

4th Sunday after Epiphany
February 1, 2026
Pastor Jasper Sellnow

Theme: Upside down blessings.

Text: Matthew 5:1-12

Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him,² and he began to teach them.

He said:

- 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 be shown 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 because of righteousness,
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

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.

The Word of God we'll consider today is the Gospel from Matthew chapter 5. Let's begin with prayer:

*I am trusting you Lord Jesus, never let me fall. I am trusting you forever and for all.
Amen.*

“I’m too blessed to be stressed!” You ever hear someone say that? Or see it on a bumper sticker? We get the message someone’s trying to convey with that statement, right? Why be stressed when you have God’s blessings! I suppose that can be a pious way to think about dealing with stressful things in this life – count your blessings, and any stress should start melting away. But in reality I think that’s easier said than done. Too blessed to be stressed? I know I’m blessed... beyond measure. But what God has done for me and

given me doesn't always change how I feel in the moment and how the circumstances of my life might test me each day.

If I were picking blessings I might have very different things in mind than what God describes today. "Bless me with money God so I don't have to worry about finances. Bless me and my family with health so we don't have to have so many doctors visits or funerals. Bless me with an easy fight against temptation so I don't stumble each day. Bless me with peace in this world so that I don't have to fight the battles against culture that can so easily wear a person down." I would love to have blessings that removed every reason for stress in this life by getting rid of the things that cause the stress to begin with!

And God looks down from heaven on me... just as Jesus did on his dear disciples on that mountainside in Galilee long ago... he looks on me and loves me and lays before me and you today blessings to be sure – but what many might see as upside down blessings. Let's briefly consider these blessings and see how God's upside down blessings offer just the right remedy for our lives as believers.

And believers are the audience for the words before us today. When Jesus preached what is thought of by many as his most famous sermon – the Sermon on the Mount – which covers all of Matthew chapters 5, 6, and 7... when he preached this sermon he was preaching to believers. Matthew tells us: **Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.**

Jesus certainly spoke words to unbelievers many times in his ministry, and God's Word is full of rich teachings that cover the entire plan of salvation from beginning to end – words that are needed for people to know their sin, their Savior, and the only way to heaven through faith in Jesus. But here in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks words to those who were already his people, already his disciples. And that helps us make sense of this sermon that is so filled with law and direction for Christian living. Only a believer can understand such encouragement in the proper light. And that's because God has blessed his believers with faith and an attitude that desires to live out that faith day after day.

It's in this context that Jesus begins his sermon with eight statements of blessing that apply to his disciples, and that includes us! And please note – these "Beatitudes" as they are known, statements of blessing – they do not tell us how to become blessed, rather they describe the blessedness that already belongs to all believers in Christ. They don't describe eight kinds of believers, they mention eight ways in which all Christians are blessed! All Christians are poor in spirit. They all mourn and are meek. They all hunger and thirst for righteousness and are merciful and pure in heart. They are peacemakers and are persecuted for righteousness.

How are you blessed in all these ways? Well, let's walk through each of these eight Beatitudes.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Does this mean poor people get blessed and rich people left behind? Hardly. Note Jesus says **blessed are the poor in spirit.** Those who are spiritually poor, who bring nothing to the table, have no credit in their account... they are precisely the ones who are fit for the kingdom of heaven. Believers are blessed because they realize they completely depend on God. I know you can relate. You're just like me – you look in the mirror and see a person totally incapable of earning God's favor to say nothing of his pardon. We know the good we ought to do... we know the evil we ought to avoid... and yet we fail day after day to live it out perfectly. We are poor indeed. But for poor sinners such as us Christ came. St. Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians: **you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.** **2 Corinthians 8:9.** Yes you are blessed in your spiritual poverty, because Christ has given you the riches his forgiveness.

The second Beatitude: **Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.** Why do believers mourn? Well we mourn for many reasons I suppose... painful trials, the loss of loved ones to death... but as Christians all such mourning has to do with sin. And ultimately that is what troubles us most. We are grieved by the sinful things we say and do. We are not okay with it even though we know Christ died for it all. We strive for perfection and when we fall short, which is every day, it hurts us to know we have failed our God and abused his grace. But how does God bless such mourners? **They will be comforted.** "As a called servant of Christ and by his authority I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." "May this true body and blood of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ strengthen and keep you in the true faith until life everlasting, go in peace, your sins are forgiven." Do you crave that comfort as much as I do? If that was all I heard each week at church it would be enough for me. And God gives it freely. What a blessing!

The third Beatitude: **Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.** The world praises bold and confident people. And even if the world might acknowledge that those who rule and conquer by force are often in the wrong and are trampling the needy underfoot... well, the world still bows to such people and is often forced to accept their domination. But Jesus says it is the meek... the gentle... the humble... the lowly that will inherit the earth. When Christ returns it will be to recreate the world – a new heavens and new earth as Scripture puts it – and God's believing people will inherit it. Not through force of will or violent war or selfish domination... but through the gift of God that is ours in the promises of Christ. Peter put it this way in his second letter: **in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells.** **2 Peter 3:13** And so we live our lives as Christians not insisting on every right, but yielding our rights to serve the good of others... we speak God's truth not like a sledgehammer looking to destroy, but with gentleness and respect... speaking the truth to be sure, but speaking it in love. And God says when we are meek in such a way we are blessed.

The fourth Beatitude: **Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.** Jesus told his followers **I am the bread of life.** **John 6:48** He also

said **whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. John 4:14** This is how God describes the nourishment our souls receive from him. We are fed. We are forgiven. Our parched souls are satisfied as the Good Shepherd leads us beside still waters and feeds us in the green pastures of the gospel. And when we hunger for such things God says we are blessed. Because he will never fail to satisfy. When we delight to make weekly worship non-negotiable we are blessed. When we add to that Sunday feast by sticking around for Bible study and Sunday School we are blessed. When we gather in our homes around an open Bible with God's Word on our lips and a prayer in our hearts we are blessed. For God has promised to fill us.

The fifth Beatitude: **Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.** It is astounding if when you read through the four Gospels how often this theme arises. Jesus teaches on it over and over again. He tells a parable of an unmerciful servant who refuses to forgive a fellow servant's debt, even though he had already been forgiven a greater debt himself. He eats dinner with a Pharisee and extols the Christian love of a sinful woman who's understanding of God's mercy prompted her to love more than those around her as she honored her Savior and washed his feet with her tears. He even gives us a simple petition that we still pray all the time in the Lord's Prayer that asks God to **forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.** Showing mercy is not a weakness like some in the world might contend. Giving grace to people who don't deserve it is not foolish, it is divine, and when we do such things we simply reflect whose children we really are. We don't show mercy in order to obtain it, we show it because we already have it... and now we are, as Luther once said, simply beggars showing other beggars where to find bread.

The sixth Beatitude: **Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.** In Psalm 24 King David wrote: **Who may ascend the mountain of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? The one who has clean hands and pure heart... Psalm 24:3-4a** You and I know there is only one person in history who can stake such a claim. Jesus Christ our Lord lived a holy life and earned the right to stand in the holy place at God the Father's side. So how then can Jesus speak of his believers here as **pure in heart?** Well, Jesus took care of that too didn't he. Consider what the writer to Hebrews says later in the New Testament: **brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus... let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings. Hebrews 10:19, 22** Yes through faith in Jesus we have hearts that are pure like Jesus. And so we know we will see God face to face and live forever at his side, because where Jesus is, we will be also.

The seventh Beatitude tells us: **Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.** Will we always have peace in this world? Well of course not. Jesus tells us in his Word: **I have not come to bring peace but a sword...** speaking of the conflict his Word often brings as people reject us and God's Word that we seek to share. But does this mean we give up on bringing peace? Well of course not! We know that peace with God is possible only through faith in Christ, and so we do all we can to offer that peace to people as we share the hope the gospel offers and trust the power the gospel has to change hearts and lives. And when we share the gospel and bring this heavenly

peace to the lives of others we are doing what our brother Jesus did his whole life through... and so yes we are blessed and called children of God right along with him.

And that brings us to our final Beatitude, and the last one is the longest... Jesus said: **Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.**

As we bring the message of peace with God through faith in Jesus to a world that is lost, we should expect that many will reject such a message and us along with it. This is nothing new. God's people of the past dealt with such troubles too. Jesus said we'd carry a cross to follow him, it shouldn't shock us that the crosses we bear are painful. St. Peter put it well in his first letter where he wrote: **Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ.** 1 Peter 4:12-13

Yes we are blessed even when we suffer. In fact we'll find ourselves – inexplicably – rewarded for such suffering one day. God's Word promises here that his believers will be rewarded in heaven, not by merit, but by grace, and be given gifts in addition to the eternal salvation already bestowed on all who die in faith. What a gracious God we have who offers such encouragement to us in the face of the fiery trials of life, so that we do not grow weary and give up.

Do you see how upside down all these blessings are? Totally different than what the world would call blessings. Often very different than what we would ask for as blessings. The Beatitudes remind us of the blessedness that belongs to all believers in Christ, they also remind us of the greater enjoyment of that blessedness that is ours when we strive to live out our faith to the fullest. And they remind us finally of the blessed condition that will follow us from this life into the life to come. What a God we have who turns the world upside down to bless people like you and me who have no reason to expect anything from him, except for the sake of Christ.

Look to Christ, brothers and sisters, and find in his holy life your only righteousness. Look to Christ and find in his perfect death your pardon and peace. Look to Christ and see his empty grave as the promise of your empty tomb one day too. And filled with such a vision of your Savior see yourself then as he sees you... as he declares you to be today in his Word... you are blessed. The blessings may be upside down to be sure – but they are real and they will follow you all your life as you walk by faith nearer each day to your heavenly goal. Amen.