

All Saints Sunday

THE BLESSING OF CHRIST

Matthew 5:1-12

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Analysis by Steven C. Kuhl

1 When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. 2 Then he began to speak, 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 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. 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. 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.

Note: Two good sources for getting at this text are Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s The Cost of Discipleship, Chapter 6, “The Beatitudes” and Robert Smith’s Matthew: Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament.

DIAGNOSIS: The Curse of the Law

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Persecuted for Being Indistinguishable from the Crowd*

No greater “curse” can befall a person than that they simply remain one of “the crowd.” It was the goal of all the great sects of Judaism to strive to distinguish themselves from the crowd, to stand out for the God of Israel. Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, and Zealots each had their own particular way of life and marks of distinction to set themselves apart. Those marks of distinction were their “righteousness.” Problem is Jesus’ disciples didn’t seem all that distinctive from the crowd. To all outward appearances they were still as spiritually poor as the crowd, still as mournfully sinful as the crowd, still as devoid of righteousness as the crowd. As a result, they were subject to “persecution” and ridicule from other groups for their lack of righteousness.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Tempted to Define Our Righteous by the Law*

The great temptation of such persecuted disciples, then and now, is to define themselves (and their righteousness) by some outward law: some law that is concrete and manageable; some law that distinguishes them from the crowd—as better than the crowd. In Matthew 5-7, Jesus lifts up all kinds of illustrations of these concrete, manageable interpretations of the of God: on “moral” relations to others (5:25-48); on piety and our relationship to God (6:1-34); on how we are to regard ourselves (7:1-29). (Of course, the illustrations in these sections don’t break down quite this neatly, but you get the point.) Still today, Christians are tempted to think that their righteousness before God rests in how they concretely and sufficiently fulfill their interpretations of the Law of God. To think as such is to rely not in Christ, but in our ourselves, that is, our own righteous keeping of the Law. But, as we will see, to rely on

the Law is to be placed under the curse of the Law.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *“Do not think I have come to abolish the law...” (5:17)*

Evidently, the persecutors were trying to convince Jesus' disciples (and us) that Jesus was undermining the Law, relativizing the Law, by his lack of standards in accepting disciples. Not so! As Jesus says in his sermon, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law. ... [I have come] to fulfill [it]” (5:17). In truth, it is the persecutors who relativize the Law, by reducing it in their interpretations to a manageable, human size. “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees,” Jesus says, “you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:20). Those who interpret the Law in such manageable terms will find out how unmanageable it is. For its true divine purpose will be “fulfilled.” Murder (5:22) is “anger” in the heart, adultery (5:28) is “lust” in the heart, etc. Who can manage the sin that lies deep within? No one, Jesus says. Therefore, attempts to become righteous on the basis of the Law is a human illusion. The Law's verdict of guilt, of condemnation, of exclusion from the kingdom, will not be averted.

PROGNOSIS: The Blessing of Christ

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Blessed Is He Who Is Persecuted for Righteousness Sake (5:10)*

The Law of God that condemns sin must be fulfilled/accomplished. Sinners must be condemned in the flesh concretely, definitively. Those are the givens, and they are meant to bring everyone to the brink of despair. It is at this point of despairing of one's own righteousness before the Law that Jesus comes as the friend of sinners with a blessing. Note: He doesn't dismiss either the gravity of the Law or of his friends' sins. Rather, taking seriously the fact of both, the Law's condemnation of sin and

his friends' sin, he welcomes the Law's condemnation upon himself. He willingly suffers the Law's verdict for the sake of his friend's sin, for the sake of fulfilling the Law: that is, he dies on the cross as one condemned under the Law. But that is not all. Jesus Christ is righteous. There is no sin in him. And so, a great contradiction emerges in the divine economy. The Law has actually been entrapped into persecuting the righteous. And so Christ is blessed with resurrection, with life, with the reward of heaven (v. 12). The Law, by contrast, has violated its own terms of existence, and thus is extinguished, terminated, with regard to Christ Jesus. In the cross and resurrection, therefore, Jesus not only fulfills the Law, but surpasses/overrules the Law, establishing a righteousness based not on the Law, but himself. As such, he alone is able to pronounce "blessing" upon those who are under the Law's curse, thus releasing them from the curse.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Rejoice and Be Glad (v. 12)*

In the face of all the tempting arguments to rely on a righteousness rooted in the Law, Jesus now invites us to trust him as the friend of sinners, to trust in that righteousness which he established in his death and resurrection. Of course, it does not preclude our ongoing repentance, that is, our recognition of how "poor in spirit" we still are (v. 3) or how "mournful" our lives still are because of our continuing struggle with sin (v. 4). Indeed, such repentance is part of the higher righteousness he established. Yet, even in the face of our sin, we rejoice and are glad because Christ ascribes his righteousness to us. Rejoicing and gladness are nothing but outward expressions of faith in Christ, that faith by which his blessing becomes concretely ours.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Blessed to Be a Blessing to the Crowd...*

Because our righteousness is Christ's righteousness, the gift of the Righteous One to the unrighteous, we as disciples don't despise the crowd, nor do we measure ourselves against them. Indeed, we can be profoundly empathetic with their struggles in life. Really the only thing that distinguishes the crowd from the disciple is the blessing of Christ himself. And by virtue of Christ's word, and with his blessing, we are commissioned to offer his blessing to others: to approach them with the mercy that we ourselves have received (v. 7); to live among them as peacemakers (v. 9), even to the point of forsaking our own rights; to be advocates for righteousness and justice among them—both kinds of righteousness, that of the Law when that is helpful, but especially, that of the surpassing righteousness that is in Christ Jesus. To be sure, Jesus' disciples expect that people will "revile [us] and persecute [us] and utter all kinds of evil against [us] falsely on [Christ] account" (v. 11). But that doesn't deter us. We know first-hand how uncanny, unconventional, and incomprehensible Christ's righteousness can be to those who can't yet imagine anything but the righteousness of the Law. We know that his blessing is inseparable from the cross. We know what it means to be "salt" (5:13) and "light" (5:14) for the world for the sake of the surpassing righteousness that is in Christ.