



[Rev. Steven S. Billings](#)

Sermon for All Saints'

November 3, 2024

For Theirs Is the Kingdom of Heaven

Matthew 5:1–12

¹Seeing the crowds, [Jesus] went up on the mountain, and when he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²And 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. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you."*

God has given us good things in creation. They are ours to enjoy in their proper place. Christians should not be strangers to the joys of fine food and wine, sexual intimacy, music, and dancing. Even mindless fun, like video games or baseball have their place. We should delight in them all. But these pleasures: food, drink, sex, and baseball, are severely limited. They quickly vanish. Why would we store up treasures here? They pale in comparison to the greater gifts and joys of mind and soul.

Have you noticed that pleasures such as gluttony and lust are overrated? They are fleeting and unsatisfying. This is partly because they're corruptions of the truly good things. Lust is not appropriate even in marriage, for it seeks not to love and serve, but to use. And that's selfish and harmful. Seeking to gain our lives, we lose them. Seeking to gain pleasures, we find them always out of reach. Whether the particular pleasures of the flesh are intoxication, food, or tingling flesh, they never last. You can never eat enough to last a lifetime; you're always hungry again. And the type of food that satisfied you yesterday may not please you the same today. We're always on the prowl for a new adventure. Besides, the pleasures never live up to the fantasy, anyway. And, though the pleasures don't last, the guilt does. People destroy themselves pursuing the vanities for which they're willing to sell their souls, and cheaply at that. Repent.

The joy of marriage is not just in the bedroom. It's on long drives and at the dinner



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table. Two become one flesh in all things. God gave Eve to Adam not just as something to use, but as a helpmeet and to be the mother of us all. Man and wife find purpose and value in service to one another and to their children, even in sacrifice. You may find value in escapism. But what value is there in simply making yourself numb? Far better to spend your time with a good book than with drugs or alcohol. Pleasures of the mind always beat pleasures of the flesh. Novels are better than drunkenness. Conversation is better than sex.

Nevertheless, nothing in this world, nothing in the physical realm, nothing even of the mind, can compare to the contemplation of God and His holy Word. Theology is the best pursuit of man. All the arts and sciences are gifts from God, of course. And they all have their place. Theology doesn't do much good when your arteries are blocked or your kidneys are failing. Nor will it repair a broken timing belt or faulty fuel injector. But theology is the highest and best endeavor of mankind. It's where men are what they were created to be, like the holy angels. For that reason it has never been a spectator sport and there are no amateurs. You are to be prepared to give a reason for the hope that is in you. No one else can believe for you. So, while I'm preaching, you're judging. You're listening and comparing what I say to the Word of God and the Voice of your Shepherd. You add your "amen" only if what I say is true. That's also the way of the Church's prayers and even of the Body and Blood of Jesus. Listen closely at the rail and you'll hear "The Body of Christ" in one voice and then "Amen" in another. Some people say it out loud. You don't have to, but some do. I do. But, whether or not you say it out loud, reception of Our Lord's Body and Blood is a confession of unity and the truth of what the Celebrant says. He says: "the Body of Christ" and you say, out loud or silently, but usually in Hebrew, "Truth," that is "Amen." Or as Luther would translate, "Yes, Yes, it is so."

God's Word is what satisfies those who are thirsty and hungry for righteousness. It satisfies their souls, deep down, where it counts. In a strange way the Word satisfies, even while it intensifies our thirst. Every preacher worth his salt has pursued the ministry for the sake of this thirst. Godly preachers love God's Word and Theology and desire to spend all their time in it. (Those who love people should not go into the Ministry. They should join one of the helping professions where they can do some good.) Whether this love of God's Word threatens to consume you so that you pursue the Ministry or not, you do love it. You know what I'm talking about. It's why you're here. Strangely, God's Word never grows old. It's never mastered. It's shallow enough for a child to wade in and understand, yet it's also deep enough for giants to drown in. It satisfies in a way nothing else can. You've heard God's Voice and rejoiced in it. You know your Lord. For, by His Word in the Bible, in preaching, in Holy Communion, Holy Absolution, Holy Baptism, and the Holy Liturgy, God bestows a kingdom on you whom others count as poor. He comforts you who mourn, gives the earth to the meek, and mercy to the merciful. He purifies the hearts that see Him by faith and calls peacemakers His sons. That's why you are blessed. It's why you're here



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today. It's not because you're poor, mourning, meek, and hungry. Those conditions afflict unbelievers as well. You're here because God bestows His kingdom on you, because you bear His Name. He comforts, satisfies, and is merciful to you. He gives you creation, even the earth itself, and His kingdom. He blesses you. Guilt departs. Shame is removed.

For all that, we've not quite yet arrived. You know this joy, this watery hope of the promise made in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. But still we are poor, meek, mourning, persecuted, and so on. These things are not our blessings. The blessings are what God does through the Son in comforting, satisfying, and being merciful to us. Blessed are you who are poor in spirit because God through Jesus His Son gives you the kingdom. It is yours, though you do not yet fully have it. Like one who has bought a house and awaits delivery of the keys, like one who is promised an inheritance, but whose loved one has not yet died. It belongs to you and one day you will come into full possession of it.

But today – the Feast of All Saints – we celebrate and remember the believers in Christ who *have* arrived. Not just the hero saints, like Peter and Paul, but also our own saints, our own departed loved ones who died in the Faith. A large part of what we celebrate is the ongoing companionship, the continuing presence of our faithful departed.

We can do this if we realize first the presence of our living Lord. As we seek and find Him, we find them. They're with Him. They live with Him, are gathered around Him day and night. Where He is, where He has promised to be, they are. The saints in heaven are part of the Church. We don't worship them, but we do worship *with* them. They worship the Risen Christ face to face. We worship the same Risen Christ under the veil of bread and wine. In Holy Communion we are linked with heaven, with the Communion of Saints, with our Christian loved ones who have gone before us. That's what the "Communion of Saints" is. We commune with the dead in Christ. Of course, they're not really dead. Jesus lives. So do they. They are in Christ. They are with Christ. Where He is, they are. Our closest meeting place with Christ is at Holy Communion. So that is also our closest meeting place with our dead who are in His keeping.

There's something good in tending graves. Moses carried Jacob's bones back to Israel. But what I really want to do is take the widows and widowers by the hand, away from the grave, out through the cemetery gate, and in through the door of the church, right up here to the Altar; and there put them in touch, not with the dead body or remains of their loved ones, but with the living soul who is with Christ at the Altar! I've never known a widow who missed her husband's body. It's the soul, the *person* that they miss.

Our human nature needs more than the assurance that some day, in some way, we will again meet our loved ones "in heaven." It is true. We will. But there is more to it than that. When death is viewed in the light of the Communion of Saints and Holy Communion,



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we know the presence of our dead. That allows a healthier bereavement. For, while our loved ones have left us and gone on a long journey, we are still in touch with them. There is a place where we can meet: at the Altar. Let it thrill us then, let it fill us with godly joy and peace, let our hearts pound with anticipation when we hear the words of the Holy Liturgy: "with angels and archangels and all the company of Heaven." Our loved ones who have fallen asleep in Jesus are there with that great company of heaven, the Communion of Saints. They are with the Lord. The nearer we come to Him in Holy Communion, the nearer we come to them. We, too, are members of the Body of Christ. We, too, are His saints, living cells in that spiritual organism, partaking and sharing in the life of the other cells, as we share the Body of Christ Himself.

There is nothing fanciful or unreal about this. It's the most real thing in all the world, for it is the promise of God. Of course, we still miss our loved ones. We would miss them if they were gone on a business trip as well. But now, since they are what some people call "dead," they are closer to us than ever. We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (Heb. 12:1). We miss their physical presence bitterly. We mourn. We weep. As Jesus mourned and wept, so we weep, for we want to hear their voices, feel their touch, and hold them in our arms. But we do not mourn as those without hope. We are blessed, for Christ Himself comforts us. Our separation is temporary and is not complete. We have not lost them. And when our sense of loss becomes too great, when despair threatens and tempts us, we can always go to our meeting place at the Altar. We can come and receive the Body and Blood of Jesus, be forgiven anew, be preserved in this holy Faith, so that we may follow where they have gone. We can come and commune with the saints and enjoy their companionship over and over again.

Jesus Christ is the heart of our religion. He loves and cares for us. His Body and Blood link us not merely to Bethlehem and Calvary. They link us also to that world beyond the grave. They link us to Easter. For His Body and Blood are risen from the dead and in Holy Communion He brings us into Himself. He stoops down to earth and the seen meets the unseen, the Church on earth and the Church in heaven are one. Angels sing with the Church triumphant and with us, the militant and the suffering, as God dotes upon His beloved Bride in both places at the same time. Praise be to Him, now and forever. Amen