

# Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

**BLESSED? SHOW ME THE EVIDENCE!**

**Matthew 5:1-12**

**Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany**

**Analysis by Steven E. Albertin**

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

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

*4Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.*

*5Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.*

*6Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.*

*7Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.*

*8Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.*

*9Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.*

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

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

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

---

## **DIAGNOSIS: Convicted by the Evidence**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** : *Befuddled by the Evidence*

Jesus begins his Sermon on the Mount with a stunning assessment of the world and a shocking claim for himself. Both befuddle and confound a world that assumes that it can assess the nature of reality on the basis of reason and experience. Both fly in the face of evidence to the contrary.

Speaking to his disciples, Jesus offers them a kind of life that seems strange if not frightening. An examination of the evidence in the light of reason and experience, of what can be visibly seen and measured, reveals that being “poor in spirit,” “mourn[ing],” “meek[ness],” “hunger[ing] and thirst[ing] for righteousness,” “revile[d] and persecute[d],” etc., are anything but blessed and commendable conditions. Even more, it takes a whole lot of nerve to presume to be able to redefine and reframe what everyone knows is the good and blessed life. Jesus is making claims for himself and the world that the evidence simply does not confirm. The evidence shows that these conditions are not blessings but curses. The evidence shows that Jesus appears to be some kind of nut with a messianic complex and not the Messiah he claims to be.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** : *Betrayed by the Evidence*

Jesus obviously believes something about God, himself, and the world that we find difficult-if not impossible-to believe. Governed by reason and experience and unable to escape what we inherited from our first parents, Adam and Eve, we cannot but believe in the evidence we can see with our eyes and measure with our hands (cf. Genesis 3:6-7). Like those first disciples, we believe that the wisdom of following and believing in Jesus will be confirmed by corresponding visible evidence of success.

When it is not, and we get only more suffering and grief, we feel betrayed. We thought that following Jesus would visibly pay off. When it does not, we mourn and are poor in spirit. We feel deceived. Should not our faith be confirmed by the evidence? Where are the success, happiness and good life we thought were part of the deal? What can we believe in anymore? How can we believe in God when such faith is not supported by the evidence of a life going well?

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** : *Buried by the Evidence*

The evidence of reason and experience is ultimately bleak. Even though we want to avoid coming to such a conclusion, the evidence is overwhelming. We live our lives in a state of denial. No one gets out alive. All the monuments we construct to our success will come tumbling down. "From dust you came and to dust you shall return" (Ecc. 3:20). We are unable and unwilling to ignore the evidence. Clinging to our reason and experience, we refuse to believe that it could be any different. We simply cannot take Jesus at his word.

Okay. So Jesus kicks the dust off his shoes and moves on, leaving us buried under a mountain of evidence. The wreckage and rubble of our lives reveal how deeply we refused to shed our pride. If we will only believe in a God who meets the expectations of our reason and experience, then such arrogance will get what it deserves.

## **PROGNOSIS: Exonerated by the Evidence**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** : *Blessed by New Evidence*

Jesus' stunning assessment of the world and shocking claim for himself were not "whistling in the dark." However, new evidence would be needed, evidence not based on the usual canons of human reason and experience. Jesus' "beatitudes" seemed unreal and

farfetched. Jesus refuses to back off-despite their unreality. He continues to offer new evidence of a new way of evaluating reason and experience throughout his ministry. He demonstrates the startling claims he made that day on the Mount of Olives blessing sinners and other such outcasts who according to the canons of reason and experience did not merit such blessing. He did it all on behalf of and in the name of God.

However, despite the evidence of his life and ministry, Jesus finally seemed unable to overturn the mountain of contrary evidence. His claims to the contrary notwithstanding, people get what they deserve. Dead on the cross, the canons of reason and experience had prevailed. Sins pile up. You cannot just say something is “blessed” when it hurts like hell. God’s judgment on those who have failed to do their duty cannot simply be undone because you say so, even if you are Jesus.

But when Jesus is raised from the dead, everything changes. This is the new evidence! It undoes everything else. Now it is clear. Jesus did have the authority to undo reason and experience and redefine the criteria of success and failure. Good Friday is good. Jesus’ cursed death on the cross is in fact a blessing. What Jesus had dared to say on the Mount of Olives and demonstrate throughout his ministry was not wishful thinking but true.

Jesus did not stay buried in the tomb. To the contrary, He left buried in the tomb all the evidence of God’s wrath and anger on sin. The risen Christ offers new evidence of a new way of evaluating life and God. Contrary to reason and experience, God embraces sinners. God blesses those who mourn, the poor in spirit, the reviled and persecuted and all those who according to what you can see, feel, measure, and calculate do not have a leg to stand on. They are blessed. Jesus’ fate belongs to them.

### **Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Comforted by the Evidence***

The mission and ministry of the Church offers this new evidence to the world. It is the Church's job to offer comfort to all those who labor under the mountain of evidence that would only further convict them of their sin. They no longer need to feel betrayed or disappointed. Even when their lives are "going to hell in a hand basket," even when their eyes are filled with tears and hearts are burdened with grief, even when they have been kicked in the teeth for daring to be peacemakers or hunger and thirst for righteousness, even when they have been reviled and persecuted, they can "rejoice and be glad." Their hearts no longer cling to the evidence of reason and experience but to the words and promises of him whom the Creator of heaven and earth has authorized to offer new evidence on their behalf. Jesus' life, death and resurrection exonerate those who have labored under the evidence of their sin. Now forgiven, they stand tall even when the rest of the world snickers, convinced that they are fools.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Showing the Evidence***

Trusting this promise, we GET TO live a new kind of life. The beatitudes are not conditions to be met or obligations to be fulfilled. They are not part of the growing mountain of evidence against us. They are gifts and blessings, the promises of a new kind of life made possible because Jesus is who he says he is.

We GET TO believe that the beatitudes are also true for us. We GET TO live Jesus' life. We GET TO show the world through the evidence of our lives that God in Christ lives in us in spite of appearances to the contrary, in spite of our sin, the suffering and disappointment that may burden our lives. Our faithful serving of the neighbor and joyful bearing of our crosses give evidence that Jesus is who he says he is and we are who he says

we are. We live lives freely giving ourselves way not only to those in need but even to those who hate us. We selflessly offer ourselves to all, declaring to the world's canons of reason and experience that they are not the ultimate measurements of life. There is another way to look at the evidence. There is another, better reason to hope.

We have not been betrayed. The evidence is right there before us in the assuring and comforting promise of the Risen One who declares, in spite of evidence to the contrary, Blessed are you!