

Lesson 13

All Saints' Day

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 5:1–12

Matthew organized his Gospel in ways that would help him teach the Christian faith and life. At the outset, as he got into Jesus' ministry, he provided the Sermon on the Mount, a summary of Jesus' teaching about the righteousness of the disciple. Jesus insisted that faith is more than sentimental "believing" or merely intellectual agreement with theological propositions. It involves a relationship with Him that is expressed in a godly lifestyle that honors Him. The classic analysis of faith listed three ingredients: knowledge, assent, and trust. One Christian teacher has quite properly added action. In Christian discipleship, faith always acts on the basis of its trust in God's good will.

Scholars identify five "books" in Matthew, delineated by the phrase "when Jesus finished these sayings." In this first book, the Sermon on the Mount, the ending emphasizes Jesus' unique qualities as the Teacher sent from God: "When Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at His teaching, for He was teaching them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes" (7:28–29).

The Greek says, "He sat down and He opened His mouth and taught them, saying" This was the classic way of introducing a teacher's setting forth something of vital importance. It says, "Sit up and take notice! This is Jesus' official teaching!" The nature of Jesus' kingdom is immediately evident. Things are turned around, the opposite of what we expect—but consistent with the surprising Good News that God loves sinners and wants us to find new life in Him. The eight statements are called the Beatitudes because each begins with "Blessed."

Both John the Baptist and Jesus called out, "Repent!" The first "Blessed" echoes that call and pertains to those whose poverty of spirit has produced true repentance. *Ptochos*, "poor," is from a verb that describes cringing or crouching like a beggar. Pride is the antithesis of this poverty of spirit and prevents the proud from being blessed.

193. What blessing do the poor in spirit receive?

"Those who mourn" care deeply about the seriousness of their own sins, about sin, injustice and perversion in the world, and about the suffering they and others experience because the world is "out of sync" with its Creator.

194. Just how are such mourners comforted? (See John 14:18–19.)

The "meek" are the gentle, the patient, the humble, those who are strong enough to not assert themselves selfishly at the expense of others. They are the opposite of the "go-getters" who move up even if they have to step on a few others. Note that the promised blessing the meek are to receive is

“the earth”—a blessing for this life, not just for eternal life. But it is generally our human experience that it is the aggressive who grab the earth for themselves.

195. In what sense do God’s meek ones “inherit the earth”? (See Matthew 6:25–34.)

God’s basic, most valuable gift is “righteousness”—being right with Him through Christ and right with others in Christ. “Hunger” and “thirst” are present tense in the Greek, suggesting “keep on hungering and thirsting.”

196. Why must this hungering and thirsting for righteousness be continual?

The Greek word for “satisfied” is very emphatic. It was used for feeding and fattening cattle by giving them all they will eat and more!

197. Where is the Lord’s “filling station” for this blessing?

The first four beatitudes look toward God. The next three look toward other people, citing virtues that disciples of Jesus display in their interaction with others.

198. Of what does “blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” remind you? Consider the opposite. What does one who is unmerciful and unforgiving reveal about how he feels about himself?

199. What is the source and basis of a Christian’s purity of heart? Paul said we will see God “face-to-face” in heaven. How do the pure in heart see God now as part of their daily life experience?

200. Why is it the peacemakers who are called “sons [and daughters] of God”? What limits are there in this matter of peacemaking? (See Romans 12:18; Luke 12:51–53.)

The final blessing involves being persecuted because of righteousness, suffering because of Jesus. Suffering for Christ leads Christians to ___ because it is evidence of a sincere identification with Christ. (See John 15:18–21.)

God’s ways and the world’s ways are usually antithetical. State this by working through the Beatitudes in this way: Jesus said, “Blessed are ___,” but our world says, “Blessed are ___.”

The First Lesson: Revelation 7:2–17

The four angels stand as potential destroyers of the whole earth and as protectors of those God will seal as His own. Then appears the angel with the seal of the living God to be placed on the foreheads of the slaves of our God—in contrast with the mark of the beast on the worldly. The *Concordia Self-Study Bible* (p. 1955) explains the total of 144,000: “[This is] not a reference to members of actual Jewish tribes, but symbolic of all the faithful believers on earth. . . . Everywhere in Revelation, 12 is the number associated with the church. Twelve squared is 144. One thousand is 10 cubed, a number for completeness” (see Galatians 3:26–29).

This is followed by John’s vision of the great multitude in white robes standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb, holding palm branches and expressing their praise.

201. Who are the ones in this multitude? How is it that they wear white robes and carry palm branches and are privileged to stand before the throne and in front of the Lamb? Why are they called “a great multitude that no one could number”?

202. To whom do they offer their praise? What do they focus on in their praise? Who then affirms their praise and joins them in praising God?

Those who interpret symbolic visions of this kind literally see “the great tribulation” as a specific time of distress preceding a millennial rule of Jesus on earth. Narrative sections of Scripture, however, never speak of a preliminary, earthly rule, but warn that the end will “come like a thief in the night” (1 Thessalonians 5:2 and others). They do, however, predict a time of great stress for followers of Jesus as the end approaches. The “multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” includes *all* who have “washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb”—Christians of every era who have, through much tribulation, entered the kingdom of God (see Acts 14:22).

203. What is it that occupies this multitude from every part of human society?

The words “He who sits on the throne will shelter [literally, ‘spread His tent over’] them with His presence” is a reference to the tabernacle with its *Shekinah*, its cloud of glory that assured the Old Testament people of God’s presence among them. The vision of John makes it clear that full awareness of God’s presence with us will be a hallmark of life in the eternal kingdom. (See Revelation 21:1–3.)

204. How are the blessings of heaven described here in negative terms, as things withheld or removed?

205. What will be the great positive of the heavenly experience?

The Epistle for the Day: 1 John 3:1–3

The opening words of this pericope are an exclamation about the kind of love the Father has given us in Christ, which may be seen in the fact that we are called children of God. John was writing to Christians, most of whom had no status in the eyes of the world. The majority of those who became Christians in the first-century Greek world were slaves. They could be treated badly or disposed of at the will or whim of their masters. The Gospel of God's love in Christ had brought them a wonderful sense of personal worth. God's Son had been made sin for them so they could be made the righteousness of God in Him! But they were feeling pressure. Even in the Church, they were being put down by the "super-spiritual." In the world, they were beginning to feel official persecution for confessing "Jesus is Lord!" and, as a result, rejecting the requirement to worship the emperor as a personification of the divine spirit of Rome.

206. In what ways is it still true today that the world that does not know God does not know the disciples of Jesus as children of God?

207. In what ways may the feeling of being put down or one-upped even by other Christians still be a problem in the life of the Church?

The Bible doesn't give us a lot of details about the eternal life that God promises. Here John wrote, "What we will be ____." His words encourage us to recognize that for now, it is sufficient to know that "we are ____."

208. What assurance is added by John's "when He appears we shall be like Him"?

John then returned to an emphasis of the importance of living out who we are in Christ. We are to purify ourselves just as He is pure.

209. What does John point to as motivating factors in purifying ourselves to become more like Jesus in our daily living?

Lesson 13

All Saints' Day

Almighty and everlasting God, You knit together Your faithful people of all times and places into one holy communion, the mystical body of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Grant us so to follow Your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that, together with them, we may come to the unspeakable joys You have prepared for those who love You; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Holy Gospel: Matthew 5:1–12

193. Those who are sincerely poor in spirit and turn in humble faith to Jesus to receive His gifts receive nothing less than the kingdom of God—His gracious rule in their hearts and lives, an eternal rule with eternal blessings. But for Him to come and rule us, we must be led by the Spirit fully to acknowledge our own emptiness before Him. When He graciously fills us and rules us, we know we are truly saved by grace alone, the ultimate basis of assurance.

194. Those who mourn over sin, especially their own, are comforted by Jesus' gift of forgiveness, with all that this means for our daily lives and for the gift of eternal life. With Jesus beside us to encourage and strengthen us, we can also endure sufferings, knowing that "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18). Nothing will be able to separate us from Him and His love. (See Romans 8:28–39.)

195. Those who are not pushy and do not just grab for themselves but trust God's guidance and blessing of their efforts will find that He knows how to care for His own. This beatitude encourages us to "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness," trusting that "all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). The promise is not overflowing wealth, though God can provide that too, if it is His will, but daily bread, the basic needs of life. That is what Jesus taught us to pray for, and Paul said, "If we have food and clothing, with these we will be content" (1 Timothy 6:8). The needy of the world, some of them fellow Christians, challenge us to become God's hand to provide them with food and clothing and shelter and to carry out programs by which they will again be able to provide for themselves. Meekness is not weakness but willingly looking beyond ourselves to see God's hand supplying our needs, which we also do so we can be His instrument to help others.

196. We receive full righteousness before God through faith in Christ. That gift does not come to us piecemeal, but is an ongoing gift, to be received each day anew in faith and to be acknowledged with thanksgiving to the Giver. When we see how far we are from the ideal of discipleship that Jesus describes, it should make us all the more hungry and thirsty for His continually setting things right with us, filling us with His gift of righteousness.

197. God's "filling station" is the Word and the Sacraments. They are the Means of Grace that bring the gracious power of the Holy Spirit into our lives. We should never travel far without stopping to fill up.

198. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy” has to remind us of “forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.” This is the healing dynamic that Jesus has brought into our lives. When we let God’s forgiving love flow through us to others, we find that the living water He supplies always remains fresh and supportive of the abundant life He came to win for us. Being unmerciful or unforgiving toward others indicates that a person thinks he can go through life without needing God’s mercy and forgiveness himself. It is when we see our own need that we become understanding and responsive to the needs of others.

199. Pure hearts come only from Him whose pure heart led Him to love us and give Himself for us “while we were still sinners” (Romans 5:8). Purity of heart is openness, single-mindedness, and integrity as we seek to do God’s will in serving others. The blessing of the pure in heart is that they will see God. That will be fully true in our life with Him in the eternal kingdom. In our present life, we see Him by faith and in the day-to-day experience of His presence with us and His interaction with us in our Christians lives. (See 1 Corinthians 13:12–13.)

200. Those who work for true peace between people and God and between people and people will be called “sons [and daughters] of God” because true peace is God’s will and purpose for humanity—it’s why He sent the Prince of Peace to be our Brother. There are times when peace with another person is beyond our achieving, when he or she insists on being antagonistic. All we can do is consciously forgive him or her in Jesus’ name, ask Jesus to forgive our own contributions to the impasse, and continue to be open to possibilities. Peacemakers are not to seek a peace at all costs. There are values in terms of Christian doctrine and morality that we are not to surrender just for the sake of peace. For example: bringing a clear witness to Jesus as the one way to the Father in the face of the world’s religious syncretism; rejecting the murder of the unborn in a society that legalizes abortion; refusing to be pressed into participating in morally questionable activities just to follow the crowd.

Fill-in Answers: Suffering for Christ leads Christians to rejoice and be glad because it is evidence of our identification with Christ. Ask yourself, “If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?”

The antithesis game may produce something like this: Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit,” but our world says, “Blessed are those with very high self-esteem.” Other opposites include mourn/self-fulfilled; meek/powerful; hunger and thirst after righteousness/are uninhibited and unrestrained; merciful/uninvolved; pure in heart/manipulators; peacemakers/movers and shakers; and persecuted/those who do what is expedient to avoid difficulties.

The First Lesson: Revelation 7:2–17

201. The great multitude in white robes are people from every nation, tribe, people, and language who have believed Jesus and have found eternal life in Him. They wear white robes because every soil and stain of their sin has been washed away in the blood of the Lamb. Blood itself is one of the most difficult stains to remove from cloth, but the blood of Jesus is a cleansing agent, cleansing us from all our sin. Palm branches symbolized victory and kingship—thus their use on Palm Sunday for what the people thought was a triumphant king coming to claim an earthly throne. The heavenly vision portrays the final culmination of their use in praise to God and the Lamb on the throne. “A great multitude that no one could number” says that the atoning work of the Lamb is effective for all of humanity and that millions have been its beneficiaries through faith. You and I may, by God’s grace, see ourselves included in the multitude.

202. They offer their praise to “God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.” The focus of their praise is the salvation offered by God through the Lamb. At the multitude’s song of praise, all the angels and the elders and the four living creatures state their “Amen!” and join them in praising God.

203. The multitude in the vision “are before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple” (specifically, the *naos*, the Holy Place in the temple). We are not given details about the life of service we will live in heaven, but this vision is more than a suggestion that life in heaven is one long worship service. It says that the throne of God and His temple, His evident presence with us, will be intrinsic to and pervade every aspect of the life of service that will happily occupy us in the new heaven and new earth. The rest of the paragraph and chapters 21–22 of Revelation underscore this.

204. Blessings promised in terms of negatives are “They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. . . . And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

205. The great positive is expressed in these words: “The Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water.” For people who lived and traveled on foot in a hot, dry climate, there could be no more appropriate picture. Point out the striking wordplay in describing the Lamb as the one who will be the Shepherd.

The Epistle for the Day: 1 John 3:1–3

206. Christians may be recognized by the world in general because of humanitarian service—as Mother Theresa of Bangladesh is honored by Christian and non-Christian alike. They may also be honored for their secular achievements in politics or business or science or the arts. But for Christians to be honored because we are born again as children of God through faith in Jesus is out of the question. The gift of rebirth in the power of the Holy Spirit is meaningless to those who have not themselves received the gift and its assurances. The world looks at outward actions; it doesn’t give credence to the inner beliefs of Christians as the basis of their actions. Witness the interview of a Christian athlete or other celebrity who credits the blessing of the Lord Jesus for his or her achievements. The interviewer usually doesn’t know how to handle this, and the network is eager to get on to something else. The world sees the Christian faith as just one of many ways by which people aim at becoming “good people.” It stumbles over testimony about being reborn to be “a new person” through faith in the one Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

207. Charismatic Christians sometimes put down those who do not speak in tongues. Individuals in a congregation may feel they are out on the fringe of congregational life because the regulars and leaders are a clique concerned largely with themselves. A congregation led by an influential pastor may one-up other congregations that are not growing as rapidly or don’t have as varied a program of activities or services. Think of other possibilities.

Fill-in Answers: John wrote, “What we will be has not yet appeared.” His words suggest it is sufficient to know that “we are God’s children now.”

208. We shall be like Jesus—with glorified bodies like His (Philippians 3:20–21), in full awareness of God’s presence with us (Revelation 21:1–4), in our reigning in glory with Him (2 Timothy 2:11–13), and in having God at the center of every aspect of our lives (Revelation 7:13–17).

209. The hope of eternal life that we have in Christ encourages us to begin living an otherworldly life, different from the general society around us. (In Bible terms, “holy” or “pure” means “different from” or “separated from.”) Verse 5 adds the motivational factor of always remembering that Jesus came to take away our sins. We love because He loved first.