

Church of All Nations

Luke 6:17-26

February 16, 2025

In both the readings from Jeremiah and Luke we have a list of blessed and woes

And because we are this year reading Luke's gospel we also need to note that this list of blessings looks familiar but different, from the better known version that appears in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. But Luke being Luke he gives us the "plain" version and he adds a list of "Woes" to the list of Blessings. Did the author of Luke's gospel edit a longer list? Maybe. In a verbal culture did Jesus, who moved around giving his teaching, present beatitudes on more than one occasion with variations in the beatitudes, maybe on one occasion or more often, adding the woes. Maybe.

Blessings in Matthew	Blessings in Luke	Woes in Luke
Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them. He said:	He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, ... power was coming from him and healing them all. Looking at his disciples, he said:	
Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.	Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.	But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.	Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*	Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.*
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.		
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.	Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.	Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.
Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.		
Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.		
Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.		

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.		
Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.	Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.	Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Luke's account of the beatitudes records just four statements about those who are blessed – Matthew has eight – but Luke pairs them with their opposites, four statements about those who might have been thought of as blessed, but who are anything but blessed in the eyes of God.

Beatitudes are numerous in the Old Testament. Blessed... also can be interpreted “how fortunate, how privileged” - I have even seen it translated as “how happy”. And who does not want to be happy? If religion could offer that as a guarantee there would be no non-religious people. But I don't think “Happy” is a helpful translation. It may surprise you but the truth is Christianity is not especially concerned with your happiness or not in any normal way of thinking of happiness. So how happy is not a helpful translation.

Better are words like “fortunate” or “congratulations”. But why are you fortunate if mourning or poor or hungry. Jesus seems to have reversed all accepted wisdom surrounding who is blessed and how this whole blessed things works. Blessed are you poor, hungry, mournful and hated?

Wait, Lord, what do you mean? I am supposed to seek to be penniless and sorrowful and in pain? Why would you want me to be in such a terrible state?

Because then you are recognising your poverty and emptiness, your need for God, your dependence on something greater and beyond self. Only then can you shuck off the protection that wealth and security of things that we imagine we can buy. You stand alone and naked before the Spirit and know your absolute dependence. Philip Yancey came up with “fortunate are the unfortunates”

It has been compared to going to a doctor. Most of the time we don't think we need a doctor. We are well, fit, not in pain, nothing is hanging off us. But even when we are unwell we can sometimes ignore it, deny it, think maybe one day I should do something about that shortness of breath or that pain in my leg. And then one day we go and the doctor says Yeah there is a problem here, you would not have wanted to wait any longer with this. And then you leave the

doctor thinking Gee that was fortunate I went to the doctor. Now I know my need and can start treatment.

Most Bible versions translate it as “Woe to you who are ...” Or we might render it as “The writing is on the wall for you who are ...”, or “What a disaster for you who are ...” Woes best understood not as a thundering condemnation but as a statement that actions do have consequences and you cannot escape them. They will catch up with you if you go down that path. Blessings and woes are inherent in the actions themselves. Didn’t Jesus once say, “the healthy have no need of a doctor”.

But back to the blessed of Hebrew scriptures. They say : if you do a particular thing, you will receive blessings. Psalm 41 says, “Happy those concerned for the lowly and poor; when misfortune strikes, the Lord delivers them. ... ” Jeremiah 17 has “Blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord . . . , he is like a tree planted [next to] water that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green.”

We need to understand what is going on here with these blessed. I think we make a mistake and we read them as if they were eternal truths that could be lifted from any context, from the very person of Jesus and made into eternal timeless truths. They are not words directed to the crowds. Luke makes it clear there were lots of the wider community at this teaching but these words are not addressed to them. Luke started the Beatitudes off with, “then Jesus turned to His disciples and said”. Literally – “turned his eyes on his disciples”. But He has just specifically selected His inner band to direct these comments to. But are Jesus’ words true in all and every situation and place? Maybe there are some which are but most become true when embraced and lived out by his faithful disciples.... maybe in our life together, if we live out this way when we can, this community of disciples, and in the power of the Spirit we can make these words become true.

Obviously not every person who mourns is comforted and becomes happy/joyful. A person has to be open and empty in order to let God and others come in. If we want to love and be loved we need to have space at the center of who we are. And then goodness will come in.

In the company of Jesus these words can come true and we find the imagination to create the new order, otherwise known as the Kingdom(reign) of God. Jesus’ intent is not to describe the world but to transform the world.

Blessed are you if you stay empty, if you become a spacious home for God, for other human beings, for the long-suffering earth.

But it is not easy for us. As I said earlier, who wants to be poor, hungry. Probably all of us would resist it if someone were to describe us as “poor” or “needy”. We don’t like other people to know that we don’t have enough money “to make ends meet”. We would do anything to avoid being considered poor.

So too, in these spiritual things. We do anything to avoid confessing the true state of our soul or spirit. We don't like to be considered dependent on other people. In the same way, we will go to any lengths to avoid it in terms of money and material wealth, so too or even more so, we avoid it spiritually.

. There is only one reality, only one Being who can give us the bread of life, who can satisfy our deep hunger for love. Blessed are you if you let go into those arms