

# All Saints'

## You Are Blessed

The kingdom of God looks different than we might expect.

Matthew 5:1-12

A sermon preached by  
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November 1, 2020

**1-2** When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. This is what he said: **3** “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule. **4** “You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. **5** “You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought. **6** “You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat. **7** You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for. **8** “You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. **9** “You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family. **10** “You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom. **11-12** “Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, *I* do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

### **You Are Blessed!**

English Philosopher Francis Bacon said:  
“Prosperity is the blessing of the Old  
Testament; adversity is the blessing of the  
New.

Jesus came to turn the world upside down. Jesus demonstrated with his words and his life that **the kingdom of God is more complicated than we could ever imagine**. How can adversity be a blessing? We don’t feel blessed when we are at the end of our ropes. And we don’t feel blessed when we get to All Saints’ Day, and we have lost the person who was most dear to us.

Today’s scripture, the beatitudes, is the beginning of Jesus’s Sermon on the Mount and contains his most important teachings. Beatitudes are words of

blessing, and the dictionary defines beatitude as “supreme blessedness, exalted happiness.”<sup>1</sup> Jesus teaches that this exalted happiness comes in very unexpected ways and at very unexpected times. And in this text Jesus is essentially sharing his vision of what God’s kingdom looks like!

Not only do these blessings describe God’s kingdom, but they are also are at their core a powerful assurance of God’s grace. These blessings proclaim that God’s love is free for all, that it cannot be earned, and it can never be repaid. In fact, when we are most desperate for God, most helpless and most in need -- God’s grace arrives. In adversity, we experience God’s presence most powerfully -- and that is a life-changing blessing.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/beatitude>

God’s kingdom is a reality “wherever God's will is done.” We witnessed it in Jesus' ministry, and it happens today whenever God’s healing, restoring and renewing power is brought into our [broken] lives.<sup>2</sup> The kingdom of God is not only a hope for the future, but a present reality. We pray that just as God’s will is done in heaven may it also be done on this earth. And, guess what? We humans are one of the main ways that happens. We humans are instruments inspired by the Holy Spirit to do God’s will--we get to help establish God’s reign on earth. So the question becomes how do we do that -- how do we, the community of God do our parts to establish the reign of God’s will? How do we first receive this grace, and then how do we share this grace?

In today’s scripture, Jesus has just begun his ministry. He has called four disciples and he has been calling for people to: “Repent, (to change their hearts and lives) [because] the kingdom of heaven has come near.”<sup>3</sup> Jesus has been healing the sick and casting out demons. And so it is with **this** groundwork that Jesus calls these four to climb with him up to a high place. Here’s how today’s story begins:

When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the committed, climbed with him. Arriving at a quiet place, he sat down and taught his climbing companions. (Matthew 5:1-2)

Jesus climbs up a quiet hillside. Those who were apprenticed to him, the

committed, they climbed with him. Perhaps the first message to hear is that to experience the blessing of God's grace, we have to take a climb with Jesus. Now the climb that represents our lives will surely be filled with good times and bad -- with times of joy and times of tragedy. Adversity is certain.

But when we are committed to Jesus, when we apprentice ourselves to Jesus -- when we choose to walk daily in the footsteps of Jesus and learn from him, we have a companion who climbs with us..... through it all even to the end. So, I ask: are you committed to Jesus? Are you an apprentice - seeking every day to learn more and be more like Jesus? Is it time you made a deeper commitment? How are you doing leaning on your climbing companion and learning from him as you work your way up this hillside?

Now there are surely times in our lives that the climb is easy and life is good --sometimes the climb that represents our lives is filled with yellow wildflowers and green grass along the way. We would use the Old Testament definition of "blessing as prosperity" at times like that, right? But you know there is another hand. On the other hand, sometimes we are blessed in the New Testament way --- our climb might be represented by jagged rocks and dangerous crevices, and those are the times that we are desperate for salvation. Those are the times that if we are going to make it, God has to step in. Those are the times that God's grace overwhelms us with just how profound that gift is!

Friends, however rough or smooth the climb of your life is or has been, the thing I want you to know is that you have a traveling companion in Jesus who will never leave you or forsake you.

And so we can see how this rhythm of living in God's kingdom might work.

First, we are blessed when we are committed to Jesus because through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus travels with us through it all. We are blessed when we learn the ways of Jesus. And the kingdom of God comes near through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.umc.org/en/content/ask-the-umc-what-is-the-kingdom-of-god>

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 4:17.

Second, we are blessed when we receive God's grace through God's people. Not only does Jesus climb with us, but there are lots of others who climb with us--there was more than one disciple on the hillside. Today we even remember all the saints in heaven who have gone before us! The kingdom of God comes near through the actions of God's people, and even through the legacies they have<sub>4</sub>left

over millennia!

And third, we are really and truly blessed when we become the instrument of God's grace for others. There is no greater blessing than to become a climbing companion with others. Part of the job of disciples is to be a part of bringing the kingdom of God near in the lives of others!

Let me show you what I mean. As I thought about All Saints Day this week, I couldn't help but think about how the kingdom of God has come near through the lives of the saints. I remembered how I have been blessed through their lives and how their legacies continue to impact the world for good.

I remembered the saints who impacted me personally. I thought about how they have shown God's loving care to me personally and taught me to do the same. I thought about my grandmother who made the best buttermilk pound cake and who taught me about birds and irises and rocks. I thought about my grandpa taking me fishing and letting me ride with him on his tractor. I thought about my other grandma who took care of us kids every day while my parents worked. She was on the feisty side -- she made sure us 5 kids were acting right, but she also had a soft and loving side to her, and she made a mean pot of pinto beans with a side of cornbread.

The kingdom of God comes near, the grace of God comes into our lives, and we are blessed through real people like our family and friends.

I thought, too, about people in the church who have shown God's grace to the least of these. I remember Betty. I met her years ago in another church. She developed a relationship with a young man who just loved coming to church. But the man had some disabilities, and not everyone took the time to understand this young man. He liked to move around during the service and people didn't always approve of his behavior--he could be disruptive in a normal, formal church setting. But he really wanted to be in church and to be with the people of the church. So Betty kind of took him under her mother hen wing. She would sit with him in a place in the back so he could walk around when he needed to but still be a part of the service. She was his buddy. She brought him change for a coke every Sunday. And she loved him. She was doing God's work in the world. That young man still attends church, he still loves Jesus, and he still feels welcome in that church years after Betty died.

What a legacy of God's love! What a witness to that church of how we must do whatever it takes to allow everyone to worship! The kingdom of God comes near, the grace of God comes into our lives, and we are blessed through the sacrificial love of people like Betty.

I heard a great story this week on a podcast-- a man from Florida was

talking about the impact his wife had on his view about the role and equality of women. He described himself as “somewhat of a chauvinist.” And he told about the way he had been raised to believe that women were good at having babies and raising families but not much else. He said he was taught that women weren’t necessarily smart or supposed to impact the world other than in their roles as mothers. And he said, “Then I met my wife, and she straightened me out.” He talked about how his wife was part of his transformation, and she wasn’t afraid to speak her mind. She didn’t hesitate to let her husband know when she thought he was wrong in his thinking. Over the course of their marriage, his views on many things including the role and equality of women in the world were completely changed. He said she put her foot down, and he had no choice but to be more sensitive. So he evolved, and he described himself as almost nothing like he was when he first married. The podcast talked about his wife’s 40 year struggle with breast cancer. One morning when the man woke up he found that his wife had died during the night. And yet her legacy continues. You see her bold words and strong beliefs had impacted her husband so much that he said he is still learning from her today even though she isn’t with him. He said that after his wife’s death he felt it was his responsibility to continue to grow, and that he owed it to her. Her legacy of speaking up when there was injustice or unfairness had become a way of thinking and acting because of the example his wife had set.<sup>4</sup>

Sometimes the kingdom of God comes near through persons who speak a word of truth into our lives, and we are blessed. We give thanks for these truth tellers -- because that is what the beatitudes are all about. You see the kingdom of God is a place where all are included and none are less valuable. Marcus Borg said: “The dream of God is a social and political vision of a world of justice and peace in which human beings do not hurt or destroy, oppress or exploit one another.”

And that brings me to one more story of a person whose legacy of bringing justice and peace made a permanent impact on this country and the world. U.S. Representative **John Lewis** was a leader of the Civil Rights Era who passed away in July after serving in Congress since 1987. He became most well-known for his fight for voting rights for African Americans. The National Archives summarizes his story like this:

In 1965, at the height of the modern civil rights movement, activists organized a march for voting rights, from Selma, Alabama, to Montgomery, the state capital. On March 7, some 600 people assembled at a downtown church, knelt briefly in prayer, and began walking silently, two-by-two through the city streets. With Hosea Williams leading the

demonstration, and John Lewis, at his side, the marchers were stopped as they were leaving Selma, at the end of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, by some 150 Alabama state troopers, sheriff 's deputies, and possemen, who ordered the demonstrators to disperse.

One minute and five seconds after a two-minute warning was announced, the troops advanced, wielding clubs, bullwhips, and tear gas. John Lewis, who suffered a skull fracture, was one of fifty-eight people treated for injuries at the local hospital. The day is remembered in history as "Bloody Sunday."<sup>5</sup>

This horrible violence served as a wake up call for Americans who saw the footage on a Sunday night. I learned that that evening, ABC was premiering the first TV airing of the movie "Judgment at Nuremberg." Media Historian Aniko Bodroghkozy (bod-ra-kozy) described the impact of the event this way:

An estimated 48 million people tuned in to watch the Academy Award-winning film, which dealt with the moral culpability of those who had participated in the Holocaust. And shortly after the movie started, ABC's news division decided to interrupt the movie with a special report from Selma.

In the days after the news film aired, a dozen legislators spoke on the floor of Congress linking Alabama Gov. George Wallace to Hitler and its state troopers to Nazi storm troopers. Ordinary citizens made the same connections. In the ensuing days, hundreds of Americans jumped into planes, buses and automobiles to get to Selma and stand with the brutalized marchers. The landmark Voting Rights Act passed with remarkable speed, just five months after Bloody Sunday.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/30/podcasts/the-daily/florida-older-voters.html>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.archives.gov/exhibits/eyewitness/html.php?section=2>

<sup>6</sup> <https://theconversation.com/how-the-images-of-john-lewis-being-beaten-during-bloody-sunday-went-viral-143080>

The adversity that John Lewis suffered drew attention to the issue of racism in America and inspired others to take action. He continued to speak and act for justice for all of God's people throughout his life -- helping us to envision what the reign of God on earth ought to look like and exemplifying bold and courageous action.

In 2018, John Lewis tweeted this message of encouragement:

"Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of

a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble."

The Message Bible talks about this kind of "good trouble" in the last verse of today's reading:

"Count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don't like it, *I* do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble."

In adversity, we find the holy presence of God!

Sometimes God's love breaks into the world through a buttermilk pound cake, and sometimes we experience the love of God through the bravery of a few committed people marching across a bridge to protect the voting rights of the oppressed. May God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven - may we be instruments of God's overwhelming love. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.