

LIFE IN THE KINGDOM
Luke 6:17-45

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What does it mean to be a disciple, a follower of this rabbi named Jesus? For the first time in Luke's Gospel, we actually learn more about what it means to say "yes" to the lordship of Jesus. Having just chosen his disciples earlier (6:12-16), Jesus now directly speaks to both disciples and would-be disciples. Coming down from the mountain, a place of prayer and retreat (6:12), Jesus stops at a level place where "a multitude of His disciples" and an even greater "throng" have gathered to experience the miraculous healing that comes from his command. In an almost mystical manner, Luke describes the multitude reaching out to touch Jesus and receive the power of healing that is coming from him (6:19).

The Beatitudes (Luke 6:20-23)

The word "beatitude" (based on a Latin word, *beatitudo*, for "happiness") comes from the Greek word for "blessed" or "fortunate," *makario*. In the first century, the word was usually assigned to those who had every reason to be happy according to the riches of the world. *Makario* was, therefore, initially a word for worldly well-being.

Jesus, however, reverses the world's definition of *makario*, "blessed," as he looks through the lens of the kingdom. According to the kingdom of God, happiness has nothing to do with one's external circumstances and everything to do with one's internal allegiance. In this first moment of instruction for his followers, Jesus challenges the notion that happiness is based upon one's accomplishments and accumulations.

Beatitude 1: Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Unlike Matthew, who identifies the recipients of this beatitude as "poor in spirit" (Matthew 5:3), Luke identifies the recipients of the kingdom as simply "the poor." This is not surprising, given Jesus' first sermon in Luke in which he declares that the Spirit of the Lord has anointed him to preach the gospel to the poor (Luke 4:18; Isaiah 61:1). From Jesus' perspective, the poor have a great advantage over the rich when it comes to embracing the kingdom of God. The momentary happiness and self-assured arrogance that accompany material prosperity blind the wealthy's ability to see beyond the present world. Matthew, therefore, catches the essence of the necessary humility and desperation most often found in the outright poor when he narrows the beatitude to the "poor in spirit".

Poverty itself does not cause the "blessed" state, but, the accompanying vulnerability often associated with poverty opens both the hearts and hopes of the poor to seek another king and another kingdom. Unlike their rich neighbors, the poor understand what it means to be utterly dependent upon the provision of God. Therefore, those pushed to the margins of life can rejoice because they can count on God, the God of the poor, to bring forth justice on their behalf.

Beatitude 2: Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied.

New Testament scholar John Nolland observes that hunger is not to be considered a separate condition from poverty but, rather, a characteristic manifestation of the earlier condition. Even as Matthew added to Luke's first beatitude, changing "poor" to "poor in spirit," he, likewise, extended "hunger" to "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:6).

Interestingly, Luke notes that the recipients of this second beatitude are those who hunger now. This emphasis on their present state of hunger makes clear that Luke is not just addressing a hypothetical situation. Those listening to the words of Jesus are hungry in the immediate moment! They are blessed, however, because they "shall be satisfied." The verb actually indicates that they will be "filled." The grammar denotes a divine passive, meaning God himself will fill them. The Old Testament is full of imagery of a great, future banquet that God holds for the hungry (Psalm 107:3-9; 132:15; 146:7; Isaiah 55:1-2). Later in Luke, a foretaste of God's "filling" occurs in the feeding of the five thousand (see Luke 9:11-17).

Beatitude 3: Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

Again, the recipient of God's blessing is suffering in the present (now). Those who are now weeping will find laughter with the arrival of the kingdom. For ancient Israel, the state of weeping was often associated with the time of exile (Psalm 126:6; 137:1). Ecclesiastes 3:4, moreover, contrasts weeping and laughing as opposites—while weeping is the release of sorrow, laughter is the release of joy.

Beatitude 4: Blessed are you when men hate you...your reward is great in heaven.

Matthew adds the word "falsely" to indicate that mistreatments must have no legitimate cause in order to be rewarded by the arrival of the kingdom (Matthew 5:11). Perhaps this beatitude echoes Isaiah 66:5 which mentions those who "hate you and exclude you for My name's sake." Not only does the persecution involve hate, but, more specifically, the ostracized are insulted and defamed.

The blessedness of hate and defamation are not found in the persecution itself but, rather, in the fact that those who are hated can be identified with the "Son of Man." The disciples will suffer for the sake of Jesus (Luke 9:24; 21:17-19). "Your name" is a singular form suggesting that it does not refer to personal names, like Jones, Smith, or McCoy, but to the name the followers of Christ bear—"Christians" (see Acts 11:26; 26:28). The term "Christian" was a negative term used to belittle those who belonged to Christ (James 2:7; 1 Peter 4:14). The disciple's rejection comes from his identification with the Son of Man, with the one who carries forth the purposes of God. Those receiving the ridicule should "jump for joy" because they will receive a great reward in heaven. While the reward is certainly in the future, the anticipation of joy can bring present gladness (see Luke 1:41, 44).

The Woes (Luke 6:24-26)

The four woes balance the four beatitudes. While not directly parallel, clearly the four woes correspond to the four beatitudes.

Beatitudes

Blessed are the poor...

Woes

Woe to you who are rich...

Blessed are you who hunger now... Woe to you who are well-fed now...
Blessed are you who weep now... Woe to you who laugh now...
Blessed are you when men hate you... Woe to you when all men speak well of you...
 and cast insults at you
 and spurn your name

New Testament scholar David Garland says, “Good news to the poor can mean bad news for the rich.” To lift up the poor is to punish those possessing the power to pull them down.

The rich find themselves in a precarious predicament because their love for the things of this world become a great stumbling block to their entrance into the kingdom of God. Later, Jesus makes it clear that one cannot serve both God and mammon (Luke 16:13).

Combined together, the beatitudes and the woes indicate the New Testament theme of the “great reversal.” In God’s future, in his kingdom, the poor inherit the ultimate riches of the kingdom, and the rich, having sold out to the present “comfort” of “this world,” will “miss out” in the world to come. Describing the recipients of the woes as rich, full, content, and extolled, Luke is using four separate adjectives to depict the same group. The very things that appear to be advantages in this world turn out to be disadvantages in the next—again, the great reversal. Perhaps Garland says it best when he writes, “The rich live under the awful burden of their riches.”

When the sixth Duke of Westminster realized at the age of 16 that he was heir to his family’s immense fortune, he dreaded it – the responsibility, the knowledge that he hadn’t earned it, the isolation. Following his death in August 2016, he placed the same burden (\$13 billion) on his son, Hugh Grosvenor, age 25. On the one hand, he’s one of the richest men in the world. On the other hand, the money made his father miserable. His father once said, “Given the choice, I would have rather not been born wealthy.”

The burden of riches is so heavy that Thayer Willis runs a counseling business to help the rich deal with the psychological challenges of their wealth. Each generation of a wealthy family becomes another chapter in the family’s narrative of managing the money and passing it on to the next generation.

I guess the biggest question is do the rich own their money or does their money own them?

Perhaps the most curious of the woes concerns those who have “all men speak well of them.” The problem exists: as men attract and receive flattery for themselves, they miss the opportunity to direct all praise towards God (see Matthew 5:16). Jesus reminds them that the false prophets enjoyed great popularity (see Isaiah 30:9-11; Micah 2:11; Jeremiah 5:31; 23:16-17) simply because they tickled men’s ears rather than boldly proclaimed the word of God.

The Hardest Command (Luke 6:27-35)

What is the hardest thing that Jesus ever asked his followers to do? You might ponder for a moment the various commands that seem particularly arduous. (1) “Go and sell all that you have and give

it to the poor” (Matthew 19:21; Mark 10:21; Luke 18:22). (2) “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24; Mark 8:34). (3) “He who wants to be first, he should be last of all and a servant of all. Whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it” (Matthew 20:27; Mark 9:35; 10:44). (4) “‘Come,’ he said to Simon Peter, ‘and walk on the water with Me’” (Matthew 14:29).

Despite the apparent impossibility of those commands, another command still seems more difficult, “Love your enemies” (6:27). Lest we miss the mark, Jesus gives us detailed examples of such love. (1) If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer him the other one also. (2) If someone takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. (3) Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back.

The central point is found in verse 32. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.” If you lend money to those who are going to pay you back with interest—note that even the sinners make such investments. But God’s people (v. 35) are to “love our enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and then our reward will be great, and we will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men.”

The Enemy

Maybe it’s the father who has never really been a father to you, the one who belittled you while he bragged on your sister. Maybe it’s the person at work who lied about you—took all the credit for the job you had done and, eventually, put you in a place that led to your dismissal. Maybe it’s your ex-husband or your ex-wife. Maybe it’s the in-law who tries to dominate your life and the life of your family. If we’re going to be the children of God, we must love like God; we must love even our enemies.

I can’t believe he did it! Unbelievable! The Rev. Walter Everett conducted the wedding of his son’s murderer after Everett helped him get out of jail by testifying before the parole board. The pastor said that he had known people whose loved ones had been murdered, and, years afterward, the family still seemed consumed by anger and hatred. “I didn’t want that to happen to me,” testifies the pastor. So he conducted the wedding at the Golden Hill United Methodist Church in Bridgeport.

The murderer, Carlucci, says he doesn’t understand how the pastor can forgive him. He continues, “I have a 13-year-old daughter, and if anybody hurt her, I’d have to hurt him back.” One month into his sentence, Carlucci got a letter from his victim’s father, from Rev. Everett. After several months of exchanging letters, Everett visited Carlucci. The pastor recalls, “When I went to leave, we started to shake hands, and instinctively embraced. We both started to cry.” Before he even proposed to his future wife, Carlucci asked Rev. Everett to officiate the wedding. Everett quickly agreed. “I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Carlucci said. “This pastor is my best friend.”

When we ourselves were enemies with God, he loved us—sent his son to die in our place. Love, in this particular passage, is defined as “doing good.” The command doesn’t necessarily change our inner feelings, but it certainly controls our outer actions. In the Old Testament, we’re told to return our enemy’s wandering donkey and to give food and drink to our enemy, as well (Exodus

23:4; Proverbs 25:21). Concerning the one who would steal your cloak, by giving him your shirt as well, you've turned his act of violence into your act of charity.

When we only love those who love us, and only give to those who can give back to us, we're acting like "sinners." Our ulterior motive is to receive something in return or simply pay off obligations to those to whom they are due, while we ignore those who have needs and are unable to reciprocate. In the first century, the wealthy lent to the poor. When the poor were unable to pay, they would face becoming a debt-slave (Matthew 18:25) or, more often, the loss of their land (see Nehemiah 5:1-5).

The key to "the hardest thing that Jesus ever asked" is the principle of triangular relationships. Every relationship we have with another includes God, the third party. Since we can never repay God for all the good he has done for us, we must not seek full repayment from others who are unable to pay us.

The Pardon (Luke 6:36-38)

Jesus does not call upon his followers to suspend their discerning faculties. Yet, as God acts in mercy, we should act with mercy. When we seek to put others on trial, we are inviting God to place us on trial. The "good measure" in verse 38 is a generous measure. When measuring out grain, a generous giver presses down and shakes the grain to fit in as much as possible. Not be contained, and the grain spills out. The point of the whole picture, however, is to declare that as we are generous to others with our forgiveness and mercy, God will also be generous with us.

The Blind (Luke 6:39)

In the context of Luke's Gospel, the blind guide refers to scribes and Pharisees who cannot see Jesus for who he really is—the Son of God. In this passage, blindness applies to those who ignore Jesus' teaching on love and mercy.

The Wooden Beam (Luke 6:41-42)

This is a cartoon-like image that pokes fun of those who readily point out the faults of others without seeing their own moral deficiencies. As Garland concludes, "The disciples' first responsibility is to purify themselves and not to set themselves up as moral watchdogs over others." Seeing the faults in our family and friends is much easier than seeing them in our own lives.

Every person is a combination of wonderful virtues and plenty of flaws – no one can escape that. We're part genius, part saint, part tyrant, and part moron. Nobody goes through life without making mistakes or doing something of which they are ashamed.

Despite the imperfections in all of us, have you noticed those who relentlessly judge others? They are always ready to make an itemized, detailed list of the flaws of others. Why is it so much easier for me to see what's wrong with you rather than what's wrong with me? Mental health professionals tell us that faultfinders are really using us as a mirror – and what they dislike about us is what they truly despise in themselves.

Jesus is saying, "Before we look at the faults of others, we must examine ourselves."

The Good Man (Luke 6:43-45)

Out of our inner existence, we bear the fruit that declares what sort of person we are—good or bad. The emphasis in the New Testament is always on obedience. Just as obedience by Peter and his colleagues led to the great catch of fish (Luke 5:1-11), obedience in our lives will lead to sincere discipleship.

Conclusion

Descending from the mountain, Jesus stops at a level place and declares the “great reversal.” Those who are the “have nots” in this world will be the “haves” in the next. The kingdom, plenty, laughter, and heavenly reward are all theirs. The lovers of this world and its riches, however, have failed to long for a new kingdom and a new king. They, therefore, are turned “upside down” in the next world, finding themselves missing the Messiah.

Unlike sinners, the followers of Jesus are to love their enemies and bless those who curse them. Mercy and grace, moreover, will be measured out to God’s children with the same measure they use when applying mercy to others. Above all else, all people, like trees, bear fruit from their inner essence—good or bad.

Which do you receive? Is God blessing you with beatitudes or warning you with woes? Let those who have ears hear our Lord’s first words of instruction to his disciples.