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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Epiphany 6, Series C
Saturday, February 12th, 2022

Sermon: Blessings and Woes (Long Version)¹

Text: Luke 6:17-26

Focus: On the Last Day, Christ will bring an end to all suffering.

Function: That they would hold onto hope in the midst of life's trials and tribulations.

Structure: Verse-by-Verse

Locus: "We pray in this petition, in summary, that our Father in heaven would rescue us from every evil of body and soul, possessions and reputation, and finally, when our last hour comes, give us a blessed end, and graciously take us from this valley of sorrow to Himself in heaven" (SC, 7th Petition of the Lord's Prayer).

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. In today's Gospel reading, we hear the blessings and woes Jesus spoke in his so-called Sermon on the Plain: "*And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God*" (v. 20).

Jesus begins by speaking a word of blessing upon the poor. The Greek word for blessing (*makarios*) can mean "happy," "fortunate," or "blessed." In Latin, it is *beatus*, and so we have come to call these kinds of pronouncements beatitudes. So why does Jesus say the poor are blessed? There certainly cannot be any kind of religious merit or moral status that comes simply from being down and out on your luck! Are these the economic poor or the spiritual poor? Art Just offers a great response: why can't it be *both*? Very often the people at the bottom of our social structures are ignored, forgotten, or taken advantage of by people further up the ladder, and sometimes this contributes to their spiritual poverty as they question the goodness of God and whether or not he truly provides.

¹ I preached a shorter version of this message on Sunday.

Nevertheless, we must all see that no matter our economic status, we are all “poor in spirit” because of our sin. Debt was a common metaphor for sin in Jesus’ parables (cf. Matt. 18:23ff; Luke 7:41ff). As we confessed in the old hymnal, we are all “*poor, miserable sinners*” (TLH). And it is only because Jesus paid for our sins and cancelled our debt by his dying on the cross that the kingdom of God becomes ours. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9).

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied” (v. 21a).

Again, Luke’s beatitude sounds a little different than Matthew’s. Matthew’s blessing is for those who “*hunger and thirst for righteousness*” (Matt. 5:6). There again is the spiritual emphasis. We hunger and thirst for a righteousness that is not our own because we cannot justify ourselves before God. Only God can justify us by grace through faith in Jesus Christ.

But Luke’s statement, “Blessed are you who are hungry now” is no less spiritual. God cares about us as total persons: body, mind, and soul. We are not Gnostics who believe our souls are trapped or imprisoned in our bodies, waiting to be released. God cares for his creatures. He urges us to pray for our daily bread and promises to give it to us. So whether you hunger for righteousness or your next meal, both are gifts from God.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh” (v. 21b).

Why do people weep? Because of pain and death. And *why* do we die or suffer pain? Because of *sin*. Sin is the ultimate cause of all sorrow—whether our sin or the sin of other people against us. Yet even though we currently walk through a veil of tears, one Day all will be made right. “Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Ps. 30:5b).

On the Last Day, when Christ returns and raises the dead, the entire world will be set to rights. Listen to the vision John saw in Revelation 21:

“Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away.... God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:1, 3-4).

No more crying, no more pain, no more death—that will certainly be a day on which to laugh and leap for joy!

Jesus continues: *“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”* (Luke 6:22-23).

Nobody likes to be disregarded or discounted for any reason, especially for their faith. Nobody wants to be excluded and left out. Yet the Bible is quite clear that if you are a true Christian, there are people who will hate you simply and solely *because* you are a Christian. St. John writes, “Do not be surprised, brother [and sisters], that the world hates you” (1 John 3:13). “Indeed,” writes the Apostle Paul, “all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus *will be* persecuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). The servant is not above the master, and if they nailed our Master, Jesus, to the cross, what do you think they will do to us?

Today’s cancel culture makes us painfully aware of how friends and colleagues can just write us off because of our political positions or religious beliefs. The so-called “tolerant” Left is anything but that. Christians should expect to be cancelled in social media. But there is nothing new under the sun. And there have always been times and places in which Christians are barred from government, military service, the board room, the classroom, and the marketplace because of their faith in Christ. That will never go away and will probably only get worse.

Yet Jesus assures us that we are blessed because our reward will be great in heaven.

While this world may offer ridicule, arrest, torture, imprisonment, and even execution because we follow Jesus, in the next world, we will enjoy only delight in the full presence of our Lord, who will commend us, saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant.... Enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:21).

Now at this point in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus’ tone drastically changes. He shifts suddenly from beatitudes to woes, from pronouncing blessing to calling down curses upon his hearers:

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets” (Luke 6:24-26).

Wow! I mean, woah! This is quite the turnaround. The four woes Jesus speaks are the complete reversal of the four beatitudes mentioned earlier. Previously, he blessed the poor; now he warns the rich. Earlier, he blessed the hungry; now the full will be begging in the streets. Before, the weeping ones would laugh. But now the laughers lament. And if people speak well of you, watch out! Flattery will get you nowhere.

The four woes trouble me—and they should. I hope they trouble you also. They certainly hit close to home because, as Americans, we are incredibly blessed with wealth and creature comforts that other people can only dream of. I’m not saying that all of us are rich, but even our lower and middle classes are generally more privileged than most other people on this planet. So whenever the Bible seems to pick on rich people, I get a little ruffled, because I feel like God may be taking aim at us.

A casual reading of the Bible might incline you to think that God is against rich people and cheers only for the little guy. In fact, the woes sound an awful lot like the Great Reversal theme in Mary's Song, the Magnificat: "He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty" (Luke 1:51-53). And Jesus says lots of uncomfortable things, such as, "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (Luke 18:25).

But God *doesn't* hate rich people. God doesn't hate anyone. Some of the richest people in the Bible, such as Abraham and David, were called God's friends or people after his own heart. There's nothing inherently wrong or evil about being rich, although there *may* be something evil about what you *do* with your wealth. God cares tremendously about how we acquire and spend our money. (*Aside*: Even calling it "our" money is not biblical, for everything belongs to God. It's *God's* money. But that is a sermon for a different day!) The Bible does *not* say that money is the root of all evil but strongly warns that "the *love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim. 6:10).

Money trouble begins when we trust in our wealth instead of God for safety and security. Riches become an idol when we worry more about money than how to use it to bless others. Money becomes a snare when we hoard it for ourselves instead of being generous to others. And we're doubly damned if God has blessed us, yet we refuse to share those blessings with people in need. The Bible says, "But if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" (1 John 3:17). Our souls are in danger when we revel in our riches and laugh about the good times, all the while forgetting that

nothing lasts forever and someday the music will stop. If you want to know what I'm talking about, spend time reading Jesus' Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man in Luke 16.

Now, I'm not accusing you. I'm not saying that money and success are a problem for you. That's between you and God. But you better figure it out before you die. Because you can't take it with you. And, as they say, the only things in life that you really keep are the things you give away: love, forgiveness, mercy, and kindness. Maybe the Woes don't apply to you. But maybe they do. So you'd better watch out!

The woes are not some kind of Marxist pronouncement or incitement to social revolution. The woes are the judgment of God upon those who rely on themselves for a false hope instead of the redemption won by Jesus Christ upon the cross.

Blessing doesn't come from anything that we say or do. Blessing comes by the Word of God on the lips of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. We're not blessed because of our supposedly good works. We're not blessed by selling everything we have and giving to the poor. "Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28). (That's another beatitude spoken by Jesus in Luke's Gospel!). We are blessed because of God's mercy and the cross of Christ. We are blessed because God promises that the hurts of this world will not last forever. We are blessed because God never breaks a promise and always keeps his Word. We are blessed... because Jesus says we are blessed. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of ✠ the Holy Spirit. Amen.