

He says, "Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." And then comes the kicker. "Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."

"Rejoice and be glad," Jesus says. And did you catch why? Not because of the worldly stuff that surrounds us. Not because we've managed to keep up with our friends and neighbors around us. It's because of what God has promised is our reward in heaven. Even if we're falsely accused, even if we're ridiculed and maligned for our faith, even if we have to endure some painful suffering or persecution for standing up for Jesus, we know we have a reward of grace in heaven. We KNOW we have a reward of grace in heaven, because God, who cannot lie, has promised us, "Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown" (Re 2:10).

We are people graciously chosen by God and richly blessed by him. As such, the more we rejoice in our salvation and imitate Jesus in our daily living, the more we're going to face pain and persecution. What Jesus once said to his disciples he also says to us: "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ...If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also" (Jn 15:18, 20). The closer we get to Jesus and the farther we get from the false philosophies of this sinful world, the more we're going to experience trouble and trial. That's the way of the Christian. Jesus says, "In this world you will have trouble," but he's quick to add, "But take heart! I have overcome the world" (Jn 16:33).

Aha! We have a joy that nothing can destroy, for we are willing to suffer for Jesus' sake. When we remember our eternal reward in heaven, we are truly blessed.

My friends, the world around us considers us complete fools. After all, we put our hope for salvation in an antiquated Jesus. We imitate him in our daily living. We're willing to suffer for his sake. Why? It's because we take to heart what God says, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us" (Ro 8:18). It's because we belong to Jesus and know we are going to heaven. We are blessed. We are happy. Never forget that. In Jesus you and I have a joy that nothing can destroy. Amen.

Matthew 5:1-12 – St. Paul's, Muskego, WI – 399, 477, 82, 84
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What is it that makes you happy? In one of our psalm refrains we sing, "Happy the people the Lord has chosen to be his own." What makes us happy, more than anything else, I pray, is to know that in Christ God has chosen us to be his own. The Holy Spirit has moved us to know and embrace Jesus as our only Savior from sin, death, and hell. This means that, no matter what, we can be happy, or, as Jesus says in our text, know that we're blessed, because he's always at our side, keeping us safe, and working everything for our good.

Writing to Christians who were suffering from persecution, even running for their lives, Peter offered this encouragement: "You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pt 2:9). This Epiphany season we've been worshiping under the theme *Aha*, citing moments in our lives that cause us to sit up and take note. Our *Aha* moment today is that we can delight even in suffering.

Understanding a Joy That Nothing Can Destroy

- 1. We have found Jesus' salvation.**
- 2. We want to imitate Jesus' life.**
- 3. We are willing to suffer for Jesus' sake.**

1. Matthew 5-7 records Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Jesus is at a high point in his ministry. Crowds are coming to hear him preach. His disciples are present to learn and to grow. Matthew says, "Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them." What's the first thing Jesus says? "Blessed are they." Another translation says, "Happy are they." Is there a difference? When we have God's blessings, don't we have every reason to be happy?

Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled." Think of all the things in life that we're convinced satisfy us and make us happy. Isn't it true that many of them really don't? They wear out. They fall apart. They break down. Isn't that why Jesus says in the next chapter of Matthew, "Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal" (Mt 6:20)?

You and I live in a world that is not friendly to Jesus or to us, who call ourselves Christian. The philosophy of our society is that we can be satisfied only if we have the same stuff as everyone else—the same electronic toys, the same expensive cars, the same exotic vacation spots. We can be happy only if we have the biggest and best of everything—the finest foods, the costliest clothes, the most extravagant houses. That's not God's philosophy. God says that we are truly blessed and most happy when we have found our salvation in Jesus. Through Isaiah God says, *"Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare" (Is 55:2).* What a vivid reminder that there's more to life than all this world's stuff!

And that "more" is the gospel. The gospel, the good news of salvation in Jesus, is *"the richest of fare."* Only in the gospel are we assured that our sins are forgiven. Only in the gospel are we promised peace with God. Only in the gospel do we find freedom from guilt and shame. And, wonder of wonders, it doesn't cost us a thing. For sure, it cost God. It cost him the life of his one and only Son. But for us it's all free. It's all ours by God's grace. *"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,"* Paul says, *"that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9).*

Aha! We have a joy that nothing can destroy, because we've found our salvation in Jesus. When we know Jesus, we are truly blessed.

2. In the midst of his list of blessings, Jesus doesn't pause and say something like, "Be sure to follow my example," or, "Be sure to do what I'm telling you." No, it's almost as if he points to himself and says, "These are things that you see in me and in my life." Listen.

"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." Who better to show us how to be merciful than Jesus, who once prayed, *"Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Lk 23:34)?* Blessed are you, Jesus, for you are most merciful.

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God." The people of Jesus' day saw firsthand someone who was pure in heart. While Jesus was accused of many things, shamefully mistreated, and eventually put to death, he could still claim, *"Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?" (Jn 8:46)* And the Spirit-inspired author of Hebrews writes of Jesus, *"We have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin" (He 4:15).* Blessed are you, Jesus, for you are profoundly pure in heart.

"Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God." At Jesus' birth the angel announced that peace had come to the earth. Isaiah prophesied that the Messiah would be called *"Prince of Peace" (Is 9:6).* Jesus came to bring the peace that the world completely misses and that, sadly, we sometimes forget. In fact, we pray in one of our hymnal prayers: *"Lord God, give to us, your servants, that peace which the world cannot give."* This is the peace of God that *"transcends all understanding"* and that *"guards [our] hearts and [our] minds in Christ Jesus" (Php 4:7).* It's the peace of knowing that we are one with God and free from sin, guilt, and shame. It's the peace we enjoy as God's own sons and daughters, his dear children, chosen by him to be his own. Blessed are you, Jesus, for you are the perfect peacemaker.

Jesus sets a very high standard for us, doesn't he? Jesus never sinned. Not once—whether in thought, word, or deed. How can we ever measure up to that—perfection? And yet, confident of our forgiveness, peace with God, and eternal life in heaven, we make it our goal to be like Jesus. Not to gain something from him—it's already ours—but to thank him for it. That's why Paul can write to New Testament Christians like us and say, *"Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Col 3:13).*

How did the Lord forgive us? Completely and unconditionally. God didn't approach us and ask if we wanted to be forgiven. God didn't ask us to make some contribution toward the payment for our sins. God didn't say something like, "If you meet me halfway, I'll meet you halfway." God came the whole way. God came the whole way in the person and work of his Son, Jesus Christ. And just as God came the whole way to us in Jesus, so we want to go the whole way—being merciful and pure in heart and seeking peace—when it comes to our relationships with others. As God inspired Paul to write, *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves" (Php 2:3).*

Aha! We have a joy that nothing can destroy, because we want to imitate Jesus' life. When we want to serve Jesus, we are truly blessed.

3. Remember that Jesus is on the mountainside and is preaching a sermon that runs three chapters long in Matthew. The crowds have assembled to listen and to learn. The disciples are present to hear and to heed. Jesus is getting them ready for what he knows they will face in being his witnesses to the world and taking a stand for the gospel.