

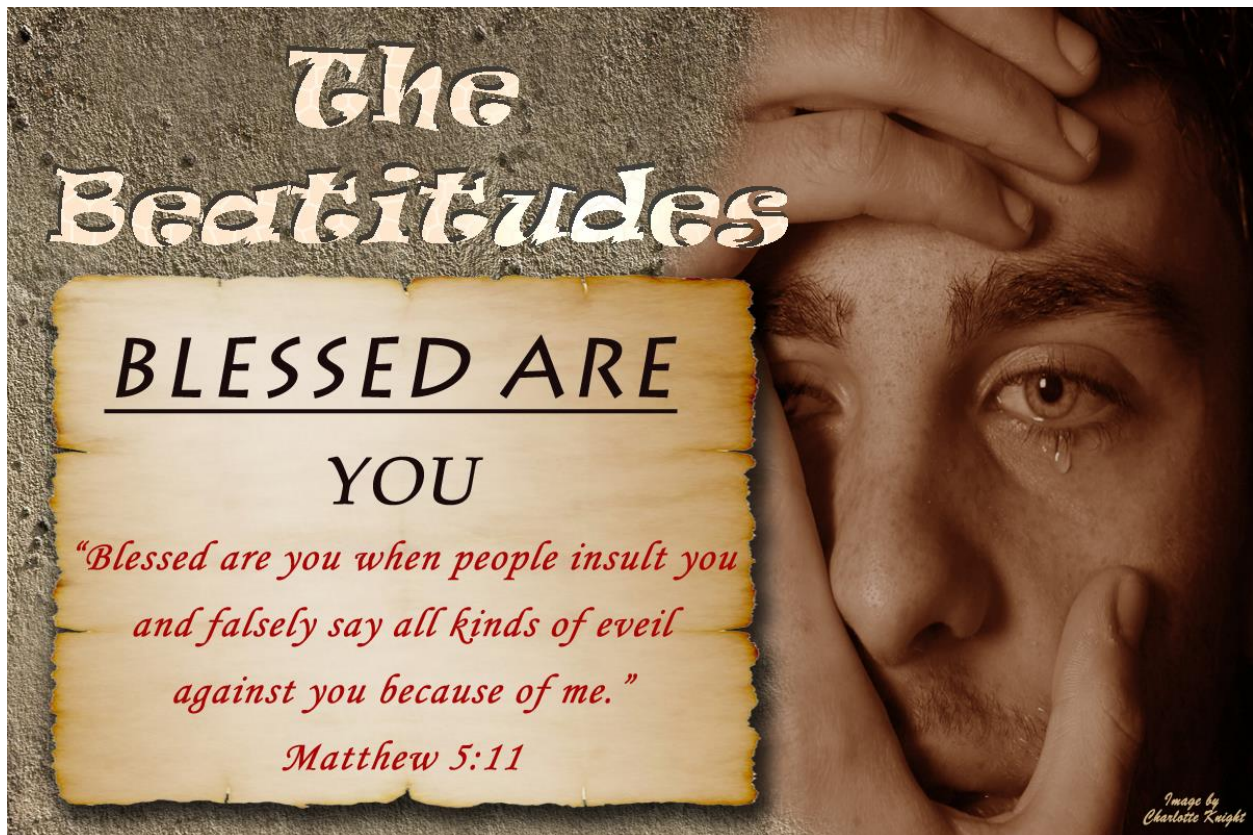
August 28

“Blessed are You”

Matthew 5:11-12

11 “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me.

12 Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”



Special Music: “The Blessing”

Bethel Music & We The Kingdom

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvXlaXX73LI>

IN MY NAME

**Blessed are you
For you have stood
Knowing you could
Make a difference
In my name.**

**Blessed are you
As you accepted the pain
As your blood slowly drained
The cost you have paid
In my name.**

**Blessed are you
Who picked up the token
Though tired and broken
For you carried your cross
In my name.**

**Blessed are you
Who finds yourself able
To come to my table
Knowing the price you will pay
In my name.**

**Blessed are you
Who drink of my wine
And claim to me mine
Counting the cost
To serve in my name**

**Blessed are you
That leave all behind
Your spirit aligned
With the teachings
Bound to my name.**

**Blessed are you
Who seek out your neighbor
To serve and to labor
And gather the harvest
In my name.**

**Blessed are you
Who give of your time
Your dollars and dimes
To further the Kingdom
In my name.**

**Blessed are you
Who give your last breath
E'er unto death
For the sake of my children**

In my name

Blessed are you

Chosen and few

Who seek out the view

Of the glory of heaven

In my name.

Welcome home, Child,

Forever my servant

You have been fervent

To lift up my children

In my name.

Welcome home.

The 3rd century was an extremely difficult time for Christians. It was during this time that persecution of Christians was at its peak. Rome did not mind that Christians believed in the deity of Christ, but the prevalent feeling in Rome was that the Christian God was just another God among the plethora of gods. They believed that everyone in the Roman Empire should worship all the gods, not just a single God. They also believed that Caesar was a God to be worshipped as well. Therefore, anyone who did not worship Caesar, or the other gods of the pantheon, was a threat to Roman society where disharmonious religious ideals needed to be quashed. Thus began the great persecution.

It was during this time that Cyprian was born and lived. Cyprian was born to an extremely well-off Carthaginian family with great influence. He grew up in a household dedicated to pagan worship and saw firsthand the ill treatment of Christians at the time. He was given to philosophy and great thoughts. He was a prolific writer and we still have many of his writings today. As a young man, Cyprian found his way to Christianity and wrote this passage in a letter to his friend Donatus:

“This seems a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden under the shadow of these vines. But, if I climb some great mountain and look out over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see — brigands [wandering thieves] on the road, pirates on the high seas, in the amphitheatres men murdering each other to please applauding crowds, under all roofs misery and selfishness. It is really a bad world, Donatus — an incredibly bad world.

Yet, in the midst of it, I found a quiet and holy people. They have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted — but they care not. These people, Donatus, are the Christians, and I am one of them.”

Later on, Cyprian became the Bishop of Carthage during a time of great internal struggle in the church. His wisdom and compassion were invaluable among Christians during this time. He fought for mercy regarding those Christians who had succumbed to the pressures of the Roman Empire and had forsaken their beliefs in order to have their lives spared. Cyprian pleaded for forgiveness for those individuals, and also begged that those who had turned away be allowed to return to the fold.

Cyprian was venerated by the church and made a saint after his passing.

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Cyprian was so impressed by the way these Christians approached life that he became one of them. Upon joining with them, he gave away large amounts of his fortune to the poor and needy. He wanted what these “Christians” had. It was more precious than his wealth, his position, his security, even his life. It was the “Pearl of Great Price” and the “Parable of the Hidden Treasure” that Jesus talked about. It was so important to have what these “Christians” had, he was willing to give up everything to become part of it. It was so important, he was

willing to wear the label of “Christian” and suffer the trials that other believers suffered. He was willing to lay down his life for this newfound relationship with God.

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I have a very difficult question for all of us who gather in the name of Jesus, for all of us who come to the table, for all of us that believe in the salvation that Christ offers through His death and resurrection. “If someone were to look at our lives, individually and together, what would they see?” Would they see people so given to their relationship with Jesus Christ that they would want what we have? Do our lives inspire people to want to leave everything else behind in this world because they want what we have? Are we so driven by our faith that it is obvious that we view the world differently than those who do not believe? Do we understand that our Christian walk and the rewards of our faith are so strong that we should be a beacon that leads others into that same relationship with God? When people see us and how we live our lives, does it make them want to scream, “I want that. I must have what they have. I would be willing to give anything to have what they have.”

“Well, preacher, don’t be so hard on me. I’m no saint, but I’m a pretty good person.”

I'm not asking if any of us are saints and I'm not asking if any of us are pretty good people. The third century Christians weren't all saints. As a matter of fact, many of them ended up falling away under persecution. Those who inspired Cyprian, lived pretty good lives. But that is not what I am talking about.

Are people so envious of our relationship with Christ that they want what we have? Do people see us standing toe-to-toe with the ugliness of the world and covet that strength that allows us to meet that ugliness head-on? Not just meet it, but thrive against it, meeting the needs of the people around us? Our relationship with God is meant to be shared, not hidden away where it cannot be found. Our lives should make people say, "I want that! Whatever it is that he or she has, I want that! How do I get it? What do I need to do?"

God expects for our lives to be similar to those that Cyprian experienced. Even when faced with the greatest of challenges, these Christians were seen as a "quiet and holy people." Nothing seemed to faze them or deter them from their belief that God stood with them in all the chaos surrounding them. Even when tortured to the point of death, they sung hymns and praised God for His grace and His mercy.

But why did they do it? Why not take the easy way out like so many of their brothers and sisters did and just give in to Rome's demands? Those that gave into the demands of Rome in order to escape torture and execution, felt they could always come back later when things cooled off. Unfortunately, dedicated Christians, those who had not taken the easy path, and were still alive, did not make that return easy. And we really need to see both sides of that coin.

The Christians that did not give into Caesar's demands suffered horribly under the hands of Rome. It was a little difficult to just let bygones be bygones. And yet, Christ taught us not only to forgive, but to also express grace, even under the worst of circumstances. We often want to blame our reservations for offering grace on human nature. It is extremely difficult to say "I understand and forgive you" when your bones are broken, your body bleeding, and your burned flesh ripped from your body. There's a similar feeling when our families are in need, and someone takes more than their fair share from the grocery store shelves. Do they really need ten packages of toilet paper or a case of hand sanitizer? "What about me and my family? We have needs, too!" I'm not going to tell you that it is easy to be gracious under those circumstances. But it is what we are called to do. It is what Jesus exemplified for us. It is what Cyprian taught to his gathering of believers. And yes, following the example of Jesus when it comes to grace will often create great agitation in others, because they believe that we are fools to do so.

"Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

Showing mercy and grace when it is least expected puts us in good company. The world at large does not agree with this approach to life. The vast majority of people seek vengeance when they or those they love have been wronged. They may even believe that they can forgive the wrong without embracing grace and mercy as well. "I will forgive them right after I make them pay for what they have done." Imagine if Christ did that to us. "I love you and I

truly want to forgive you, but first you have to suffer for a thousand years of pain and anguish before I can do that.” That isn’t the example of Jesus nor is it what He teaches. Paul tells us in Ephesians 4:32:

“Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

To follow Christ and adhere to this teaching about forgiveness is to choose to live our lives in the minority. It is the minority because human nature pushes punishment over mercy. Many Christians default back to Old Testament teachings rather than embracing the example set by our Lord. It is far easier to for us to submit to our human nature and believe “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth” than to engage at the more divine nature of showing mercy and saying “I forgive you.”

When we release our feet from this world where human frailties and warped justice prevail and focus instead on a more spiritual plane where Jesus becomes our common template for living, we start to see people the way that Jesus sees people. We start to love people the way that Jesus loves people. We begin to see that the human induced problems that we find around us, are not where our eyes should be focused.

When we read today’s verses, it is so very important for us not to be distracted by the reward. Our human nature likes the glitter of gold and the sheen of diamonds. But such things hold no value to God and the closer we draw to Jesus, the more we realize that. I hear ministers preach all the time about

the reward of heaven and I agree that reward is a powerful thing. But it should never be our focus. We do not help the broken in order to go to heaven. It isn't a quid pro quo system where we earn enough brownie points to buy a ticket. We serve the broken people of this world because Jesus served the broken people of this world, and our constant desire should be to be more like Him.

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Let's rephrase this a little to get into the deeper meaning:

“When we are put to task for being the hands and feet of Jesus in this world, we feel the hand of God using and blessing us, giving us the strength and courage we need to continue on that path. Because we have chosen and embraced that path, which often leads to pain, harassment, and persecution, we can feel joyful the reward of heaven is waiting for us, just as the believers and martyrs that came before us.”

The reward of heaven is not payment, but a privilege that comes from our choice of following Christ. If our eyes are focused on the reward, our motivations are somewhat selfish and not entirely given to the task. If our eyes are focused on Jesus and we serve as His hands and feet, the reward is given without expectation. The reward becomes a recognition for the life that we have chosen to live. The relationship that we have with Christ is far more important than the

reward. To place the reward above our service is a disservice to both ourselves and to God.

The most important word in these verses is the word “You.” “Blessed are you.” This beatitude is not written generically. It is written to the followers of Jesus Christ specifically. You who have chosen the path of righteousness. You who have given your lives to the advancement of God’s Kingdom. You who exemplified Jesus in a world that is often critical of a Christ centered way of living. You who are called on at times to be persecuted, ignored, and abused for Christ’s sake. You, who have chosen to have a relationship with the Creator of the Universe over the baubles of this world. You... you have a place in heaven. Guaranteed. Part of the Divine Package that also includes grace, mercy, joy, peace, and most of all love.

This week, I want us all to think about what that really means to us. What is the first thing that we do when we wake up? The first thing we should be doing is thanking God that He has allowed us to serve another day in His Creation meeting the needs of His children. A simple thank-you will suffice as we acknowledge the relationship we have with God and all He does for us. Let’s all try to thank God for another day the moment we open our eyes in the morning.

“Blessed Are You!”

AMEN

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