



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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THE TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## Do You See What I See? I John 4:7-13; Matthew 5:8

There are times after preaching a sermon that I am left with more questions than with answers I have given. The Gospel has a way of speaking to you clearly and concisely at one moment and then sneaking around behind you to whisper yet other questions that you have not yet considered. In that way, the Gospel remains alive and lively, always urging us to think and wonder deeper even as it invites us to the simple affirmation of “Jesus is Lord.”

Last week I mentioned that some people believe that if you could ever live as the Sermon on the Mount calls us to live, then you would truly be a follower of Christ, no doubts about it. On the other hand, there are many people who think that the teachings included in chapters five through seven of Matthew’s gospel are impossible to live in the way Jesus presents them. Jesus is offering us a goal to shoot for knows that we could never actually reach it. Expecting us to react perfectly in every situation, to be happy no matter the circumstances, and to do things like love our enemies and turn the other cheek are simply asking more than we mere mortals can provide. Ideal or impossibility? Which do you think the Sermon on the Mount is?

Or is there another possibility? Lutheran pastor David Lose suggests that there is a “trap” in the Sermon on the Mount and specifically in the Beatitudes. This is the trap: we tend to believe in the Beatitudes—all of those “Blessed are you if’s . . .”—that Jesus is establishing a set of conditions for blessing instead of actually blessing the people who are listening to him. In other words, instead of hearing, “Blessed are you who hunger and thirst after righteousness,” we think, “Am I hungry enough for righteousness? Do I crave justice? Do I care enough about doing what is right all of the time to warrant Jesus blessing me?” More often than not, the answer is no and we do not feel worthy of Jesus’ blessing.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>David Lose, “God Bless You,” *Dear Working Preacher* (January 23, 2011); available online at: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1542>.

If so, we are wrong! Rather than setting up conditions under which Jesus will reluctantly grant us blessing if we jump through all of his hoops, in the Beatitudes, Jesus is “just plain blessing people.”<sup>2</sup>

"Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
"Blessed are those who mourn,  
"Blessed are the meek,  
"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
"Blessed are the merciful,  
"Blessed are the pure in heart,  
"Blessed are the peacemakers,  
"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake,  
"Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.”

But do you feel blessed? Dr. Lose reminds us that back in the Middle Ages, whenever someone sneezed, anyone around them quickly responded with, “God bless you” for fear the person had the plague. We do the same today for a variety of reasons: to ward off illness or disease or even death. The “God bless you’s” that we utter are not offered out of generosity or for anything good; they are spoken out of fear.<sup>3</sup> Too many times we offer a “God bless you” out of fear rather than a sense of joy and well-being for someone else.

Sometimes when we hear the Beatitudes, we become fearful rather than happy because we think we can never measure up, we can never attain the level of spiritual commitment to earn God’s blessing. Yet, scripture teaches us that God blesses us because God loves us. And God loves us, not because of what we do. God loves us because of who we are—God’s children! So bless you! Be blessed—be happy—experience that inner joy of knowing that God loves you and wants you to enjoy the goodness of life.

Today I want to offer you a blessing and to borrow Jesus’ words to do so. Ready, here it is: “Blessed are you pure in heart, for you shall see God!”

“Are you kidding?” you ask. We all know that none of us are pure of heart. How can we be? There are too many irritants, too many temptations, too many doubts and uncertainties for anyone to be “pure of heart.” It sounds as if Jesus really is asking the impossible of us.

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<sup>2</sup>Lose.

<sup>3</sup>Lose.

Remember, Jesus is not asking or telling us to do anything. He sat on the hillside beside the sea and looked over the crowd before him. What do you think he saw? When you hear Jesus say over and over, “Blessed are you . . .” to whom do you think he is speaking? Frederick Buechner imagines that if we were to describe the kinds of people Jesus was talking about in his sermon, they would be likely be “spiritual hero men and women of impeccable credentials morally, spiritually, humanly, and every which way.” And then he adds, “If so, we would be wrong.”<sup>4</sup>

Jesus is not speaking to “spiritual giants.” He is talking to the poor, the mournful, the meek, and the hungry, the people who have no power or standing or, quite frankly, much to be hopeful about at all. Jesus is not asking them if they deserve to be blessed. He is telling them that they are blessed. God bless you!

So, God bless you, you pure in heart folks. You are going to see God!

Still not convinced? Buechner explains who these people really are whom Jesus is blessing. Of the “pure in heart,” he says, “Not the totally pure, but the ‘pure in heart,’ to use Jesus’ phrase, the ones who may be as shopworn and clay-footed as the next one, but have somehow kept some inner freshness and innocence intact.”<sup>5</sup>

You don’t have to be perfect to receive God’s blessing nor do you have to be perfectly pure—or even 99.99% pure. We are not soap, but we are the people whom God has washed clean enough to warrant his blessing.

I know because I have seen your blessing. I have seen firsthand that God blesses you because I have seen God in your midst. Have you seen it? Have you seen what I have seen?

I saw it last weekend—several times, in fact. During our memorial liturgy when we remembered our dear friends who have died, some of us became visibly moved and understandably fragile. What did you do? You put your arms around those people. You touched them lightly. You prayed for them. You hugged them. There was a purity in that moment and I saw God right in the middle of you all.

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<sup>4</sup>Frederick Buechner, “Beatitudes” in *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1988), 19.

<sup>5</sup>Buechner.

I saw it the day before. You were working and talking, laughing and singing. You were having a great time doing something for people you may never meet. You were helping someone who either needs help now or will soon. I saw the blankets and pillows, the soups and cookies, the landscaped yards and gardens, the fresh porches and sidewalks, the smiles, the tears, the joy. There was a purity in what happened during Lakeside Involved and I saw God among you, you pure-hearted people!

I saw God again on Monday when some of you were able to donate blood in order to save someone else's life. Imagine, you made it possible for someone to live another day in order to be blessed by God. Blessed are you!

I saw it two more times last week when thirteen excited children popped off of our bus and ran into the building to be tutored and loved and cared for as they are every week.

I so often see God in the midst of what you are doing, not only here, but at home, at work, at play. You are a loving, caring, generous bunch of folks who take seriously God's call to follow Jesus. We do not always get it right, but we are trying to stay on the path. Does God want more from us? I am certain that he does. I think Jesus was trying to help us see that we are sometimes poor in spirit, that we ought to hunger and thirst for righteousness, that we should be meek and merciful and make peace. God knows that we mourn and are persecuted at times and struggle with how in the world to be what God wants us to be. Nevertheless, God blesses us!

We are not pure people. We are human through and through. We have feet of clay and sometimes our hearts are even a little small and stony, but, as Buechner says, we still have some "inner freshness and innocence" that keep us alive to the world. We will be blessed with seeing God in the midst of it all. Indeed, there are angels among us . . . and they are you!

God bless you . . . and answer that prayer you have been praying for so long. God bless you . . . and say no to the thing you want but know you do not need. God bless you . . . with the awareness of right and wrong to get along in this world. God bless you . . . when you feel like God has abandoned you or you aren't even certain if God is real at all. God bless you—make you happy—on those days when you think you are alone and forgotten. God bless you when you are asked to part with your hard-earned money and you do so because you feel that you should. God bless you . . . because you keep trying to be a follower of Christ and don't give up. God bless you . . . because

you aren't really sure anymore what it means to be a follower of Jesus. God bless you . . . because God loves you. God bless you . . . because you are God's child. God bless you . . . because you still have that "inner freshness and innocence" which keeps you pure in heart. God bless you . . . when you pay attention to the world around you so that you can see God.

Have you been trapped? Did you think you could get off the hook, avoid the blessing of God because you don't measure up or do enough or believe enough? You have been caught and you can't get away for the generosity of God has no limits. You are blessed because God loves you and God is with you.

I pray that we will all leave here today no longer wondering whether or not we measure up to God's standards in order to be blessed by God. I pray that we will leave here today eager to get outside and open our eyes to all of the wonders of life God has given to us already as blessing. I pray that you will begin to see more and more of the pure moments of life that are given to us as gifts from God who loves us more than we can ever imagine. Do you see what I see? I see a group of pure-in-heart people who are about to see God at work in the world and in themselves as never before. God bless you!

November 12, 2017

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Church words like faithfulness, forgiveness, love, and gratitude play easily on our tongues, O God. When we begin to discover the power and potential of those words, however, we realize we cannot be glib or careless with them. These are words of life for us and we learn to treat them as special. So this morning, O God, we can say that we are truly grateful for your faithfulness toward us, for the forgiveness you frequently offer, and for the love which has changed us altogether.

On this weekend when we remember the unnumbered people who have served our country bravely and sacrificially, we offer gratitude for our veterans and for what they have done for us. We ask your blessing on them and their families and we pray that we will never handle the gift of freedom lightly or unadvisedly, but will cherish it and share it with others whenever we can.

We also realize, O God, that freedom does not mean safety. We grieve today for the lives lost last Sunday while people like us were worshiping you. We pray for their families and community and for the ones who are still fighting for life. We pray as well for the family of the young man who chose hatred and violence as a way of life. We pray that anyone who struggles with anger and a desire to hurt others will seek and find help. We pray that we will find ways to remain safe without shutting out the very people who need a loving fellowship. We pray that we will find a way to diminish the violence that plagues our communities and our world.

Grant us all the help that we need, O God, whether it be for illnesses of the body, the mind, or the spirit. Work within us to restore us to wholeness and teach us patience as we move in that direction. We pray also for a sense of our partnership with you as we seek to cure our ills. Make us aware that we are your children, created by your love, and given the gift of life.

Hear our prayers, O Lord, and open our eyes to see them realized. Sharpen our vision and broaden our view to see the full scope of your work in the world. And invite us to join you in this work so that others may see in us the love of Christ offered to them. All of these things and much more we pray in his blessed name. Amen.