

## **“Blessings and Woes”**

### **Luke 6:17-26**

After Jesus chose the twelve apostles, Luke’s gospel account continues with the sermon on the plain. This is very similar to the Sermon on the Mount, found in Matthew chapters 5-7. It may be the same sermon. There are certainly some striking similarities in content. But there are also some significant differences.

The description of the location is different. There appears to be a difference in the timing of these two sermons according to the gospel accounts. And the actual content of the sermon varies as well. For example, this sermon is much shorter than the Sermon on the Mount. Also, this sermon contains the section of “woes” which find no counterpart in the Sermon on the Mount. It is quite possible that Jesus delivered sermons on the same theme with slight variations on more than one occasion. It is also possible that these are in fact the same sermon and that the differences only reflect a difference in emphasis between the gospel writers.

This morning we are only going to deal with the first part of this sermon which we find in our text, the blessings and the woes. From this text we learn what God calls a blessing, and what God calls woe. These are important terms to understand if we will correctly interpret and apply these words from Jesus.

“Blessed” does not merely mean fortunate or happy. In Scripture the idea of “blessedness” is tied to the favor of God. Remember the blessing that God gave to

Aaron and his sons for the people of Israel in Numbers 6:23-26, “Speak unto Aaron and unto his sons, saying, On this wise ye shall bless the children of Israel, saying unto them, The Lord bless thee, and keep thee: The Lord make his face shine upon thee, and be gracious unto thee: The Lord lift up his countenance upon thee, and give thee peace.” And the next verse, verse 27, says, “And they [the priests] shall put my name [the LORD’s name] upon the children of Israel; and I will bless them.”

Blessings, blessedness, is inseparably linked with the favor of God. All the good things of this world, separated from the favor of God, are in reality a curse, making the broad way smooth and pleasant, but it leads to everlasting death. On the other hand, if your way is hard and full of pain and suffering and trials yet God’s favor is upon you it is a blessed way because it leads to life everlasting. “Blessed” is linked to the favor of God.

“Woe” is an interjection that announces condemnation or grief. By itself the word “woe” doesn’t really mean anything. Its significance for us in this study comes from the way it’s used in scripture. This interjection is used over 50 times just in the prophetic books of the Bible to introduce prophecies of doom upon particular people, groups of people, and nations. Just as “blessed” is linked to God’s favor, “woe” is linked to God’s curse. From this text we learn what Jesus called blessed and what Jesus called woe.

## II. The Setting

Verse 17 begins, “And he [Jesus] came down with them [the twelve apostles], and stood in the plain.” Remember, Jesus was on mountain somewhere in Galilee, probably near the city of Capernaum. He went up this mountain the night before to pray. In the morning he called his disciples and chose the twelve from among them. And in this text we read he came back down from the mountain with the twelve that he just chose.

Verse 17 continues and tells us who else was present on this occasion: “The company of his disciples, and a great multitude of people out of all Judæa and Jerusalem, and from the sea coast of Tyre and Sidon.” His disciples were there. This was not only the twelve which he had just called to be apostles, but a much larger group of people who were his disciples. Again, a disciple is “One who follows one’s teaching . . . A disciple was not only a pupil, but an adherent . . . [disciples were] imitators of their teacher.”<sup>1</sup> And at this point in Jesus ministry there was a fairly large group that would be considered his disciples.

And there was also this “great multitude of people.” We are told where these people were from. First, “out of all Judæa.” Judæa was the name of the Roman province that was bordered by the Jordan River to the east, the Mediterranean Sea to the west, Galilee to the north, and the desert/wilderness area to the south. It was much larger than the historic area which had been allotted to the tribe of Judah. It

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<sup>1</sup> *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Disciple, A. 1.

included the areas the Bible refers to as Samaria and Idumea. People from all areas in Judaea were present to hear Jesus.

In particular we are told that there were people present from Jerusalem, which was the principle city of the Jews in Judaea. This is remarkable because Jerusalem was a long way away from Galilee. And Jerusalem was the religious and cultural center of the Jews. There were many notable and famous rabbis who lived and taught in Jerusalem. Yet great numbers of people came from Jerusalem to hear Jesus.

And we are also told of people who came from the “sea coast of Tyre and Sidon.” Tyre and Sidon were two ancient cities along the Mediterranean Sea which belonged to a group of people known in history today as the Phoenicians. As Jerusalem was the religious capital of the region, the area around Tyre and Sidon was the business capital of the region. These cities were an ancient navel power and were known for their commerce, they had trading posts as far away as India to the east and Britton to the west. The Jews who lived in the area which bordered Tyre and Sidon would have likely been business men. Men of commerce. Men who had a great business interest in the things of this world. And we are told that people from this area came to hear Jesus.

The end of verse 17 tells us that all these people came, “to hear [Jesus], and to be healed of their diseases.” The first great draw for these people was to hear the words of Christ as he preached. Some of these people travelled a long way to hear

Jesus. Without a doubt, this was an inconvenience for them. It took them away from their homes and from their regular business. And yet they went because they wanted to hear him. Matthew Henry commented on this passage, “Those that have not good preaching near them had better travel far for it than be without it. It is worth while to go a great way to hear the word of Christ, and to go out of the way of other business for it.”<sup>2</sup>

The second great draw for these people was to be healed. For some time now Jesus had performed miracles of healing. Especially during this period of ministry in Galilee Jesus healed great numbers of people as they came to him. And notice that this healing ministry included both physical and spiritual deliverance. The end of verse 17 mentions diseases. Verse 18 says, “And they that were vexed with unclean spirits.” And the end of verse 18 tells us “they were healed.” There was no limit on the number. There was no qualification. They simply came and they were healed.

This was an incredible healing ministry in the number of the healed, in the nature of the afflictions from which these people were delivered (both physical and spiritual), and in the manner in which they were healed. Verse 19 tells us, “And the whole multitude sought to touch him, for there went virtue out of him, and healed them all.” Jesus was a fountain of healing virtue. All who touched him were healed. This was not always the case during Jesus earthly ministry, but this was an

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew Henry’s commentary on this text.

occasion where there was a tremendous outpouring of miraculous healing. And then Jesus began to preach to this great crowd of people who had come to hear him.

Now we understand the setting for this sermon on the plain. Jesus came down from the mountain. There was this great multitude of people gathered who had come to hear him and be healed. All who came to be healed were delivered from their infirmities, both physical and spiritual. And then Jesus began to preach. Jesus begins this sermon with four statements which all begin with the word, “Blessed.” And then he gave four more statements which all begin with the word “Woe.” And these statements “blessed” and “woe” statements correspond with each other, and we are going to look at the corresponding statements together. As we look carefully at each one of these statements we learn what Jesus called blessed, and what Jesus called woe.

## **II. “Blessed” and “Woe” Statements**

Before we begin looking at these statements it is important to make sure understand who Jesus said these things to or about. As we have already mentioned, there were three distinct groups present when Jesus delivered this sermon: The multitude, the company of disciples, and the twelve. This is a mixed group and we know that most of these people were not true believers in Jesus Christ as the Messiah. As we continue through the gospel account we will see the multitudes

ultimately turn upon Jesus and cry out, “Crucify him.” When Jesus began teaching hard truths, many of the disciples went back, and walked no more with Jesus (John 6:68). And even among the twelve, one was a traitor. The statements of blessedness apply to believers, and the statements of woe apply to those who would ultimately reject Christ.

I also believe that these statements of blessedness have a first-line application to those who suffer for righteousness sake. For the Son of man’s sake. Blessed is poverty, blessed in hunger, blessed is weeping, and blessed is being hated and reviled. Blessed be every affliction when endured for Christ’s sake. Now we will look at these statements.

Jesus began in verse 20, “Blessed be ye poor: for yours is the kingdom of God.” And in verse 24 we read the corresponding woe: “But woe unto you that are rich! for ye have received your consolation.” This statement of “blessed” is similar to the statement found in Matthew 5:3, but there it says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” Here there is no connection to the spirit. Whether this is the same sermon or a similar sermon preached on a separate occasion, this text simply says “poor.”

The word that is used here for poor refers to someone who is absolutely destitute. There are four different categories among the poor in Scripture. The first category is those who are poor because they are lazy. Scripture provides no comfort or hope for those who are poor because they will not work. The summary

statement for this type of poor person is found in II Thessalonians 5:10, “If any would not work, neither should he eat.”

The next two categories of poor are given hope in scripture. God cares, is concerned, and says he will help and avenge these two groups of poor people. First, those who are poor as the result of calamity. Second, those who are poor as the result of oppression.

The final category of poor found in scripture are those who are poor for righteousness sake. This is the group referred to in our text. Poor for the Son of man’s sake.

There are times when, for the sake of Jesus Christ, Christians must sacrifice wealth. If in your work you can gain wealth through dishonest means, that wealth must be forfeit. The believer has no choice. You cannot gain wealth dishonestly. You are a Christian. You bear the name of Christ. And if you would dishonor him for temporary mammon, you must ask yourself if you have every truly knew him.

In times of persecution, if the ultimatum is given that Christians must either renounce their faith or renounce their wealth, their physical possessions, our wealth must be forfeit. What will it profit you if you gain the world and lose your soul? If any of us are ever called upon to make such a sacrifice, we should count ourselves blessed.

Poverty is hard. We live in the wealthiest time in world history. We live in one of the wealthiest nations that has ever been created. The average American has



a much higher standard of living than most nobility has had throughout history. We have become very accustomed to abundance. The stock market goes down a few points and we talk about recessions and economic disaster. We do not know what it is to be truly poor, to be destitute, like verse 20 is talking about. We can look around the world and see people who are destitute, but most of us have never experienced anything like that. But if we are ever called upon to suffer poverty like that for Jesus sake, we must do so, and do so gladly, and count ourselves blessed. Why? As Jesus said, “For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

There is also an application here for the spiritually poor. In a very real sense we are all spiritual paupers apart from Christ. We have nothing of any value. Our best righteousness is filthy rags before God. Blessed is the man who sees his spiritual poverty and goes to beg from Christ. Jesus doesn't give spiritual alms to beggars, he gives a kingdom, the kingdom of God.

Now look at the corresponding woe. In verse 24 Jesus said, “But woe unto you who are rich.” We know from Scripture as a whole that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with wealth. Abraham and Job were fabulously wealthy, and both of those men had their wealth as a result of God's blessing upon their lives. And we have many other examples of wealthy people in the Bible who are also called righteous: David, Lot, Boaz, Joseph of Aramethia, and on and on we could go. Scripture does not denounce wealth itself, but it does give frequent warnings to the wealthy.

Just in Luke's gospel we find the following warnings. In Luke 8:14, in the parable of the sower, we are told that some of the seeds are choked out by weeds which represent "cares and riches and pleasures of this life."

In Luke 12 Jesus gives the parable of the prosperous farmer who built bigger barns to hold his wealth, but then died before he could enjoy it. God calls that farmer a fool. And in verse 21 Jesus says, "So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

In Luke 18:24 and 25 Jesus said, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."

If we have wealth we must take great care that it does not become a spiritual stumbling block for us. We must hold it with an open hand. God has entrusted to us whatever we have and it is his to take away. May we have the attitude of Job: "The Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord." (Job 1:21)

Woe to those who are rich, whose riches have come at the expense of righteousness, of holiness, of fidelity to our Lord Jesus Christ. Such riches are a curse. Such riches are a weight which drag a soul down to hell. Woe to those who are rich at the expense of their soul! Like John Bunyan said, "The [devil's] service

is hard, and his wages such as a man can not live on, ‘for the wages of sin is death.’”<sup>3</sup>

In verse 42 of our text Jesus warns that those who are rich by this means: “Ye have received your consolation.” Will you trade your soul for this world? If you do, this world is all you get. And this world is headed toward a fiery judgment, and you along with it.

As we made a spiritual application to poverty, so we will to riches. Those who believe they are spiritually rich, on their own, apart from the grace of God, able to purchase their own redemption, will find out that they are poor, and wretched, and naked on the day of judgment. Heap up all the righteousness you can in your flesh, but in the end you will find all these things you had esteemed as great riches to be worthless. No greater example of this exists than the apostle Paul.

Before Paul was saved he was the example of human righteousness and good works by every imaginable measure. He was a sincere, and zealous, and committed religious person. But then, on the road to Damascus he was arrested by the revelation of Jesus Christ. And in Philippians 3:7-8 Paul said, “But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for

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<sup>3</sup> *Pilgrim's Progress*, in the discussion between Christian and Apollyon. I changed the tense in the quote.

whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ.”

That which is the jewel of your righteousness apart from Christ is dung. Cast it aside. See yourself as you truly are, spiritually destitute, and flee to Christ. Apart from him, this sin-cursed world is your consolation. In Christ, you are an heir to the kingdom of God.

The next statement of blessedness we find in this text is found at the beginning of verse 21: “Blessed are ye that hunger now: for ye shall be filled.” The corresponding woe is at the beginning of verse 25, “Woe unto you that are full! for ye shall hunger.” Matthew 5:6 has a similar statement of blessing, but there it says, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.” This is similar to the statement about riches. Hunger itself does not make a person righteous. And physical hunger carries no guarantee from God that the hungry person will be filled. But those who suffer hunger for righteousness sake, for Jesus sake, they will be filled.

Hunger, true hunger that comes from a complete inability to purchase or acquire or work for food in any way, is among the most extreme forms of poverty. Proverbs 6:30 says, “Men do not despise a thief, if he steal to satisfy his soul when he is hungry.” We understand the desperate measures that people can be driven to by hunger. We can live in poverty if we have food, but we cannot live without food. Food is a necessity of life. But if this which is necessary for physical life can

only come at the cost of that which is necessary for spiritual life, then the cost is too great. If we must go hungry for Jesus' name's sake, then we must go hungry. And if that is our condition, we can count ourselves blessed, because the promise of God is that we will be filled.

We can apply this principle to a spiritual hunger as well. Are you hungry for spiritual things? Do you hunger and thirst after righteousness? Go to the Bread of Life. Go to the source of living water. Go to Jesus Christ and you will be filled.

Now look at the corresponding woe. "Woe unto ye that are full! for ye shall hunger." Think long and hard before you sell the eternal to satisfy the temporal. Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of pottage, and afterward he found "no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears." (Hebrews 12:17)

"Woe unto ye," the curse of God comes upon you, if you are full at the expense of righteousness, at the expense of our Lord's name. You may be full now, but there will come a time when you hunger and there will be no relief, eternally. Like the rich man in hell in Luke 16 who desired just the smallest drop of water, but it was denied him. In Luke 16:25 we read, "Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented."

We can make a spiritual application from this as well. Are you full, is your spiritual appetite satisfied, with the things of this world? Woe unto you if this is

true. You may be full now, but the day is coming when you will seek repentance carefully with tears, like Esau did, but you will find no space for repentance.

The third “blessed” statement is found in the second part of verse 21: “Blessed are ye that weep now: for ye shall laugh.” The corresponding woe is in the second part of verse 25, “Woe unto you that laugh now! for ye shall mourn and weep.”

Those who weep now are blessed, for they shall laugh. This word “weep” doesn’t simply mean to cry, but to mourn. Walking with the Lord, bearing the name of Christ, identifying with him, is no guard against weeping, against sorrow and pain and grief. Our Lord wept and experienced emotional pain and agony Jesus wept as he was brought to the grave of his friend Lazarus (John 11:35). Matthew, Mark, and Luke all tell us that Jesus was in agony as he prayed in the garden right before he was betrayed. If our Lord was not above such suffering then neither are we.

There is consolation for those who weep now: they shall laugh. Similar imagery was used in the Old Testament to refer to the Lord delivering his people from captivity. Psalm 126 talks about the people laughing and singing as they returned to Zion. And Psalm 126:5-6 says, “They that sow in tears shall reap in joy. He that goeth forth and weepeth, bearing precious seed, shall doubtless come again with rejoicing, bringing his sheaves with him.”

And so we sojourn in this world as strangers and pilgrims, and often we weep. But when when we gain that heavenly kingdom which we seek, we will laugh as we enter. Here we suffer, but there we will be comforted.

But woe to those who laugh now. The Bible isn't against laughing. The word that is used here for laughing is only used twice in the New Testament, in verses 21 and 25 of our text. And this word indicates loud laughter in contrast to the weeping that is also mentioned in these verses. And why is the laughing that Jesus talks about here wrong? Because it has come at the cost of righteousness. Woe to the man who laughs as he discards and disregards the name of Jesus Christ. The end of such ill-advised mirth will be mourning and weeping.

The final "blessed" statement in this text is found in verses 22 and 23: "Blessed are ye, when men shall hate you, and when they shall separate you from their company, and shall reproach you, and cast out your name as evil, for the Son of man's sake. Rejoice ye in that day, and leap for joy: for, behold, your reward is great in heaven: for in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets." The corresponding woe is in verse 26, "Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets."

This "blessed" statement says directly what is implied in the others. The end of verse 22 says, "For the Son of man's sake." Blessed are you when you are hated for Jesus' sake. There is no inherent virtue in being hated. A wicked man who is hated by his victims for his wickedness is not "blessed" simply because he is

hated. The blessedness is tied to *why* a person is hated. If you are hated and reproached and shunned for the Son of man's sake, rejoice! Such hatred from men carries to you the blessing of God.

In verse 22 warned his disciples about reception they would face in this world. First, "men shall hate you." This warning is repeated several times in Scripture. In Luke 21:17 Jesus said to his disciples, "Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake." In John 15:18-19 Jesus said, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you." I John 3:13 says, "Marvel not, my brethren, if the world hate you."

Next in verse 22: "They shall separate you from their company." This is a warning of social exclusion. If you faithfully bear the cross of Christ the world will reject you. There will be a social separation. James 4:4 says that friendship with the world is enmity [hostility] with God. The opposite is also true: there will be some who separate themselves from you because you are a follower of Jesus Christ. This can be hard, painful, difficult. But in our text Jesus said, "If this happens to you, you are blessed."

Third, Jesus said they "shall reproach you." Rebuke you. Taunt you. Rail at you. Defame you. They will say of you like Amaziah (ah-ma-zi-ah) said of prophet



Amos, “He is a conspirator. He is a traitor. He cannot be tolerated among us.”

(Amos 7:10) If we are reproached for the sake of Christ, we are blessed.

And finally, Jesus said they shall “cast out your name as evil.” The Greek word that is used here for evil particularly indicates evil that “causes labor, pain, or sorrow.”<sup>4</sup> You will be seen as something troublesome. If you are kept around you will cause labor, pain, or sorrow of the conscience. As a man would cast away an ember to keep it from burning his hand, so men will cast out your name as evil.

When I was studying this I thought of King Jehoram in II Kings 6. He was a wicked king of the Northern kingdom of Israel, the son of Ahab and Jezebel. And for the wickedness in the land the judgment of God was upon them. The armies of the Syrians had surrounded Samaria. The Israelites inside the city were starving. The situation had become so desperate that some of the people had resorted to cannibalism. Mothers were eating their children. And when the wicked king Jehoram heard about the horrific things which were taking place in his city, he said in II Kings 6:31, “God do so and more also to me, if the head of Elisha . . . shall stand on him this day.”

Elisha was the prophet of God in the city. Elisha wasn't the problem. But King Jehoram cast out his name name as evil. Why? Because Elisha pointed out the problem. Elisha called out the kings sin and the sin of the people as the cause

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<sup>4</sup> *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, Evil 2.

of their trials. And for this, he was despised. It is no new thing that God's servants are despised.

Jesus said in John 3:20, "For every one that doeth evil hateth the light, neither cometh to the light, lest his deeds should be reproved." Don't be surprised if you are hated and rejected for Jesus sake. Rather, remember what Jesus said, and count it a blessing to suffer for his sake.

Verse 23 expands upon that. Jesus said, "Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy." Don't just grin and bear it. Rejoice! Leap for joy! Why?

"For, behold, your reward is great in heaven." This life is but a moment. A vapor that vanishes away. All the things of this life are fleeting. But a reward in heaven is eternal. It is not passing away. And when we suffer for righteousness sake, for Jesus' sake, we are promised a heavenly reward.

At the end of verse 23 Jesus said, "For in the like manner did their fathers unto the prophets." If we suffer like this, we are in good company. This is how the prophets were received. The prophets had a hard job that was often fruitless and thankless. They were despised and rejected by men, but they were blessed by God. It is far better to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season. The reproach of Christ is greater riches than the treasures in this world (Hebrews 11:25-26).

Now look at the corresponding woe in verse 25, "Woe unto you, when all men shall speak well of you! for so did their fathers to the false prophets." Woe to

you if you value more the praise of men than the praise of God. If it is your great life goal to gain the praise and applause of men, woe unto you for this will not gain you the favor of God.

The false prophets spoke soothing and flattering words to the people of Israel. People liked them. People spoke well of them. But they were deceitful and rejected of God. Woe unto you if you are found numbered among them. Matthew Henry commented, “We should desire to have the [approval] of those that are wise and good, and not be indifferent to what people say of us; but, as we should despise the reproaches, so we should also despise the praises, of fools.” Woe to you if you would trade righteousness to be spoken well of by men.<sup>5</sup>

This morning we have looked at four statements of blessing and four corresponding statements of woe from Jesus. May each one of us individually examine our lives by this text. What do I hold dear? Where do I look for blessing? According to Jesus am I among the blessed, or am I among those to whom he announces woe? All this world, all the good things in this world, became a curse for us if we chose them over Jesus. Every privation, every trial, every form of suffering is a blessing to us, if we bear them for the sake of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew Henry’s commentary on this passage.