

LUKE

“The Values of God’s People”

Luke 6:20-26

Sunday, October 1, 2017

By David A. Ritchie

²⁰ And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

²² “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! ²³ Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

²⁴ “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ “Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.

“Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

²⁶ “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. ¹

Heavenly Father, you are the author of our life and the author of our redemption. You have made us a people of your own possession. As we look into your Scriptures, may your Holy Spirit teach us to love what you love. By your transforming grace, make us a people after your own heart. In the mighty name of Jesus we pray, AMEN.

I. Introduction

With much of the national conversation revolving around what it means to honor our country and those who have sacrificed for its welfare, a few days ago I found myself going down a bit of an internet rabbit hole that led me to the history of the various oaths that the soldiers of this nation have taken upon entering military service.

I have a great respect for our military. My grandfather lost both of his legs in occupied France during World War 2, and I even have an ancestor who fought in the American Revolution. Several members of our congregation are U.S. veterans, and last year around this time we sent one of our younger members to join the army.

So I found it fascinating that ever since 1789 when U.S. soldiers have taken their oaths, the first promise they make is not to defend an American symbol or even American soil, but rather the American constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic.

Think about how surprising that is. Even before a soldier promises to obey the commands of the commander and chief, he or she swears to support and defend the constitution. The idea is: Presidents and policies and parties come and go, but arguably what makes the United States of

¹ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Lk 6:20–26.

America the United States of America is a document known as the United States Constitution.

Now if you take the time to read the constitution there is a lot of practical guidelines about governance: things like how many representatives a state can have in Congress, how many years old a person must be before being elected President, and what type of matters go before the supreme court, and how various states are to relate with one another. However, this is not the reason that that constitution is so revered.

For the U.S. Constitution does not simply talk about the way our government works. At its core, the U.S. constitution is a statement of *what we as a people value*.

It was through the constitution, perhaps more than anything else, that the founders of this nation put into words the ideals that we as a people strive to embody. Here are the words of the Preamble of that constitution: **“We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”**

These words don’t always represent who we are as a nation, but they do represent who we were founded to be and what we were founded to value. The founders knew then and what we must know now is that the only way you can have a united people is when the people are united by what they value most.

So too, here in Luke 6, Jesus has called twelve men to be his apostles. With this act, he is signaling that he is in effect recreating his people. The twelve apostles represent a renewed and restored twelve tribes of Israel, who will go forth into the earth to declare and display the kingdom of God.

And now, with his newly appointed apostles before him, Jesus launches into one of his most famous sermons. However, by several of the literary cues within the sermon itself, Jesus is not just giving a sermon. He is essentially authoring a type of constitutional charter that will give vision and values of what it means to be a part of God’s people. To use a more specific and more biblical word, Jesus is inaugurating a new covenant.

Jesus’s sermon begins with a preamble-type-list of blessings and woes. This might not mean much to us. But for a Jewish audience, this would have conveyed deep, biblical symbolism.

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, chapter 28, there was another very famous list of blessings and woes that were given to God’s people Israel as they prepared to enter into God’s Promise Land. Israel would be blessed if they obeyed God’s laws. They would be cursed if they disobeyed and rejected God’s laws. These words were an essential part of the covenant – that is, a sacred and sacrificial bond – between God and his people. Now Jesus is bringing before him a group of twelve. They too are on the cusp of a entering a new kingdom. And now, by using this language of blessings and woes, Jesus is giving his people a new covenant. ²

II. Text

² Tom Wright, [Luke for Everyone](#) (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2004), 71.

Particularly, the list of four blessings and four complementary woes reveal the counter-cultural set of values that God's new covenant people are called by Christ to embody. The reason that these words are counter-cultural is because they completely subvert the value system of the world that glorifies wealth, comfort, pleasure, and significance above all else. Jesus blesses the unlikely, the unworthy, and the unsuspecting. Let's take each blessing and corresponding woe so as to understand who and what Jesus wants us to value as God's people.

1) **A Blessing to the Poor and A Woe to the Rich.**

"...Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" (Luke 6:20 & 24, ESV).

An undeniable feature of Jesus's ministry is his love for the poor. And here he pronounces a blessing upon them.

Should we understand Jesus to be making a statement that all poor people are righteous and blessed and all rich people are wicked and cursed? Not at all. In the Bible there are wealthy people who God calls to be his people. People like Abraham the Patriarch, Solomon the King, and even Lydia the merchant in the book of Acts. Likewise, there are plenty of poor people who are God's people too.

The type of poverty that Jesus is speaking of is a spiritual poverty that recognizes that is the same way a beggar needs bread, so too we need the grace of God.

This is the heart of King David, who was not poor in terms of wealth, but nevertheless expresses a spiritual poverty in Psalm 86: *"Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy" (Psalm 86:1, ESV).*

To have this poorness in spirit is to have an acute awareness of our own need. The poor in spirit are those who understand grace like West Texan farmer understands a gentle rain.

The opposite of this is self-confidence, self-reliance, and a refusal to sacrifice independence or control.³ And if we can say anything about material wealth, it may be that at times the possession of material wealth may intended tempt us to believe we are more self-sufficient than we really are.

Biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson writes that: *"[Poorness in spirit is] ...a spiritual attitude, a disposition of soul which could be called poverty: a self-disposition which [makes] room for the Word of God....it's most essential characteristic is the profound awareness of who we are as creatures before God. This is a sense of our dependency. We exist, moment by moment, only because of the creative love and fidelity of the Father. We are, of ourselves, totally unnecessary. We are naked and powerless before the mystery of our own destiny. This awareness is harder to achieve and maintain than we might suppose. When we think about it, it seems obvious. But look at how much of our lives are built around an avoidance of this realization. We construct around ourselves a veneer of protection against the simplest of facts of all about us humans: that we don't belong to*

³ Wilkins, Michael J. *The NIV Application Commentary: Matthew*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 220.

ourselves but depend upon Another.”⁴

2) A Blessing to the Hungry and A Woe to the Full.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied....Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry” (Lk. 6:21a & 25a).

The hungry are those who refuse to be satisfied with the world, and hunger for the eternal feast only the Messiah can bring. The full are those who desire their own comfort and convenience above all else.

As I. Howard Marshall notes: “The imagery finds concrete expression in the picture of Lazarus, hungry on earth, but sitting in the bosom of Abraham at God’s table (16:20–22).”⁵

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us” (Luke 16:19–26, ESV).

Here the Rich Man hungers, but all he hungers for is his own comfort and selfish desire. He simply wan to be served and to be satisfied in himself. Even in the depths of hell, he does not desire nearness to God. He desires a waiter.

3) A Blessing to the Weeping and A Woe to the Laughing.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh...Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep” (Luke 6:21a & 25a, ESV).

Weeping refers to mourning and grief; the deep recognition in our bones that the way the world is not the way it should be. It means that we grieve over the brokenness in God’s good creation, and we yearn for redemption.

It means that we are grieved by the millions of people in our world without access to clean drinking water. It means we are bothered by the genocide of Christians in the Middle East and the genocide against the unborn in North America. It means we feel anguish for those that have suffered natural

⁴ Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Some Hard Blessings: Meditations on the Beatitudes in Matthew*. (Allen, Texas: Argus, 1981), 34, 36.

⁵ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 251.

disaster and those who have suffered systematic oppression.

The opposite is of this mindset is a mindset that constantly seeks to be numb to reality by sedating ourselves with busyness, with entertainment, with substance.

One of the things I have learned to deeply appreciate about being a pastor is to serve families in the midst of loss and to officiate funerals.

A funeral is like a sudden whiff of smelling salts that wakes us up to the reality of our own mortality. We are suddenly confronted with the fact that we and everyone we know and love are frail and finite. As the Psalmist says, there is wisdom in knowing within our heart that our days are numbered (Ps. 90:12). And for this reason, it is often in mourning and grief that our hearts are calibrated to know what truly matters.

As the book of Ecclesiastes says, *“The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth”* (Ecclesiastes 7:4, ESV).

4) A Blessing to the Hated and A Woe to the Popular.

“Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets... Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets” (Luke 6:22–23;26, ESV).

The persecuted are those who suffer are rejected for righteousness sake. Make no mistake. The way and values of Jesus will put you at odds with the world. As a preacher, this point lands hard on my heart. It is much easier to validate peoples’ idols than to confront them. But the truth is that all our lives are called to go against the grain of this world.

The opposite of this is a type of life that seeks the constant approval of the world. And think for a moment the myriad of ways we vie for the approval of others in our daily habits: the way we dress, what motivates the choice of car we drive or the home we live in, and how we so carefully make social media posts and then frenetically check to see whether or not people like us.

“Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—skip like a lamb, if you like!—for even though they don’t like it, I do ... and all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company; my preachers and witnesses have always been treated like this... There’s trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular.”⁶

⁶ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2005), Lk 6:26.

What do these values have in common? Jesus awakens us as his people to lift up our eyes from ourselves and our circumstances and to look into eternity; to look beyond “*this light momentary affliction*” unto “*the eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison*” (2 Cor. 4:17).

But we must not mistake Jesus to mean that he is calling us to some sort of Buddhist stoicism, wherein the path to God lies in denying our desires. Rather, Jesus is saying that this world will never truly fulfill our desires, but that he will!

As C.S. Lewis once wrote: “...it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires, not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at sea. We are far too easily satisfied.”⁷

III. Conclusion

Now when we think about putting these values into action it would be easy to say that we should pursue a set of actions that would put us into the category of blessings and not in the category of woes. And certainly, we should be a people who give generously and sacrificially for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. We should seek times of fasting and prayer, wherein we stir our selves to a hunger for God. We should mourn with those who mourn, and stand up for the truth even if it costs us the approval of the outside world.

But in all honesty who here among us could say they truly have merited the blessings of Luke 6? Who could declare themselves innocent of deserving the woes? The answer is “none is righteous, no, not one” (Rom. 3:10).

Nevertheless, we as God’s people are invited to partake in blessings we did not deserve. In the same way that modern Americans have inherited the blessings of a constitution that they did not bleed for, in a far, far greater way, we have inherited the blessings of the new covenant that was paid for by another’s blood.

For Jesus was the one who was poor, the one who hungered and wept and was rejected for our sake; so that we might inherit the blessing he deserved, while he took upon himself the all our woes.

And for this reason we worship him, we value him, and we seek to order our lives to model him.

AMEN.

Community Group Discussion Questions

- 1) “Blessed are the poor...Woe to you who are rich.” How do these statements cut against our desire for self-reliance, independence, and control? What values instead is Jesus pointing us toward?
- 2) Much of our culture is built around garnering the approval and validation of others. What

⁷ Lewis, C.S. *The Weight of Glory*. (New York: HarperOne, 1949, 1976, 1980), 26.

are the ways that we vie for this approval and validation?

- 3) *What do the woes of Luke 6:24-26 reveal about us, and how does Jesus himself embody the blessings of Luke 6:20-23?*