

SCRIPTURE READINGS AND SERMON

All Saints Day

November 1, 2020

Psalm 149:1–9 (ESV):

1 Praise the LORD!

Sing to the LORD a new song,
his praise in the assembly of the godly!

2 Let Israel be glad in his Maker;
let the children of Zion rejoice in their King!

3 Let them praise his name with dancing,
making melody to him with tambourine and lyre!

4 For the LORD takes pleasure in his people;
he adorns the humble with salvation.

5 Let the godly exult in glory;
let them sing for joy on their beds.

6 Let the high praises of God be in their throats
and two-edged swords in their hands,

7 to execute vengeance on the nations
and punishments on the peoples,

8 to bind their kings with chains
and their nobles with fetters of iron,

9 to execute on them the judgment written!

This is honor for all his godly ones.

Praise the LORD!

First Reading: Revelation 7:2–8 (ESV): Revelation 7:9–17 (ESV):

2 Then I saw another angel ascending from the rising of the sun, with the seal of the living God, and he called with a loud voice to the four angels who had been given power to harm earth and sea, 3 saying, “Do not harm the earth or the sea or the trees, until we have sealed the servants of our God on their foreheads.” 4 And I heard the number of the sealed, 144,000, sealed from every tribe of the sons of Israel:

5 12,000 from the tribe of Judah were sealed,
12,000 from the tribe of Reuben,
12,000 from the tribe of Gad,
6 12,000 from the tribe of Asher,
12,000 from the tribe of Naphtali,
12,000 from the tribe of Manasseh,
7 12,000 from the tribe of Simeon,
12,000 from the tribe of Levi,
12,000 from the tribe of Issachar,
8 12,000 from the tribe of Zebulun,
12,000 from the tribe of Joseph,
12,000 from the tribe of Benjamin were sealed.

A Great Multitude from Every Nation

9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, 10 and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!"

11 And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, 12 saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen."

13 Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, "Who are these, clothed in white robes, and from where have they come?" 14 I said to him, "Sir, you know." And he said to me, "These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation. They have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

15 "Therefore they are before the throne of God,
and serve him day and night in his temple;
and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence.

16 They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore;
the sun shall not strike them,
nor any scorching heat.

17 For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd,
and he will guide them to springs of living water,
and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

EPISTLE: 1 John 3:1–3 (ESV):

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Beloved, we are God’s children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. 3 And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

THE GOSPEL - Matthew 5:1–12 (ESV):

The Sermon on the Mount

1 Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.

The Beatitudes

2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying:

3 “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

4 “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.

5 “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.

6 “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.

7 “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.

8 “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.

9 “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

10 “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

11 "Blessed are you when others 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 so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Sermon 42 – All Saints' Day

Matthew 5:1-11

Dear friends,

What do we possess as Christians? We possess Christ, we know this in the abstract, but what does that mean? This question is especially poignant on All Saints' Day, which we celebrate today, because it demands that we look at what the Christian church actually is. In our Gospel lesson Jesus both addresses that particular point but He also highlights what it is that a Christian is. But is this what a Christian becomes? Is it what we aspire to be, or is what we actually are, if it is what we actually are, then why aren't we it? The answer is complicated, because we are complicated, we human beings. So this is what we're on about today.

Jesus has just begun His ministry in this part of Matthew, much of His early life has been explored thus far but little of His actual work. Matthew structures His Gospel this way for reasons to make His point. The verses listed here are actually the start of one of the main sections of Jesus' work, the punch line before the joke, or the trailer for the movie. It is a modern movie trailer too, that reveals all the main beats of the plot, and if you're like me, puts you off wanting to go to the movie theatre entirely. My point is that Jesus is summarizing here, He is going to spend the next several chapters unpacking – in sometimes eye-watering detail – everything He says here. Expanding on it. Explaining it. We don't have six chapters, we have about fifteen minutes at best, so let's go.

“Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him.” So these words are spoken to the disciples in earshot of massive crowds. The disciples will be the leaders of the church, they are going to carry all the torches for the rest of forever, and Jesus knows this. So when Jesus sets out to teach them explicitly, He starts from the top, the Vince Lombardi method: This is a football kind of thing. If we were in Jesus' position, we would perhaps start with a different angle, a different approach, but it tells us something that Jesus begins in this way. **“2 And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: 3 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’”** This is Jesus' punchline for the Christian faith, the tone-setter for everything He's going to say next. Why?

We would start with faith, maybe start with Jesus Himself, the crucifixion, sin, death, anything. Jesus starts with poverty, but poverty of the spirit. He may be talking about sin, He probably is talking about sin, but He's not using the word, or explaining the concept in a way that's familiar to us. He talks about poverty. What is poverty? Lack. Need. He says that this is what a Christian is. A person lacking something essential in His spirit. What do we lack as people in our spirits?

You could say righteousness. We are not righteous people, we are sinners, as these words make uncomfortably clear sometimes. You could say humility, that we tell God what to do, that we expect God to do what we want, because it seems clear and reasonable and right to us. Love, perhaps. We do not give our neighbor, those around us, the consideration that they should be given, we don't love them well, because they irritate us, they get in the way, or because

they just need too much and we don't have any more to give. I don't think it ultimately matters. Jesus sets up here that the perennial Christian condition, the day-in day-out of Christian life, is need. That is what prepares you to be a member of the kingdom of heaven. Your neediness from God.

What do we need? New hearts, new minds, new selves. We need a new world. We need a new society. We need a new future, a new status, a new destination. Jesus illustrates all of this in the following words.⁴ **“Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy.”** And so on. We need righteousness, yes. We need to be better people. We need mercy, for we receive so little, and show so little. So sin is ultimately the point, but sin here is illustrated by means of need. We need a new everything. We need a new life.

What Jesus is telling them is exactly what this new life is, and what it looks like. He's illustrating the need, but He's also sketching out the designs for how He will meet that need. He's showing you the solution and the problem with the same sentences. We know we are in need, Jesus helps us define our spiritual needs, and He does that by telling us how those spiritual needs will be met. How they will be transformed into something else.

Are these words condemnation? Yeah, they are. We don't fit these descriptions and we know it, and so does Jesus. Is that all they are? No. They are also a description of what Jesus makes happen in us. We are poor in spirit by nature, we need things from God, and Jesus is telling the disciples that He will provide those things. He will provide comfort for those who mourn, righteousness for those who

seek it, strength for the powerless, mercy for the merciful. Why does He need to do this? Because we cannot get those things here on this Earth, at least not consistently. The meek are those without power, and the way this world works, particularly now, is that the powerless are supposed to rise up and take power for themselves. Being meek looks like being weak to most people, and being weak is not a good thing. It allows people to stomp all over you. Being a peacemaker is not valued because making peace in these days usually involves compromise, which usually ends up with two sides who hate you even more than they hate each other. Mourning is painful, sometimes deeply and desperately so, crippling. Comfort in mourning is often a fleeting thing, maybe it comes on the good days, but it never lasts.

Jesus is building something else, and these are the architectural plans for it, the design documents, summarized by an elevator pitch. This is what that something else looks like. It is the kingdom of heaven, what Jesus has been prophesying all along, and this is the kingdom of heaven. Comfort for the mourning. Seeing God. Purity of heart. It isn't a place, it isn't a nation, and it isn't an aspiration either. It is a reality that exists in you and I, and we live in it, and it lives in us. Jesus makes this happen, and that is what He is telling His disciples. This is brought to you, through me. Jesus is going to live this perfect life. He is going to go to the cross to kill the evil that lurks in our hearts, the evil that creates this need. The evil that makes it so that every good thing we do, something awful seems to happen in its wake, that for everything we fix, we break something else. That's what Jesus writes the end of, sin itself, the source of all of it. Then Jesus goes to the grave, to win victory over death, to do death so that when we do it, when we suffer it, it doesn't hold us. In order for any of what is promised to here to happen, Jesus must first die

and rise. In order for any of it to be real for us, in order for any of it to be given to us, we must believe that Jesus died and rose for us.

That is why He tells the disciples this. Remember that this is all they actually *did*, this the extreme brief of their job description. Tell what you saw. That's what it means to be a witness. Tell truthfully what you saw. That's what the disciples were going to do, and in doing that, they would build this kingdom. They would spread this faith. They would oversee its growth, its compression, and its eventual persecution. It all boils down to telling, and it all boils down to faith, and faith doesn't exist without that telling. That is why the church is what it is. It is here to meet spiritual needs, to serve Jesus who fills those needs with their opposites. Instead of worry, contentment. Instead of war, peace. Instead of hopelessness, hope. Instead of evil, good. This is what you and I actually have, right now.

So why can't we hold on to it? Because of the final point that Jesus makes. **11 “Blessed are you when others 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 so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”** We can't hold onto it because we live here, now. The church is peace, but is persecuted. The church is contentment, yet it always needs more and more and more. Jesus is everything we have and everything we need, but it seems like we can never get our fingers around him. Something is always in the way. Him, her, the place, the time, the awful things that happen in the world, it always screams louder than God's Word speaks. But the truth is the truth, and it is simple. You have Jesus. Jesus knows what you need. Jesus is what you need, your deepest, most profound spiritual needs, all in one. But it is never enough for what we *want*. And that is that.

That is us. We are pulled one way, then another. Jesus pulls us one way and only one way, even when it is the last way we want Him to go. Jesus pulls us to Himself.

Amen.