

Those are Blessings?

Luke 6:17-26 (NIV)

¹⁷ He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, ¹⁸ who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, ¹⁹ and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. ²⁰ Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹ Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. ²² 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. ²³ "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. ²⁴ "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. ²⁵ Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. ²⁶ Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Jesus is gaining traction in the first year of his public ministry. Last week, we heard Jesus call sinful Simon Peter to take on a new profession and be a fisher of people. In the verses leading up to our reading from Luke today, Jesus officially chose his Twelve disciples. Now, Jesus and the Twelve come down the mountainside and stand on a level place. "A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all." (verses 17-19)

If you were one of the Twelve, you had to be thinking, "This is great! We are super popular being around Jesus. Power is exuding from him. He's going to protect us. We are going to be loved by the people as he heals them and drives out demons. We are going to be so blessed to be Jesus' disciples."

Has that thought ever come to you, that if you are Jesus' disciple, you will be blessed in a showy display like the Twelve experienced? Was becoming a follower of Jesus pitched as a life where things will just go better, that if you're going to church every Sunday, you will have an easier life, your bills will kind of miraculously be paid, you won't get sick, you'll heal from your cancer, you'll be loved and have friends with everyone? As a pastor, did I think that if I'm really dedicated to God, faithful in my daily Bible readings, diligent and dynamic in my preaching, that people will flock in droves to be members of our church? Is this how we thought we would be blessed to follow God?

Jesus knows his disciples and us so well. That's why in view of such massive popularity and success, Jesus segues into a teachable moment. Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. 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." (verses 20-22)

Wait a minute, Jesus. You're saying that those are blessings? I mean, aren't the blessings right here in front of us with all the people and all the healing and all the power? This is what a blessed life looks like, a beatitude, if you will. These things that you mentioned – poverty, hunger, weeping, being ostracized – I don't want those. How can those be blessings? But Jesus wants to calibrate our expectations and our definition of what it means to be blessed.

Okay, let's start with the first one: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." (verse 20) What kind of poverty is Jesus talking about here? Do I have to give up all my money? But then again, Simon, James, and John were wealthy enough in their fishing business to have partners and hired hands. Matthew, a former tax collector, was wealthy enough to throw a lavish feast for Jesus. Obviously you don't have to be financially poor to follow Jesus. So, what's a blessed way to be poor?

Thankfully, in Matthew's account of Jesus' beatitude message, the phrase "in spirit" is used to define this blessed poverty. The spiritually poor person realizes that they have nothing that they can do, nothing that they can bring to God, which should make them a part of his kingdom. They have an empty heart without any riches. God has to fill them and make them rich.

This is the exact opposite of what we see in verse 24: "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort." They have no room in their heart for God. They've filled it with creature comforts and self-reliance and think that they're fine, that

they're rich, even before God. The world looks at them and sees how well off they are and deem that this person must belong to God because he's so rich. But those are not true riches, nor are they what makes someone rich before God.

God makes rich those with poor, empty hearts, rich with his mercy, treating them not as their sins, their spiritual poverty deserves. We come with nothing to offer and shouldn't belong to God, and God lavishes on us what we could never earn or buy. He places us in his kingdom, under his protection. He gives us citizenship with him. He makes us a benefactor, an heir of eternal life. We're spiritually poor, and God has blessed us as he pays for us to be a citizen of his kingdom.

"Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied." (verse 21) I don't really think a grumbling tummy is a blessing. I want that fixed, but God says it's a blessing.

Someone who thinks that they are satisfied and that they don't need any more of God, Jesus says of them: "Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry." (verse 25) Thinking that they have had their fill of God, they push away from the table of his Word. They don't come and gather with other Christians because they think that they're good. They don't receive his Supper thankfully or often because they don't think they need it. They stopped hungering for God, stopped seeing the need to be filled with him as often as possible.

That's why it's a blessing to hunger spiritually, to realize that I need to be filled up. I need what he offers. I need his riches, his perfection, his righteousness. I need his undeserved love day in and day out. I hunger for you God, and when I hunger for you, you fill me with meals of your Word, with your body and blood shed for me. And God never leaves me empty, nor does he give me the bare minimum to survive. His Word, his Supper, are these bounteous feasts of his rich forgiveness. When we hunger for him, we seek him out and we are filled and satisfied. That's why it's a blessing to hunger now for God because he indeed fills us.

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." (verse 21) Given that this is weeping, as if you were mourning, I don't know a single person who thinks it's a good thing to be mourning. We want our lives to be happy, to be good, to have the minimal amount of pain or sorrow possible. There are times when we live contrary to God and his Word to attain such a life. To those who run away from following God's will for our lives now for the sake of pleasure, Jesus says: "Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep." (verse 25) Basically, you have your pleasure now and don't expect it in the future.

When you grieve over your sins, over every wrong thought, word, and action which separate you from God, which push him away from you, God comes with his full and total forgiveness that he paid for with his life, his flesh and blood. Because he has removed all our sins, because he has paid the price and wiped out our debt of sin, he wipes every tear from our eyes, assuring us that he has brought us together. No sin can overcome his payment. No outside force can separate us from his eternal love and forgiveness. As you weep now over your sins, you are blessed because God wipes the tears from your eyes showing you that he has removed all your sins.

"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." (verse 22) Being poor in spirit, hungering for God to fill us with his perfection, weeping over our sins - these things won't make us popular and they probably won't attract people to us in droves. People will instead hate us, exclude us, insult us, and reject us because we follow God. The world may reject you, but God never will. He sticks with you through it all, no matter how bad it gets. When we are ostracized because we belong to God and his kingdom, Jesus tells us, "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets." (verse 23) We have a belonging with God now and forever, just like the persecuted prophets of old. This is why we are blessed no matter how anyone else treats us.

Life sometimes goes really well and we get to see things like what the disciples saw coming down from the mountainside - people are coming, God's power is obviously displayed in our lives, people are healed - and these are blessings. But you and I are also blessed when we are poor in spirit, hungering for God's perfection, weeping over our sins, ostracized for following Christ. We are blessed because of what we have with God. We're rich because God has made us a part of his kingdom. We're satisfied because God has filled us with his perfection. We laugh because God has taken away all our sins forever. We rejoice and leap because we will never be excluded by God. These really are blessings, and we are truly blessed. Amen.