THE BEATITUDES

Luke 6:17–26

Key Verse: 6:20

“And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.’”

 How do you see yourself? Many of us aren’t sure. And it often varies. When we think we’re doing well, we feel great, but when we see what’s lacking in us we can feel miserable. And too often our view of ourselves is shaped by how others see us. We think achievements or success make us somebody, or that our problems and weaknesses define us. In today’s passage Jesus tells us how to think about ourselves and what to value, and it’s different from what most people would tell us. In these poetic-sounding words what does Jesus mean? Why is it important to see ourselves the way he does? How can we possibly base our lives on what he’s saying? May God open our hearts and speak to us today.

In the past three chapters describing Jesus’ ministry we’ve seen a problem with the religion of those times. One of its most glaring issues was how it ignored people who were suffering or very sick. When Jesus began to serve, he totally shifted the focus. He said he came to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty for the captives, recovering of sight to the blind, and to set at liberty those who are oppressed (4:18). Then he proceeded to heal somebody suffering from an unclean spirit, as well as all kinds of sick people. He cleansed a leper, healed a paralytic, then shocked everybody by calling a tax collector to be one of his disciples. He said he came as a doctor not for the healthy but for the sick, and he clearly meant spiritually sick people. Then one Sabbath he took a big risk by healing a man with a withered hand, right in front of his opponents. We’ve seen how these religious men were constantly criticizing Jesus. He wasn’t following their rules. He dared to claim to have authority to forgive sins. He didn’t seem to be pursuing holiness, because he was so closely associating with sinners. And he wasn’t keeping their meticulous Sabbath rules. The religion of the time was like an old wineskin, dried up, hard and brittle. It couldn’t connect with real people or their problems and needs. What’s worse, these men were trying to stifle what Jesus was doing. Through an all-night prayer session Jesus decided to focus his ministry on raising twelve apostles who would learn from him, become like him, and whom he would eventually send into the world like lights in the darkness.

 Now Jesus turns his focus on teaching them. Today’s passage is the opening of his famous “Sermon on the Mount.” It’s a much shorter version than what’s recorded in Matthew’s Gospel, but the basic teachings are the same. Jesus is telling us how to live in this real world as God’s children. He begins with his “Beatitudes.” He gives four blessings, then four woes, to tell us how to see ourselves and others, what to value, and how this makes us counter-cultural.

 Before examining his words, let’s first look at the setting. Read verses 17–19. For starters, the Pharisees’ strategy to discredit Jesus isn’t working. Even more people seem to be coming! There are three groups here: the Twelve; a great crowd of disciples; and a great multitude from all over the place. In this open setting Jesus is going to teach and train the Twelve. It means his words are primarily for them, but they’re also for all disciples, and really, for anyone.

 And once again Luke is highlighting Jesus’ healing ministry. People come to hear Jesus but also to be healed of their diseases. It seems that by just listening to his words, those with unclean spirits get cured. Luke says power is coming out from Jesus and healing them all. Partly his healing power seems connected to his all-night prayer in verse 12. His prayer not only guided him in selecting the Twelve; it’s what empowered him to heal, and ultimately, to teach.

 Jesus is going to teach many things in this sermon, but he begins with a special section of blessings and woes. To get an overall sense of what Jesus is saying, let’s read verses 20–26. There’s rhythm, symmetry, irony and profound truth in these brief words. Matthew’s version recounts eight blessings, while Luke records only four. Luke seems to develop these blessings into a kind of progressive order—poverty, then hunger, then weeping, then being hated. And only Luke adds four corresponding woes. Among other meanings, Luke seems to be suggesting that Jesus’ words are like a fork in the road, confronting us with a choice we all have to make. Our choice is going to have consequences both now and in eternity. Which path will we take?

 Let’s take a look. Read verse 20 again. It’s interesting that Jesus is talking to his disciples. Matthew’s version is in the third person, talking about people in general, but what stands out here is that Luke uses the second person “you.” Jesus is looking at his disciples and addressing them directly. And he’s saying they’re “poor.” Peter and his partners have left their fishing business to follow Jesus. They have no more steady income. Levi has left his tax collector’s booth and spent a lot of money on a dinner. He’s become poor, too. In fact, in his own devotion to serving people Jesus himself has become poor (2Co8:9). Later he’s going to tell someone, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head” (9:58; cf. Mt8:20). Jesus is so radically committed to ministry that he has to depend on the help of some women he’s healed to support him and his disciples (8:3). For any man that’s pretty humbling.

 Being “poor” is not only here in verse 20; it’s mentioned a total of eleven times in Luke’s Gospel, and the word “rich,” another 15 times. Luke has a keen interest in Jesus’ teachings on this. It’s not an “extra”: Luke depicts Jesus focusing his entire gospel ministry on the poor (4:18; 7:22), and he tells his disciples to invite the poor, to give to the poor, and to value what the poor give (14:13,21; 18:22; 21:2–3). In the world, the poor tend to be not so important or seen as a burden. There’s so much attention on the rich and famous, so much rich envy, so much pride in possessions (1Jn2:17), whereas the poor often don’t even have names. Jesus flips this on its head, and in one of his parables he highlights a poor beggar named Lazarus, who’s covered with sores, starving and ignored, yet ends up exalted in heaven (16:20–22). This matches all the other New Testament teachings on how believers should be living with our material possessions and treating the poor and the rich (e.g. Ac2:45; Ro15:26; 1Co4:11; 2Co6:10; Gal2:10; 1Ti6:6–10,17–19; Jas1:9,10; 2:1–7; 5:1–6; 1Jn3:16–18). In light of all these plain Bible teachings, it’s kind of bizarre how some preachers today are still telling people they can get rich by believing in Jesus. Is material wealth really the measure of God’s blessing? Others have taken it to the opposite extreme and say the only thing to be done in the cause of Christ is social welfare.

 But what Jesus is saying is not really about forcing poverty or economic equality on people. It’s much deeper. When he says “poor,” he’s talking matters of the heart. In verse 21 he parallels “poor” with those who “hunger now” and who “weep now.” In a literal sense, poverty leads to hunger and weeping. But this also has a spiritual meaning. Jesus is basically talking about those who learn to humble themselves (1:48,52; 14:11; 18:14). He’s talking about a broken spirit, meaning a broken and contrite heart (Ps51:17; cf. Mt5:3a). He’s talking about a real awareness of our own sin (Ps51:2–4a). He’s talking about someone who knows how desperately he needs God and who’s crying out to him for help (Ps40:17; 70:5; 86:1; 109:21–22). Jesus wants us all to have and maintain this kind of heart, this kind of spirit, however we may be blessed in this life, or, tested by hardship: “Lord, I’m so desperately in need of you!” Are we this desperate?

When Jesus says the poor are blessed, he’s also talking about the desires of our hearts, what we really value. Some people can be poor outwardly but still long to be rich; their values haven’t changed. They still love the world and things in the world, not God (1Jn2:15). This is a real problem for many believers. Later Jesus warns that our spiritual life can get “choked” by the cares, riches and pleasures of life (8:14). Only Luke’s Gospel records the parable of the rich fool (12:13–21), where Jesus says that our life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. He tells us: “Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (12:33–34). Only Luke’s Gospel tells us how Jesus warns us not to get engrossed in eating, drinking and marrying, buying and selling, planting and building, trying to hold on to our goods, and Jesus speaks three haunting words: “Remember Lot’s wife” (17:27–32). We can know all the right things, but what we truly desire and value actually determines the direction of our lives. How many people have tried so hard to gain the whole world, only to lose themselves in the process (9:25)? Jesus wants us to embrace being poor in this world for his sake. It means not to be anxious and worried about our lives, but to seek God’s kingdom, to have confidence in this promise of God, and really value it as our best treasure (12:22–31).

Look at verse 21. Jesus parallels not only poverty with hunger and weeping, but also God’s kingdom with true satisfaction and laughter. He’s telling us that the hope of God’s kingdom is what really satisfies our souls and gives us lasting peace and joy. He wants us to live with this conviction, that through faith in him, we’re heirs of the kingdom, we’re truly satisfied, truly joyful, truly blessed!

Read verse 22. Here Jesus takes the irony even further. Notice there’s an exclamation point here. Being hated, excluded, reviled and spurned is harsh, and never fun. Nobody can pretend they like it. Why do people treat us so badly? It’s because we believe in Jesus and give our lives to follow him. This pits us against the values and standards of the world. Jesus is so compassionate; he’s such a wonderful healer; he cares so much for all the outcasts, all the oppressed. So why don’t people like him? It’s because, then as now, he challenges us to repent. He challenges us to turn from the world, turn from our sin and turn to him. And people just don’t want to do that. If we’re serious about following him, we’re going to experience the rejection he did. We’re going to be pressured not to follow him. It happens in families, at school, at work and in all kinds of social settings. Once we identify with Jesus, we’ll never be popular. Sometimes it can be so lonely, so hard to bear. So he encourages us further. Read verse 23. He’s saying that persecution for his sake is a sign that we’re the real deal, just like the prophets of old. The more we’re hated for his sake, the more we’re blessed. Amen?

Look at verses 24–26. Who is Jesus talking to here? It may be to anyone. These are people who focus on enjoying life right now. They’ve got all the comforts of wealth, pleasure, entertainment, and popularity in this world. It seems like they’re living their best life. In the Old Testament one of the psalmists also struggled when he saw such people who seem to have no struggles, who seem so free and able to boast (Ps73). But then he realized that God would one day bring such people to ruin. He concluded, “Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you (Ps73:23–25). These “woes” of Jesus challenge us to make that choice: are we all in to follow him? Or are we trying to keep one foot in the world? He wants us to experience the real blessing of his kingdom, not the temporal blessings of this world that end up deceptive and phony.

Let’s read verse 20 again. Praise Jesus who became poor to make us truly rich in his kingdom! Praise God who has chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of his kingdom (Jas2:5)! May he grant us a new conviction of who we really are in him. May he open our eyes to the true blessing of following our Lord Jesus Christ and living as heirs of his eternal kingdom. And may he grant us that desperation of spirit to depend on him, and his direction to serve poor and suffering people of our times for his sake.