served his Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I have the privilege of visiting with Ray and Pauline almost every week. In fact, weeks that I am not able to stop by to visit, I feel a bit guilty. You see, I stopped by to drop off the DVD of the previous week's service. So when I am not able to get there, They are not able to go to church on Sundays; and that is Ray's greatest desire, to come to church on Sunday.

As a younger man, Ray worked in a nursing home as a custodian. He would work in the rooms and the halls; he would talk to the staff, and he would visit with those who were housed there. In many cases, he would tell them about his Jesus, and how they can be saved by Jesus as well. He would even lead those who wished to do so in a prayer to ask for Jesus to enter their life and save them from their sin. You see, Ray's job was to clean the halls of the building, but Ray’s life work was to tell as many people he knew about Jesus, and lead all who wished to do so, to the feet of Jesus. At one point in Ray’s career he was told he was no longer allowed to share Jesus with the guests. This broke Ray’s heart, how could he do his life’s work without sharing the gospel of Jesus. But as I understand it, the guests of the home found out and started to complain. I believe the nursing staff found out and they also complained. Wouldn’t you know it, the heads who make the decisions, relented and allowed Ray to proceed in doing his job the way he always had. Ray was shining the light of Jesus into the darkened halls of a place where many who were infirmed waited for the end. Ray gave hope to those who did not have hope. Ray gave peace to those who were tormented. Ray gave comfort to those who were in pain.

Now Ray is the one in failing health. It takes all of his strength and the help of another for him to get out of bed in the morning, the same goes for getting out of his chair. I can’t escape the irony of the one who once helped care for the frail, is now the one being cared for. He, like others with the same ailment, has every reason to be angry and bitter. Nobody would blame them if they wanted to complain and feel sorry for himself. But instead, he continues to serve Jesus to the best of his abilities. He starts our prayer time over the phone at our Wednesday afternoon prayer meeting. He has turned a curse into a blessing, not by living in denial, but by living by faith.

People like Ray suffer through no fault of their own. He certainly did not do anything to deserve the condition he is in. At the same time, we often bring about our own misfortune by the poor choices that we make. We have all heard it said, “Be careful what you ask for; you may just get it!” And I, like many, got a taste of it when I was younger. Many times, I would see something and want it so badly. But I was fortunate enough to have a father who not only allowed me to decide for myself, but also would allow me to make my mistakes and learn from them.

I remember when I was maybe 7 or 8, we went to a relative’s house and he had a white horse there and he left me go for a ride on it. After I got back, he was telling my dad that he was going to get rid of the horse. On the way home I asked my dad if I could get the horse. He didn’t answer right away, but a day or so later he called me to the kitchen table and asked me if I really wanted the horse and of course my answer was yes. He then explained that if I got the horse, I would be responsible for feeding and watering the horse everyday. He explained all the responsibilities of owning such an animal; and as I thought about it, I decided against it.

After I started to college, I was in the market to buy a car to drive to school. I found a old Toyota Corolla and thought that would be a good car to have. I talked with my dad and he allowed me to buy it. After we got it home we noticed that the whole front unibody was pop-riveted on, and that it would not be safe for the road. I was crushed because the plans I had for the car were not going to happen. Was it a blessing or a misfortune? In many ways I see it as both. Buying the car was a costly mistake, especially since my father footed the bill for it. But the lesson I learned from it was priceless and a true blessing. We all know what it is like to want something so badly you would do anything to have it, only to realize that it was never going to fulfill our fantasies. I have heard that the two happiest days in a boat owners life are the day he buys the boat… and the day he sells it.

I like to imagine that I think things through before making a decision. But there have been many times when I have used poor judgment and have dealt with the misfortune of my decisions. But there have been many times when I did not act on the opportunity and felt as if I had missed out on a blessing. Years later I think of some of those instances and I am grateful that I was able to walk away from some of the deals of a lifetime I experienced.

God shows his mercy by giving us what we need, not necessarily what we want, but what we need. More importantly, God uses the circumstances of the moment to give us the gift of abundant life, if we’re willing to turn to Him in faith. I was privileged this week to read the words of a Confederate soldier wounded in battle and interred in a Union POW camp to rehabilitate. He wrote:

*I asked God for strength that I might achieve; I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.*

*I asked God for health that I might do greater things;*

*I was given infirmity that I might do better things.*

*I asked for riches, that I might be happy; I was given poverty, that I might be wise.*

*I asked for power that I might have the praise of men;*

*I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.*

*I asked for all things that I might enjoy life; I was given life that I might enjoy all things.*

*I got nothing that I asked for , but everything I hoped for.*

*Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered.*

*I am among all men, most richly blessed.*

So I ask you, one more time: “Are you blessed?” Rather than tallying up your good fortunes and weighing the good against the bad; base your answer on what Jesus said in the *Beatitudes*. To help you hear Jesus’ voice in a fresh , new way, listen to this passage paraphrased by Eugene Peterson in the Message:

*(3)"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule. (4)"You're blessed when you feel you've lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. (5)"You're blessed when you're content with just who you are--no more, no less. That's the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can't be bought. (6)"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. He's food and drink in the best meal you'll ever eat. (7)"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'careful,' you find yourselves cared for. (8)"You're blessed when you get your inside world--your mind and heart--put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. (9)"You're blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That's when you discover who you really are, and your place in God's family. (10)"You're blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God's kingdom. (11)"Not only that--count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. (12)You can be glad when that happens--give a cheer, even!--for though they don't like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble. Matthew 5:3-12 MSG*

Allow the Lord, our God, to pour his blessings out upon each of us, not that we may be rich or famous, but that we may experience new life in God’s kingdom and be faithful to His purposes, set before us.