

EPIPHANY 4
ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
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“IF I REALLY WERE A CHRISTIAN I WOULD...”
(Matthew 5:1-12)

Grace, mercy, and peace are yours from God our Father and from Christ Jesus, our Savior. Amen.

The Christian life is very much like walking a tight rope. Because this is so, the devil has an easy task. To knock us off that tight rope of faith all he has to do is to push us one way or another. On the one hand, he can appeal to that sinful nature that is inside of each one of us, a nature that he knows all too well since he also has it – it’s the corruption of pride, lust, and covetousness. So it is that he easily tempts us to all manner of evil thoughts and activities by appealing to those passions, lusts, and pride that are a part of our corruption. It’s not a difficult job at all to get someone to sin when sin is what they want to do.

On the other hand, he can push into a self-righteous attitude of heart. To do this he only has to appeal to a corrupt way of thinking in us – that is, he only has to appeal to our desire to have some level of worthiness of our own making. Once we fall to this idea, we are like silly putty in his hands, for we will either become self-righteous and hypocritical Pharisees on the one hand, or despair of being true Christians on the other.

It is this second scheme of Satan that I want to address today, and we do so by borrowing a rather common conditional statement that many Christians, at one time or another, in one way or another, ask themselves: If I really were a Christian I would...” Our text will help us see why that is such a dangerous question, but it will also help us to fill in the blank with the only correct answer. Our text is Matthew 5:1-12:

Seeing the crowds, he went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. (2) And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying: (3) "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. (4) "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. (5) "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. (6) "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. (7) "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. (8) "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. (9) "Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. (10) "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of

heaven. (11) *"Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. (12) Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.*

Our text forms the opening portions of what is known as Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. Individually, these verses are known as *the Beatitudes* – the word beatitude is derived from the Latin word which means “blessing.” Jesus pronounces a blessing on those who are what these words describe. It is important that we understand what it means to be blessed, because as we typically understand the word “blessed” we mean it in reference to having received something from another, most often from God. For example, it is not uncommon to hear someone refer to children as a blessing from God. What does that mean? Does it mean that children are a gift from God? Well, yes, but it actually means something even more. To be blessed is to be made happy by a good gift. No one says, “God blessed me with a toothache this morning, because generally we think of a toothache a curse – not that it is necessarily, but that’s how we think of it. The point is that when God blesses people, His gifts result in blessedness, or happiness.

Yet, when people read through the Beatitudes, they often are not happy by what they hear. It’s not what the words convey to them, but what they perceive in themselves when they hear these words. Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Their focus becomes on what they are rather than on what God gives. Here is where Satan’s task is so easy. He only has to appeal to that desire within us to look within us for the certainty of God’s blessings. This desire is given voice when the individual says, “If I really were a Christian I would... be poor in spirit, mourn my sin, be meek in my dealing with others, have a greater hunger and thirst to do righteous things, show more mercy to others in their needs, have a purer heart than I do, always be at peace with others, and even be so open about my faith in Jesus that I would feel more persecution.” “If I really were a Christian I would....stop sinning and be more holy.”

On the surface, that may sound like a fairly accurate description of what it means to be a Christian. It isn’t though. In fact, it is the exact opposite of what a Christian is and should be. A couple of weeks ago, when I got in the vehicle to run some errands, the radio came on immediately. I wasn’t quick enough to turn it off before I heard this one rather well-known evangelist say, “I never stopped sinning until I realized that a Christian is a saint. That’s when I stopped sinning.”

We rightly are shocked and repulsed by such a statement, but we should understand clearly that it is the natural conclusion to the statement, “If I really were a Christian I would stop sinning and be more holy.” A Christian doesn’t stop sinning simply because he is a Christian. Yes, he strives against sin in his life, he abhors it, he even repents of it, but he never stops committing it. God’s Word has very clear and condemning things to say about those who deny that they sin: namely that they deceive themselves and the truth is not in them. So we learn that the reality is that it is not those who acknowledge their sin but those who believe they can and have stopped sinning that are not really Christians.

Lest we forget, being a Christian is first and foremost a matter of trusting in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. And it is right for us to trust in Jesus for forgiveness because He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Note well, He is not the moralizer of God who shows the world how to stop sinning. He came into the world to take our sin away, but not our sinful nature. When He died on the cross, it was in payment for our sin, not to show us how it’s done. His life and death were all about our justification before God, not about giving us a way to be better people. The Gospel of Christ is to show us that Jesus is our Savior and not we ourselves.

This, then, is what the Beatitudes are about, too. They aren’t about a fictitious cessation of all sin that we are able to accomplish, but about a genuine recognition of sin in our lives. Those who are poor in spirit are the ones who recognize that it is precisely because of sin that they have nothing to offer God. Those who mourn do so because they acknowledge sin in them keeps rearing its ugly head. Those who are meek, are humbled by their failures to obey God rather than pointing the finger at others. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness do so because they don’t have righteousness in them but need it from an outside source – that is, the righteousness that comes through faith in Jesus.

Faith in Jesus is a two-sided coin. One side of faith is repentance – which is genuine sorrow for sin. The other side of the coin is trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of sin. Just like you can’t slice a quarter in half and still have \$.25 to buy a piece of bubble gum, so also you can’t disconnect sorrow from sin from trust in Jesus and still be a Christian. Judas was sorry for his sin of betraying Jesus, but his sorrow wasn’t coupled to trust in Jesus. Peter, on the other hand, possessed sorrow for sin and trust in Jesus for forgiveness for his denying Jesus, and Peter was blessed by God for he inherited the kingdom of God, was comforted by His Savior with forgiveness, inherited the earth, was filled with the righteousness of Christ, obtained mercy, and is called a son of God.

So how do we fill in that blank? If I really were a Christian I would....what? If I really were a Christian I would stop sinning? No, but I would abhor the sin that is in my life. If I really were a Christian I would flee in faith to the only One who can comfort me, fill me, and give me eternal life. If I really were a Christian I would trust in Jesus who purchased forgiveness for my sins by His suffering and death on the cross.

The Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper are given for the very purpose of delivering to you that blessedness of which the Beatitudes speak. It is not those who quit sinning and are baptized that will be saved, but those who believe and are baptized will be saved. The Lord's Supper is not for those who believe they have quit sinning enough to be worthy of the Sacrament, but it is meant for those who feel the guilt of their sin, acknowledge it, sorrow over it, and trust that Jesus died to atone for it. Those who so receive the Lord's body and blood find entrance into God's kingdom, comfort, mercy, and righteousness from God, the right to be called children of God, and a place in heaven by the merits of Jesus Christ.

That comfort, that righteousness, that eternal life is also made available to you in the Words and promises of God in Holy Scripture. To His Word you should listen and in His Word you should trust, for in them your God blesses you with that which you cannot earn by imagining you can or have stopped sinning, but through the very faith that comes by hearing and hearing the Word of God. This is the faith by which we are blessed. This is what the Christian believes. AMEN!