

**Beatitude**  
**4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)**  
**(Mt 5:1-12)**

The reference point for any discussion of Christian holiness is Jesus' "Sermon on the Mount" (Mt 5-7). This is the first and most important of the five teaching sections in Matthew's Gospel. In three short chapters, St. Matthew distills the essence of Jesus' teaching on what it means to be Christian. Jesus' teaching is vivid, fresh, humorous, and distinctive. Jesus has an absolutely unique message about human life. We will be hearing the Sermon in the Mount in the next several Sunday Gospels.

Like a New Moses, Jesus goes up the mountain, and like Moses he brings God's revelation to man. Without abolishing the earlier law taught by Moses, Jesus supersedes it and brings it to its full perfection in himself.

The Sermon can be divided into three parts. The first section (Mt 5) addresses morality, "right and wrong." Here Jesus expounds some of the 10 Commandments. The second section (Mt 6:1-18) explains the central focus of Christian spirituality, which are prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Finally (Mt 6:19-7:28), the sermon sets forth various maxims defining the Christian way of life, which all center on a total trust in God's providence.

Moses expounded the Law of God (the "Torah") in a lengthy section of the Bible beginning in the book of Exodus and extending through Leviticus into the book of Numbers. It is then recalled and further expanded in the book of Deuteronomy ("Second Law"). "This Torah" articulated an entire social structure, legal framework, worship system, and way of life. And it all began with a prologue called the "Decalogue," or "Ten Commandments" (Ex 20:1-17). Likewise, when St. Matthew expounds the central teachings of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, it all begins with a prologue called the "Beatitudes," which is our Gospel today.

The beatitudes list eight qualities that test and perfect the soul: poverty of spirit, sorrow, meekness, hunger for righteousness, mercy, purity of heart, peace, and persecution. These are "blessed," and attain the good things of God: His Kingdom, comfort, the earth, satisfaction, mercy, and divine adoption.

In his great philosophical work on ethics, Aristotle begins by articulating the universal truth that "all men desire to be happy" (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 4). It is for this that they pursue knowledge and activity. His next sentence is, "but with regard to what happiness is men differ." Christians differ greatly.

In the Beatitudes, Jesus answers the question of happiness in a way that no philosopher ever did. Jesus teaches that true happiness is not found *in the pursuit of happiness!* But neither is Jesus saying that happiness is found in being unhappy. Jesus doesn't use the word "happiness" at all. It is strange to realize, but it is true: Jesus did not come to earth to teach men how to be "happy," or show them the path to happiness! Instead, he spoke of "beatitude," being *blessed*. None of the beatitudes of Jesus describes "happy" experiences—they are instead things that in this world are a burden.

Man's highest fulfillment is to be "blessed" by God, not simply "happy." Christian ethics is lived from a supernatural point of view. Its point of departure is nothing this world can offer, and its final goal is nothing in this world. Both are found in heaven, which is beyond this world. Christians therefore do not pursue "happiness" as the world or philosophers can ever define it. We pursue "Beatitude," the state of being in God's favor, in His grace, loved by Him, blessed by Him. Heaven is the "beatific" vision, a union with God and face-to-face vision of Him in a state of total blessedness.

From the outset of this sermon, Jesus explains that Christian life is *paradoxical*. It's not that the things of this world are evil, but nothing in this world is sufficient. All the goods of this world (i.e., all natural happiness) have to be transcended by a new perspective. According to this beatific perspective, to be "persecuted for the sake of righteousness" is a greater 'happiness' than having riches and an easy life. And to be in a state of mourning or poverty of spirit (emptiness, longing, loneliness, loss) puts one ahead of those futilely trying to satisfy every hunger and medicate every pain. Paradoxically, suffering and sacrifice enlarge and open up the human spirit to the one thing that alone can fill it: God Himself. What for the non-believer leads to despair, for the Christian becomes an occasion of grace and *blessing*. To be filled with God, we have to be empty of other things.

The beatitudes are paradoxical, and they introduce the entire sermon of Jesus' teachings. Everything about the mysterious "Kingdom of God" will be paradoxical to human thinking. Typical ways of acting and normal human values will be judged and overturned by Christ. A Christian lives in the world, but not from the ground up, according to human thinking (according to "flesh and blood"). He lives in the world from heaven down, according to the Spirit (cf. Jn 3:3-6; 6:60-63).

The Beatitudes also reveal another characteristic of Jesus' teaching. It always has reference to Jesus himself as "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." The "book" of Christianity is not so much something written down, it is Jesus Christ himself. What Matthew has written down from Jesus' teachings, reveals Jesus! When Jesus gives the Beatitudes and charts out the path that leads to eternal life, he is essentially charting out *himself*, his own inner identity. The beatitudes are a self-description. As the Catechism states, "The Beatitudes depict the countenance of Jesus Christ and portray his charity" (1717).

Therefore, Christian holiness is not simply a set of precepts and maxims and philosophical principles written in a book, such as Aristotle's great *Nicomachean Ethics*. Nor is it even the divine precepts of Mosaic Law that make for a wise and just society. Christian holiness is first and always a conformity and union with Christ. This is what is meant by the "Kingdom of God." No one would ever think to say such a thing of other great philosophers and guides. Our "book" and "constitution" is a living person, who is at once fully human and divine. Jesus doesn't just merely show us the way, he *is* the way. The great saints are not simply people who "kept the laws"; they are people in whom we can recognize the identity of Christ: poor in spirit, hungry for God, merciful, meek, pure of heart, persecuted.

Heaven is not human happiness. Heaven is the joy of God's Beatitude. And the promise of heaven is already ours now through Christ. On the great day of judgment, after separating the sheep from the goats based on what people did or failed to do for the least of the brethren – i.e., for those who were poor, who mourned, who suffered injustice, who were persecuted – the Son of God will invite his sheep into *Beatitude*: "Come, you who are *blessed* by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world" (Mt 25:34).