

Blessings & Woes

Introduction

The Text

¹⁷ And he came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, ¹⁸ who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all.

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. (Luke 6:17–26)

Uneasy in Our Seats

- A. The words spoken by Christ there in vv. 20-26 are the sorts of words that make us Christians here in America uneasy in our seats. I mean, who didn’t just get called out by Him?
 1. Anybody prefer to be rich rather than poor? Anybody prefer to be full rather than hungry? Anybody prefer to laugh rather than cry? Anybody prefer to be loved rather than hated?
 - a. If so, then, according to Jesus, you and I are in danger of missing the kingdom of God!
 - i. Indeed, it seems our eternal destiny hinges upon which of these two lists we are in—the former with its blessings, or the latter with its woes.
- B. Now, certainly there is nuance to this, there’s critical interpretive work we must do if we are to understand such things rightly, but we must not miss the initial punch of these words. I think He wants us to feel them.
 1. I think He wants us to squirm a little bit—wondering: “What’s He talking about and how does that relate to me?” That’s what I hope to uncover as we move through this for the next couple of weeks or so.
- C. This week we’ll be dealing with the text in general, making 3 Initial Observations and then identifying 3 Guiding Principles—general principles that will guide us in our interpretation of each part.

1. It might help you to think of it like this: this week we're flying over the text, getting a general sense of the overall landscape; next week we'll be parachuting down to the ground below and tackling the text verse by verse.

3 Initial Observations

(1) The Sermon on the Level Place

- A. As we cross the threshold of v. 20 we enter into one of the most significant and, perhaps, one of the most familiar discourses in Luke's gospel. Jesus is delivering a sermon here that will carry us through to the end of ch. 6 (v. 49).
- B. The content of this sermon parallels in many ways what Matthew records in his gospel (chs. 5-7), famously known as the Sermon on the Mount.
 1. The parallel of material in Matthew's and Luke's sermons, combined with the distinct differences that exist between them, have led to much speculation over the years as to how exactly they are to be related.
 - a. Are Matthew and Luke recording the same sermon with different editorial emphases? Are they recording two separate sermons delivered by Jesus who, being an itinerant preacher was certainly likely to have repeated some of His material as He taught from place to place?
 - i. It is really of little import to me, and we shall not engage such a discussion here.
- C. Suffice it to say we have before us the very words of God. We shall not immediately default to Matthew's version of things, but we will let Luke's stand on its own terms.

(2) The Charter of the Kingdom of God

- A. Secondly, we must recall the broader context in which this sermon arises.
 1. You might remember from last week, ever since Jesus' baptism back in Luke 3, conflict and opposition have only been on the rise—wherever He goes, whether Nazareth or Galilee.
 - a. And, sadly, He's opposed most viciously, not by the Gentiles or the flagrant sinners, but by the religious leaders in Judaism—the very people who should've been most ready to receive Him.
- B. It's in this context, in light of this kind of opposition and rejection, that He, as we saw last week, more intentionally begins to establish a counter-community, a new Israel, a new people of God. He appoints twelve apostles to head up this new community (6:12-16).
 1. And then He comes down from the mountain with these twelve. And it is here, “on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people” around Him (v. 17), that Jesus “lift[s] up his eyes on his disciples . . .” (v. 20) and preaches (for 30 verses).

- a. And, in this sermon, He gives to these apostles and disciples of his, what I might call the charter (or constitution) of this new people He’s establishing—the very charter of the kingdom of God.
- C. In the sermon that follows, He unfolds for us both: (1) The marks by which the citizens of this kingdom can be identified (vv. 20-26); and (2) The ethics which the citizens of this kingdom are to live out (vv. 27-49).
 - D. But now, feel the weight of this. Jesus is giving us here a detailed explanation of what it means to be a part of His kingdom, to be children of His Father, to be His disciples, to be a new Israel and a new humanity.
 - 1. To push back on Him at this point is to push a dagger into our own heart. What we do with these words is our life or death.

(3) The Citizens of the Kingdom

- A. As I make now my third and final Initial Observation we are ready to look at our text itself (esp. vv. 20-26). There is something to the structure of these verses that I wanted to bring out.
 - 1. I’m sure you already noticed it. But what we have is a list of blessings (beatitudes) (vv. 20-23) and a list of woes (vv. 24-26). And the two lists are set in clear opposition to one another.
- B. And He uses this antithetical structure to help us clearly see those few key marks by which the citizens of His kingdom can be identified.
 - 1. Positively, in the list of blessings, He’s helping us see what kingdom citizens are. But then, negatively, in the list of woes, He’s helping us see what they are not.
 - a. They are poor not rich, hungry not full, weeping not laughing, hated not spoken well of.
- C. And, again, we’re starting to feel a bit uneasy in our seats.

3 Guiding Principles

- A. Now we are ready for those 3 Guiding Principles—all three of which, I pray, will help us untangle some of these issues we’ve identified.

(1) The World Is Upside-Down

- A. The first Guiding Principle I would give to us is this: The world is upside-down.
- B. We can’t help but notice the radical, counterintuitive nature of Jesus’ pronouncements. In that first list, what we would woe, He blesses. And, in that second list, what we would bless, He woes.

1. Jesus says that blessing, as it is to be found in this world, moves away from riches towards poverty; away from fullness towards hunger; away from laughter towards weeping; away from acceptance towards rejection.
2. But the world sees blessing moving in precisely the opposite direction. We love the Cinderella stories, the rags-to-riches stories.
 - a. Those are the kinds of people that Oprah wants to interview. Those are the kinds of people that get their stories told on ESPN—“He grew up in the hood, no money, no parents, gangbanger, and now he’s playing for the Niners and living in a mansion up in the hills. He’s made it!”
 - b. I went to seminary in Philadelphia. Philly is where the Rocky movies were filmed. Rocky pulls himself from the first list over to the second list by the brute strength of his biceps. And that’s the kind of thing we celebrate. There’s this statue of him in downtown Philly next to the art museum’s steps he ran up in the movie. And there’s always people there. Running the steps. Dancing on the top. Taking photos with the statue. This is the world’s kind of beatitude!
 - i. And then Jesus comes and says: “Respectfully, no! Blessing moves in the other direction.” And we all just scratch our heads.
- C. Now, if we are going to understand the kinds of things that Jesus pronounces here as blessed or woeful, then we must understand the world as Jesus sees it. And He sees the world in light of [Gen 3](#). Therefore, He sees the world, in this current dispensation, as upside-down.
- D. You may recall, I’ve made this point before, but what we traditionally refer to as “The Fall” in [Gen 3](#) can also be rightly referred to as “The Flip”.
 1. Think with me here about the order of creation: vegetation is put under the animals; the animals are put under humanity; with the woman put under the man; and the man put under God.
 2. Now consider the fall: the fruit is leveraged by the serpent; given to the woman; who gives to the man; who directly disobeys the command of God.
 - a. The fall moves in precisely the reverse direction, indicating a sort of undoing and inverting of God’s created order.
 - i. And, ever since, the world has been upside-down. The ground bears thorns, the animals are against us, women long to rule over men, and men have in their hearts now by nature a stubborn principle of pride and self-reliance: “I don’t want, I don’t need God—I can be my own god!”
- E. The world is upside-down. That’s why when God enters into this world, He becomes a man; the King of Kings becomes the servant of all; the Owner of the cosmos becomes homeless; the eternally joyful becomes the Man of Sorrows; the Great Physician is beaten and broken beyond recognition; the heavenly Priest becomes the sacrifice; the Lion of Judah becomes the Lamb; the Author of Life is put to death; the Creator of all is destroyed.

1. The world is upside-down. And that's why, when God comes to us in Christ, intending to put us right-side up, it looks, it sounds, it feels upside-down to us: "Blessed are you who are poor, hungry, sorrowful, and rejected?!"

F. If we lived in light of [Gen 3](#), it would change a lot for us.

1. To give you an example, Tim Keller, a prominent evangelic pastor-scholar, was recently invited to Princeton Theological Seminary to be granted a prestigious award. But as more and more people became outraged that they would grant such an award to a man who holds that women and members of the LGBTQ community should be ordained as pastors, they revoked the award.
 - a. Regarding this, my good friend from seminary wrote on his Facebook feed: "I'm sure the man who preaches the 'upside down kingdom' will not be losing sleep over not receiving this prize."
 - i. If we're going to side with God, we don't expect the world to side with us. And we don't lose sleep over it. We're with Christ when we suffer in this upside-down world.

(2) The Identifying Marks of Kingdom Citizens—Physical and Spiritual

- A. Now, the second Guiding Principle: The identifying marks of kingdom citizens that Luke gives us are to be both physically and spiritually understood.
- B. Christians are often a bit uncomfortable with the way Luke phrases his blessings and woes. He uses such unapologetically physical terms.
 1. Matthew's Beatitudes, on the other hand, trend much more in the spiritual direction. And, it is for this reason, I believe, that his are far more popular and preferable to us.
- C. To give you the most prominent example of this, consider the way each phrases his first beatitude. Where Luke has, "[Blessed are you who are poor](#)" (6:20), Matthew has: "[Blessed are the poor in spirit](#)" (5:3).
 1. What are we to make of this? I think both are aiming at the same point, just with a different emphasis. And it's for this reason that I find it wonderfully balancing to read Matthew's and Luke's list of beatitudes alongside one another.

(1) Reading Luke in Light of Matthew

- A. On the one hand, Matthew will not allow us to overemphasize the physical to the neglect of the spiritual. It is always the heart, the spirit of a man, that Jesus is after.
 1. Matthew keeps us from thinking that Luke is ascribing here some sort of intrinsic virtue to the economic state of poverty—as if you get into the kingdom of God by virtue of your bank

account—"You've got stocks and bonds, you're out; all you have is a few coins in a piggy bank your mama gave you when you were five, you're in!" That's not it.

- B. Matthew reminds us that the physical poverty Luke identifies must have a spiritual dimension to it for it to truly be blessed.
 - 1. But we must admit, it is often the poor who are most open to the things of God. So long as I am rich, it just continues to nourish that principle of pride we spoke of: "I don't need God."
 - a. But physical poverty can and should awaken us to our spiritual poverty before God. And, insofar as that is the case, being poor physically is actually a great blessing.
- C. This is precisely what we see in the immediate context of these blessings and woes after all. Did you notice the types of people that were surrounding Jesus as He began to preach? " ¹⁷ [There was] a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, ¹⁸ who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all" (vv. 17-19).
 - 1. Who are the people gathering around Jesus to hear Him and touch Him? Well, it is those people are physically unwell. This physical state has opened them up spiritually.
- D. Perhaps you are there right now. You thought you had it all together and it's all come crashing down. Don't curse such trials. Let them lead you to the Savior and His kingdom. You're impoverished before Him. You need forgiveness of sin, the riches of His grace. Reach out and touch Him.
 - 1. In a strange, upside-down way, let your physical poverty be a blessing to you.

(2) Reading Matthew in Light of Luke

- A. But now, on the other hand, while Matthew will not allow us to overemphasize the physical, Luke will not allow us to overemphasize the spiritual.
 - 1. We feel safer with Matthew because we tell ourselves that we can be poor in spirit even while we maintain and pursue vast riches in the physical realm. "O I'm poor before God, even when I'm filthy rich before neighbor!"
- B. But Luke comes in and makes us a bit uncomfortable in this. There is something blessed, in this upside-down world, about poverty.
 - 1. While it is not wrong in and of itself to be rich, we can't deny that if we truly follow the principles of discipleship laid out for us by Christ, I just can't imagine we'd be rich for very long.
 - a. He talks about selling what we have and giving to the poor that we might have treasure in heaven (Luke 18:22).

- b. He talks about using our wealth to throw banquets for the poor, crippled, lame, and blind precisely because they can't pay us back, and instead we'll be paid back by God in the resurrection (Luke 14:12-14).
 - c. And in a few weeks we'll see that He talks about giving our shirt to the one who steals our jacket (Luke 6:29). He talks about giving to everyone who begs from us (6:30). He talks about lending to people in need expecting nothing in return (6:35).
- C. I just don't see how we can truly be poor in spirit, depending upon God alone, following Him with all of our hearts, and not also trending towards poverty in worldly goods.
 - 1. The spiritual dimension will have physical expression as we forego the things of this world in love for God and neighbor.
- D. Does that sound crazy? Perhaps it would be, were it not for my third and final Guiding Principle.

(3) A Story Is Determined by Its End

- A. A story is determined by its end.
- B. I phrase this last principle along the lines of a quote I once heard from the American actor and screenwriter, Orson Welles: "If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story."
 - 1. In this way a story is determined by its end. If it ends well, the whole story is deemed a comedy. But if it ends poorly, it is a tragedy through and through.
- C. This idea becomes critical when we consider what Jesus pronounces as blessed and woeful here. For, with regard to the present moment, He seems to have gotten it all wrong. But when once the end comes into view, we see that He has been right all along.
 - 1. For the poor, their inheritance is the kingdom of God. For those who hunger now, in the end, they will be satisfied. For those who weep now, in the end they will be laughing. And for those who are persecuted now for Christ, in the end, they shall find a great reward waiting for them in heaven.
- D. Brothers and sisters, in Christ, ours truly will be a rags-to-riches story. It's where the story ends that makes all the difference.
 - 1. If this life is all there is, then "we are of all people most to be pitied" (1 Cor 15:19)—tragedy!
 - 2. But if there is a resurrection from the dead, then "this light momentary affliction [will be shown truly to have been] preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison" (2 Cor 4:17)—comedy!
- E. Let me leave you with this. Jesus is not calling us to go here anywhere that He hasn't already gone Himself. I suppose this recalls what I said of Him earlier.
 - 1. He came into this fallen and flipped world. He gave up His riches and became poor. He subjected Himself to bodily need. He was acquainted with grief, the Man of Sorrows. He, of

course, was hated, excluded, reviled, spurned, and even killed for me. And He was raised from the dead and has entered into glory.

- a. He's gone ahead of us in the flesh, but He's come back for us in the Spirit. O God help us!