

20th February 2022

Bible Reading: Luke 6:17-26

A New Mindset

Nola & I have had the privilege of being part of many short-term mission trips both within Australia and overseas. If you have been part of a mission trip or youth conference group, the end of your day brings everyone together for conversation. It is an opportunity to unwind a bit and debrief your experience as a group. Reflections are shared and the activities of the day are put into context a bit. Often this time begins with going around sharing about the day. One way to frame it is for everyone to share one positive thing, and one challenging thing about the day. Sometimes it's called highs and lows, one leader refers to it as "roses and thorns," which brings the reminder that even within the same flower of a day, there is beauty to behold, as well as prickly things that might take you by surprise.

In today's gospel reading, we find a short series of roses and thorns as described by Jesus to his disciples and the crowd who had gathered around. In Luke's gospel, they are described as "blessings" and "woes." They are a part of a lengthy sermon that is paralleled in Matthew's gospel as the Sermon on the Mount chapters 5-7. Rather than the 107 verses, Luke's gospel has Jesus only giving a 32-verse sermon known as the Sermon on the Plain. These verses might sound familiar as they are echoes of the well-known Beatitudes in Matthew 6, although here Luke puts a different spin on things.

First, he identifies the blessings, or the roses. He identifies the poor, the hungry, the weeping, those who are excluded and persecuted. If these examples strike you as odd, you're not alone. They are far from a typical list of blessings. Often, we associate the word "blessing" with happiness or good fortune. But in the Greek, the word holds a bit deeper meaning. It is beyond the superficial or even material possessions; it is a word more closely connected to the first-century sense of unity with God in an eternal sense, relating to righteousness and being in right relationship with our creator. To be "blessed," meant living in a keen awareness of the presence of God. It is not to be free from struggle, but to be oriented towards a reality where God's realm is realized. In each of these blessings, the struggle comes with a promise of reversal: the hungry will be filled, the weeping will give way to laughter.

In these verses, Jesus is "on the level" with us, telling us the truth of our lives as He sees us, and confronting us with our responsibility to be a part of God's Kingdom with our response to what we see in the world.

God calls us to be a part of the kind of Kingdom that Christ modelled. Immediately prior to these verses, Jesus is surrounded by crowds seeking healing, which he offers. Throughout the gospel, we find Jesus attending to the very real needs of the poor and suffering. We see Jesus acting with love and compassion in a powerful ministry of presence, and calling his disciples to do the same.

We can reach out to those who are hungry, that they might be filled, whether that is through Food Network or practical support for neighbours and friends. We can offer comfort to those who weep, by reaching out with phone calls, cards, or visits and offering friendship and care that gives way to laughter. These are ways we can live into the blessings that Christ teaches, plain and simple.

This would be challenge enough, but the gospel pushes us even farther, as Luke punctuates these blessings with 4 corresponding statements of "woes." These are the thorns; examples given of things that are soon to be upended. These woes, unique to Luke, are tough ones to hear, particularly if we find that they are descriptive of us. Jesus, speaking quite freely and plainly, calls the audience and us, out of our complacency and away from the safety and security of our laurels that we rest upon, and says that the reign of God, here and now, is about something more than just our own accomplishments.

In fact, these accomplishments might just be our undoing. I think Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of these verses in *The Message* helps get at the meaning of these verses well. He puts v24 through 26 like this:

"But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made. What you have is all you'll ever get. And its trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself. Your self will not satisfy you for long. And its trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games, there's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it.

There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular".

These four pairings, blessings and woes, roses and thorns, challenge us to look at our lives and our world with new eyes. They challenge us to clarify our values and examine what are the things in life that we will take a stand for in relation to faithful living.

Packed into these verses are very real instructions for the disciples, including those of us who claim to follow Christ today, to reorient our relationships and reverse the social, economic, and political injustices that surround us so that we might live most fully into the reign of God here and now.

It is important that we understand that Jesus is not giving us a list of rules that we must follow in order to be saved. Some of us have come out of churches where week after week you left church feeling you had to work harder and give more in order to be accepted by God. The Bible is clear: we are forgiven and given new and eternal life because we place our trust in Jesus Christ. There is nothing we can do to earn God's favour! We are saved because we receive and trust what He has done for us on the cross.

Jesus is helping us see God's intention and desire for our lives. He points us in the direction of living the new life that we can have in Him. These words startle us because they confront some of our wrong-headed ways of looking at the world. Jesus calls His followers to a New Mindset, to live differently from those who do not know Him; those who do not see clearly.

One of the reasons the church lacks the power it had in the past is because we are working so hard to show the world that we are "*just like they are*" that we have become "Just like they are". We are just as preoccupied with getting rich, marriages are just as fragile, we are just as addicted to power, we are as obsessively competitive about our children, our business ethics are determined by what is to our advantage!

And we watch the same shows and laugh at the same crude jokes. Those outside the church see this and conclude that all this talk about "Jesus changing my life" is more of a slogan than a reality. They see no evidence of God's transforming power in those who claim to follow Him.

Jesus makes four statements that start with the word "blessed" and then four that start with the word "woe". Each of the "blessed" statements has a counterpart in the "woe" section. Jesus identifies four areas where we should be thinking differently from those around us.

Wealth:

The first warning Jesus gave is about wealth. In our world people equate riches with success. People who make more money are deemed "more significant". Money translates into influence. Almost all of us would like to have more money because deep down we believe that this would solve most of the problems we face in life.

The people of Jesus day looked at wealth much as we do. They actually believed that those who had riches were “blessed by God”. The poor were therefore not blessed. Imagine the shock of the crowd when Jesus said, *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”* Jesus follows this with the words, *“But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.”* V24

Jesus wasn't saying that people who make a lot of money are bad. What Jesus is speaking against is the mindset that is so wrapped up in worldly possessions that we neglect the life to come. Riches tend to attach us to this world. Riches are bad when they become our source of security and the driving force of our life. Wealth is often not a blessing; it is a stumbling block.

Comfort:

Next, Jesus said, *“Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.”* Once again, we turn to Matthew and we see the verse clarified, *“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”*

Jesus is not saying that hunger and famine are good things in and of themselves. We should be working to alleviate all such suffering. However, physically hungry people tend to be focused people. Have you ever searched the cupboards for something to eat? People who are truly hungry are even more focused. Jesus says we need to have that kind of hunger for righteousness (or the things God considers to be important).

Probably the greatest indictment of Western Christianity is our comfortableness in the world. We don't see faith that is characterized by sacrifice, diligence, passion or single-mindedness. Jesus draws attention to the fact that the Christian faith is not about fulfilling certain assignments it is about living in dynamic and intimate relationship with God. The Lord wants us to hunger for a deeper relationship rather than being content with superficial spirituality.

A Good Time Mentality:

We hear people all the time saying, *“I just want to enjoy my life”*. Unfortunately, these are often the people who live for the weekend parties, when they can drink themselves into oblivion and frequently talk about their “great friends”. The problem is that it's empty. It is like the veneer on a piece of particle board. It looks good on the outside but what is on the inside is different.

The pursuit of pleasure is like a drug. We always need a little bit more pleasure to help us get our “high”. Jesus speaks to the “good time mentality” when he says, *“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.”* Later he adds, *“Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep”*. V25

Jesus is not against laughter. In fact, the Bible tells us that laughter is good medicine. Jesus speaks against the superficial and shallow laughter that characterizes the world. As believers our joy should come from our relationship with God. The situation of the world is tragic. People are doing all sorts of foolish and sinful things to “feel good.” Sin has caused havoc in life. We should mourn over: disease, injustice that victimizes the weak, child abuse, domestic violence, the drug culture, the increase in divorce, and the loneliness and alienation that so many people experience. And certainly, we should mourn over the many lost people who will go into eternal darkness without Christ.

In the book of Ecclesiastes Solomon tells us that it is better to go to a house of mourning than a house of feasting. The reason is that the house of mourning makes us realize the shortness of life. It causes us to address ultimate issues. It strips away the pretend “happy world” in which so many try to hide. The house of mourning forces us to consider what is really important. It points us to the eternal rather than the temporary.

Popularity:

We all see the power of peer pressure in teenagers. The desire to be accepted and popular can lead kids to do all kinds of dangerous and foolish things. Peer pressure is not only something that affects teenagers. There is nothing wrong with having people like you. The Bible tells us that we should have a good reputation with outsiders. However, the question is: "What are you willing to do to be popular?"

Jesus said; *"Blessed are you when men 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 fathers treated the prophets"*
v22-23

Note the key words: *"because of the Son of Man"*. Jesus is not saying it is good to be disliked. Some people are disliked because of their abrasive personalities. They are not being persecuted for their faith but because they are obnoxious.

The blessing comes when we choose to stand with Jesus Christ and others reject us because of that fact. When people dislike you because you are a follower of Jesus, the Lord reminds us that *"great is our reward in Heaven"*. We have chosen the right path and it will lead to eternal blessing.

I have had very little experience in being "popular" but in those fleeting moments I have discovered that popularity is an illusion. It does not last. Those who celebrate you today will just as easily turn on your tomorrow. The only dependable relationship is with Christ.

A.W. Tozer has written,

"We who follow Christ are men and women of eternity. We must put no confidence in the passing scenes of the disappearing world. We must resist every attempt of Satan to palm off upon us the values that belong to mortality. The church must claim again her ancient dowry of everlastingness. She must begin again to deal with ages and millenniums rather than with days and years. She must not count numbers but test foundations. She must work for permanence rather than for appearance."

Jesus warns us in v26: *"Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets."* When everyone is singing our praise, we should be on guard. We should ask, "Are we popular because we have compromised, or sold out the gospel?"

Conclusion: (In a few minutes we will "Search O God, and know my heart today")

Let's wrap this all up and draw some application. The first thing we learn is that we must Choose between two worlds: the immediate and the eternal. Here is the question for all of us:

- "Do you want to be rich, satisfied, enjoy life and be popular more than you want to be faithful to Jesus Christ?" The answer to that question will tell you which path is really more important to you. That question will give you a glimpse of who or what you are truly following.
- Do we crave the same things everyone else craves and put all our focus on present enjoyments, or do we see the big picture and reach for the bigger prize of eternal life with the King? We can live for glory in the present, or in eternity.
- "Is my life any different from my non-believing friends?" On the one hand we know that we are just as in need of grace as our friends. However, if we have trusted Christ; if we have really turned to Him, we should be going in a different direction from the rest of the world.
- Are you just like your friends are, or do they see in the way you live, the values you cherish, and the things you are committed to, the resemblance of Jesus? Prayer.