

Through the Eyes of Jesus

Luke 6:20-26

Rick Peterson

Our text tells us Jesus “lifted up His eyes toward His disciples.” Can you imagine being among the crowd that day? Imagine the gaze of our Lord falling upon you. You are about to discover how Jesus sees His disciples. And you are about to discover that to be a disciple is to see *yourself* as Jesus sees you, and to conform to life through His eyes. He alone is your Teacher. He sets the agenda, and He alone defines you. How others see you matters little by comparison. Let me say it this way: the work of the disciple is to conform to the Master, not to the culture, not to religious tradition or to family expectations. From the moment Jesus sets His eyes upon you, He alone defines you. What remains is for you to recalibrate your thinking and re-habituate your way of life to meet the Lord’s view of discipleship, for after all, discipleship is *not* an option.

So, how then does Jesus see His disciples?

Although Jesus knows each of His sheep by name, He never views a disciple as a solitary figure, and neither should you. You are a member of a global family of believers. Discipleship is **both** personal **and** communal in lifestyle.

Here then is a central principle: The church community is to reflect the relational community of the Trinity, meaning, persons in devoted relationship to one another which preserves the distinction in individuals and roles. This is how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit abide within community one with another—three equal Persons in indissoluble relationship, while preserving distinction in Persons and roles. We too, are to be in devoted relationship one with another, but instead of losing ourselves within the community, we also maintain our unique distinction in our person and role in the community. This is what it means to believe in the Trinity. To be a trinitarian Christian goes far beyond merely reciting the Creed. The trinity defines how we do relationships. And life is all about relationships—to God, the self, and the other. Tragically, most professing Christians are not aware of this principle. They have not been taught.

Therefore, this bears repeating: both distinction and community exist in healthy relationships. Both the dignity of the individual *and* the essential role within the community are to be protected and preserved. And it is within this community that the salvation of the individual is worked out. More than challenging, we can say it is, in fact, impossible to form and maintain healthy community apart from this core trinitarian principle. We simply cannot form a church and expect to automatically become a loving, healthy, community of disciples. Many have tried, and just as many have failed. Why is this? It is because genuine community involves hard work, humility, gut-level self-examination, and confession of sins, lots of confession of sins (James 5:16), as well as lots of forgiveness—seventy times seven type of forgiveness (Matthew

18:21-35). And most people are simply not willing to engage in this effort—even though Christ calls them to do so.

We must understand and obey the truth that a solitary disciple is a contradiction in terms. Before we can become effective ambassadors of reconciliation, we must first be reconciled within ourselves and with each other—we must model reconciliation to the world. If we are not doing it, the world will never do it. So, I say it is impossible because in order to build authentic community, we must be saved from ourselves, and that is not something people want. They just want to go to heaven when they die. The result is most professing Christians never rise above their inherited family relational patterns. They are stuck in toxic ways of doing relationship, and they drag these patterns into their churches. Consequently, they never learn what it means to be genuine members of the body of Christ. Most churchgoers are much too vested in toxic relational patterns to be available for healthy community. Old, toxic familial patterns make it impossible to move beyond the membership rolls and into authentic community living.

In other words, the very thing from which Jesus died to free people, namely, the “aimless conduct received by tradition from our forefathers,” is the very thing to which people cling (see I Peter 1:17-19). What is more, the focus on personal salvation, to the exclusion of community, also makes it impossible to form genuine community. We hear terms such a “My salvation,” and “I got saved” without any reference to the greater community. And, once a person attains salvation, that person is free to take their personal salvation elsewhere. The Christian becomes a religious consumer. So, church leaders respond by bending over backwards to make religious consumers feel comfortable and happy. The emphasis quickly becomes one of pleasing the Christian rather than pleasing Christ. Worship is replaced with entertainment, or at best, worship becomes merely informative rather than *formative*. The result is one can attend churches like these for years and never hear the words “disciple” or “formation,” even mentioned.

Is the Church Necessary?

If one is honest, given the prevailing theology, one has to wonder if the church is even necessary. If one can be saved apart from the greater community, then why fuss with all the pettiness, hypocrisy, greed, dysfunction, and even immorality often found in the church? The fact is, many professing Christians have concluded the church is *not* necessary. Many stay home on Sundays. And in all fairness, this is understandable. Many of us have made valiant attempts to connect and to share in a Christian community, but found so little of Christ there, we saw no reason to continue. Some of us have suffered severe spiritual abuse. We have grown weary of celebrity pastors, professional worship leaders, choreographed performances, and the vile hypocrisy and shallow materialism in American religion.

Yet, the fact remains, Jesus sees His disciples as both individuals *and* members of one another. The challenge is to recover preaching *and* worship that is both formative for individuals and which facilitates healthy community. Our Lord's *Sermon on the Plain*, when heard and obeyed, serves as a corrective to help us back on track. For here our Lord is setting forth foundational instruction in how to live as a community of disciples. This is discipleship 101. We ought therefore to pay close attention, and we must be prepared to obey. For here we have a firm foundation for both individual and community formation. The alternative is to continue to build on sand.

Blessings and Woes

So then, to be a disciple means to be defined by Jesus, and not by popular culture or family history. And Jesus views His disciples as both individuals and communal members of His flock. And here in the first six verses, we discover the disciple also walks a narrow path. For here Jesus addresses two groups of people living out two differing realities. The first group our Lord says are blessed, but upon the second, He pronounces only woe. And it would appear both call themselves Christ's disciples. What we have here is an ominous preview of the Lord separating out His sheep from the goats (Matthew 25:31-46). And these verses will make many very uncomfortable. For the second group holds to values very much in keeping with western culture: they are rich, they are filled, they laugh, and their religion is popular among the people. They are, as some say, enjoying "The good life," but upon this group, Jesus pronounces woe. A term of pity.

But let's begin by looking closer at the first group. Jesus views this first group of disciples as a community of people under the blessing of God, not *because* they are poor, but because the kingdom of God is theirs. They are poor in the eyes of the world, but they are blessed because God sovereignly cares for them. Now mark it down: God is the source of all good things for all people in all times and in all places (Acts 14:14-18). And these disciples are blessed because they find their consolation in God, and not in accumulated wealth. Indeed, they have renounced all self-reliance in order to follow Jesus. They have counted all things as lost for the sake of Christ. These disciples are blessed because they believe God will satisfy their hunger; and they are blessed because it is God who will turn their weeping into laughter. These disciples are in fact, rich in the only way one can be truly rich in this world—in faith (James 2:5). And they are hated and persecuted because they do not belong to the world any more than Jesus does. These disciples are blessed because they are citizens of the kingdom of God.

What this means is these blessed disciples are living out the eschatological reality of the kingdom of God in in the present; that time in which God Himself will "wipe away every tear from their eyes" (Revelation 21:4). Do you realize in the new heaven and new earth there will be no self-reliance, no competition, no retirement plan, and no hoarding of wealth? There will be no need for it. These disciples are blessed because the kingdom of God is theirs—in the

present day—and they have no need to approach life as do those in this present age. In other words, to be a citizen of God’s kingdom means to live and rest in His sovereign protection and care. There is no greater blessing than to realize you are under God’s active care. Let me ask you: What if you knew, I mean, really knew, deep down, that all your needs will be met? How would this change things for you? Would it feel you are living in a blessed state? Jesus says His disciples are so blessed.

The Pitiful, Woeful state of the Rich

Okay, now to the group upon whom Jesus declares woe. What are we to make of this? Can this mean western values are to be pitied in the eyes of our Lord? What if everything western culture holds in high esteem Jesus sees as woeful? Imagine standing in front of a large crowd of Americans and pronouncing a woe upon the so-called “American Dream.” What kind of response would you expect? It is not likely you would be popular. If a pastor said these words on any given Sunday, many would reject him and not return.

Now, this leaves us with an important question: Can one be rich and still be a blessed disciple? This would appear to be the great question. Jesus warned of how difficult it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Why is this? Does God reject rich people? No, God does not reject rich people, but they often reject Him. In other words, it is hard for the rich to enter the kingdom of God precisely because they trust in their riches and not in God.

The difference between blessing and woe lies not in wealth or poverty but in trust and control. Will God provide for me? Will I be satisfied with what God provides? What if I want more and better? Some people want to act out in greed, competition, accumulation, and self-reliance and still claim to be followers of Christ. And false prophets will assure them of God’s approval. But in answer to this question as whether one can be rich and be a disciple, Paul tells Timothy,

¹⁷ Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. ¹⁸ *Let them* do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, ¹⁹ storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life (II Timothy 6:17-19).

Here we discover there were those in the early church who were “rich in this present age.” Notice that Paul is commanding, he is not suggesting. And, he commands that these rich Christians approach their wealth through the lens of the kingdom of God, and not this present age. Possessing wealth must be tempered by the values of the kingdom of God. This means they are not to be haughty, but humble. They are not to trust in their “uncertain riches” but in the living God. That is the central issue. That is the great problem. Riches become an end unto

themselves, and people place their trust in the gift instead of the Giver, “who gives us richly all things to enjoy.”

Refusing the World's Ways

In Genesis 14, Abraham refused material gifts from the king of Sodom saying, “I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth, that I will take nothing, from a thread to a sandal strap, and that I will not take anything that is yours, lest you should say, ‘I have made Abraham rich’ (Genesis 14:22-23). Abraham knew God as his provider and he was not going to take even the least chance that the king of Sodom would take any glory which belonged only to God. Abraham also refused to accept Sarah’s burial place as a gift, he insisted on paying for it (Genesis 23). God promised the land to Abraham, and he would not allow it therefore to be a gift from anyone else’s hand.

Elisha refused payment for services from a commander of a pagan king who had been healed of leprosy through Elisha’s command (II Kings 5). When Elisha’s servant later chased down the commander’s chariot and asked for money on behalf of Elisha, the prophet cursed his servant and all his descendants with the leprosy that had left the commander.

By contrast to Abraham and Elisha is the woeful record of Nebuchadnezzar, the infamous king of Babylon. At the height of his power, Nebuchadnezzar declared he himself had raised up and built Babylon for his own mighty power and majesty. He ended up insane, humiliated before God as he ate grass like oxen, and his hair grew out like eagle’s feathers and his nails like bird’s claws. Only when he turned his eyes toward heaven and praised and extolled the true King of Heaven was his sanity restored (Daniel 4:28-37).

Thomas Aquinas said there are four great substitutes for God among men: wealth, power, pleasure, honor. And this is the great point, these things are not evil in themselves, but they make poor substitutes for God. Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, “You cannot serve both God and,” what? “money.” And do you remember why you cannot? “Jesus said, “For he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other” (Matthew 6:24). How do we know we are serving mammon (wealth personified into deity)? Jesus continues, “Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life” (v.25). Worry, anxiety, and fretting about that you will eat, drink, wear, is symptomatic of a divided heart attempting to serve God and money. It is a woeful state. A person in this state is to be pitied.

By the way, in the first century, a rich person was simply one who had more than they needed. We think of Bill Gates or Warren Buffet. But the first-century near eastern mind viewed wealth as possessing more than was necessary for daily life. This is why John the baptizer exhorted the wealthy saying if they had two coats, or more food than was needed, to give to the one who had none (Luke 3:11).

So how does a rich person function in the kingdom of God? They do good with their money. They are rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up treasures in heaven, a “good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.” In other words, they wear their wealth loosely. They do not over identify with their bank balance. They are keenly aware of the temptations that come with wealth. They freely give. Prudence is one thing, but a miser stands in direct contrast to values of the kingdom of God. We are to approach the world with an open hand and not a closed fist. A rich person can be a disciple, but it is hard, for the temptation is always present to find one’s consolation in riches, and not in God.

Let’s summarize today’s lesson in discipleship. First, a disciple sees his or her self through the eyes of Jesus. What others think or say about the disciples matters very little—it is the Lord Jesus who defines you, and not others. Second, a disciple is both an individual and a member of the larger trinitarian community of disciples. Even personal salvation is realized fully only within the greater community. Third, the community of disciples are blessed because as citizens of the kingdom of God, they experience God’s daily provision and protection. On the other hand, a disciple who is defined by popular culture, who rejects community, and who finds consolation in self-reliance and wealth accumulation is in fact, in a pitiful state of woe.

Now let me close with a very important question: How does Jesus see you? To which group do you most identify, the blessed, or the woeful? Most of us will have to admit to succumbing to the lure of wealth—at least in principle. Many of us will have to admit loving to be filled; many of us will have to admit to seeking the good life—laughter, pleasure, fine food, and to be named among the so-called winners; and nearly all of us will have to seeking to please people in our religion. If so, this is your time to repent. This is your time to admit you have been lured away from the Father’s house and have spent your inheritance in fleshly indulgence. Now is the time to leave the pig pen and return to the Father’s house. If you have allowed yourself to be defined by popular culture; if your worldview is presently being formed by Fox News, MSNBC, CNN, or any other mind-forming influence, now is the time to repent and return to being defined by the kingdom of God. Now is the time to be formed by Jesus, and to derive your values from the kingdom of God. The Father will see you coming as you return, and He will run to meet you on the road, and welcome you. The Father’s love for his prodigal child is beyond human comprehension, but not beyond human experience. Return today. **AMEN.**

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