

Introductory

In the sixth chapter of Luke, in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus speaks words that are like the ones found here, in the Sermon on the Mount. This text is appointed to be read every year on All Saints in all three hymnals. It is also read on Epiphany 4A in LW and LSB. The Luke text is appointed to be read on Epiphany 6C in both LW and LSB.

First off, some distinctions. In the Bible, you are either wise or foolish, and you are either cursed or blessed. Christians are both wise and blessed and that has to do with the work of God, not of self. We should also note for the hearer the difference between happiness and blessedness. Happiness is mostly temporal and always temporary, while blessedness is eternal.

And yes, money can buy happiness, but it's temporal and temporary. Sometimes I'm more happy than at other times. You can run the entire emotional gamut during one football game. If you give me money, I'll probably be happy about it, and I'm generally more happy on vacation than I am when I'm doing a household chore because I have to.

Secondly, some grammatical considerations to help us better understand these words of Jesus. We note that the subjects for all of these words are plural, i.e. Jesus is not speaking of an individual person, but of the group. We also note that the verbs in the "oti" clause that follows each main clause are almost always in the future tense, i.e. He is saying that these things will happen later.

But perhaps most helpful is to note that Jesus is speaking descriptively, not prescriptively. He is not telling us to *be* blessed. He is telling us that in fact we *are* blessed. This is important because the Lutherans see these wonderful, comforting words as another occasion to engage in yet another incessant and unending debate about Law and Gospel. It's not.

Here, Jesus tells them who they are; He tells us who we are, and I don't know about you, but it's good news to me that Jesus calls me "blessed," like He does here. He may call you "blessed" here, and he may describe you in a lot of positive ways, but never does He call you "perfect." One can be merciful, for example, without being *perfectly* merciful, or a peacemaker, for another example.

But He never says that we are perfectly peacemaker or merciful, and we aren't. But He is speaking to Christians, and He does say that we are merciful, and we are. We are merciful because we are Christians, because Our Lord has made us Christians, and because He has taught us to be merciful. Jesus is, of course, the perfect peacemaker, perfectly merciful, and all the rest.

As far as I'm aware, the Christian religion is the only one whose founder has the trait of merciful as a core characteristic, and who describes His followers as "merciful," and He actually encourages that sort of behavior in us. The pericope only includes through verse twelve, but we can't help but notice that He concludes the Beatitudes by calling us "salt" and "light."

And since we are salt and light, we influence others around us in this and in other ways. As a result of our being salt and light the Christian West understands mercy well, and on a corporate as well as on an individual level that rubs off, so we find even non-Christians and pagans imitating us in this regard. On a societal level, the Church is salt for entire nations, including our own.

An astounding example of this is the Sunday Morning Gathering – it began in the Los Angeles area – a gathering of Atheists who meet and listen to speakers and who give money to charitable causes. They must have perceived that people perceive that Christians do good things in the world, and their motivation is that they expressly want to show people that Atheists are good people too.

All Saints is about the past. All Saints is about the present. All Saints is about the future. On this day, we remember that we are part of the group; centuries of Christians who have gone before us, billions of Christians who are currently calling themselves Christians in the world, an unknown number of Christian who will follow after us, all ending up in the Church Triumphant.

Textual Notes

1. After the Temptation, Jesus heard that John had been arrested, and He went to Galilee. There He called the fishermen into the Apostolic Office, and right before this, we find Jesus in Galilee, teaching and preaching and healing, accompanied by "large crowds" (4:25) from all over the place, including "Galilee and the Decapolis and Jerusalem and Judea and from beyond the Jordan."

Now we are told that "Ἰδὼν δὲ τοὺς ὄχλους ἀνέβη εἰς τὸ ὄρος – seeing the crowds, He went up onto the mountain." The preposition "εἰς – onto" followed by a noun in the accusative case indicates motion, and it seems like the motion is intended to get Him away from the pressing crowds, something He often attempts to do. It was not a hard climb, but it served to cull the herd.

When He reached His destination "καὶ καθίσαντος αὐτοῦ προσῆλθαν αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ - having sat down, His disciples came to Him." Sitting, not standing, was the normal posture when teaching, and His assuming this posture was an invitation from the Rabbi to all who so desired to learn from Him. It was "οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ - His disciples" who did that. The crowds did not.

Perhaps review the categories of people with whom Jesus interacts. Likely huge swathes of people wanted nothing to do with Jesus or anybody like Him. Then there are those identified by variations

of the noun “crowd,” those who are interested, but not buying what He is selling. Those identified as “disciples” are on some level buying in to the Jesus Movement.

Out of those disciples He chooses twelve plus seventy who come to be known as “Apostles.” They are responsible for carrying on after He is gone, and those who hold the Apostolic Office these days fill that role. We call them “Pastors.” The people who learn from the Pastors – who learn from the Professors – are disciples of Jesus; followers who want to learn more about Him.

2. The other indication that the Rabbi is teaching His disciples is that “αὐτὸς ἀνοίξας τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ - He opened His mouth,” and then “ἐδίδασκεν αὐτοὺς λέγων - He was teaching them, saying...” The verb for “teaching” is in the imperfect tense, and as we shall see, the teaching continues for three entire chapters. We call those three chapters the Sermon on the Mount, and we are familiar.

Pastors, when we open our mouths, ought to be teaching our people. Instead of complaining about how nobody comes to Adult Bible Class, maybe start teaching from the pulpit, when you probably have more listeners who are there to listen. You can begin by simply teaching them what the text says, and then go from there, shepherding the flock into a better understanding of their religion.

There are several disturbing trends going on in the LCMS these days, and one of them used to be known as “Gospel Reductionism” and it was condemned by the self-described “Confessionals,” who now embrace it and proselytize for it. Their proof text seems to be Paul’s, “I preach Christ, and Him crucified,” as if that’s all Paul ever said. Paul actually said a lot more than that.

3. The Sermon on the Mount begins with eight Beatitudes. The Beatitudes are a Christian thing; they are not a part of any other religion, and they are foundation to ours. The word comes from the Latin “beati,” which means happy, rich, or blessed (WIK). Grammatically, each Beatitude consists of a conditional statement and a resultative statement, and if/then if you will.

In some cases, the result of the condition would have been surprising and unexpected. Such is the case in the first Beatitude, “Μακάριοι οἱ πτωχοὶ τῷ πνεύματι - Blessed are the poor in the spirit.” The root of the first noun is the adjective that describes crouching or cowering. My mother made a distinction between people who are poor, and people she described as “dirt poor.”

This is not the word for what we might call the “working poor,” but it’s the word for what we might call “dirt poor.” It describes people who know that they have a spiritual problem, one rooted in sin. These are the kind of people who are repentant sinners, who come to church and call themselves “poor, miserable sinner,” and beg only for the mercy of God.

These are people who await and receive Absolution, who cherish baptism, who eagerly desires the Sacrament of the Altar, and who greatly appreciate those means of grace. It is well for preacher to remember that those are – by definition! – the kind of people who are your audience on Sunday morning. You are preaching to people who are in church, not to people who are not.

Those who are not are increasing, and those who are present are decreasing in most places. About one in ten Americans is in the pew on any given average Sunday, and if you do the math, nine out of ten are not. You are speaking to the one, not to the nine, who are not there to hear you. On every Sunday, and on this one in particular, speak to them as you would to faithful Christians.

The reason why people like that are called “blessed” is “ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν – because theirs is the Kingdom of the heavens.” I would avoid the common “for” and use “because,” which is much more descriptive, and which is most often the best translation for “ὅτι.” These people are called “blessed” for this very reason; because they are poor in spirit.

4. And “Μακάριοι οἱ πενθοῦντες, ὅτι αὐτοὶ παρακληθήσονται – blessed are the mourning, because they will be invited.” The first verb occurs ten times in the NT, indicates great sadness, and is often used in connection with the sort of mourning that takes place at a funeral. Some funerals are sadder than others, and some have a happy aspect, but there’s always mourning at the funeral.

The second verb occurs one hundred nine times in the NT, it is rendered “comforted” by every single English translation in front of me, but I’m not feeling it. The word means “to invite,” literally “to call to one’s side.” Happiness at the Christian funeral comes from our knowledge – some more certain than others – that the deceased has been invited into eternal paradise.

The cognate noun of the verb used here is “παράκλητος – paraclete,” a word used five times by John and only by him. Four times he uses it in his Gospel to refer to the Holy Spirit, and once in his first Epistle to refer to Jesus. The 1611 translators of the KJV certainly knew about the relationship of those two words, and they consistently render the noun “comforter.”

The verb has etymological roots in “to strengthen,” and “to comfort” had a different nuance then from now, and that is probably the reason why they went with “be comforted” here. Why do all the modern translations I’m looking at continue to use the word “comfort,” and not “invite,” which is the correct word? Sadly, we can only conclude; it is another case of LBT.

This is also the kind of language we would use when talking about a Christian funeral. The Holy Spirit works through the Word at the Christian funeral to comfort the people who are mourning the loss of a loved one with the knowledge that he was in Baptism invited into heaven. That all sounds pretty basic, and it is, but if you’ve ever been to a non-Christian funeral, it’s very different.

If you go to a funeral where the eulogy is the central component of the thing, you will note that there isn’t much comfort in listening to people sanitize and glorify the life of a poor, miserable sinner. If we were being honest, we would call that part of the service the Rite of Lying or some such thing. But of course, we don’t do eulogies, so it’s a moot point. Or is it?

It's a moot point, except that we get asked to make the eulogy part of the service a lot more than we used to, and the askers are becoming more demanding all the time. One of the problems is that the young have less respect for their elders, and for the religious beliefs of their parents, and for the wishes of their deceased parents, also regarding funerals, than they used to.

Children increasingly don't see a problem in injecting their own beliefs into the funeral service of their parents, who – if they were alive – would tell them to do what the pastor says to do for the funeral. For their part, the children often have no qualms telling the pastor what to do at the funeral of their lifelong Lutheran and now deceased parent, and it can get ugly.

Often, a gentle “that's not the way we do it” or “how about I read the obit after the benediction” is sufficient. But every once in a while, people will “insist,” and the potential for drama is high, and we don't need drama at the funeral of the lifelong Lutheran distracting us from the wonderful Good News of that glorious entrance into eternal paradise.

So, I told them that they could use the building before the Church Service and the insistent persons could eulogize her dead loved one. While they used the building for that before the Service of Christian Burial, I sat at the parsonage next door watching the Internet. When they were done using the building before the Church Service, Funeral Home Guy came over and got me.

Not in any hurry, I got ready and walked next door and did a Church Service; a funeral for the lifelong Lutheran. It's not the ideal, but drama was averted, and there are plenty of other things to have drama about when family gathers at the death of a loved one, and the funeral service should not be one of them. And we don't do eulogies.

People don't come to funerals like they used to. They come to visitation, which must be easier; stand in line and when it's your turn murmur, “so sorry for your loss,” or some such thing, and move on. Funerals must be harder. You have to take off work, and I think bosses aren't as likely to allow that as they used to be, and you will probably lose pay if you do, unless you're union.

People tell me that the modern funeral is often little about God and much about the deceased. When those people familiar with the situation speak of the eulogy, they use words like “painful,” and “they just keep going on and on.” My mother went to a Pentecostal funeral for a cousin, and commented on how bad it was, “one after another got up there and told lies.”

I think maybe people avoid Lutheran funerals for a different reason; we talk about death at the Lutheran funeral. We also talk about life, but if you aren't a Christian, then all you hear is the talk about death, and have you noticed how many times in the LSB service the liturgy makes it clear that Christians go to heaven, and as for the rest of you – there are only two possible outcomes.

5. Then, “Μακάριοι οἱ πραεῖς, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσιν τὴν γῆν – blessed are those who are angry at the right time, because they will inherit the earth.” Barclay is helpful here. He begins by noting that the adjective “πραῦς” is not easily translated into one English word. He further notes that the word “meek” is hardly one of the honourable (“u” not needed) words of life.

Nowadays it carries with it an idea of spinelessness, and subservience, and mean-spiritedness. It paints the picture of a submissive and ineffective creature.”

He goes on to note that the word is instead “one of the great Greek ethical words.” He further talks about how the word appears in Aristotle’s table of virtues as the mean between “excessive anger” and “excessive angerlessness,” and he ends up translating the verse “Blessed is the man who is always angry at the right time, and never angry at the wrong time.”

To be sure, sometimes Jesus gets angry, and always at the right time and for the right reason. Paul admonishes the Ephesians (4:26) with the imperative “be angry,” adding “but do not sin.” There are things about which we ought to be angry – injustice, sin, a warped society with warped morals, to name just a few of a plethora – and if we are not, then that’s a problem.

But wait, there’s more from Barclay. He talks about a secondary usage of the word,

the regular word for and which has been domesticated, which has been trained to obey the word of command, which has learned to answer the reins. It is the word for an animal which has learned to accept control.

That translation would be, he says, “Blessed is the man who has every instinct, every impulse, every passion under control...who is entirely self-controlled.” Such an idea comes up in other places in the Bible, notably when James uses the ship and rudder metaphor as well as the horse and bit metaphor to tell us that we ought to control our tongues.

Ellicott also references Aristotle, and renders the word, “the character of one who has the passion of resentment under control, and who is therefore tranquil and untroubled, as in part determining the popular use of the word, and in part also explaining the beatitude.” Many of the commentators go with “meek,” and what do you call that? Lazy Bible Commentator (LBC) Syndrome?

To have one’s head on straight is a good thing, and I know a lot of Christians whose heads are so attached. People who are in many and various ways unhinged tend to not be Christians, and we are speaking in general terms. We know and are comforted by the answers to life’s basic questions; how we got here, what we’re doing here, what happens when we leave here by death?

Knowing those things, the rest is just details. Not knowing those things, you wonder how you and all this came to be; am I really just another animal who evolved from another animal? Not knowing those things, you wonder if the Hokey Pokey is, in fact, what it’s all about, and if not, then what? And all your life you know about death, and you try not to think about it, sometimes successfully.

6. “Μακάριοι οἱ πεινῶντες καὶ διψῶντες τὴν δικαιοσύνην, ὅτι αὐτοὶ χορτασθήσονται – Blessed are those who are hungering and thirsting for righteousness, because they will be filled.” Both hunger and thirst were simply part of the landscape for many in first century Palestine, and for many historically. Not so much in our place and time, and you might have to explain

The picture painted here is of Christians who want to do good, who in fact have passion for it. It’s an apt description of most of the Christians I know. Their problem is that they often fail, the result of Original Sin. True righteousness is found only in The Cross. In preaching this text, I will probably work in a sacramental reference right...about...now.

7. “Μακάριοι οἱ ἐλεήμονες, ὅτι αὐτοὶ ἐλεηθήσονται – Blessed are the merciful, because they will receive mercy.” This we observe to be axiomatic. We give less slack to people who are constantly critical and judgmental of others than to people who are not. It’s the same concept expressed when Jesus says of judging that “the measure you give will be the measure that you get.”

The quality of mercy is often explicitly seen in the words and acts of Jesus. That act is often found in connection with the emotion commonly translated “compassion.” That emotion is almost always found in His dealings with the poor and downtrodden, and almost never found when He is interacting with the religious leaders. Dealing with them, He has – google “antonym mercy.”

8. Then, “Μακάριοι οἱ καθαροὶ τῇ καρδίᾳ, ὅτι αὐτοὶ τὸν Θεὸν ὄψονται – Blessed are the pure in heart, because they will see God.” The adjective “καθαρός” appears twenty-seven times in the NT, and it means “clean,” of something either having been physically washed, or being ceremonially clean, or – as is the case here – being ethically or morally pure.

Notably, the adjective for “pure” in the sense of perfectly clean, is “ἁγνός,” which occurs eight times in the NT, to refer, for example, to a virgin. But it does not appear in this verse. Here there seems to be a distinction between being morally pure and being perfect. Jesus knows that only He is perfect, and never says that of Christians, but we can be good people.

The verb in the second clause is “ὁράω,” one of several Greek words translated “to see.” It means to physically see with one’s eye, and to understand what is being seen, with an emphasis on that thing being seen. The time when we see God in this life is in the host and cup and perhaps in the person of the robed pastor. Later on, God will be seen more graphically.

Job seems to think that on the last day he will stand “in my flesh” and see God with his own eyes, and about that he is absolutely giddy. Paul talks about how we now see dimly, like we’re looking into a mirror, and the best mirrors in his day left a hazy image at best, and later, when we get to heaven – which is where the Christian is headed – we will see God more clearly.

9. “Μακάριοι οἱ εἰρηνοποιοί, ὅτι αὐτοὶ υἱοὶ Θεοῦ κληθήσονται – blessed are those who make peace, because they will be called sons of God.” The first noun is a compound of two Greek

words; “peace” and “to make.” Christianity is the actual religion of peace. The religion that insists on the conversion of all people to it, either that or we’ll have to kill you, isn’t.

I just completed about eight weeks talking to my Adult Bible Class about that religion. We came out of seminary with a cursory knowledge of it and others, and that was sufficient in 1985. But since then we have had a military presence in the Middle East, and terrorism came to the homeland in 2001, and it has cooled off a bit here, and over there ISIS has been defeated.

With all the misconceptions being bandied about by ignorant people, I decided to become less ignorant, so I read some books, did some research, and now I have a lot better handle on that religion than I did a few years ago. However unpleasant, we need to know those things, and our people need to know those things, and it’s my job to teach them about them.

Besides Adult Bible Class, I have addressed this from the pulpit. How can you preach on Matthew 11 and not address this from the pulpit, which I did last week? Having said that, we need to be careful that we are not constantly hammering another religion. Our religion is about bringing peace between sinful man and Holy God by means of preaching the Gospel, not by force of arms.

Christians don’t force other people to become Christians, nor – with a few exceptions – do they pass laws making church attendance compulsory. For one hundred fifty years after Henry VIII mucked church up in England, English were sometimes fined for skipping church. They skipped church because – depending on the current ruler – it was Anglican or Catholic and they were not.

In Medieval times, Church and State were separate, and if you wanted to go to church, you went to church, and if you didn’t want to go to church, you didn’t have to, much like our current state of affairs. The combining of Church and State beginning with Henry VII and afflicting the rest of Europe has been a bad thing for the Church and thank God for the First Amendment!

10. Then, “Μακάριοι οἱ δεδιωγμένοι ἕνεκεν δικαιοσύνης, ὅτι αὐτῶν ἐστὶν ἡ βασιλεία τῶν οὐρανῶν – Blessed are those having been persecuted on account of righteousness, because theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” The first verb is in the perfect tense; past action with results that endure into the future, and the second verb (is) is in the present tense, not the future.

The reference then is to those who have in the past been persecuted in the Church Militant, and who now reside in the Church Triumphant. Martyrdom was frequent for Christians in the Early Church, and it is almost unknown in the Christian West. But we have watched it going on in other places on the Internet and the TV for the past several years and should be familiar with the concept.

11. Then, “Μακάριοί ἐστε ὅταν ὀνειδίσωσιν ὑμᾶς – Blessed are you when they should insult you.” We note here a shift from the generalized “those” to the more specific as well as much more

personal second person plural “ὕμᾱς – you.” We also note that insults for Christians are not a matter of “if” but a matter of “when;” it’s going to happen, and if you speak, it happens a lot.

Included also on the list of things that will happen to Christians are persecution, speaking evil of us, and lying about us “ἐνεκεν ἐμοῦ – on account of me.” In verse ten, He had talked about being persecuted on account of righteousness, and now He talks about people being mean to us on His account, and those are important words.

People are mean to Christians every day, and often it has nothing to do with the fact that the person is a Christian. People are mean to the non-Christian as well, and to people who belong to other religions or no religion at all. In some cases, people are mean to Christians because the Christian is acting or saying something that has nothing to do with righteousness or on account of Jesus.

And then there are the Christians who are just plain obnoxious – they would call themselves “spiritual,” who seem to almost invite mean things being said and done about and to them. Those same Christians might be found sharing horror stories about how they were “persecuted” or “insulted” et al because of their religion, and it may be, but that’s not always why.

But it happens. From Jesus on, the Bible makes it clear that actual persecution is a very real possibility for those who follow the Christ. Peter wrote about that in the third chapter (v. 14) of his first Epistle, and he adds “for the sake of righteousness” – a causative clause – to his talk about suffering persecution. It’s an important distinction, and one that ought to be made.

12. When those things happen, do not be sad or bitter, but instead “χαίρετε καὶ ἀγαλλιᾶσθε, ὅτι ὁ μισθὸς ὑμῶν πολὺς ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς – rejoice and rejoice greatly, because your reward is great in the heavens.” As noted before, the Christian religion is a futuristic religion; what goes on here is important, but its importance pales in light of what goes on in eternity.

The futuristic nature of our religion is criticized by unbelievers, who might tell you that he wants to make this world a better place, the here and now. What he doesn’t say is that he has no hope for another world – heaven – and that his making the world is probably going to involve some of my money forcibly snatched out of my pocket and dropped into the hand of other people.

It’s a false dichotomy and go ahead and use that term and explain it. Logic is the science of correct thinking, and if people don’t know how to think correctly, then they need to be taught. I’ve been doing more of that lately, on Sunday morning and even to the children in Confirmation Class. Logic used to be taught in schools, but these days – some people pick it up, others don’t.

The false dichotomy is that we can either strive to make this world a better place or wait until we die and go to heaven, which is a very good place. The falsity is obvious; it is the Christians who actually strive to make this world a better place – we are salt – and those non-Christians who imitate us because they want everybody to know that “we are good people too!”

And finally, He points out that this is nothing new, “οὕτως γὰρ ἐδίωξαν τοὺς προφῆτας τοὺς πρὸ ὑμῶν – for indeed they persecuted the prophets before you” and they had. In fact, were there any OT prophets who were *not* persecuted, et al? Of the Twelve, eleven died a martyr’s death. Only John the Apostle died from natural causes.

Hymns

LSB 677 – For All the Saints

LSB 932 – Jesus Sat with His Disciples

LSB 982 – Blest Are They

Anything from the *Church Triumphant* section

Sermon Titles

Blessed, Past, Present, Future

Who Are These People?

The Beatific Vision

We Understand

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa