

“Blessed” (Luke 6:17–26)

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What do most people want in life?

If you were to ask people that question, “What do you want?”, I think a lot of people would say very concrete things, like more money, a better job, a better house, more time off from work, more vacations, a better marriage, better relationships with others, to lose weight and be healthier.

People might also talk about broader, more abstract concepts like love, happiness, safety, security, power, control, comfort, conveniences. Perhaps some people would talk about fame and popularity, or least being well regarded and accepted.¹

How about you? What do you want today? What are you lacking?

Today, we’re continuing to look at the life of Jesus by studying the Gospel of Luke. And today we’ll be looking at the beginning of what is called “The Sermon on the Plain.” Specifically, we’ll be looking at Luke 6:17–26. And in this passage, we see that Jesus shows us that our priorities are upside down. A great reversal is coming someday. We might say that Jesus flips the script on the world’s values. The people who are lowly now will be exalted, and the ones who are living their best lives now will live their worst lives later. The ones who prepare for this reversal are the ones who are blessed. But woe to those who think they can find ultimate security, comfort, meaning, and acceptance in the things of this world.

So, without further ado, let’s start to look at this passage. We’ll begin by reading Luke 6:17–19:

¹⁷ And he came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and

¹ To see some lists of what people want, see Kathy Caprino, “The Top 8 Things People Desperately Desire but Can’t Seem to Attain,” *Forbes.com*, May 24, 2016, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/kathycaprino/2016/05/24/the-top-8-things-people-desperately-desire-but-cant-seem-to-attain/#5ae7947086c7>; Kathy Carpino, “The Top 10 Things People Want in Life but Can’t Seem to Get,” *Huffington Post*, March 29, 2016, updated December 76, 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/kathy-caprino/the-top-10-things-people-_2_b_9564982.html; Christine Comaford, “The 3 Things All Humans Crave—And How to Motivate Anyone, Anytime, Anywhere,” *Forbes.com*, March 13, 2013, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/christinecomaford/2013/03/13/the-3-things-all-humans-crave-and-how-to-motivate-anyone-anytime-anywhere/#36cea9701ad6>; Rosalind Tompkins, “Life Lesson: Top Ten Things That Most People Want,” *Tallahassee.com*, January 8, 2014, <http://blogs.tallahassee.com/community/2014/01/08/life-lesson-top-ten-things-that-most-people-want>.

the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon,¹⁸ who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured.¹⁹ And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all.²

Here is the setting of this passage. Somewhere in Galilee, Jesus has come to a level place, a plain or possibly a plateau. And he's surrounded by a large group of people. First, we're told he's "with them," which is a reference to the twelve apostles, Jesus' special followers, whom we talked about last week. Then, he's surrounded by a larger crowd of disciples, people who started to follow Jesus because they heard about his miracles and his teaching. Then there's also "a great multitude of people" from different places. Some are from Judea and Jerusalem. Judea was a region to the south, about a three days' journey on foot. Jerusalem was the capital city, where the temple was located, the center of Judaism. Some people are from two cities on the Mediterranean, Tyre and Sidon. This is surprising, because they cities were generally known as Gentile cities, and they have bad reputations in the Old Testament (Isa. 23; Jer. 47:4; Ezek. 26–28; Joel 3:4; Amos 1:9–10; Zech. 9:2–4).

It seems that the disciples came to hear Jesus and the larger crowd wanted to be healed. We're told that they tried to touch him, because Jesus' power would "come out from him" and heal them. Jesus is consistently pictured in Luke as a healer, and he heals physical ailments and spiritual ailments. Here, we're told that people who had unclean spirits were cured. "Unclean spirits" are demons. The Bible doesn't hesitate to talk about good and evil forces beyond the world that we can see. There is God, of course, who is spirit. We can't see him. He's immaterial, above and beyond the world but present everywhere within it. And there are angels, God's servants and messengers. But there are also demons, whom we presume are rebellious angels. There is evil in the world that is beyond what we would call normal. In a letter written by one of Jesus' apostles, we're told, "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). Jesus did this in part by removing evil, demonic spirits from people.

But today I want to focus on his teaching, which is what we see in the next several verses. This sermon begins in verse 20 and runs through the end of the chapter, but we'll only be looking at verses 20–26 today. Let's read those verses now:

²⁰ And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said:

² Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.

“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

²² “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! ²³ Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

²⁴ “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ “Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.

“Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

²⁶ “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.”

Jesus says that there are certain people who are blessed. We might say that these people are fortunate, or that they have received favor from God. And Jesus says there are people who should be pitied, people who are actually unfortunate and not favored by God.

These statements of blessing and woe are similar to ones we see in the Old Testament. Here are some statements of blessing that we find in the Old Testament:

- ¹ Blessed is the man
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
 nor stands in the way of sinners,
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
- ² but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
 and on his law he meditates day and night. (Ps. 1:1–2)

Blessed are all who take refuge in him. (Ps. 2:12; cf. Ps. 34:8)

Blessed is the man who makes
 the LORD his trust,
 who does not turn to the proud,
 to those who go astray after a lie! (Ps. 40:4)

- ¹ Blessed is everyone who fears the LORD,
 who walks in his ways!
- ² You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;
 you shall be blessed, and it shall be well with you. (Ps. 128:1–2)

Later in Luke, Jesus will say, “blessed is the one who is not offended by me” (Luke 7:43) and, “Blessed . . . are those who heard the word of God and keep it!” (Luke 11:28).

But here, he says that certain people are blessed: the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are persecuted. I think it’s best to see that these are not four different groups of people, but one type of person. This is the type of person who is down and out now but who

trusts in God nonetheless. This is the kind of person who relies on God and is willing to suffer for being associated with Jesus, who calls himself the Son of Man. And we see that most clearly in verses 22 and 23.

Let's think quickly about who these people are. Jesus first says that the poor are blessed for theirs is the kingdom of God. Do all poor people belong to God? Are all poor people automatically part of God's kingdom?

In the Bible, we see that the poor are generally those who are oppressed or who can't provide for themselves, so they trust in God. One theologian says, "*The poor* in Judaism referred to those in desperate need (socioeconomic element) whose helplessness drove them to a dependent relationship with God (religious element) for the supplying of their needs and vindication."³ Earlier in Luke's Gospel, Jesus said he came to preach good news to the poor (Luke 4:18). We talked about how this doesn't just mean the literal poor, but those who realize their spiritual poverty. That's why Matthew, his Sermon on the Mount, has Jesus saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3).

(Just as an aside, some people think that this sermon Luke gives is the same sermon as the Sermon on the Mount, which is found in Matthew 5–7. That's possible. It's possible that either Luke or Matthew rearranged that material in different ways to suit their purposes. But it's just as likely that Jesus preached similar sermons during his years of ministry. I have preached the same sermon in different places a few times, and even when I preach different sermons in the same place, I say similar things and reuse some material I had used earlier.)

We know from Jesus' other teachings that no one is part of God's kingdom unless he or she is transformed by God. In John 3, he says that in order to see and enter the kingdom of God, one must be born again of the Holy Spirit. In other words, one's heart must be changed. Those people who have been changed by God trust him. Specifically, they trust that only Jesus can make us right with God, only he can give us eternal life. Both the poor and the rich face the biggest problem of life, which isn't physical death, but rather separation from God. We are separated from God because of the presence of sin in the world. Sin is rebellion against God, a rebellion that started with the first human beings and continues today. It's the power that distorts

³ Robert Guelich, *The Sermon on the Mount* (Waco: Word, 1982), 69, quoted in Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 574.

our desires, so that we don't love God and other people rightly. Since we don't love rightly, we don't live rightly: sins are the wrong acts that we commit. This affects both the poor and the rich.

Poor people are more likely to realize their need for God. They realize there are problems in life that they can't fix, so they turn to God. But this isn't always the case. Sometimes, poor people are very proud. They think that they're only poor because of some bad breaks. Otherwise, they'd be rich. And they don't really need help or God. A poor person can still love money more than God. A poor person can still believe that money equals security, happiness, and wellbeing.

So, Jesus doesn't just have in mind someone who is poor. He has in mind someone who is poor and who trusts in God, someone who realizes he or she has nothing to give God, but who has everything to receive from God. And what is amazing is that Jesus says that the kingdom of God belongs to that person *right now*: "yours is the kingdom of God." The poor person who trusts that Jesus can give abundant and eternal life is part of the kingdom now.

The next two descriptions of those who are blessed are often related to poverty. Jesus says that those who hunger will be satisfied. Note that this blessing is future. Jesus does not say he will remove all poverty and hunger from his people now. But those who are hungry now will be satisfied later. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matt. 5:6). Those who hunger for such things will receive them. The Bible also describes eternity with God in a renewed creation as a feast (Isa. 25:6), so this promise isn't just metaphorical, but it's literal, too.

Jesus also says that those who weep will later laugh. Weeping and mourning may come from poverty, but there are all kinds of reasons why people mourn. We mourn because of the death of a loved one. We can mourn over our own brokenness and our own sin. We can mourn because of depression and loneliness. But if we trust in Jesus, we will be comforted. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matt. 5:4). The Bible describes God wiping away all the tears of his people (Isa. 25:8; Rev. 7:17; 21:4).

One of the reasons we know that Jesus isn't referring to all the poor or all people who hunger and weep is because of what we see in verses 22 and 23. Again, Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets." Jesus is talking here about those who suffer "on account of the Son of Man," which is one of the titles that Jesus gives to himself. If

you are willing to suffer simply because you are associated with Jesus, “your reward is great in heaven.” The prophets of the Old Testament suffered for God. Those who trust in God will often suffer in this world. We who know Jesus will say things the world doesn’t want to hear. We’ll live in a way that the world doesn’t understand. And there are times when we’ll be hated, ostracized, and thrown out of certain spheres of life. Some people may be disowned by their families. Some people may lose jobs or spouses. Some people in the world are beaten, imprisoned, and even killed simply because they’re Christians.

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus says,

¹⁰ “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

¹¹ “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹² Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you (Matt. 5:10–12).

Peter, one of Jesus’ apostles, wrote,

¹⁴ If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. ¹⁵ But let none of you suffer as a murderer or a thief or an evildoer or as a meddler. ¹⁶ Yet if anyone suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but let him glorify God in that name (1 Peter 4:14–16).

In other places in Luke’s writings, which includes this Gospel and the book of Acts, we see that Jesus and his disciples referred to the way the prophets of the Old Testament were rejected by their own people because of the message that they taught (Luke 11:47–51; Acts 7:51–52). In Acts, we see that the apostles were beaten for teaching about Jesus, and when that happened, they were “rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name” (Acts 5:41). They were glad to suffer for the name of Jesus. They knew that theirs was the kingdom of God.

Now, we turn to the woes that Jesus utters. This, too, is a concept found in the Old Testament. Sometimes, we read of certain people who would be cursed. Other times, we read that word, “woe.” Here’s just part of one passage, from the prophet Isaiah:

²⁰ Woe to those who call evil good
and good evil,
who put darkness for light
and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet

- and sweet for bitter!
- ²¹ Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes,
and shrewd in their own sight!
- ²² Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine,
and valiant men in mixing strong drink,
- ²³ who acquit the guilty for a bribe,
and deprive the innocent of his right! (Isa. 5:20–23)⁴

So, who are these people who are warned, the people who are actually unfortunate, people who should be pitied? Jesus says the rich, those who are satisfied, those who laugh, and those who are spoken well of are objects of woe.

He says that the rich in this life have already received their consolation. Again, we shouldn't think that all rich people are automatically excluded from God's kingdom. In the Gospels, we see wealthy people who have faith. Joseph of Arimathea is one example (Luke 23:50–53). We also see later in Luke that Zacchaeus, a tax collector, responds rightly to Jesus and gives away a good portion of his wealth (Luke 19:1–10).

But Jesus does often warn the rich about the folly of treasuring money. In Luke's Gospel, he teaches about the fool who builds himself a bigger barn to store all his stuff instead of using his wealth for godly purposes (Luke 12:15–21). He teaches the famous parable of the rich man and Lazarus: a rich man ignored the homeless and sick man, Lazarus. When they died, the rich man found himself in hell while Lazarus was in heaven (Luke 16:19–31). The Bible teaches that those who love money often put their trust in it. They don't want to part with it, to give it to those in need, because they love money more than people. They think that money can bring them happiness and security.

But a day of reversal is coming. James, Jesus' brother, wrote,

⁹ Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, ¹⁰ and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away. ¹¹ For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass; its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits (James 1:9–11).

The rich man and all his possessions will pass away. If he has rejected Jesus, he will be cut off eternally from God. He will be cut off from all that is good. That's why Jesus says that the rich have already received their consolation. Their best life is now.

⁴ See the larger passage beginning in verse 8. See also Isa. 31:1; Amos 5:18; 6:1; Hab. 2:15–20.

Jesus also says that who are full now will be hungry. In hell, there is no joy or fun. There is an eternal hunger that will never be satisfied. There will be no laughter, but there will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Luke 13:28).

Jesus also says that those who are spoken well of are objects of woe. Clearly, he doesn't mean all people who are spoken well of, because he likens these people to false prophets. In the history of Israel, there were false prophets.⁵ These were people who claimed to speak for God but who actually spoke lies. They are people who taught things that people wanted to hear, like that God would bless them even though they were doing things that God hates. False prophets are alive today. These are the people who claim to speak for God but who teach things contrary to what we find in the Bible. Most people won't be false prophets in that sense. But a lot of people do reject the Bible's teachings because they want to look good in the eyes of the world. This happens all the time. It's what leads people to edit the Scriptures. These people are afraid of looking foolish, backward, and bigoted. So, they try to bring Christian teaching in line with the world's beliefs. Instead of trying to reconcile people to God through Christ, they try to reconcile God to the world, all in the name of a Christ of their own imagination.

Now, you may wonder at this point if it's wrong to be rich and to have a full stomach and to laugh. You may wonder if you must first become poor and hungry and sad in order to be a Christian. Or you may be a Christian and wonder if you're doing things the wrong way.

Earlier I said that most people want more money, better health, a better job, better relationships, more time, and so on. Those things aren't bad. But they can be bad when we make those things ultimate things in our lives.

What's wrong with making those things ultimate things is that we were made to find our treasure in God. We were made to hunger for him, to find our joy in him, and to live life under his rule, which is expressed through his word. We were made to love God more than anything else. God is supposed to be the center of our lives. How are we doing with this? We don't love God the way we should. We don't live the way we should. We make other things the center of our lives. These things are our true gods, our idols.

A lot of people, when they think about idols, they think of little statues of gods like Baal that are worshiped by primitive people. But anything can be an idol, not just gods of sun, rain,

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 1:1–9:50*, 585: “Israel often courted prophets who gave the message it wanted to hear, rather than giving God's message (Jer. 5:31; 14:13–16; 23:9–15, 27–28; Ezek. 22:23–31; Isa. 30:10; Mic. 2:11 . . .).”

thunder, or whatever. Things like money, entertainment, careers, relationships, and politics can be idols. And idols are fluid—we shift from one to another.

What we really want are the things that idols promise us: approval or acceptance from others, comfort, control, and power. Tim Keller calls these “deep idols.”⁶ The “surface idols” of money or entertainment promise us the deep idols. But these idols lie. They can’t give us an acceptance that will never end. They can’t give us eternal comfort. They will never empower us, because we’re enslaved to them. Idols simply don’t work.

Well, we’ve gone through this passage and thought a bit about it. Now, what do we do with it?

First, I want to talk to those who aren’t yet Christians. I want you to consider what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying that those who don’t rely on him and treasure him will lose forever. Their best life is now. But those who trust in him, even if their lives are hard now, will have their best life forever.

All of this reminds me of Pascal’s wager. Blaise Pascal was a seventh-century French mathematician and a Christian. He wrote a series of notes, called the *Pensées*, which is French for “thoughts.” He was going to arrange these into a defense of Christianity, but he died before he could do that. At any rate, in his *Pensées*, he writes about making a wager. I don’t think he’s saying that we bet on Christianity like we’re betting on a horse. In the latter case, we’re hoping the horse will win, but we know it could very well lose. Pascal doesn’t mean that Christianity might be wrong. But he’s trying to get a non-believer to see that it’s wise to believe in Christianity and foolish not to believe.

In part, he writes this:

Yes, but you have to wager. It is not up to you, you are already committed. [In other words, you have to make a choice.] Which then will you choose? Let us see. Since you have to choose, let us see which interests you the least. You have two things to lose: the truth and the good, and two things to stake: your reason and will, your knowledge and beatitude; and your nature has two things to avoid: error and wretchedness. You reason is not hurt more by choosing one rather than the other, since you do have to make the choice. That is one point disposed of. But your beatitude? Let us weigh up the gain and the loss by calling heads that God

⁶ Timothy Keller, *Counterfeit Gods: The Empty Promises of Money, Sex, and Power, and the Only Hope That Matters* (New York: Dutton, 2009), 64–65.

exists. Let us assess the two cases: if you win, you win everything; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager that he exists then, without hesitating!⁷

The key thing Pascal is saying is that if you “bet” on Christianity and you win, it’s infinite gain. You may have some finite losses, like being mocked or hated. At worst, people can kill you because you’re a Christian. But if you “bet” on Christianity being false and you lose, it’s infinite loss. Sure, you may have had some finite gains like an easy life, people speaking well of you, some more money in your pocket. But the infinite loss of hell far outweighs those finite gains, just as the infinite gain of heaven far outweighs the finite loss of suffering in this life.

The reason that Jesus can tell us that the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are hated are blessed is because Jesus exchanged the riches of heaven for a “poor” life on earth (2 Cor. 8:9), he knew what it was like to be hungry and to weep, and he was hated and persecuted. In fact, he was killed. But he knew these losses were finite. They were limited and they wouldn’t last forever. He knew he would be exalted forever, that the gain of doing his Father’s will far outweighed whatever pain he suffered.

If you’re not yet a Christian, I urge you to trust in Jesus. I don’t bet that Christianity is true. I know it’s true. And I would love to meet with you personally to talk about this.

If you are a Christian, are you seeking first the kingdom of God? Do you find yourself drifting to the world’s values? Or do you first seek God’s approval, knowing that he will reward you?

Here’s one thing we should notice in this passage: Jesus combines both right doctrine and things like caring for the poor and the broken. Those who are rich and are full are on the side of the false prophets, who spoke false messages. Those who are with the true prophets, who speak the truth, ought to care about the plight of the poor. Some Christians care a lot about theology and reading the Bible, but not so much about caring for the poor. Some Christians think that the faith is all about caring for the poor, but they don’t really believe all that’s in the Bible. Jesus tells us we can’t pick and choose. We need to believe the truth and we need to live in light of it.

So, let’s pray to God that he would reveal where we have messed up priorities. Don’t put your hope in the things of the world. Care for the poor, the broken, the hungry. Care about truth.

⁷ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, ed. Honor Levi, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 154.

Care about God's glory. And don't care about what others think of you; instead, care what God thinks of you.