

Time has a way of softening everything that was once shocking to us, making it not so offensive, not so surprising anymore. And the cross is actually a really good example of this, because back in ancient times, the cross was something that was feared, something that was hated. It was a terrible way to execute somebody. It was a horrible way to die. Nobody wanted to be near it. Nobody even wanted to talk about it. And for Paul to say that we as Christians must be crucified with Christ would've been very offensive, even insulting to those who first heard it. But today we decorate with crosses. We have some here in the sanctuary. We probably all have crosses at home. Some of you are probably even wearing cross shaped jewelry. We may even say that a cross, a particular cross, can be beautiful. So what changed? People became a lot more familiar with it over time. They were always looking to it because of Jesus. And for that reason, it became no longer strange. So if we want to understand the cross rightly, if we want to fully understand what Jesus did for us, we have to make the cross strange again.

And the same is also true of a lot of the things that Jesus says. They were originally offensive, even shocking to those who first heard them. But centuries of listening to Jesus took away their shock. And I'm sure that we have all heard these words many times, which unfortunately means that we probably don't listen to them as closely as we should. The Beatitudes from our Gospel reading for today are an excellent example of this, because they are very familiar to us. We use them everywhere. People use them for decorations, for example. Hobby Lobby, of all places, sells a kids' craft that has the Beatitudes on it. It's shaped like a beehive with little bees that have each of the Beatitudes, because it's the "bee-attitudes." It's all very cute, but where's the shock of what Jesus says? It becomes very, very familiar. And some of the Beatitudes themselves are used more than others. Blessed are the peacemakers, for example, often gets used for the police. You'll sometimes see it on cop cars or even used as decorations with a thin blue line. And the Colt S&W, a handgun made in 1873, is often called the Peacemaker. It gets applied even to something like that. Now, I'm not condemning these examples. I'm just using them to show that these words are not shocking to us anymore. If we're not afraid to use them in all of these different ways, they aren't strange. So we need to make them strange if we are going to understand what Jesus is saying.

So let's look, first of all, at that word "blessed." "Blessed" these days often gets used to describe how I feel. People might say "I feel so blessed" when they're talking about their lives. Maybe we ourselves have even spoken that way. Again, that's fine. But even Hobby Lobby, for example, has another decoration that says "blessed, not stressed," focusing entirely on our feelings. But what we need to see here is that Jesus is not primarily talking about our feelings. Jesus is talking about our situation. If we are blessed, it is because of what God has done for us. In fact, blessed there could even be translated as "fortunate" or "privileged." And that privilege may influence my feelings, that privilege that I have from God, but it is not dependent on them. And even using that word "privileged" makes it strange again. It kind of shocks us a little bit, especially because of the way the world uses that word today. But it shows us just how surprising what Jesus says is, because to be privileged by God, to be truly fortunate in the eyes of God, is not what the world thinks that it is.

Let's take the first beatitude as an example. Verse 3 of our reading: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." So Jesus is contrasting here the poor with the rich. The poor are those who are in need. The rich are those who are not. But being poor in spirit does not mean lacking something in our spirit, as if we are vicious or mean-spirited. Rather, being

poor in spirit means recognizing that we are poor, that we are in need. It shows us how much we depend on God. I know that we as Americans especially don't like to be dependent on anything. For us, a self-made man is something good. We want to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps. We want to build things on our own. We don't want handouts from anybody! We're a very independent people. But that can also bleed over into our relationship with God, and we can start to think that we are rich in spirit, that we don't need anything even from God. But being a Christian means that we depend on God for everything. Being a Christian means that we live always on handouts from God. We are living on a kind of heavenly welfare throughout our entire lives. But once we realize that, we will be richer than kings, because the poor in spirit have the kingdom of heaven.

Let's look at the second beatitude. Verse 4: "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." People mourn because they've lost something, most often because they've lost a loved one. But it doesn't have to be just that. They can mourn over anything that they have lost. Israel, for example, in the Old Testament mourned over the loss of Jerusalem. And someone might mourn because they have very little in their lives. They might mourn because they're living in a difficult situation. Those who mourn is any miserable situation that a Christian may find themselves in. But privileged are you, Jesus says! Privileged are you when your situation is terrible. Privileged are you when you suffer for being a Christian. Not because of your situation, but because comfort will come. God will turn your situation around. God will make it better. Only a Christian can truly know that better times are coming, because God has promised it through his Son.

One more. Verse 5: "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." Now, meekness in the Bible is not weakness, the way that it often gets ridiculed today. To be meek is not to lack in self-assertion. It's not too be shy or to be a pushover, the way that it often is depicted in the world today. Jesus himself describes himself as meek in Matthew chapter 11, and Jesus drove out moneychangers from the temple with a whip! So being meek, then, is about not insisting on your own way. Not in the truth. We can't compromise in the truth. But rather through the realities of life. Being meek means yielding to others. It means giving up what is mine for the sake of someone else. Let me use a picture to show you an example. Think of a lion playing with his cubs. A lion is mighty. He is powerful. He could tear those cubs apart if he wanted to. But he holds himself back for their sake. That's what Christian meekness is. Now, the world doesn't want to do that. The world wants to have its own way in everything. You can't tell me what to do! I'm going to do what I want, and there is nothing that you can do to stop me! The world thinks that the aggressive, the violent, the self-assertive are the ones who will get everything. But Jesus shows us otherwise. It is the meek who will inherit the earth. The me-first world will perish, but those who are meek like Christ will come into their own.

So just from these three then, Christians, we can see how strange it all really is, how Jesus turns over our expectations. And that can help us understand all of the rest of them as well. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are those who want to be like God. Not to be "themselves" the way that the world thinks about it, but to imitate the Lord in everything. They will be satisfied. They will find the fulfillment that the world can't. The merciful are those who do not insist on their own way, those who are willing to forgive even their enemies. They will find mercy, because they will find the forgiveness of God. The pure in heart are those who are not corrupted by the world. They are separate. They are distinct. They are different from everyone

else. And even though they don't have a home here, they will see God in the end. The peacemakers are those who seek to be reconciled with others, who are not always seeking after their own. They are willing to be reconciled even with their enemies, and they will be called the sons of God.

But truly privileged, truly privileged are those who are persecuted for the sake of the kingdom of heaven! Fortunate are you when people reject you. Fortunate are you when people speak evil of you. Fortunate are you when they make your life miserable. Blessed are you when you suffer for being a Christian, because it shows that you don't belong to this world. If you did belong to the world, they would leave you alone. But because they don't leave you alone, it shows that you are not of this world. So rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in the kingdom of heaven!

Yes, Christians, this is true privilege. And like all privileges, it's not something that you gave to yourself. If you are blessed, you are blessed because of what God has done for you. God makes you privileged. God has given you the privilege of all these things. You are who you are and you have become what you are because of Jesus Christ. It is a great privilege to suffer together with him. It is a great privilege to become like him in everything. And we have this privilege because he gave himself for us by dying on that cross.

Therefore, Christians, do not be like the world. Be like Jesus, because the kingdom of heaven is yours through him!

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, who has called us out of the world through your Son, Jesus Christ, help us to walk in the way of righteousness, and make us ever more like you, so that we shall see you in the glories of heaven; through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.