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Emily: Dear Jesus. I am so happy right now. It's -30 in Edmonton at the moment and I get to be sitting here on the beach in Mexico enjoying the sunshine. I am blessed.

Hayley: Dear Jesus. I heard some great news today! I got the lead role in the school play. There were at least 20 other girls trying out, but I got it. I am blessed.

Jenny: Dear Jesus. I can hardly believe it. I got my test back today and I got an A. I am blessed.

Zoe: Dear Jesus. It's official! My parents just ran into a lot of money and they are paying for all of my brothers and sisters to be home for Christmas together. We are blessed.

Madilyn: Dear Jesus. It's -30 outside. I didn't get the part in the school play. I barely passed my test. And my parents told me their divorce will be finalized during Christmas and we're broke. I am cursed.

Congregation...is this true? I think somehow you know that the answer is no. But there is something inside of us that says that that is true. We are very inclined to believe that to be blessed means we are given good things. I was on Facebook a few weeks ago and I saw a Christian company post a picture that said something like, "Like this post if you are blessed!" And there were thousands of comments. I'll read you a few.

- I woke to see another day!
- I am blessed every day. God is good!
- If you woke this morning, you are blessed.
- I have my health

- I am blessed with good friends and health.
- The sun is shining and I can still laugh.
- He blessed me with one more day. I am thankful and grateful.

I did a scan of the comments and those few summarize the main theme: If you are alive. If you are healthy. If you have food on your plate. Then you are blessed and we can be happy and declare that God is good. So, does that mean that if we die, we are not blessed? If we have to go in for a surgery, or are confined to a bed because of a disease...does that mean we are cursed? If we can't afford to eat a meal – does that mean that God is not good?

What would happen if I went up to chair of council John Strikweirda a month ago and chatted with him about his upcoming hip surgery and I said, "John, you are blessed." Or when Pastor Rich first learned about his daughter Rachel's brain bleed and was crying his eyes out not knowing if his daughter would live and I came up to him and said, "Pastor Rich...you are blessed."

I think if I did those things we would consider that to be offensive. In addition, I think that if I did that and one of you heard about it, you would be angry with me. And you should be. Not because what I said is incorrect...but because it is incomplete. Which I'll get too later in the sermon.

But I want to point out that the issue is that when we say that we are blessed ONLY when good things come our way we do inevitably communicate that people are not blessed when bad things happen. And we can also end up believing it. We may believe that we are cursed if bad things happen.

Our society as a whole understands what it means to be blessed in a very different way that the church does. Society will listen to popular opinion as truth, but we as a church look at scripture for final authority. We read in our text earlier what is actually meant by blessed. When Jesus began his sermon with these beatitudes, people would have been stunned. Jesus does not begin with "blessed are the rich." He never says, "blessed are those who are healthy" or "blessed are those with loving family dynamics" or "blessed are you if you're popular and good looking." Which is what people thought and is what people think.

Let's look at it again creatively and let's see if we are as stunned as the listeners on the Mount of Beatitudes would have been.

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Emily: Dear Jesus. I don't have enough money to buy any food today. And it's a long walk to the homeless shelter. I need you ,God. I can't do it alone. I am blessed. Because the Kingdom of heaven is mine.

Hayley: Dear Jesus. I just found out I have cancer and I'm going to die soon. I can't stop crying. I am blessed. Because I will be comforted.

Jenny: Dear Jesus. Everything I have is yours. I am willing to give up anything and everything. I would rather suffer than disobey anything you say. I am blessed. Because I will inherit the earth.

Zoe: Dear Jesus. My heart longs for justice. I will pursue justice relentlessly until everything is made right. I am blessed. Because I will be satisfied.

Madilyn: Dear Jesus. Today I saw our mean neighbor trying to carry all of her groceries in her house at once. So, I ran over to help her and we carried them in together. I am blessed. Because I will receive an abundance of mercy.

Emily: Dear Jesus. It's Sunday today and I am so excited to worship you. I want to worship you for who you really are as revealed in the bible. Not a god that I just made up in my head and believe whatever I want to believe because it sounds nice. I am blessed. Because I will see God.

Hayley: Dear Jesus. It was hard, but I did it. I kindly confronted the person who said hurtful things about me. We had a great conversation and now we can move forward in a healthy way. I am blessed. Because I am a child of God.

Jenny: Dear Jesus. I sat on the bus today and someone I recognized said loudly, "she's a Christian!" And everyone around me gave me a horrible look and they all got up to sit as far away from me as possible. I am blessed. Because the kingdom of heaven is mine.

Zoe: Dear Jesus. Everywhere I went today people were insulting me. They were lying about me. They were talking badly about me. Someone even pushed me on the ground and kicked me. I know it's because I go to church to worship you. I am blessed. Because great is my reward in heaven.

(Girls sit down)

Pretty different, isn't it? Does this mean that when we do get good things it isn't a blessing from God? No. Not necessarily. So, what does it mean to be blessed? How are we to understand it? Because if we are blessed to be a blessing, which we are, then we need to understand what it means to be blessed. Let's dig a little deeper into our passage and see what Jesus is trying to say.

A little later in the sermon on the mount, Jesus teaches us how to pray. I'm going to start it and we're going to see if you can say the next line when I pause: "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name: *Your kingdom come.*"

If you have ever prayed the Lord's Prayer, you have prayed for God's kingdom to come. There is a heavenly kingdom and there is an earthly kingdom. When sin entered into the world, the king of darkness, was given rule. We read in Luke chapter 4 that when Jesus came he inaugurated the kingdom of God here on earth – where Christ is King. When Jesus defeated Satan on the cross and rose again 3 days later, He established HIS Lordship over the earth.

So, what we have here is we live in what we call the "now and the not yet." Because God's kingdom is here, but not completely. Not everyone in the world let's their knees bow and tongues confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. But the church does. We confess that Jesus is the Lord. And we happily submit to his rule over us. And we wait for the day when Christ will return – which he will – and his Kingdom will fully come. Until then we live in eager anticipation for that.

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What does this have to do with being blessed and being a blessing? A lot. What Jesus is doing for us here in the Beatitudes is painting a picture of the heavenly kingdom. Starting with the first beatitude and saying it plainly: blessed are you who know how much you need Christ. The kingdom of heaven is yours! Look forward to that.

And what fuels our expectancy for Christ's return? Our need for him. I remember being in Gems once and I was maybe in grade 6 or 7 and we were talking about Christ's return. We had some sort of booklet and we were answering questions. One question was "do you want Jesus to return tomorrow?" And I remember saying no. I didn't want him to return because I liked my life. I had plans for the future! If Jesus came, then I wouldn't get to go to University! I wouldn't own a house!

I'm a bit older now. And I've experienced a lot more pain. I also understand a lot more what is happening around the world and it's so bleak sometimes. Like last week we heard of the bombing in Sri Lanka. When we hear on the news about another terrible injustice in the world or something in our life crumbles, we can't help but cry out – "Come Lord Jesus. Maranatha!" Those who suffer the most in this life ache the most for Jesus' return.

And not suffering in this life can do the opposite. For example, I have a friend who is from the Czech Republic. We used to talk a lot about Jesus and Christianity. She was an atheist and still is. She lives a great life. She's beautiful, she has a great husband, they had their first child about a year ago. She runs marathons. They are successful in everything. So, when I pray for her, I find myself saying, "Jesus, have mercy on her. Show her that she needs you. Because right now, why would she ever call upon your name? She has everything...so, how can she know she actually has nothing?"

We can learn a few things about what it means to be truly blessed in this world. It surely does not mean only material items. In some of my research for this sermon I learned that the word "blessed" is used in the New Testament 112 times. Does anyone want to guess how many times that word is used for material prosperity? 0. Zero. The word is typically joined in with words that have to do with bringing us closer to Jesus.

The biblical meaning of being blessed is not any temporary or shallow, but a deeply permanent promise of salvation. It is anything that brings us in a right relationship with the God who created us. That's pretty different than how our world defines that word, isn't it? Jesus pronounces salvation on the mount of beatitudes and gives great hope to his people as we wait and wait for our King to return. All those who belong to the invisible church are blessed. We are a blessed people.

Jesus is not saying in the beatitudes, "if you do these things, you will be blessed." He is also not saying, "now that you believe in me, this is how you must behave." Jesus is saying to us something like, "The beginning of my ministry means the beginning of the heavenly kingdom on earth. I know it's not totally here yet, but it will grow. And when I return again it will be here fully. When you realize this, your heart will change. Because of your eager anticipation for the coming kingdom, you'll want to live into it now.

These beatitudes show us what the future kingdom will look like, but we can still see glimpses of it on earth and live in it now. When we live into our identity as being part of this heavenly kingdom here on earth, we become a channel of blessing to the world. In other words, we are blessed to be a blessing. Let's look at an example from verse 4 which we looked at earlier in the time of confession.

Verse 4 says "blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." We mourn because we have sinned personally and corporately. We grieve over our sin and are confident that because of Jesus everything will be made right again and we will be comforted. We mourn in this life for more than that too. We all have experienced loss in life. It's true that in this life that many people who mourn will be comforted. But it's also true that many people, even some in this room, will mourn and never be fully comforted until the heavenly kingdom fully comes. We live in the now and the not yet.

One of my best friends lost her dad in the fall of 2017. It was terrible. And totally unexpected. I was talking to her about this and she said that the people who also lost their dad earlier than expected were the ones who gave her the greatest comfort because they had experienced it themselves and had really valuable words to say. My friend was telling me that she is now very aware of others who also lose dads too young and would seek them out to give them comfort.

We can see how blessed and be a blessing plays out here in this verse. We are blessed simply because we are part of the heavenly kingdom. We know this world is temporary. We know that we will eventually be fully comforted. And so, we can be a blessing to others who are mourning. My friend will say, "I'm not automatically a blessing just because I experienced this loss. I actually have to seek out people to comfort them." And she does.

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Congregation. Have you mourned? You can be a blessing. Who better to comfort someone who just lost their husband than another widow? Have you lost a parent? You can bring the greatest comfort possible to someone else who loses a mom or dad. When we are in the greatest pain, we receive the greatest comfort from others who have experienced the same pain and understand the same hope.

Congregation. We are a blessed people. We just went through a series on Job for Lent and we also know that we are a suffering people. We are a blessed people and we are a suffering people. I said earlier that if I were to go to John Strikweirda or Pastor Rich while they were suffering and told them that they were blessed I would be correct, but I would be incomplete. I would need to add a "because" in there. John and Pastor Rich are blessed because they know that Jesus is the Lord over all the earth. I still wouldn't go up to either of them in the middle of their situation and say, "you are blessed because you have salvation." Rather, we as a church respond knowing they are a blessed people.

For example, the day after the deLange family heard the news that their daughter Rachel might die, I was in Red Deer for the classis meeting. I got a call from Gerald Vandermeer because he wanted to see if we could set up a prayer meeting in our church and pray for Rachel. Rich and Patsy are part of our blessed church family and they were hurting, so members of our congregation responded by being a blessing. The prayer meeting was held, money was given, emails were sent, videos were made. In whatever capacity we could, our church automatically responded by being a blessing using the gifts we have.

Conclusion:

So, congregation, we are blessed because we know Jesus as our Lord right now and in the future. As a blessed people we are to be an active blessing – not just when we receive material items, but also from our pain. We all have been given gifts to use. All to encourage each other to draw nearer to Jesus. We are a family. We get to do this together. We are in this for the long haul. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus and on eternity and remind ourselves that this life is temporary and the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to us. Then maybe we'll sound a little something like this:

Madilyn: Dear Jesus. It's -30 outside. I didn't get the part in the school play. I barely passed my test. And my parents told me their divorce will be finalized during Christmas and we're broke. I am blessed. Because you are with me now and you will be with me forever. I know what it feels like and I can bring hope to others who will also go through it in the future.

For anyone visiting and does not yet know Jesus, you have heard the hope that we have in Christ. We are not perfect here. We experience our fair share of suffering. We do not have it all together. But we are together. We follow Jesus who possesses the very qualities that he preaches. He is the supremely merciful One who made peace between us and God and made eternity with God possible for us.

We invite you to be part of our family. You don't need to go through this life alone. There are people here who have experienced what you are experiencing and we are happy to be a blessing to you. If you would like to know more about the gospel, please find me or Pastor Michael after the service. If you can't find us – find anyone who is a member here and they will help you get connected. We want you to hear and know the good news and for God's blessing to be upon you.

Because that is where it all begins...God's blessing. God blessed us first. Every blessing he pours out we turn to praise. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Amen.