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“Not Success - Blessed”

Text: Matthew 5:1-12; Revelation 7:9-17; 1 John 3:1-3

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Blessed. Jesus used that word nine times in the Holy Gospel we heard today. But what does it mean . . . really? It's not a word that has much currency in our world today. Occasionally you'll hear someone say "I'm so blessed" - usually when something good happens. And a form of the word gets trotted out every Thanksgiving with the admonition to "count your blessings" - as if we could. So it's good, I think, to take some time today to think about this. *What does it mean to be blessed?*

I find it helpful when wondering about the meaning of words to pick out their opposite and think about the contrast. So what is the opposite of blessed? Well, the first word that comes to mind would be *cursed* - and I think that's true. But I think there's another one, another word that is the opposite of blessed in a very practical sense, and therefore one that is better able to help us understand the readings for today and to understand the day that we celebrate today, All Saints Day. And I think that word is: **success**.

Now at first, those two words may seem the same. And I think it true that the word success has replaced the word blessed in our world today and, honestly, even in many churches today. We want to have success. We want to be successful - however you define that, whether it's in terms of money, or career advancement, or the number of people you have in your church, the number of people who friend or follow you, or this week, being elected - whatever you think it is for you. That's the focus for many, what defines them, and what they put all their effort and energy into, doing whatever it takes to be a success. And if they achieve it, they think they are blessed.

But that brings me to the reason why I think *success* is the opposite of *blessed* - **because the doer is different**. Success is what I do, what I accomplish, what I achieve. But blessed is what God does and gives to me. To be a success or a failure is to be defined by the world's standards; to be blessed or cursed is to be defined by God's standards. And those are vastly different things - for God sees things quite differently than we.

And if you need a demonstration of that, just very quickly run down the list of who is blessed from the words of Jesus we heard today. These are not those we would normally think of as blessed.

Being **poor in spirit**, beggars before God.

Mourning, sorrowful over sin and death.

Meek, humble - that's somebody who gets walked on and taken advantage of, isn't it?

Hunger and thirst for righteousness, yearning for that right-ness with God that no, we do not have by ourselves.

Being **merciful** - when you have to stop what you're doing, go out of your way, and give of yourself and what you have to help somebody else out - somebody who may not even deserve it anyway! Mercy is hard work.

Being **pure in heart** - purity is scoffed at today, the bondage of the past rather than the "freedom" to follow your own heart.

Peacemakers - yeah, right! Ever try to do that?

Those **persecuted for righteousness' sake, for Jesus' sake**. Really, do I even need to talk about this one?

If your mind is set on success and thinks in those terms, this list really is quite the opposite of that, isn't it? To our world, and even to us who are bombarded with the thinking of the world everyday, this isn't blessed. Some might even think that being these things is being cursed.

Or what about the first reading from Revelation. Those in John's vision of heaven, who are they? We are told: **These are the ones coming out of the great tribulation**. They are Abel, murdered by his brother. Joseph, sold into slavery. Isaiah, who was sawed in half. Paul, who was stoned, beaten, ship-wrecked, and then beheaded. The early Christians who were burned at the stake or thrown to the beasts as entertainment. Christians today who are killed today simply because they will not deny Jesus and confess Mohammed. And you could fill in that list a hundred-fold, with people who lived long ago and people today. In this world and life, they looked anything but successful, anything but blessed. Some might even say they are cursed.

So what about you? Are you blessed? And how do you know?

Well, the thinking of the world is that you're blessed if good things happen to you - at least, things you think are good and consider good. But on the other hand, these verses that we've just gone through seem to be saying you're blessed if bad things happen to you - things you think are bad and consider bad - or if life is difficult. But by either of those standards, it's all rather subjective, isn't it? It's up to you and how you think. If things are going well or not . . .

But it's not that way at all. Good things happen to all people and bad things happen to all people. You simply cannot judge by that. You cannot judge blessedness in terms of success or ease or hardship or struggle or whatever you think is good or bad. God and His gifts are not so subjective or uncertain.

So, rather, here's how you know: **because God says so**. And what God says is truth. Always. Who He calls blessed is blessed and who He calls cursed is cursed. He's the judge, not you and me.

So you may not think you are blessed. You may not feel it or look it, you may have had such an awful, terrible, no good, very bad year that you have trouble coming up with even a single blessing to count at Thanksgiving. Instead, maybe you feel cursed, weak, dumped on, down and out, and the farthest thing from blessed.

If so, hear these sure and certain words of St. John again that we heard in the Epistle: *See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.*

The word *blessed* isn't used there by John, but he's talking about it, isn't he? Because he's talking not about what we do, or accomplish, or achieve, or what we feel or think, but about a more definite reality - what is given to us by God. And that even though we are blessed now, that may not be what it looks like or feels like now. A worldly mindset that thinks in terms of success does not know us as blessed. But *what we will be has not yet appeared*. Or in other words, that blessing is still hidden for a while. We'll see it later, when Jesus appears. John got a glimpse of it, that vision of heaven, that *later*, the *not yet*. And he wrote it for us, that though we do not see it, we believe. We believe that blessing is not a matter of success or sight, but of gift and faith.

Now, it's not wrong or bad to be successful - it's just not the same as being blessed. For think of this too - how many people have been cursed by success? Who in the pursuit of what they think is success have lost more than they gained?

So perhaps it is our addiction to success that has blinded us to what blessedness really is. And All Saints Day calls us back - to see once again the truth; to see once again what true blessedness is and where it is to be found - not in what we do, accomplish, or achieve, but in Christ alone. Christ who was not a success by worldly standards. By the end of His life, He didn't have that many followers, and those He did have weren't very good. They kept getting it wrong. They were slow to understand. They ran away in fear. And in the end, Jesus was arrested, convicted as a criminal and crucified as one - *hung up between two evildoers as a curse*. Yes, Jesus was cursed. God even said so, in Deuteronomy: *a hanged man* - and that means a man hung on a cross, not with a noose - *a hanged man is cursed by God* (Deut 21:22-23). Jesus, true God and true man, was cursed by God and man.

But that truth is why there is such a thing as All Saints Day - for He was cursed **for you**. He was cursed with your curse, that you be blessed with His blessedness. That you, sinner, be in Christ, you, saint. A holy man, a holy woman, because your sin is forgiven and your curse taken away. For to be a saint is not what you do, it is not to be a successful Christian in the eyes of the world or through your own efforts - it is what Christ has done for you and given to you. And not just you, but for people - as John saw and told us - of *every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages*.

For God, you see, blesses for the long haul. We tend to be day-to-day or year-to-year people, living life with blinders on - forgetting the past and too consumed with the present to worry about the future. And so we want our blessedness here and now, where we are looking, and if we don't see it, think it's not there. But maybe we're just not looking in the right place.

All Saints Day takes the blinders off. Look at those in the past, that great cloud of witnesses who were blessed who maybe didn't look blessed - but now we can look back and see how God was working. Look at the future blessedness that God has waiting for us in His Son. And you, Jesus says, you are blessed. He is working. He is blessing. And that glorious future and eternal blessedness awaits you. For in Christ, your robes are washed and made white in the blood of the Lamb already now. The blood of the Lamb washed upon you in Baptism and Absolution and in the Supper. The blood of the Lamb shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. The blood of the Lamb who became your curse and gave you His blessedness. And whose blessing is not limited to just those things we think are good and desirable - but who blesses you at all times.

And we rejoice in that not only for ourselves, but today especially for those who have gone before us and are safely home. Those John saw. Those we remember in our hearts. Those we miss, maybe terribly. *While we feebly struggle, they in glory shine. For a more glorious day is breaking* (LSB #677). The night of sin and death will then be over, when the Son comes again. And what we see dimly now we will see fully. The blessed ones, whose heads were chopped off, who struggled through tears and pain, who were tortured, who prayed, who fought for a truth unwelcomed by the world, who looked in this world and life anything but successful. But there they are! In glory. Blessed. The host arrayed in white (LSB #676) and at rest in Christ.

You will join them one day. Though now is still the time of great tribulation, no tribulation can stop the God of all blessing from blessing you. He'll use it, in fact, to do so. So great is He. So fear not, nor worry. ***Rejoice and be glad, for great is your reward in heaven.*** Not because you're so successful, but because Jesus is. And so you are blessed.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.