

“WHAT THE KINGDOM OF GOD LOOKS LIKE NOW”

I. Introduction

- A. Perception is not always the same thing as reality.
 - 1. Some of the things that look so realistic in the movies are really just the product of sophisticated special effects.
 - 2. A person suffering from vertigo feels like the ground beneath his feet is unsteady when it is actually perfectly stable.
 - 3. A person experiencing a hallucination sees all sorts of things that are not really there.

- B. In the verses that we have just read from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus shows us that perception is not the same thing as reality when it comes to the kingdom of God.
 - 1. In this present evil age, the kingdom of God often appears to be weak, inconsequential, or even offensive.
 - 2. Yet the Scriptures declare, “Glorious things of you are spoken, O city of God.” (Ps. 84:3)
 - 3. The apostle Paul deals with this tension in his second letter to the Corinthians, where he writes, “we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that the surpassing glory belongs to God and not to us... So we do not lose heart. Though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.” (2 Cor. 4:7, 16-18)

4. Jesus says something very similar to that here in our text from Luke 6.

II. Poverty Instead of Riches

- A. When Jesus came down from the mountain and power came out from him to heal the diseases of all who touched him, people must have thought that the kingdom of God was arriving in all its glory.
 1. But the blessings and woes that Jesus pronounced immediately after performing those healings made it clear that the kingdom of glory is not yet at hand.
 2. These four blessings, or beatitudes, give us a picture of what the kingdom of God looks like in this present age, and it is not what we would expect.
 3. Instead of promising 'your best life now', Jesus says that you have to wait for 'your best life later.'
- B. The first blessing is pronounced upon those who are poor.
 1. If you are familiar with the version of the beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew, you know that it says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit."
 2. This difference raises a question about the relationship between Matthew's Sermon on the Mount and Luke's Sermon on the Plain.
 3. It could be that these two Evangelists were recording the same sermon but were giving their own distinctive summaries with different emphases.
 4. Or it could be that these are two sermons that Jesus preached on different occasions that have a number of similarities with each other.
 5. In any case, the variation between "poor" and "poor in spirit" in the first beatitude clues us in to the fact that Jesus is not merely

talking about material poverty here.

- C. In pronouncing a blessing on those who are poor, Jesus is not saying that being poor is itself a state of blessedness or that all the poor have an inheritance in God's kingdom.
 - 1. There is nothing inherently good about poverty.
 - 2. Poor people are just as sinful as everyone else in the world.
 - 3. Furthermore, verse 20 explicitly tells us that Jesus is not speaking of all poor people here but of those who are his disciples.
 - 4. In this beatitude, Jesus is acknowledging the fact that God's people often experience affliction, deprivation, and marginalization in this world precisely because we are not willing to make the world into an idol.
 - 5. Christians are not to make material prosperity the chief end of our lives.
 - 6. Instead, we are to look for ultimate happiness in something that will endure for all eternity: the kingdom of God.

- D. The woe that is set in contrast to this first blessing is addressed to those who are rich.
 - 1. Jesus says, "woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."
 - 2. Now, this does not mean that no rich person will be admitted into heaven.
 - 3. There are a number of godly rich people in the Bible.
 - 4. We might think of Job, or Abraham, or Joseph of Arimathea, or those first century Christians who had homes large enough to serve as places of worship.

5. There is nothing inherently evil about wealth.
6. The Bible does not say that money itself is the root of all evil, but that “the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils.” (1 Tim 6:10 ESV)
7. Wealth is a blessing from God, but like all of God’s good gifts it can be improperly handled, and this makes it spiritually dangerous.
8. The point that is being expressed in this first woe is that those who are chiefly occupied with worldly wealth will inevitably give no thought to the life to come.
9. When a person looks for ultimate comfort and security in the things of this world, the only thing they are going to find is earthly comfort and earthly security.
10. And as C.S. Lewis once pointed out, the sad irony is that “There is no earthly comfort in the long run.” [*The Four Loves*, 190]

III. Hunger Instead of Being Full

- A. In the second beatitude, Jesus declares that those who are hungry now will be satisfied in the world to come.
 1. Notice how the word “now” is used in the second and third beatitudes and in their corresponding woes.
 2. This draws our attention to the key contrast between these two groups of people.
 3. God’s people often experience deprivation and sadness now.
 4. Those who belong to the world often experience abundance and happiness now.
 5. In the next life, this will be reversed.

6. Those who have their treasure in this world will have none in the world to come, while those who use the things of this world only insofar as they help them live unto God store up treasure in heaven.
- B. The hunger of which Jesus speaks in the second beatitude could refer to physical hunger in certain situations, but several considerations make it clear that this is not the only thing that Jesus is talking about.
1. Like the previous blessing, this one is not pronounced on all hungry people but on Jesus's disciples.
 2. Moreover, Matthew's version says, "those who hunger and thirst for righteousness."
 3. We could say that the version in Matthew stresses what it is that Jesus's disciples hunger for, and that the version here in Luke simply stresses that Christian experience in this world is generally characterized more by longing than by satisfaction.
 4. And the reason why this is the case is because Christians are not to look for ultimate satisfaction in the things of this world.
 5. We look for ultimate satisfaction in knowing Christ and being found in him and knowing the power of his resurrection.
- C. The people of the world are set in contrast to this because the thing that they are living for is the earthly satisfaction of their desires.
1. It is easy to see how this is the case in our culture.
 2. We live in an age of instant gratification.
 3. The notion of controlling or restraining one's desires is deemed to be oppressive.
 4. The very structure of our society encourages us to look for satisfaction in the things of this world.

5. Yet for all of the emphasis upon self-determination and self-expression and self-gratification, there is little interest in the cultivation of any virtue in the self.
6. What Augustine said of the wicked in his day is just as true today: "It grieves them more to own a bad house than a bad life, as if it were man's greatest good to have everything good but himself." [*The City of God*, 3.1]
7. As Christians, we need to long for something more than the unfettered freedom to satisfy our every desire.
8. We need to cultivate a deeper hunger.
9. We need to seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

IV. Sorrow Instead of Laughter

- A. In the third beatitude Jesus says, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh."
 1. This does not mean that Christians should be perpetually gloomy.
 2. On the contrary, the Bible says that we are to "Rejoice in the Lord always." (Phil. 4:4)
 3. Christians are to be joyful, but our joy is different than the frivolous escapism of those who belong to this world.
 4. We find our joy in the Lord and in his kingdom.
 5. We take delight in what is true and honorable and just and pure and lovely and commendable and excellent.
 6. The fact that we see the world as God's good creation causes us to take life seriously.

7. We face up to the fact that there is something profoundly wrong with this world.
 8. We are grieved by the evil that we see in our own hearts and in the hearts of those around us.
 9. And because it breaks our hearts to see God's world ruined by sin, we reserve our most heartfelt laughter for the day when this world will be healed.
 10. When the new creation dawns, we will take up the words of the psalmist and say, "When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dream. Then our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy; then they said among the nations, 'The LORD has done great things for them.' The LORD has done great things for us; we are glad." (Psa 126:1-3 ESV)
- B. The woe that corresponds to this third blessing is addressed to those who laugh now, and it warns that they will mourn and weep in the age to come.
1. This warning should strike terror into the hearts of our non-Christian neighbors, but they are too busy laughing and being entertained to pay it any notice.
 2. Our age has made an idol of laughter.
 3. In our culture, the prime coping mechanism that people employ to help them deal with life in this fallen world is escapist entertainment.
 4. For so many, life revolves around various forms of amusement and play.
 5. Entertainment is so pervasive that it has even transformed our political process, our schools, our churches.

6. For almost everyone in our society, if something is not fun, it is not worthy of their time and attention.
7. What a dreadful shock it will be for such people when all of their amusements and distractions are taken away from them and they stand before the great white throne of judgment.
8. As we sing in one of our most sobering hymns,

*But sinners, filled with guilty fears,
Behold his wrath prevailing;
For they shall rise, and find their tears
And sighs are unavailing:
The day of grace is past and gone;
Trembling they stand before the throne,
All unprepared to meet him.*

V. Rejection Instead of Acceptance

- A. The last blessing in our text is pronounced upon those who are excluded, reviled, and spurned by the world because of their devotion to Jesus Christ.
 1. We are living in an age that is becoming increasingly hostile to orthodox Christian belief.
 2. This makes it vital that we remember that it is an honor to be rejected for Jesus's sake.
 3. We need to remember the response of the apostles to the opposition that they faced in the book of Acts, where Luke tells us that they rejoiced "that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name." (Acts 5:41)
 4. This fourth beatitude makes it clear that opposition from the world is a normal part of Christian experience.

5. Of course, this does not mean that we should try to provoke people into hating us.
 6. On the contrary, as far as it depends on us, we should strive to live at peace with everyone.
 7. But the fact that we owe our ultimate allegiance to Christ means that there will be times when conflict is inevitable.
 8. As John Calvin said, "To be at peace with everybody we would have to turn our backs on God." [*Sermons on the Beatitudes*, 60]
- B. Jesus says that we should rejoice when we experience opposition on his account because our reward is great in heaven.
1. This does not mean that we merit a reward by our suffering.
 2. Jesus has won the reward for us.
 3. And that reward is not to be understood as something that is separate from Jesus himself.
 4. Our reward is that we will be vindicated as those who truly belong to Christ and have an inheritance in his kingdom.
- C. The woe that corresponds to this fourth blessing is pronounced on those who receive worldly commendation.
1. The only people who receive the world's full approval are those who affirm whatever it is that the world wants to hear.
 2. Perhaps you have heard someone claim that those of us who hold to the Bible's teaching on sexuality are "on the wrong side of history."
 3. Well, Jesus's fourth woe says that those who think that they are on the right side of history are simply caught up in the spirit of the age.

4. This is the epitome of worldliness.
5. In the words of theologian David Wells, worldliness is whatever makes sin look normal in any age and righteousness seem odd.

VI. Conclusion

- A. There is a section in John Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion* where he says that Christians need to "learn that this life, judged by itself, is troubled, turbulent, unhappy in countless ways, and in no respect clearly happy; that all those things which are judged to be its goods are uncertain, fleeting, vain, and [spoiled] by many intermingled evils." [3.9.1]
 1. This is not morbid; it is simply the truth.
 2. The fact that this life is in bondage to sin and decay means that we must not look for our ultimate happiness on earth.
 3. The person who refuses to face up to this is living in the realm of fantasy rather than in reality.
- B. The material world as it presently stands is not the true home of those who belong to Christ's kingdom.
 1. We are looking for a better country, a heavenly one.
 2. We are looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.
 3. We are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.
 4. If you are a Christian, your happiness is not rooted in this life, but in the life to come.
 5. This is a good thing, because in spite of all the glitz and glamour of this present age, the shadow of death is always hanging over it.
 6. But those of us who belong to Christ join the psalmist in saying, "Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth

that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." (Ps. 73:25)