



SERMONS

by

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Bible readings: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 and Matthew 5:1-12

Key aim: 1) Exploring how to talk about the cross 2) Exploring how to receive the blessed

Title: "Blessed is the day for Jesus is Immanuel"

We sometimes use the words "blessed" and "blessing" intentionally and unintentionally as an expression to terminate a conversation that is going too long. But what does "blessed" really mean? The Greek word translated as "Blessed" (makarios) carries the sense of God's favour towards the action and way of life. It means happy, fortunate, and heavenly—a sacred joy that can make you cry. It's a state of well-being that does not depend on our personal circumstances. So, what does the cross have to do with this?

Let's turn our attention to 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 for a moment, which we heard earlier. Paul travels to Corinth from Athens where his message of the Cross had been rejected by the philosophers. Paul knew that Jews had awaited a Messiah—a great Redeemer, liberator who would restore the nation to its former glory. They turned out to hail such a Messiah when Jesus rode into Jerusalem.

On the other hand, the Greeks, the great philosophers—people looking for ideas that would show them the meaning of life and the route to a happy existence. They were known for their divisive philosophies. They would wonder how a crucified Jesus could be held up as an example to live by. Many were searching for answers and were attracted by the God of the Jews. Some might ask, how could Jesus with His pathetic death on a cross appeal to such people, eh?

Is it right to say both the Jews and Greeks were looking for meaning, a saviour, purpose, and a good life—not prepared to wait, settle for vague answers or anything that seems uncertain?

But what was the result? Their expectations were not fulfilled—their hopes were dashed, and the events of Good Friday put an end to all their yearnings. Their idea of a Messiah, long looked for and prayed for by the Jews, did not include a humiliating death on a cross outside the city wall of Jerusalem.

So what does Paul seek to do? He attempts to convince Jews and Gentiles that the life and ministry of Jesus, despite ending in apparent failure on a cross, was, in fact, the greatest victory that could possibly be—the triumph of love through death on that cross, the triumph of light over darkness, victory over sin.

Even though Paul was close to the people of Corinth, he does not hold back or mince his words with his letter. He said, 'the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.' By all common-sense, human wisdom, and logical reason, the story of Jesus and His death on the cross was completely nonsensical to the Jews and Greeks. They would ask, how can God, all-powerful, show his power in such weakness and humiliation?

So how does this relate to us? It's true to say it is not only 1st-century Jews or Greeks who found the story of Jesus and his death foolish. Even many contemporaries can't comprehend why, if God is

God, Jesus, his Son, ended up crucified on a cross. I know I have wrestled with this before. Perhaps it applies to you too at times. We happily focus on Jesus' ministry of compassion and healing; we rejoice in the resurrection of Jesus and of his conquering of death for all. But how can we talk about the cross?

Brothers and Sisters, I believe the message of the cross is God's power at work to save us when we cannot save ourselves—no matter how hard we think, work, or how well we live. Perhaps that's why we sometimes feel uncomfortable about the message of the cross. It takes away our independence. Many experienced Christians and theologians have even had to learn this lesson.

For example, for years John Wesley sought to work out his own salvation—through a methodical application to Bible reading, prayer, good works to the needy, and through becoming a missionary in North America—but none of this gave him the assurance of God's love and of his salvation. It was only on 24th May 1728 that he felt he trusted in Jesus Christ and was given an assurance that he had been saved from the law of sin and death.

Let me be clear, I am not saying that human beings should not use their God-given powers of reason and intelligence and seek to understand more deeply the workings of the world we live or help others. I'm simply saying God who created everything cannot be known or comprehended from our wisdom alone or from our work alone. The heart of true wisdom knows the ways and the will of God. The human wisdom Paul opposes is not intellect or education, but false independence of God and a bent toward self-sufficiency.

Paul says, "consider your own call, brothers and sisters—not many of you were wise by human standards, not many powerful Yet God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the strong. God chose what is lowly and despised in the world." In a way that's us, no? God chose to reach out to us—he is the source of our life. If one looks through the history of Christianity and the history of the Church, time and again we can see God at work through broken people—people who could never have imagined that in God's strength they would achieve great things for the kingdom.

Let me give you an example. If you look at the history of the Bible Christian Church which was a Methodist denomination founded by William O'Bryan, a Wesleyan Methodist local preacher, on 18 October 1815 in North Cornwall and was part of the Wesleyan Methodism until about 1907. History tells us that most Bible Christians, especially the early generations, were humble, uneducated people—miners, farm labourers, and domestic servants—yet they were filled with passion to preach the Gospel like their founder William.

The church sent missionaries such as Sam Pollard from Camelford, a small Cornish town on the edge of Bodwin Moor (Tribal China), Paul Robins (Canada), and James Way (Australia) all over England and other countries, further encouraging the spread of the church in those countries. Some devised a script so that their language could be written down and the Scriptures translated for them. Now even though they were initially only a small denomination of 22, the Bible Christians grew significantly faster than the British population throughout their existence. Many of the missionaries such as Sam and Paul are held up as heroes among the people even up to today because of their

work. How do we want to be remembered? What legacy would we like to leave behind? This will not be easy brothers and sisters.

The cross was seemingly foolish to those who did not understand the lengths to which God's love was prepared to go to love us into the kingdom. But just as Jesus told it straight to his disciples and made them aware that they, too, would be called to suffer if they were truly to follow Him, so for us, the message is clear. As Jesus had to suffer on the cross so we may face testing times in our Christian lives—loss of friends, loss of reputation, even loss of our job. But Brothers and sisters let us persevere in our suffering and remain righteous and steadfast by fixing our eyes on the cross.

Let's draw our attention to the Gospel Reading.

In this reading, Matthew is writing about Jesus' first, longest, and most important sermon, delivered on a hillside overlooking the Sea of Galilee to His disciples and a wider audience on the mountain. Like in our first reading, Jesus is presented as the Messiah, who aids Christians in their controversies. Jesus summed up the gospel reading in one word, "Blessed." So important, Jesus repeats it with joy over and over again. Jesus makes a point of singling out the kinds of people who seem to have no reason for hope in this world or situation, however slight their hope in God.

He promises to reverse their fortune, their sufferings, and honour and reward for the righteous and those who suffer for the sake of Jesus. This is a present tense blessing, rather than for the future.

The blessings are divided into three sections:

1. Blessed are (they)... promises to the suffering (v.3-6).

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.

2. Blessings promising rewards to the virtuous/righteous (v.7-10).

7 "Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive 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 for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

3. Blessed are you... promises to Jesus followers (v.11-12).

11 "Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.

12 Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

It is as if Jesus was saying “Oh the heaven...” This is the kind of joy God desires for us. It is a state of joy and well-being that does not depend on circumstances. It is obtained through personal relationship with God.

This is consistent with Paul’s letter that we heard read earlier; God is determined to rewrite every wrong, remove all condemnation, and put us in a state of justification, including full acquittal from all charges against us and redeem us. He wants to renew/Sanctify us by the power of the Holy Spirit, which allows acceptable living before God. These blessings are not random. Each leads to the other in logical succession. Jesus describes a radical process of reconstruction that occurs in the heart, the mind, and the will. Observe the sequence carefully! First, we must recognize we are in need (poor in spirit). Next, we repent of our self-sufficiency (mourning). Then, we quit running the world our way and surrender control to God (meekness). So grateful are we for his presence that we yearn for more of him (hunger and thirst). As we grow closer to him, we become more like him. No longer filled with hate, we learn to forgive others (the merciful). Are we prepared to forgive and forget?

We increasingly see things from God's perspective (the pure in heart). We put ourselves in the firing line to resolve conflict (the peacemakers), and at times we endure injustice (the persecuted). This is a rebuilding of our whole way of life on His foundation. This is counter to everything the world holds dear. Jesus promised his followers three things. They will be completely fearless, filled with joy, and in constant trouble. In their brokenness, they will receive the jewel of joy. What is broken in your life? What extent are you willing to go to receive the jewel of joy? Will you be Jesus' follower?

God’s joy/blessing is received upon surrender rather than through conquest. The first step to joy/blessed is a plea for help. Experience shows that those who taste God’s presence know their spiritual inadequacy, for their options have finished. They have long since stopped demanding justice, and instead plead for mercy. They ask God to do for them what they can’t do for themselves. It is a different path, a demanding path we’re not used to taking. I believe this is how God progressively rebuilds believers' broken hearts/lives and puts His world at our feet as we learn to submit and put our hope in Him to keep us safe.

This week's headlines have largely been dominated by Brexit talk, and Donald Trump's inauguration—causing a lot of distraction and uncertainties in our politics, economy, banks, for immigrants, and for our friends in Europe. It leaves one to wonder what’s next. God knows. God does indeed know. And that is why we need an anchor to put our trust in, right?

“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.” (Hebrews 6:19).

The Beatitudes are like the chain that anchors us in the storm, the promises of God’s word, and the presence of God’s Spirit. The blessing of knowing God is sacred and joyous. His is a joy which consequences cannot quench. His is a peace that circumstances cannot steal. Pronounced by Jesus upon you and me this morning. It is progressive for all who have the courage to follow Him. A holy joy. And it is within your reach today.

Brothers and sisters may you receive God’s blessing in abundance today. **Amen.**

Lord Jesus, we thank you for your blessing, the blessing you promised, the blessing you assure, the blessing you bring into our lives as we follow you purposely. Lord, in the week ahead as we begin, may there be an anticipation of the exciting journey that you take us on and may your blessing be upon us, our families, and those we care for and those we will meet, and those we can influence for your glory. Give us the assurance of knowing that we are indeed citizens of your kingdom. We ask this in Jesus' name. **Amen.**

Experience/References

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