

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

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Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

Matthew 5:1-12

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Years A, B, and C - All Saints Day, Text: Matthew 5:1-12
Year A - All Saints Day, Text: Matthew 5:1-12

These verses constitute the introductory section of what is referred to as “the Sermon on the Mount,” a title inserted by translators, but not included in the Greek text. The term “blessed” surfaces nine times in Verses 3–12.

It is helpful to understand that the concept of “blessings and curses” is contained in the final section of the Covenant God made with the Israelites at Matthew Sinai (see Deuteronomy 27:11–28:68). The sections that have to do with “curses” are quite brutal (v. 27:11–26; 28:15–68). Furthermore, while the concept of “being blessed” in Deuteronomy 28:1–14 is linked to material blessings, the New Testament emphasizes the spiritual dimension of reflecting Jesus’ loving, serving mind and manner (Matthew 5:1–12).

As we can see from Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus teaches that, in a “Kingdom of God” sense, there are only two people on Planet Earth — Jesus and me. Jesus is all around me on Planet Earth in “distressing disguises.” He is the hungry one, the thirsty one, the stranger who lacks friends, the one who lacks clothing, the person who is sick, and the prison inmate. “Blessed” are they who devote life to serving Jesus by serving these needy people.

Verse 5:1: Jesus goes up “the mountain,” sits down (in Jesus’ day, teachers sat while teaching), and His disciples come to Him. Matthew sees in Jesus a new Moses, who, on a new Sinai, defines the stipulations of God’s new covenant with His people.

In Mark 3:12–19, we read of Jesus going up the mountain and calling the Twelve. However, Mark makes no mention of Jesus teaching on this occasion. In both Matthew and Mark, the mountain is not named. In Luke 6:12, we read of Jesus going up the mountain to pray, and then descending to a level place where He delivered what is referred to as the Sermon on the Plain (6:20–49). Luke’s discourse consists of 30 verses in contrast with Matthew’s 109. However, both Gospels present love and servanthood as the fundamental guideline for the faithful walk of God’s people.

Verse 5:2: The statement, “Jesus began to speak,” implies that Jesus continued to proclaim the discipleship

guidelines contained in chapters 5 through 7. It would seem that, in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew has put together collections of sayings that Jesus taught on various occasions to present the New Covenant as the perfect realization of the various Old Testament guidelines for life. The sermon concludes with a statement of the doctrine of the “Two Ways” and a description of two classes among Jesus’ audience (v.7:24–27).

Matthew has organized his nine beatitudes into two stanzas of four verses each (v.5:3–6, 7–10), with the ninth beatitude (v.5:11–12) serving as a powerful grand finale. He opens and closes the initial series of eight with the same solemn promise: “theirs is the kingdom of heaven” (verses 3, 10). The concept of “the kingdom of heaven” is the central theme of Jesus’ proclamation (v.4:17, 23), and the Beatitudes begin to flesh out what Jesus means by God’s rule. Each beatitude reveals some aspect of God’s astonishing claim to authority and power.

The concept of kingdom opens and closes the series, and at the heart of the message of the Beatitudes are the words righteousness and mercy — concepts that are basic to everything that Jesus has to say in Matthew’s Gospel about the nature of God’s rule. They stand at the head of the Sermon on the Mount like magnificent carved lions at the entrance to a sanctuary.

Each beatitude consists of two parts. Real surprises come in the first part of each, where Jesus names the beneficiaries of the promised blessings. The second half of each beatitude is couched in traditional language. The one indispensable fruit of the Spirit desired by Jesus is righteousness, which may be defined as hearts focused on the will of God — i.e. love toward God and neighbor (including the “enemy”). However, the reality of righteousness is complex and profound. Little wonder, then, that Matthew devotes 28 chapters to describing its contents and singing its praise.

Verse 5:3: Blessed are the poor in spirit: Unlike Luke’s Gospel, which declares, “Blessed are the poor,” Matthew stresses poor in spirit. He sees in this beatitude special encouragement for people who see themselves as lacking in spiritual gifts and charismatic endowments. Others in

the community, because they were rich in “display” gifts of the spirit — prophecy, exorcism, healing — were full of pride, puffed up, and acting as though their gifts were personal achievements (7:21–23; 1 Corinthians 4:6–7, 18–19; 13:4–5). Jesus expresses praise for those whose prime gift is an awareness of their own emptiness, whose one resource is God, who rely totally and always on the limitless grace of God. The word blessed expresses ultimate approval and endorsement.

Verse 5:4: Blessed are those who mourn: What do the “blessed” mourn about? The Roman occupation? Pitiful wages? Cruel taxes? Serious illness? The approach of death? Yes, all those things, but it is above all grief over sin. Because they know and love the will of God, they deeply mourn their own sin and the terrible reality of sin hanging like a weight on the neck of the world. Those who are truly aware of the nature and power of sin, and devote life to battling with and conquering those powers, “shall be comforted.”

Verse 5:5: Blessed are the meek: The Greek word translated as “meek” reflects the terms gentle and humble in v.11:29 and 21:5. When Jesus entered Jerusalem, He did so as a King unlike any earthly sovereign, “meek and mounted on an ass” (Matthew 21:5). Jesus comes to serve and refuses to live high at the expenses of others. And He calls us to reflect His mind and manner in all that we think, say, and do.

In his writings, Dr. Kenneth Bailey states that “meek” also connotes someone who has the courage to stand up for what is right, yet also the wisdom to act with restraint and not lash out rashly. Israel of old was promised a land. Here Jesus transforms that ancient promise: God is preparing a new heaven and a new earth, and the meek are “first in line” to inherit that transformed creation.

Verse 5:6: Blessed are those who hunger: Luke 6:21 takes the beatitude only this far; he has meditated profoundly on how precious in the eyes of the Lord are the world’s poor and hungry. Although Matthew does not disagree, he shares the teaching of Jesus in a slightly expanded form. God’s favor leaps on those whose deepest hunger and thirst is for righteousness. They will be satisfied, filled, vindicated, and saved on that eternal day when God will richly supply every need.

Verse 5:7: Blessed are the merciful: To be merciful is to focus on the compassionate actions of almsgiving, healing, and forgiveness. Those who live by mercy will at the end be astonished by God’s mercy (v.23:23).

Verse 5:8: Blessed are the pure in heart: Jesus exalts purity of heart, which is a will and a mind that is nei-

ther divided nor confused in its affection, devotion, and commitment. The pure in heart have turned to God and they will see God. And God will see them, acknowledge them, and lift up His divine face upon them!

Verse 5:9: Blessed are the peacemakers: In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus pays particular attention to threats to the peace of the community. Some of the leaders are in love with their own titles and status, forgetting that all are equally sisters and brothers (Matthew 23:8–10). Apparently, the same leaders are dishing out rough justice to straying “little ones,” dismissing them from the community without a second thought (ch. 18). However, communities demonstrate and cultivate the peace of God when they cross borders established by culture and tradition, and when they befriend and love their so-called enemies. Blessed are they, for they shall be called children (sons and daughters) of God.

Verse 5:10: Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. The pious, the wise, and the prophets who have, in every age, placed their lives at the feet of the Lord of the universe have always been vulnerable and never immune to contradiction and rejection. However, they bear their wounds as badges of divine approval, provided that those wounds are a result of their suffering for righteousness’ sake. Jesus foretold heightened conflict, worlds in collision, as the old and fallen world gathered its forces to resist the breaking in of the new world of righteousness. However, blessed are those who are persecuted, for the new world of God’s righteous and sovereign Son will come, and it will be theirs!

Verses 5:11–12: The ninth beatitude, although different in form, expands on the eighth, concludes the series, and prepares for what follows. The reader is not merely learning what Jesus once said long ago, but what Jesus is addressing to him or her in the present time. In this beatitude, Jesus focuses on the sad fact of persecution. He knows that people will revile you, utter all kinds of evil against you, misunderstand you, resent you, publicly insult you, and accuse you in court. Here Jesus refers to those persecuted on His account, while the preceding beatitude reads for righteousness’ sake. Jesus and righteousness are linked together throughout the Gospel!

Jesus never advises anyone to *seek* suffering, but when it comes, disciples may still rejoice and be glad. Persecutions are signs that His brothers and sisters are not citizens of the old world but of the new, and that they are fellow citizens with those servants of God, the prophets, who hailed the new world long before it broke in fully in the Person of Jesus!