

Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷He went down with them and stood on a level place with a large crowd of his disciples, and a large number of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, as well as from the coastal area of Tyre and Sidon. These people came to listen to him and to be healed of their diseases. ¹⁸Those who were troubled by unclean spirits were also cured. ¹⁹The whole crowd kept trying to touch him, because power was going out from him and healing them all.

²⁰He lifted up his eyes to his disciples and said:

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

²¹Blessed are you who hunger now,
because you will be satisfied.

Blessed are you who weep now,
because you will laugh.

²²Blessed are you whenever people hate you,
and whenever they exclude 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 of this: Your reward is great in heaven! The fact is, their fathers constantly did the same things to the prophets.

²⁴But woe to you who are rich,
because you are receiving your comfort now.

²⁵Woe to you who are well fed now,
because you will be hungry.

Woe to you who laugh now,
because you will be mourning and weeping.

²⁶Woe to you when all people speak well of you,
because that is how their fathers constantly treated the false prophets.

Backward Blessings?

I.

The year was 1910. A country preacher made his way by horse and buggy to the 13 congregations under his care. They were just little pockets of Lutherans scattered across the plains who would gather for worship in some member's home on whatever day the preacher arrived. The preacher was Richard Schamber—my grandfather.

I wonder whether the sermon changed from stop to stop. His circuit covered 150 miles. Making his way by horse and buggy gave him lots of time to think. Even if he wrote out his sermon word-for-word, as he delivered it, things changed slightly. Perhaps some unique situations each little pocket of Christians was facing found its way into the sermon at each stop. Sometimes maybe he was a bit more animated, other times more subdued. Maybe something mentioned to him at a previous last stop made its way into the sermon as he preached it for the dozenth time.

After two years, my grandfather was called to a different place. There were “only” three congregations this time, but much like the 13 separate stops, each of these probably heard a little different version of the sermon.

Jesus was an itinerant preacher—a traveling preacher—too. “He went down with them and stood on a level place with a large crowd of his disciples and a large number of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, as well as from the coastal area of Tyre and Sidon. These people came to listen to him and to be healed of their diseases” (Luke 6:17, EHV). Jesus had a large congregation gathered together this time. They had come for two main reasons: to hear Jesus teach God's Word, and also to be healed.

Sometimes Jesus would preach to people who were not believers, seeking the lost and explaining God's Word to them. Some eagerly believed what he taught, others were like the rich

young man who went away sad when Jesus explained to him that his possessions were his gods.

At this particular stop, those gathered around for this worship service and Bible study were already disciples—followers of Jesus. It wasn't just the 12, there was a large crowd of his disciples.

“Those who were troubled by unclean spirits were also cured. ¹⁹The whole crowd kept trying to touch him, because power was going out from him and healing them all” (Luke 6:18-19, EHV). This group of disciples knew that the power which healed them came from Jesus. Sometimes Jesus healed with a word, sometimes with a touch. Here, many touched *him* and were healed. They knew that it was God's power that was healing them.

II.

The traveling preacher was ready to begin the preaching and teaching that day. Like many traveling preachers, it's not hard to believe that he would touch on many of the same things in his sermon, even if a few of the details changed. Every believer needs to hear the same things. There are two sermons of Jesus in the Bible that seem very similar, but by the definition of their locations they were probably given at different times. The Sermon on the Mount is spoken about in Matthew 5. There you will find the so-called Beatitudes—the “blesseds.” Jesus also preached the Sermon on the Plain, which we are talking about here. The Sermon on the Plain has some of the same “blesseds,” but not all of them. It also includes some “woes.”

“He lifted up his eyes to his disciples and said...” (Luke 6:20, EHV). In both his sermons on the Mount and on the Plain Jesus was speaking to disciples—people who were already his followers.

III.

Are you a follower of Jesus? Do his words speaking about blessings sound a little backwards to you? “Blessed are you who are poor... ²¹Blessed are you who hunger now... Blessed are you who weep now... ²²Blessed are you whenever people hate you, and whenever they exclude and insult you and reject your name as evil” (Luke 6:20-22, EHV).

Jesus follows up the “blesseds” with some “woes.” “Woe” indicates sorrow or distress or trouble. A person will be in trouble if they do a specified thing. The “woes” that correspond to each blessed sound strange to our ears, too. “But woe to you who are rich... ²⁵Woe to you who are well fed now... Woe to you who laugh now... ²⁶Woe to you when all people speak well of you” (Luke 6:24-26, EHV).

Jesus' attention-grabbing sermon here on the plains was different in another way, too. Most preachers don't like to have you walk out after the sermon with the last thing you heard being the hammer of God's Law. Jesus starts with the “blesseds” which contain some odd-sounding gospel promises, but ends with the “woes” which seem like equally odd-sounding law. The “woes” are spoken as warnings to those whose faith is weak or wavering. Some might even have been falsifying faith just for show—just to try to be part of what they thought might be a potential in-crowd.

“Blessed are you who are poor, because yours is the kingdom of God. ²⁴But woe to you who are rich, because you are receiving your comfort now” (Luke 6:20, 24, EHV). Jesus' contrast of poor and rich brings to mind the Pharisee and tax collector praying in the temple. The Pharisee thought he was rich toward God; he pointed to all his accomplishments as a follower of God; he thought he was well-positioned to be highly thought of by God because of his good deeds. The tax collector, on the other hand, was humble. He approached God hat in hand, as someone who knew he did not deserve to stand in God's presence, or even look up to heaven.

In Jesus' “blesseds” and “woes,” the poor are believers who realize they have no riches to bring before God; their actions are worthless if they try to use them to earn God's favor. The rich look at their own words and actions and think they are “rich” before God. The rich are sadly mistaken. The poor are actually rich. They already have as their inheritance the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who hunger now, because you will be satisfied... ²⁵Woe to you who are well fed now, because you will be hungry” (Luke 6:21, 25, EHV). I have known some Christians who believe they are in the well fed category. They believe they have learned everything there is to know about God. They are satisfied with their knowledge of God's Word. They stop faithfully

studying God's Word. Some get sucked in by false teachers and begin to believe things about Jesus that are very, very wrong. Their false sense of security could wind up causing their faith to be eternally lost, and their hunger will be endless.

Those who are hungry now are *never* satisfied with what they currently know or think they know about God. They want to learn more and more. They search the Scriptures regularly. They understand that those who aren't growing in their faith have a faith that is dying, and they seek constantly to nourish that faith and build it up.

"Blessed are you who weep now, because you will laugh. ²⁵... Woe to you who laugh now, because you will be mourning and weeping" (Luke 6:21, 25, EHV). Those who laugh now don't think of sin as such a serious thing. They use the death of Jesus as a license to sin. They don't hate sin, but enjoy their drunkenness, their sexual sins, their lies and cheating. They will weep and mourn forever in hell over their lives of sin.

Believers can see the sad results of sin. They weep over sin. Not only is there sin all around the Christian, they can see sin in their own lives, too. There have been times you could have done good and didn't. There have been times when you did things that are not God's will, and you knew it. These things bring sorrow and weeping to the believer's heart. But you will laugh with joy in heaven, where you will no longer have to hang your head in shame and sorrow.

"Blessed are you whenever people hate you, and whenever they exclude and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man. ²⁶Woe to you when all people speak well of you, because that is how their fathers constantly treated the false prophets" (Luke 6:22, 26, EHV). Peter once wanted to be spoken well of. He denied Jesus three times, because the alternative was to be branded a follower of Jesus as he lurked around the courtyard of the high priest. Being branded an insurrectionist did not appeal to Peter, so he denied that he even knew the fellow, let alone the idea that he was a disciple. Of course, Peter was reinstated by Jesus as a disciple. He went on to be one of the boldest confessors of Jesus and treated it as a badge of honor to be hated and excluded and insulted and rejected because he was preaching the name of Jesus.

Faith in Jesus is something given to you as a free gift by the Holy Spirit. You are blessed, even when people hate you because of your faith; even when they insult you and treat you as a fool because you believe in Jesus. It's not a reward that you *earned*, but a reward of God's grace. When you suffer for Jesus, he promises that he will strengthen your faith. In the Second Reading for today, Paul recognized that the "thorn in the flesh" that God refused to remove served as a blessing. God told Paul: "My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9, EHV). Paul put it in perspective: "Therefore I will be glad to boast all the more in my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may shelter me" (2 Corinthians 12:9, EHV).

IV.

Jesus' blessings aren't backwards at all. Thank God that through the power of his saving gospel he has put you on the right road. He enlightens you by the Holy Spirit and guides you in your Christian life. That's what it means to be blessed.

You live under the care and love of your gracious Heavenly Father. You have fulfillment and satisfaction in your life, because you know that through Jesus and his redeeming work, you are a precious child of God. To be blessed is to know that, because of Jesus, God will take care of you, provide for you, and love you forever.

If we try to accomplish any of that by ourselves, we fail. We might *think* we're on the right road, only to find out it is another dead end. Day by day renew your faith and trust in God. Stay hungry. Keep growing in God's Word. Remind yourself every day that Jesus' blessings aren't backwards. His blessings continue to all eternity. Amen.