

One of my pastor-friends recently told me his whole philosophy of ministry could be summed up by an REM song: Everybody hurts. I think he's right. What hurts in your life? Let me ask it a better way: If Jesus shook your hand after the service, what would you ask him to do for you? Grab your bulletin and jot your answer down. You can use a real pen, or just form the letters with your finger. What would you ask Jesus to do for you today?

Some people didn't have to imagine meeting Jesus. One day Jesus came to a plain where a huge crowd was waiting for him. Suddenly, one person who had been afflicted by a demon was miraculously healed. Can you imagine the scene that ensued? Everyone mobbed Jesus! All the people wanted to touch him because power was going from him. What if you were there that day? Can you see yourself pressing through the crowd, reaching for his robe? What would you ask Jesus to do for you today? Then you touch him. And just like that, Jesus fixed it. What was the crowd like after Jesus healed everyone? Jumping for joy! Laughter! Singing! The best day ever!

Jesus is looking at the ground. Very deliberately he lifts up his eyes until they lock with the disciples. He inhales and opens his mouth. Listen to this.

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹ Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ²² Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. ²³ Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets. ²⁴ But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. ²⁵ Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. ²⁶ Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets."

When everyone was rejoicing, Jesus wants to teach something. Today, when you come to Jesus with a prayer for him to help you, Jesus wants to bless you.

Jesus Blesses His Disciples

- 1. He redefines our best days.**
- 2. He redefines how we relate to him.**

First, Jesus redefines our best days. Imagine Jesus had just healed you on the plain. What would be your best day, right before you were healed or right after? Most of us would say after! But what would God say? Remember, before they were healed, they wanted nothing more than Jesus. Is that true afterward?

It's the same for us. We define our best days as the ones when our retirement accounts are healthy, when our pantries are well stocked, when our evenings are full of laughter and when our friends love us and respect us. But all those blessings come with certain

hardships. It is hard to stay focused on Jesus during days we consider best. So Jesus redefines our best days as the hard days. When we are poor hungry, sad, rejected we run to Jesus. Being close to him is the best blessing he can give. That's how Jesus brings blessings in hardships.

Perhaps you've felt that. When your financial future isn't so secure, if you've ever gone hungry, when you choke back tears in your heartbreak, those are real hardships. But Jesus is not just picking on you. There is a blessing in these hardships. When every earthly prop gives way, he then is all our hope and stay. When you can't focus on earthly blessings, then know that great is your reward in eternity.

That's more than just a "pie in the sky" hope for later on. Eternal blessings change your earthly life too. It's like my job in college.

When I was in college, I worked on a hog farm in southern Minnesota. My job was to spray the manure off the wall. It made you feel like a man, but it was filthy and monotonous and sweaty. Sometimes I would go to the pig farm at 4 am, before class. That was the worst because I knew that once I got done with this task, I had to sit in class and try not to fall asleep! But other times I would go to the farm on Friday afternoon. I knew that when I got back to school after work, there'd be a basketball game going. Not only that, but nobody would want to guard me because I smelled like manure! I'd get all the wide-open shots I wanted. On Friday afternoons, work was just as smelly and sweaty as ever, but I knew I had a fun night ahead of me, so I'd be singing and dancing around the pig pen with my pressure washer. Jesus never said our life on earth would be easy. He says leap for joy because great is your reward in heaven.

What problem did you write down at the beginning of this sermon? Now let's imagine two situations. First, imagine God miraculously takes away your hardship. If I asked you, how has God blessed you? What are you going to say? "He took away my problem!" And you'd be right! But now let's imagine God lets you struggle. In his wisdom, he blesses us IN hardship. I ask you "How has God blessed you?" No matter what, you can still say, "He has prepared a home in heaven for me because he loves me." That's how Jesus redefines our best days. The best days are the hard days because those are the days Jesus uses to keep us close.

But he doesn't just redefine our best days; he also redefines how we relate to him. To understand that, we have to wrestle with a real difficulty in this passage. Jesus says, "**Woe to those who are rich,**" and the problem is, many of us are rich. But Jesus didn't say, "Woe to those who are rich because they are rich." There's nothing wrong with having earthly blessings. There are plenty of Bible stories about God-fearing rich people like Abraham, Job, Zacchaeus. God gave them riches, but they knew that their greatest blessing was eternal life in heaven.

Is that how you relate to Jesus? If you relate to Jesus as the one who is primarily supposed to give you good things in life and keep bad things away, then you've missed his point. All of us miss his point from time to time. When we do that we are not like Abraham. We're like the rich man when Jesus said, **"It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to be saved."** Woe to us.

So Jesus also redefines how we relate to him by describing the perfectly blessed person. The perfectly blessed person is poor—so poor he has no place to lay his head. (**Luke 9:58 The Son of man has nowhere to lay his head.**) He's hungry—hungry like someone alone in the wilderness for 40 days, who ate nothing. (**Luke 4:1-2 Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing during those days, and when they had ended he was hungry.**) He weeps—like someone who stands at the grave of a loved one. (**John 11:35 Jesus wept.**) He's rejected and hated. (**John 15:18 If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first.**) Nobody in this world would consider Jesus' life blessed. But that's exactly what it was because his entire life was focused on the great reward in heaven.

But Jesus didn't claim that great reward for himself. No, he lived that perfect life and died an innocent death, and then he turned around and gave the reward to you. At your baptism, he gave you eternal life. But he gave you so much more! He gave you his life! You have clothed yourselves with Christ. By your baptism, Jesus' life is your life. By faith, Jesus life is your life.

Jesus lived life for you. You are every bit as poor as your Savior, and the kingdom of heaven is as much yours as it is his. You are every bit as hungry as Jesus, and you will be filled. You are as teary-eyed as Jesus at a funeral, and you will laugh. You are as hated as he was, and you will be welcomed with open arms for all of eternity! Jesus' life is yours, and his blessings belong to you.

And now he calls you even deeper into the experience of his life. Jesus endured poverty with a smile, hunger with joy, mourning with optimism, rejection, and crucifixion for the joy set before him. Today he calls, "Follow me" not from his heavenly throne. He calls us with a crossbeam on his shoulders and a smirk on his face, "Take up your cross and follow me." Under our crosses, in our hardships, we feel our need for Jesus. In hardship we get Jesus' best blessings, we get to know him. That's how Jesus defines our relationship.

You know, the word "Christian" was first used as an insult. It means "little Christ," and it was used to label people who followed Jesus, who lived such a backward life in this world. And that's what we are, little Christs. His life is ours. His blessings are ours. And now our life resembles his. Thank God!

What is the thing you would ask Jesus to take away? By all means, you can ask him to do it for you. But if he doesn't, maybe he's redefining what you consider your best days. Maybe he's inviting you to relate to him—to live with him—under the cross.

One story before we end. There was a pastor who had a hardship so severe that it felt like Satan was afflicting him. He begged Jesus to make it stop. He was just the crowd that met Jesus on the plain. He was just like you. And amazingly, to this pastor, Jesus spoke back. The man prayed, "Please, Lord. You have the power. Take this away!" The way Jesus answered totally redefined what the pastor considered his best days, and it redefined his relationship with Jesus. The pastor's name was St. Paul. This was Jesus' answer, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made complete in weakness." And "that is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in hardships. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Amen.