

“The Blessed Life: Part 1” | Luke 6:17-23 (The Sermon on the Plain)

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(Discussion questions on page 7)**

Today we begin a sermon series about a famous sermon. It’s recorded in Luke 6, and sometimes called The Sermon on the Plain. It is similar to the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7), and like that sermon, encapsulates the heart of Jesus’ teaching about the identity and character of his disciples.

The Sermon on the Plain is challenging, but also captivating. It sets before us a vision of life that is counter-cultural and counter-intuitive, but ultimately holy: “Love your enemies.” “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.” “Forgive” (Lk 6:27, 36, 37).

Today we will consider the setting and opening of the sermon, Luke 6:17-23. And we’ll consider two things. When looking at the setting of the sermon (vv 17-19), we’ll note (1) The Big Picture. What is the larger context of God’s work that we must have in mind? And when noting the opening of the sermon (vv 20-23), we’ll consider (2) The Big Reversal, how Jesus teaching her requires us to look at things very differently. First, the big picture; second, the big reversal.

I. The Big Picture (vv. 17-20a)

Four details about the setting alert us to a bigger reality: the choosing of the twelve that happens in the morning (vv.12-16), the location on a mountain (v12), Jesus’ new teaching to a large group of disciples (v20), and Jesus’ mention of “the kingdom of God” (v.20). These details call to mind a scene from long before.

In the book of Exodus, God is forming the twelve tribes of Israel into his special people. He calls a prophet, Moses, to go up a mountain (Mt. Sinai) and there gives him teaching. Moses comes down the mountain and teaches the people. The crux of this teaching is how God wants this people to order their lives to be His Kingdom people on earth.

Jesus’ actions call this scene to mind, and alert us to this larger reality: God is reconstituting His people around Jesus. Jesus will enact a new covenant—in his blood (Lk 22:20)—and this teaching in the Sermon on the Plain is part of the way Jesus is building the people of His Kingdom.

This larger picture tells us two things about how we are to hear Jesus’ sermon on the plain.

First, the context for this sermon is the arrival of the Kingdom of God in Jesus. Jesus said of his ministry in Luke 4, “I must proclaim the goods news of the Kingdom of God” (Lk 4:43). Just as God’s kingdom was showing up through the people of Israel, it now is showing up through the

people gathered around Jesus. The driving theme of the sermon on the plain is the *nature and character of the kingdom of God*.

Second, the kingdom of God shows up on earth through a people God calls to be *different*—distinct from the ways and values of the world around them.

This was the calling of Israel; they were to be different than the nations around them:

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ² “Speak to the people of Israel and say to them, I am the LORD your God. ³ You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you. You shall not walk in their statutes. (Lev 18:1-).... ‘You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy’ (Lev 19:1-2).

But Israel continually fell into becoming like the nations rather than remaining distinct:

they mixed with the nations and learned to do as they did. They served their idols, which became a snare to them. (Ps 106:35-6).

And Israel rejected the prophets God sent to turn her back from her waywardness.

Here, then, are two things we draw from the big picture to keep in mind as we listen to Jesus’ sermon:

1. It is much easier to fit in with the culture around us than to remain distinct. But God is calling his people to be *different*—distinct from the ways and values of the world around them. There is much we can learn from any culture, whether American culture or African Culture or European Culture. But in every culture the Lord puts his people, his call is for them to be *different*—distinct in their ways and values, holy even as he is holy. As we hear the counter-cultural call of Jesus’ sermon, we should be asking ourselves where we look more like our culture than His Kingdom.

2. Second, the antidote to cultural assimilation is obedience to the Word of God—not adherence to a culture’s general sense of morality. God’s people must do more than follow a general sense of morality—justice, goodness, love—that their culture follows. If we actually follow Jesus’ words in this sermon, our way of love and justice will be *different*. For example: In a world that seems to celebrate hating enemies, we are called to “love our enemies” (6:27). In a world that teeming with a passion for justice, Jesus people not only seek justice, but they forgive, and they show mercy: “Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful;” “forgive, and you will be forgiven” (6:36, 37).

From the big picture, we draw this first point: *God calls his people to be different—distinct from the ways and values of the surrounding culture*. Only by being different, will we make a

difference. What this difference looks like, is captured in the contents of this sermon, including its opening. Let us now turn to these opening lines, and consider *the big reversal*.

II. The Big Reversal (vv. 20-23)

Jesus opens his sermon by announcing the status of people. He draws a line between those who are blessed, and those who are not. What he is doing is marking out the *nature* of the people of the kingdom.

But what Jesus says is unexpected, and his assessment seems upside down. He takes the things that we would identify as signs of blessing—wealth, health, happiness, popularity—(vv. 24-26)—and then says that the blessed life is their exact opposite. Blessed are the poor, hungry, sorrowful, and hated (vv. 20-23). What is Jesus doing here? What does he mean?

Certainly, we might think of God's overarching care for the marginalized and weak, which we see across the Bible. And it is true, as the church develops, we see Christians caring for the weak and marginalized—for the poor, widows, outcasts. The kingdom of God is good news for the poor and hungry, because God calls his people to see them and care for them (see Acts 6:1, Gal 2:10).

But something more is going on here. Jesus is talking about those who are blessed as *inheritors* of the kingdom: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Lk 6:20). People do not enter or inherit the kingdom of God based on any economic status—whether rich or poor—, but based on grace. Jesus must mean something more.

With these descriptors—poor, hungry, sorrowful, persecuted—Jesus is drawing on rich biblical imagery for a *spiritual state*, or heart posture. In the Old Testament, the terms poor or hungry often referred to spiritual states, such as neediness before God or appetite for God. Think of the Psalms of David: "This **poor** man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles" (Ps 34:6). Or, "My soul thirsts for God" (Psalm 42). This is, in fact, how Matthew draws out the meaning. In the sermon on the Mount, Luke's "blessed are the poor" becomes "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (Lk 6:20; Matt 5:4); Luke's "blessed are those who hunger" becomes "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Lk 6: 21; Matt 5:6).

We need to plumb these descriptors and ask how, as physical descriptions, they point to a spiritual state that Jesus calls Blessed. And we need to do so keeping in mind what Jesus even means by "blessed."

Let's organize the remainder of this sermon around these two questions: what does Jesus mean by "blessed"? And what do these descriptors—poverty, hunger, sorrow and persecution—tell us about true blessedness?

1. What does Jesus mean by "blessed?"

Sometimes these verses are referred to as the beatitudes, which is a word that means “supreme happiness” or “heavenly joy.” In the biblical sense, to be blessed certainly includes the idea of happiness. But that notion is not weighty enough for what Jesus means here.

To be blessed, in the sense Jesus means, is a reality deeper than immediate material circumstances. To be blessed means divine approval, it means God has looked upon you and found you worthy not only to receive the blessings of eternal life, but worthy to be His son or daughter right now.

Think of our desire to have the approval of others. Perhaps a desire to know that our own father or mother finds us worthy and loves us. Or our desire for the world around us to approve of us, finding us competent, or talented, or attractive. We have a deep need to be noticed and approved of. And this is part of how God made us—and we are restless until we are approved of by him.

C. S. Lewis picks up this theme in his essay, *Weight of Glory*, calling it our need for the Divine Accolade—the need for the creature to hear that the Maker finds them worthy. Lewis calls this type of blessing a state of experiencing glory:

And surely, from this point of view, the promise of glory [the divine accolade, God’s approval] becomes highly relevant to our deep desire. For glory means good report with God, acceptance by God, response, acknowledgement, and welcome into the heart of things. The door on which we have been knocking all our lives will open at last.¹

Towards the end of the sermon on the mount in Matthew, Jesus speaks of a time when we all will come before God, seeking his blessing—his approval and welcome. And Jesus warns of the horror that in the end some will hear him say, “I never knew you. Depart from me” (Matt 7:23).

To be blessed, in the biblical sense, is not only to have the promise of eternal life, but to have the presence of God as our approving father. That is blessedness.

2. Let us ask, now, what these descriptors—poor, hungry, sorrowful, persecuted—tell us about who is Blessed?

Whereas in the Old Testament, it was tied up with obeying the law and being found worthy, here with Jesus, the blessing is attached to a spiritual condition of the heart, captured by these four descriptors. Let us consider what each one teaches us about those who God calls blessed.

1. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God” (6:20b)

¹ Lewis, *Weight of Glory*, 40-41.

Poverty was certainly more common in Jesus' world than in modern America. It was an agrarian culture, and what modern anthropologist often call a peasant society.² And Jesus' people—the church—are to have a heart for the poor. As the leaders of the Jerusalem church urge Paul: “only they asked me to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do” (Gal 2:10).

But across Luke's Gospel and the larger bible, it is not economic situation alone that merits God's blessing. It is a poverty of spirit. A good example of what Jesus means here is found in his story of two praying men:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.'¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. (Lk 18:10-14).

Poverty, here, is poverty of spirit: true contrition over one's own moral bankruptcy. To be “poor of spirit,” as Matthew puts it, is not that we say we are insignificant, or of no value—these things are not true of human beings. “Rather, it is a confession that we are sinful and rebellious and utterly without moral virtues adequate to commend ourselves to God.”³

We must think of the Lord's words in Isaiah: “But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at my word” (Isa 66:2).

God is not looking for good people. He is not looking for virtuous people who care for all the right causes. God is looking broken people—aware of their own moral bankruptcy.

Blessed are the poor, means, *God approves of those who humble themselves before him.*

2. Hunger: “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied” (6:20c).

The kingdom of God certainly envisions a day when God's people know no hunger. Images of that often include a banquet and feasting. But this image of hunger and feasting runs deeper than physical food. Matthew states it, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.”

This is not a hunger merely to be declared in a right standing before God. It is a hunger to be made like him. It is an appetite for godliness.

² See HAKKINEN, Sakari. Poverty in the first-century Galilee. *Herv. teol. stud.* [online]. 2016, vol.72, n.4 [cited 2024-05-07], pp.1-9. Available from: <http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222016000400046&lng=en&nrm=iso>. ISSN 2072-8050. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/hts.v72i4.3398>.

³ D. A. Carson, *Jesus' Sermon on the Mount*, 18,

What are you hungry for? The approval of others? A place at the table in the world? A meaningful life? These things may be fine, in proportion. But do you hungry most to be Christlike? Do you long to be holy, and humble, and pure, and selfless, like our Lord?

Blessed are those who hunger now, means that God approves of the man or woman who is longing for godliness, he or she will be satisfied.

3. Sorrow: “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh” (6:21).

Sorrow implies contrition over our own sin. It is Isaiah’s plea, “Woe is me, I am a man of unclean lips” (Isa 6). It is Paul’s declaration, “Wretched man that I am” (Rom 7:24). This is the person who is less concerned about the speck in someone else’s eye but instead laments the log in their own.

Sorrow also implies sadness over the lostness of the world. It is Jesus’ weeping over Jerusalem because the people will not turn to him; Jesus’ weeping over the fact of death as he stands outside Lazarus’ tomb, knowing that this is what a world under sin is like.

Do we weep over the lostness of the world, or do we spend more time condemning those around us? Jesus does not say, “blessed are those who condemn,” but rather, “blessed are those who weep.”

Blessed are those who weep, means the God approves of those whose hearts are broken over sin, and those hearts will be comforted.

4. And finally, Blessed are the persecuted:

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. (Luke 6:22-23).

Jesus states four negative things happening to the disciple here: he or she is *hated, excluded, reviled, and has their name besmirched as evil*. And notice that all four are *on account of the Son of Man*. In other words, this is persecution stemming from our walk with Jesus.

The Christian does not go looking for persecution—we are not masochists. But neither do Christians avoid it at all costs. There will come a point, Jesus has promised us this, when life with him will cut against the grain of life in this world. And people around us will not like it.

But when we feel rejection, or hatred, or slander because of this, we should “rejoice!” Why? First, because we are in the company of the prophets of old, who also were reviled. And second, because this is a bright sign that we are of God’s people, and as such, have a great reward awaiting us in heaven.

Blessed are the persecuted, means God sets his approval and delight upon the man or woman who is willing to suffer on account of His son—and he will give them a crown in heaven.

God call his people to be different—distinct from the ways and values of the world around them. And we do this by keeping his ways.

And God calls those who are spiritual humble blessed. We learn as the sermon opens, that the good life is the godward life—the life of contrition, hunger for righteousness, closeness to Jesus. Out of the grace we have received from Christ, let us lean into this call to be different. In the weeks ahead, let us prayerfully take heed to Jesus Sermon on the Plain.

Small Group Questions

1. In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus is calling his followers to be different—distinct from the ways and values of the world. What are some ways Christians today look more like the world than the Kingdom of God?
2. How might the average Westerner complete the sentence, “Blessed are those who...”? What do Jesus’ statements in Luke 6:20-23 (see also Matthew 5:3, 4, 6, 10-12) tell us about true blessedness according to God’s Kingdom?
3. Consider Jesus’ words in Luke 6:22, “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.” Have you ever experienced being hated or excluded on account of your faith in Christ? How might you connect that with Jesus words about “rejoicing” in Luke 6:23, “Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets”?
4. How does our culture describe the good life? How do you think of the good life? How do Jesus’ words in Luke 6:20-23 differ?