

“Blessed Are You...”

Luke 6:17-26

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

February 13, 2022

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany

Today we'll be taking a look at the Beatitudes, according to the Gospel of Luke. It's been three years since I last talked about the Beatitudes, but it feels like an eternity. A *lot* has happened since then! So I'm going to approach this passage today as if we're all hearing it fresh, for the very first time.

There are two versions of the Beatitudes in the Bible, one in Matthew's gospel, and one in Luke's. They are similar, but different: Matthew's list is longer; Luke's list includes not just blessings but woes; Matthew's list feels a bit more spiritual in nature; Luke's list feels a bit more practical. In Matthew's Gospel, the Beatitudes form the first part of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount; in Luke's Gospel, they form the first part of his Sermon on the Plain. Faithful Christians need to pay attention to both.

But what *are* the Beatitudes? What does the word “Beatitude” mean? Merriam-Webster says that “beatitude,” in a general sense, is “a state of utmost bliss.” In Christianity, the word specifically refers to the declarations that Jesus makes in his sermons that begin with the words “blessed are.” The word “beatitude” comes from the Latin word *beatus*, which means “happy” or “fortunate.” So Jesus is talking about certain people who especially happy or fortunate, who receive a special blessing from God.

So which groups are those? Which groups of people are especially blessed by Almighty God?

Well, in Matthew's gospel, Jesus identifies *nine* groups of people that are especially blessed: (1) “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (2) “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” (3) “Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” (4) “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” (5) “Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” (6) “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” (7) “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” (8) “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (9) “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” That's Matthew's list. Luke names only *four* groups. I'll be focusing on Luke's shorter list today.

So, to set the stage. Jesus “stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.” People have come from far and wide to be with Jesus. That “level place” might very well have been a flat, grassy area on top of a hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee, like this hill, not far from Capernaum. Luke says “They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits

were cured. And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.” So Jesus is carrying out his ministry, healing people from major ailments, literally changing people’s lives. Then he starts teaching them. Or, more precisely, he starts *blessing* them. He says:

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” This is the first of the Beatitudes in Luke’s Gospel. Matthew has one that is similar, but different: “Blessed are the poor *in spirit*, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” In Matthew, Jesus blesses the *poor in spirit*, the spiritually discouraged. In Luke, Jesus blesses the people who are *literally poor*. The economically disadvantaged. The “have-not”’s as opposed to the “have”’s. Jesus is blessing the people who *have trouble making ends meet*. In today’s world, he’d be talking about the people who struggle to pay their rent or to put food on their table, people who are barely getting by from one day to the next, and have no means to put away anything for retirement. You know, here in the state of Michigan, if someone works a minimum-wage job, 40 hours a week, 50 weeks a year, that person would be earning less than \$20,000 a year. If that’s a single parent with two or more children, that family would be living below the poverty line. If you don’t believe me, look up the numbers, and do the math. It is people like these that Jesus blesses.

Now, remember that I said that Luke’s version of the Beatitudes also includes not just blessings but woes. These is a woe that goes with each blessing. Just a few verses after Jesus says, “blessed are the poor,” he says: “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” Jesus does not mince words. Later in the gospel, someone comes up to Jesus and asks him what he must do to inherit eternal life. He live a faithful life; he’s been keeping the commandments of God since his youth. Jesus tells him there is something else he needs to do: “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor.” The man “became sad; for he was very rich.” Jesus looks at him and says, “How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” For those among us who are blessed with financial resources, we would be wise to pay careful attention to Jesus’ words. The Gospel values are all about *generosity* and not about *greed*, about *sharing* and not being *selfish*. This doesn’t mean it’s impossible to follow Jesus if you’re wealthy; Zacchaeus, for example, was a wealthy tax collector. He and Jesus have a conversation; he says to Jesus, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Jesus responds, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” It is certainly possible for wealthy people to inherit the kingdom – *if* they’re willing to become exceedingly generous. In the days of the early church, Christians sold their possessions and goods, and distributed the proceeds to anyone in the community who was in need. “There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold.” Go read Acts 2, 4, and 5 if you need a reminder. And ponder the example that people like Zacchaeus and those early Christians set for all the rest of us.

The second Beatitude in Luke’s Gospel is this: “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.” Again, there is a significant difference from Matthew’s version. There, Jesus says: “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” That’s a *spiritual* kind of hunger. Here in Luke, it’s a very *physical* hunger. He’s talking about the people who literally don’t have enough to eat. According to data collected by the United States Department of Agriculture, there are more than 38 million people *here in our own country* who are food insecure, which is defined as lack of consistent access to enough food for every person in a household to live an active, healthy life. That is more than 11% of the population of our country. About one out of every nine people here in America

doesn't have enough food to eat. That's actually slightly *higher* than the global percentage. Estimates range from about 700 to 820 million people around the world who regularly go to bed hungry, out of about 7.75 billion people on this earth, which works out to about 9 to 10½% of the world's population. That suggests that we might have a bigger hunger problem *here in America* than the planet does as a whole. We certainly need to care about hungry children in far-off lands – but we *also* need to be concerned about people down the street or around the corner, *right here in Mason*, who don't always have enough food. For Jesus also says this: "Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry." I don't entirely know what he meant by that, but it doesn't sound good! All of us who have plenty of food on our table at every meal really need to consider what *more* we can do to assist those who *don't*.

The third Beatitude in Luke is: "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." A few verses later, Jesus says: "Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep." This Beatitude, like the one before it, is predicting a great reversal of fortune. Those who are hungry will be filled; those who are weeping will laugh. Mary, the mother of Jesus, said something similar, when she sang her song of praise before she gave birth to Jesus; she said that God "has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." The consistent impression we get, throughout Luke's Gospel, is that the coming of Jesus brings hope and help to the poor and the lowly, the oppressed and the marginalized. Jesus has come, in part, to do something about the great economic disparities that divide the poor from the rich, the hungry from the well-fed, the people who are crying because of their circumstances from the people who are laughing in luxury. Christianity is at its best and truest when we help that vision become reality.

The final Beatitude in Luke's Gospel is this: "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets." Jesus is talking about the people who really take the Gospel message seriously, who try to enact it and live it out in their own life, and who have to live with the consequences that brings. For when we *truly* follow Jesus, we stand apart from the crowd, we go against the grain, and sometimes – and this is especially true for people in younger generations – we get picked on, harassed, made fun of, looked down upon. "You really *believe* all that stuff?" "Yeah, I really do." And the laughter begins.

The goal of the Christian life is not to please *people*. The goal of the Christian life is to please *God*. Jesus says: "Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets." Each of us has to decide whose praise matters more: the world's, or God's. If we are seeking the world's praise, if we are looking for fame and glory and honor, if we care more about popularity than honor and integrity and faithfulness, we will sell our soul again and again, and we won't be worthy of being called *Christian*. We will be like the false prophets in the Bible, the ones who didn't listen to *God*, but who just did and said whatever the people wanted them to do or say. The *real* prophets listened to *God*, did what *God* was calling them to do – no matter the cost. For some of them, it was a pretty severe cost. But Jesus says: "Blessed are you ... for surely your reward is great in heaven."

These are Luke's Beatitudes. They all have to do with real-world situations, and they call for real-world *decisions*. What are you going to do if you are wealthy? What are you going to do if you have plenty of food to eat? If you are laughing in your luxury? If you care more about what people say than about what God says? What are you going to do if you want to take the Gospel message *seriously*?

© 2022 Rev. Bill Pinches