

Sunday, February 1, 2026

Sermon: "So Blessed"

Matthew 5:1-12 NRSV

Where we are going in today's message: Blessings aren't door prizes handed out by God.

One week from today, there's going to be a little football game in Santa Clara, California. Standing astride the 50-yard line in Levi's Stadium, a senior NFL referee will toss a coin. Moments later, he'll blow his whistle - and Super Bowl LX will be under way.

The best players from two of the best teams in football this year, the Seattle Seahawks and the New England Patriots, will pound each other for several bone-jarring hours. When the dust finally settles, one team will emerge the victor. The players of that team will embrace, pound one another on the back, and probably dump a barrel of Gatorade on their coach. Every player on the winning team will walk away with a massive gold ring and a bonus check for \$178,000.

As for the opposing team, there will be no confetti, no back-thumping hugs, no victory party. Just a slow, dejected walk through the tunnel to the place that will be known throughout the next year as the Losers' Locker Room. The thrill of victory, the agony of defeat. That's football.

Don't feel too sorry for the losers, though. Their Super Bowl consolation prize is \$103,000 each. Not bad for a few hours' work!

Neither team will have anything to be ashamed of. Just getting to the Super Bowl is no mean feat. Even if this is the only Super Bowl game they ever play, it will probably be mentioned in their obituary.

"Winning isn't everything," remarked the legendary Green Bay Packers coach, Vince Lombardi ... "It's the only thing." But isn't there something a little off about that message? It works just fine as a motivational sign on the locker room wall, but consider this: If winning is the only thing, then what about the losers? Do they get no credit at all from their coach? All their hard work, their grit, their determination — is it truly for nothing? Do they end up like vanquished gladiators in the Roman Colosseum? Thumbs down from the emperor, a swift strike of the sword and their miserable lives are history.

While we may wisely shake our heads at the astounding, ethical tunnel vision behind Lombardi's words - and wonder how grown men can become so obsessed with what is, after all, only a game - haven't we all absorbed some of that all-or-nothing thinking ourselves?

Everybody loves a winner, and so do we. Most of us would much rather win - bringing home the jumbo gold ring in the form of performance reviews, report cards, investment returns and sales reports - than admit to having come in second. Somehow, an achievement that may be perfectly fine in and of itself looks like abject failure when measured against the higher achievement of someone else.

There's one thing you're likely to see near the end of the Super Bowl coverage. In those frenzied moments after the game, some sportscaster is going to stick a microphone in the face of one of the victorious players and ask, "How does it feel?" (Come on now, America's eager to know.)

It's very likely one player or another will utter these words: "I'm so blessed." Blessed to be a pro football player, blessed to be on the winningest team, blessed to have caught the long pass, blessed to have bagged the 55-yard field goal, blessed to have made the crucial block, blessed to have sacked the quarterback 15 yards behind the line of scrimmage. (Sounds a bit like a humble brag, doesn't it?)

Along with the answer, "I'm so blessed," comes a further question - "Blessed by whom?" - which is not so likely to be voiced outright, but whose implications are plain to see.

Blessed by God, of course. For doesn't God agree with us and all our culture that winning isn't everything, it's the only thing? Doesn't God bless all winners? And doesn't God curse every miserable, low-down loser?

If that's really true, then God help us all!

Fortunately, that's not the way God operates. Not at all. And how do we know that? We know it by listening to the pep talk Coach Jesus gives his disciples in Matthew 5.

On a hillside in Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth sits down to teach. In sitting down, he's following the tradition of all great rabbis, who sat rather than stood when imparting their greatest wisdom. Gathered around Jesus and his disciples is a motley crew of misfits and malcontents. They're ordinary working folk - shepherds, farmers, fishermen, potters, weavers, shopkeepers. We might call them "blue-collar workers" today, people who work hard for a living, but still "owe their soul to the company store."

More than that, these people live in the sort of system modern sociologists label an honor/shame society. Elaborate purity laws separate the largest portion of that society from the tiny, privileged elite. In first-century Palestine, there are so many ways of becoming ritually unclean that only the most meticulous practitioners of religion - the Pharisees - have the slightest chance of succeeding, and even they worry about not measuring up. Most of Jesus' crowd that day are carrying around huge burdens of guilt, a result of the stifling honor/shame system.

Jesus looks out over that crowd of common, salt-of-the-earth people and sees a dull, beaten-down look in nearly every eye. He opens his mouth to speak, and some of the most famously reassuring words in all the Bible come out:

"You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and God's rule.

"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.

"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.

"You're blessed when you've worked up a good appetite for God. God's food and drink is the best meal you'll ever eat.

"You're blessed when you care. At the moment of being 'carefull,' you find yourselves cared for.

"You're blessed when you get your inside world — your mind and heart — put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

"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."

If those words don't sound familiar, they come from the modern Scripture paraphrase, *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson. But you get the idea. To the poor masses of Galilee and Judea, Jesus' gracious words fall like spring rain upon parched desert sand. "Come," they say to their friends afterwards, "come with me and listen to a preacher who doesn't tell us what terrible sinners we are - but who shows us how to joyfully live better, all the same!"

The words of the Beatitudes are so familiar to most of us, at least in the traditional version, that we may not realize how revolutionary they are. Each statement begins with the Greek word makarios, sometimes translated "blessed" and sometimes "happy," but the meaning isn't completely covered by either of those English words.

The great Scottish Bible scholar William Barclay explains this passage:

"That joy which has its secret within itself, that joy which is serene and untouched, and self-contained, that joy which is completely independent of all the chances and the changes of life. ... The beatitudes speak of that joy which seeks us through our pain, that joy which sorrow and loss, and pain and grief, are powerless to touch, that joy which shines through tears, and which nothing in life or death can take away ... the serene and untouched joy which comes from walking forever in the company and in the presence of Jesus Christ."

There's a resolute certainty to this teaching that provides the greatest comfort. Jesus isn't just voicing a pious hope. He is assuring his followers of something that is already true in God's eyes, and that will become increasingly evident as the heavenly plan unfolds.

Some have suggested that makarios should be translated "congratulations." Let's try it out: "Congratulations, you poor in spirit, go pick yourselves up. You are no longer destitute in body or mind." "Congratulations, mourners. You're already seeing signs of new life." And so on.

“Congratulations, losers!” the sports commentator says to the losing Super Bowl team ... NOT! It’s hard to imagine anyone uttering those words in anything but a sarcastic sense. But for Jesus, there’s no contradiction at all, and he’s being anything but sarcastic.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit ...” The expression means something like, “Blessed are the broken-down in spirit,” hardly the sort of people most would consider blessed by God.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” The Greek word translated “to mourn” literally means “to crouch or cower,” to be so beaten down by life’s trials, you can hardly get up.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Meekness doesn’t sound to most of us like a positive quality, but the Greek has more of a three-dimensional meaning. Meekness, as Matthew uses the term, is more like a quiet, inner strength seen in those who seek moderation in all things and exercise self-control.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” How much do you want goodness? Jesus wants to know. Do you want it as much as a starving person wants food, as a dying person yearns for a drink of water?

“Blessed are the merciful ... Blessed are the pure in heart ... Blessed are the peacemakers ...” The list goes on. Each one turns the wisdom of the world - then and now - completely on its head.

Who are the movers and shakers in the reign of God, you may wonder? Not the ones you think, replies Jesus.

The race goes not to the swift, the one who waves the hand with the flashy gold ring or cashes the fat prize check. Rather, the race goes to the one who’s best able to trust the promises of God in Jesus Christ.

How many times have you heard a friend say, “I’m so blessed”? That exclamation is usually followed by a recitation of shiny things that deliver feelings of satisfaction - prosperity, good health, a brood of beaming children. Some people even say “I’m so blessed” with big-ticket consumer items in mind - a shiny new car or a vacation home. Is God really the giver of such “blessings”? Not if you define blessing the way Jesus does! Jesus has a peculiar idea (to our minds)

of who's entitled to say, "I'm so blessed." To him, it's the poor in spirit, the bereaved, the meek, and all the rest.

To our Lord, blessings sound less like things, and more like a healthy relationship with God. That relationship - paradoxically - thrives even amid suffering, deprivation and difficult times!

Blessings aren't door prizes God doles out to the faithful. They're more like life preservers God throws to desperate souls struggling to keep their heads above water.

You've heard the letters "SOS," and you surely know they are a universal distress signal. That three-letter sequence was chosen more than a century ago because, in Morse code, it was the easiest and most recognizable message for a telegraph operator to send out swiftly, again and again, from a sinking ship. There's an urban legend that SOS began as an acronym for "Save our souls," but that's all it is, a legend without basis in fact. Dot-dot-dot, dash-dash-dash, dot-dot-dot. The sequence was chosen for its simplicity because there's no mistaking it for any other telegraphic message.

To be sure, the "Save our souls" explanation is more colorful and romantic. But even though it's not true in telegraphy, it does happen to be true of the blessedness Jesus is talking about. When we're at the end of our rope - when we're poor in spirit, mourning, meek, persecuted for the sake of righteousness, or suffering in any other way - God can be trusted to throw us the life preserver we need: salvation in this life or the next.

More than that, what's true for us as individuals is even more true for our lives together as a community of sometimes struggling, hurting people. Never forget, Jesus doesn't speak the Beatitudes to any one individual. He speaks those blessed words to the whole community of the faithful.

Beatitudes belong in the plural! That's how they make the most sense. In tough times, we do well to turn to one another, to lean on our neighbors, to "rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep," as Paul reminds us in Romans 12:15. If we do, we're very likely to find others who've overcome similar difficulties, borne similar burdens, and lived to tell the tale.

It's not a matter of "I'm so blessed." It never is, as Jesus sees it. Instead, it's "We're so blessed!" Blessed because of the Christian community, the church that is the gift of a loving and generous Lord. It is only in this sort of gathering - on a sunny hillside in the Holy Land or in your own sanctuary - that we discover how blessed we truly are! Alleluia, Amen.