

Last week, Pastor Chris began his sermon with a provocative question: “Why do we preach?” He proceeded to answer the question in a powerful way: the Law and Gospel of God’s Word are preached because we human beings need to hear it as often as possible. “Once is not enough.” “We are more sinful than we care to admit, and more loved than we dare to hope.” Without hearing this and believing this is true in Jesus, we default to old patterns of behavior that are not only not helpful, but harmful to ourselves and those around us. We preach because we need God’s Words to reset us, to reorient us, to renew us.

I’d like to use a similar lens to examine this week’s Gospel Lesson. You heard it before; the opening to Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount, and as we focus in, let’s start by asking, “Why did Jesus preach?” We could propose a lot of reasons. Allow me to suggest in this particular case, at this early point in his public life, Jesus is preaching a descriptive message. What he is describing is a compelling, spiritual reality that is present wherever He is and wherever He goes. He is describing His values as they are lived out by real people in the real world. In other words, right from the start, Jesus describes what it means to be blessed by Him, and He immediately acknowledges that this throws a person into opposition with the values of the world. Make no mistake, it is a good thing to be blessed by Jesus. What you gain is far better than what you lose. But, it also drafts you into a struggle. You have to give Jesus credit: His preaching tells the whole truth. He announces from the very beginning, if you are with Me, you are blessed, and you will be opposed. Full disclosure.

So what do you think when you hear Jesus describing these blessings? Are you attracted by what He says, or excited? Are you confused, or maybe even turned off? All these reactions are understandable, because Jesus is describing a spiritual reality that pushes against the conventional wisdom of the world. He’s shaking things up. Bible scholars sometimes call it Jesus’ “upside-down kingdom.” Do you see why? Jesus claims, right out of the gate, that there is blessing in being poor in spirit, being in mourning, and being lowly or meek. Common sense says the opposite—to be blessed is to avoid those things. Why did Jesus preach? Because what He brings into the world is so different than what people expect; He brings what we need most. What we need is for Jesus to fill our emptiness. When He does, we are truly blessed.

You see, to be ‘poor in spirit’ is to recognize your spiritual emptiness. To be poor is to not have what you need. To admit a poverty of the soul leads to blessing. How? Because then God can give to you. You’re not carrying armfuls of trophies and awards to God saying, look at what I’ve done! You have to bless me! You can only receive God’s gifts if you drop those things, and as it says in the words of the great hymn “Rock of Ages,” “Nothing in my hand I bring/simply to thy cross I cling.” We need Jesus to put His accomplishments into our hands.

When Jesus fills our emptiness, we are truly blessed. This is why He can say, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” Mourning and grief is our experience of an emptiness. A person we love is no longer in that seat. A situation we enjoyed no longer exists. Jesus says, those who mourn shall be comforted and are now blessed. How? Because Jesus has

come to fill the space with Himself. He comes not with a superficial smile, but with the power of resurrected life. He who came out of his tomb alive comes to you to walk with you in your sorrow, and He will never leave your side, and one day He will usher you into the Great Reunion.

Jesus preached to describe this spiritual reality: In the middle of all the difficulties we have living out our Christian faith in our daily lives; when we are sad and upset; when we are despondent and dejected; when others ridicule us for our faith or for sticking up for what we believe is right; when we are trying to show mercy and love or bring about peace and we are told to get lost; there God meets us, he strengthens us, he comforts, he helps us endure, he gives us the courage to move on.

George Matheson was a great preacher and hymn writer who lost his sight at an early age. He thought of his blindness as his thorn in the flesh, as his personal cross. For several years, he prayed that his sight would be restored. Like most of us, I suppose, he believed that personal happiness would come to him only after the handicap was gone. But then, one day God sent him a new insight: The creative use of his disability could become a blessing to others.

So, Matheson went on to write: "My God, I have never thanked you for my thorn. I have thanked you for my roses, but not once for my thorn. I have been looking forward to a world where I shall get compensation for my cross, but I have never thought of the cross itself as a present glory. Teach me the glory of my cross. Teach me the value of my thorn."

George Matheson had discovered what it means to be blessed - the kind of blessing that is not only a future hope, but also a reality in the here and now.

You may be suffering a great deal from sickness; you may be persecuted for doing what you consider the right thing; you may be upset about your own sinfulness or the weakness of your faith; you may even be upset by those who have failed to show love toward you; whatever the case, Jesus has come near to you. He died for you to cancel your sin. He rose to life to transfer His gifts to you. Let him fill your emptiness with Himself. Let His upside-down values become your values. Let Him give you His blessing.