

First Presbyterian Church
Luke 6:17-26, “Blessings and Woes”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 2/2/2025

Today we begin the first of four weeks in Luke chapter 6.

This chapter is what dorky scholars call “the Sermon on the Plain”
because it is very similar to “the Sermon on the Mount”
found in Matthew, but Luke says Jesus
went *down* to a level place.

So, yes, biblical scholars really do need to get out more.

The sayings of Jesus that open our passage are often called “beatitudes.”

The beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew are far more familiar
to most people than the version we find in the Gospel of Luke.

But regardless of where we find them,

Jesus’ beatitudes ... are confusing.

They say things that sound good,
but which also run against our experience.

And Luke pairs his set of four beatitudes with a corresponding set of four woes.

These are just as confusing, but proclaim bad outcomes
on what we usually consider to be highly desirable circumstances.

Is Jesus just gaslighting us? Telling us that what we think is bad is really good?

And that what we think is good is really bad?

How can we make sense of what he says here?

We have been wired toward a set of dispositions in life.

This wiring has come from our evolutionary development,
which God has used to establish all the incredible
biodiversity that we see in the created world.

The dispositions we’re wired for are known as “survival of the fittest.”

This is how sharks got big teeth and homo sapiens got big brains.

It’s how we developed everything from opposable thumbs
to the bonds of communal relationships: caring for people.

It’s how we acquired emergency health responses in our bodies
that happen automatically to save us from pathogens, blood loss,
or sudden exposure to extreme cold or heat

And ... It’s how we got so darn good looking!

I mean, just look at this room full of beautiful humans –
every one of us is full of beauty. We’re made in God’s own image.

The evolutionary principle “survival of the fittest” got us all of this and more.
I don’t think it’s just random chance – it’s a good gift from our Creator.
We are here because over the last hundred thousand years or so,
our ancestors were a little smarter, stronger, happier,
and healthier than the rest of the group.
We are the beneficiaries of all the tiny genetic improvements
that each generation has contributed.

In the big picture, that’s a good thing, and part of God’s design.
But as humans have built communities and societies,
these big picture dispositions for survival
can become grotesquely amplified in personal relationships.
If strength is good, then I’ll turn strength into domination.
If feeling happy is good, then I’ll laugh at your problems.
If being smart is good, then I’ll work to give my kids
more learning opportunities, and your kids less.
If eating is good, I’ll stock up way more than I need.
Me first, my kind first, my country first.
It’s survival of the fittest, but the outcome is not fitness –
it’s short-sighted selfishness that sabotages genuine thriving.

If you wonder how people can behave like animals,
or why you yourself have acted from predictable, basic, carnal motivations,
the reason is that *we are animals!*
And yet, the Spirit of Jesus is at work to elevate our bodies,
minds, and hearts so that as representatives of creation,
we who are made from dust (and who will return to dust!),
might commune with the divine.
I think the beatitudes strike us as being so strange, almost otherworldly,
because in the beatitudes, Jesus points beyond our animal instincts
and invites us to experience life from the perspective of God.

Some people have said,
“Well, this teaching wasn’t for everyone – just the disciples.”
But Luke makes sure we know this message is really for us:
According to vv. 17-18, Jesus shares this wisdom with the 12 apostles
(whom he chose in the previous passage),
a large number of disciples (who extend beyond the apostles
and included many women),
and also a crowd of regular people (who are curious but uncommitted).

For us to go deeper into this teaching, we need to answer a question:
what is it about the characteristics listed in the first line
of each beatitude blessing that connects them to the good outcomes
that Jesus declares in the second line of each beatitude blessing?

These blessings and woes do not describe
four different kinds of suffering people
and four different kinds of triumphant people.
They describe the qualities which emerge
within those in whom the Kingdom of God is arriving.

The Catholic scholar John Gillman writes,
**“Jesus proclaims that the poor are ‘blessed’
not because of the miserable condition
in which they find themselves.
Jesus does not glorify poverty, a condition that often leads to premature death.
In our own time Dorothy Day reminds us that living in poverty
is hardly a condition to be romanticized.”**
He goes on to note that **“The poor are not ‘blessed’
because of any prior conversion experience,
attained virtue, or interior disposition.
Nor are they proclaimed blessed because of the good deeds
they might have accumulated
or fidelity to the covenant they have shown.
The poor are ‘blessed’ for one reason only, and that is because,
‘Yours is the kingdom of God.’”**

On the flip side, what about people who have material wealth,
who have enough to eat, who enjoy laughter and celebration,
who are spoken well of?
Should they seek to get rid of these things
so they can be down in the dumps with the blessed?
Does God not like us to eat well and enjoy the goodness of creation?
Is Jesus *anti laughing*?

Again, we miss Jesus’ point if we turn these woe categories
into hardened rules about circumstances you ought to avoid.

So what is it about poverty, hunger, mourning, and persecution
that make them so blessedly “blessed”?

People in those conditions may recognize that the deepest satisfaction
of their needs comes from the arrival of God’s reign
in their life.

When we have the self-awareness to see that
despite all our striving to be the fittest, there’s still quite a lot that we lack,
then we are ready to see the way of faith.

But when our vision is clouded, and we think we can get to the top of the pile,
control our fate, laugh at the haters,
and live the good life because we worked for it,
woe unto us ... for all of these things are an illusion.

I watched a documentary called “Don’t Die.” Anyone else seen this?
It’s about a guy named Bryan Johnson (NO RELATION!)
who made a fortune as a tech-bro, and has now decided to try
extending his natural life further than anyone in recorded history.

Here’s a good summary of his regimen from Screen Rant:

“Bryan goes to sleep at 8:30pm and wakes up at 4:30am,
with him hopefully getting exactly eight hours of sleep.

Johnson then turns on a light in his bathroom that gives sunlight exposure,
takes three pills, takes his body temperature with an inner-ear thermometer,
and starts HRV therapy that stimulates the nervous system.

Next, **Johnson takes 54 more pills and a drink called the Green Giant**,
puts on a hat with lasers that stimulate hair growth,
and works out for an hour.

After his workout, Johnson eats a few pounds of vegetables,
does high-frequency electromagnetic stimulation on his abdomen,
does 12 minutes of near and red-light therapy, and does audio therapy.

Johnson finally has one more meal before 11am and then takes another 34 pills.”
<https://screenrant.com/dont-die-documentary-most-schocking-reveals-list/>

That’s just the morning! He’s spending millions of dollars a year on all this.

Bryan thinks he can find all the body hacks and improve humanity
through his attempt to literally attain eternal life on his own strength.

I don’t judge him in particular, though.

Bryan is just an example of what our whole society is aimed at.

Let's look again at these blessings and woes,
and I'll pair them up so you can hear the connections directly.

Poor and Rich

*Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.*

Those who recognize their need for God through their lack of money
or through other kinds of poverty, are blessed because God's incomparable
riches are available to them in Christ.

But those who have a lot and keep piling it up
to make themselves feel safe
block out the kingdom of God.

Hungry and satisfied

*Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.
Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.*

Those who feel hunger in their stomachs here on earth are blessed
because that hunger will be satiated for eternity
when they sit at God's banquet table.

(And God sincerely hopes they find food here on earth).

But those who keep eating more than they need while others go hungry
have missed the gracious and free invitation to join in God's perspective,
and they will also miss the banquet table.

Weeping and laughing

*Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.
Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.*

Those who weep when they look at the state of the world,
when they look at their frightened neighbors,
when they look at their lives and consider all that has been lost,
are blessed.

Blessed because God also weeps over the state of the world.

This is not a quality we seek out in life,

but one that emerges within us as God's perspective
unfolds in our hearts and minds and relationships.

And those who weep now will be filled with true joy that leads to honest,
life-giving laughter.

But there are those who look at people who are hurting, who have less,
who are pushed out, who are in minority communities,
and they laugh in derision. They make jokes at others' expense.

Woe to them, because when God's truth is revealed
they will mourn and weep for wasting their lives on cheap jokes.

Persecuted and Honored

*Blessed are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.*

*"Rejoice in that day and leap for joy,
because great is your reward in heaven.*

For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

*Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you,
for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.*

At no time in my life have I thought that I could possibly be persecuted
in this country for standing with Jesus,
for standing with the people Jesus stood with.

But our church got a letter from the Presbytery last week saying that
as Immigration Customs Enforcement officers are seeking people
to be deported, our church could be searched.

Last week someone was arrested during a church service in Georgia.
So we have to make plans for how to respond, know what our rights are,
and decide what we are willing to do.

This is just the beginning. We are entering a season where the church
in the United States will need to decide if it is willing
to take up their cross and follow Jesus,
or if they want everyone to speak well of them.

Well guess what? We can't live forever – even if we take 54 pills every morning,
work out every day, and eat our vegetables.

We just have a short period of time down here,
it's gone before we know it.

So let's make it count.

Let's look to Jesus and live by faith, even if it means we're poor now,
even if it means we're hungry now, even if it means we weep now,
even if it means we are persecuted now.

The life of faith is powerful. Nobody can take it from us.

And it connects us to God's eternal riches, joy, laughter,
and honor that make life worth living – not just in heaven – right now.