



Luke 6:17-19, 20-26

“The Upside-Down Kingdom”

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13th Sunday After Pentecost

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“Following Christ from City Center”

LUKE 6:17-19, 20-26 "THE UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM"

Literary Prototype: Ex. 19:2-22:33 Moses/Mountain/Torah

6:17-19 MINISTRY SUMMARY: JESUS FACES THE PEOPLE WITH HIS TEAM AND THE SPIRIT'S POWER. 1st Sermon, 4:16-30

Luke's 4th Summary (4:14-15, 31-32, 40-41), Q //Matthew's Sermon On Mount 5:1-7:27

17 a And he (i.e. Jesus) came down with them (i.e. *the twelve*) and stood on a level place, //Mk. 3:7-12, Ministry Team: Jesus, The Twelve, Disciples
 with a great crowd of his disciples, Committed Plus The Curious
 with a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem Jewish Territory
 and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, Oppressors Of Israel, Gentile Territory: Foreshadows Gentile Ministry

b who came to hear him (fulfilled in sermon in 6:20ff.) Vision Of New Reality, The Word About The Kingdom
 and to be healed of their diseases; (fulfilled in 6:19) 5:15-17, No Secret Teaching, Public, Kingdom Deed No. 1: Healing
 and those who were troubled with evil spirits were cured. Sin/Death/Evil Not Yet Conquered, Kingdom Deed No. 2: Banish Evil

18 And all the crowd sought to touch him, New World, Vision Of World Made Whole, Healing Precedes Kingdom Teaching
 19 a' b' for power (*dunamis*) came forth from him and healed them *all*. 8:44-47, 9:1-2, Acts 5:14-15, Jesus Models What Twelve/Disciples Will Do
 Kingdom Present! People Listen Better After Bring Loved! Two Destinies: Blessing/Woe

VA1: 6:20-26 INTRODUCTION TO THE SERMON ON THE PLAIN: THE RADICAL WISDOM OF THE KINGDOM. //6:46-49

Congratulations Not Based On Appearances But Ultimates

a) v.20a Jesus' Audience: His Disciples (Left All) And Would-Be Disciples (See 7:1). God's New Order, Not Sociological But Religious

What Is Reality? Who's Well Off? "Congratulations to _____ because of _____"

20 And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said: Intro Formula (6:27, 39), 7:1, All Overhear, Apprentices/ Learners/ Disciples
 Change World View, Congratulations & Condolences: Two Kinds Of People

b1) vv.20b-23 Four Blessings Honoring Disciples. **b2) vv.24-26 Four Threats/Curses.** **Blessing/ Cursing Form:**

You = Plural 2nd Person (*You*), Disciples Left All To Follow, *Poor*, 4:16-21, 1:46-55, *Is. 61:1-2*

1) Poor/Rich (Present/Past Tense) Jesus/Kingdom vs. \$\$, Winners/Losers, Not Exhortation, 12:13-21

Is. 61:1-2 "Blessed/ (happy, fortunate) are you poor, 24 But woe (grief/pain) to you that are rich, 1) Pronouncement: *Macarios/ Ouai*
 a for/ yours *is* the kingdom (reign) of God./ for you *have received* your consolation. Mt. 5:3, 11, 2) Audience: Poor/Rich
 Lk. 16:26, 3) Reason: *For*

2) Hungry/Full (Future Tense) 4) Promise: Positive/Negative

21 b Blessed are you that hunger now, 25 Woe to you that are full now, Mt. 5:6, Derisive, Indifferent
 for you shall be satisfied. (p.v. by God, 9:11-17) for you shall hunger. Kingdom Reverses World's Structures
 Jesus Speaks From Within The Future Kingdom

3) Weep/Laugh (Future Tense) Pity Those Who Stand Under Ultimate Judgment

b' Blessed are you that weep now, Woe to you that laugh now, Sneer In Contempt Of Other's Needs
 for you shall laugh. (because of God) for you shall mourn and weep. Ps. 107:3-9, James 2:6-7, 4:9
 ----- Vison From The End Determines The Present

4) Shame/Honor (Present/Past Tense) Flattery, Much Longer (Setting Of Persecution)

22 a' Blessed are you when men hate you, 26 Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, Double Blessing: Blessed (1)
Dishonor and when they exclude you (social? synagogue?) Eighteen Benedictions:
 and revile you, No. 12 Excluded *Nazarenes* As Heretics
 and cast out your name as evil on account of the Son of man! 21:17, 1 Pt. 4:12-14, Because Of Being A Jesus Follower

23 Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy (or dance), Rejoice, Leap for Joy (2)
 for behold, your reward *is* great in heaven; Double Reason: Reward Great (1)
 for so their fathers did to **the prophets**. (See Acts 5:41-42, 7:52) for so their fathers *did* to **the false prophets**." Prophets (2)

Good Life = Rich + Gourmet + Humor/Entertainment + Reputation = Life Aligned With This World, Its Values = Finite/Passing Away

A Brief Treatment Of Luke 6:17-19, 20-26

These two paragraphs span the seam between two major sections of Luke: 1) 5:17-6:19, *The Second Kingdom Cycle*, and 2) 6:20-49, *The Sermon at the Plain*. Luke's skillful use of introduction and reversal (a-b-b'-a') ties the two paragraphs together. The crowds came for two reasons, *to hear* (a: v.17e) and *to be healed of their diseases and spirits* (b: vv.17f-18a). The healings are presented first (b': v.19) and after that the teaching of the sermon (a' 6:20-49). Luke is not only skillful within units but between them. As we noted earlier, v.17a-d presents a center with four circles: Jesus, the twelve apostles, a great crowd of disciples, Jews from Judea and Jerusalem, Gentiles from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon. The meaning of this arrangement is that Jesus has implications for his followers, for Israel, and for the Gentiles. His person and message are aimed at the widest possible audience. Jesus descends the mountain after a night in prayer; with him are his inner and outer circles, and together they face a needy, broken world.

The ministry of Jesus is divided into two parts: word and deed. People come *to hear him*, but also for physical and spiritual healing with diseases and demonization distinguished. One can imagine the chaos as needy people tried to touch Jesus; we surmise that one of the jobs of the twelve was crowd control! Verse 19 deserves to be quoted, "And *all* the crowd sought to touch him, for power came forth from him and healed them *all*." Jesus was soggy with the Spirit's presence; the loving energy that flow from him could be felt as *power*. How many hours these encounters took we do not know, but what an amazing sight it must have been as Jesus moved from one to another with an intimate knowledge of what each one needed. Death still ruled, and sin and evil would soon enough make their corrupting presences known, but here- for a day at least- full human function was restored for all. Love reigned. This is a glimpse and foretaste of the fullness of the kingdom in the resurrection of the dead. God cares about people, about their bodily and spiritual wholeness, and that means ultimately the removal of all impairments. It is only when all needs are met that Jesus begins to teach a ready audience, v.20, "And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said..." While the disciples are his most immediate audience, the gathered Jews and Gentiles *overhear* the teaching; it's part of their call to be his followers.

The technical name for a blessing is *macarism* from the Greek for *blessed* which is *macarios*, the opposite of which is a *woe*- Greek *Ouai*, and they are the light and dark sides of the future. Jesus, from his position of sharing God's knowledge, announces winners and losers ahead of time. The classic form has four parts: 1) Pronouncement, 2) Audience, 3) Reason, 4) Promise, as in v.20b, *Blessed are/you poor/for/ yours is the kingdom of heaven*. In the Woes the promises changes to a negative.

The eight blessings/woes Jesus offers are carefully structured into two columns of four and arranged in opposing pairs: poor-hungry-weeping-true prophets // rich-full-laughing-false prophets. The contrast is between two types of people: kingdom insiders and outsiders, each of which have four related characteristics. Another structuring principle is the use of tense and time. The first and last pairs use the present and past tenses; the two middle pairs use the word *now* and the future tense. Jesus is a divider.

While the pains are sociological and concrete (poor, hungry, grieving, excluded), they also have extended religious meanings. Disciples have left homes, forage, face enormous pain, not least of which is being thoroughly misunderstood and marginalized. But being with Jesus is worth it. Those whose lives most profit from present arrangements in an unjust world (rich, full, laughter-filled, well spoken of) will find themselves on the underside when the kingdom reverses the whole of life. We are duly warned! The disciples are also warned to stick to Jesus' message and never to tickle ears as false prophets.

THE UPSIDE-DOWN KINGDOM

“Woe to you, when all men speak well of you....”

Jesus’ commentary on preacher fame and pastoral popularity.

LUKE 6 : 2 6

The Bible is full of guidance through dreams. When waking consciousness fades into sleep and our minds have a mind of their own, God may speak, and we are left with a strong impression of having been addressed. Abraham had dreams as did Joseph; Jacob saw a ladder from heaven to earth traveled by angels; King Solomon had such dreams, as did Peter and Paul.¹ I’ve had several that shook me and gave wisdom. In her book *Who Walk Alone* Margaret Evening retells a dream:

“I visited Hell, where the sub-warden showed me round. To my surprise I was led along a labyrinth of dark, dank passages from which there were numerous doors leading into cells. It was not the Hell I pictured at all. It was all rather religious and *churchy*! Each cell was identical. The central piece of furniture was an altar, and before each altar knelt greeny-gray spectral figures in attitudes of prayer and adoration. ‘But whom are they worshiping?’ I asked.

‘Themselves,’ came the reply. ‘This is *pure* self-worship. They are feeding on themselves... in a kind of auto-spiritual cannibalism. That is why they are so sickly looking and emaciated.’”

I was appalled and saddened by the row upon row of cells with their non-communicating inmates, spending eternity in solitary confinement, themselves the first, last, and only object of worship.”²

¹ An older but still helpful treatment of dreams and spiritual growth is Morton Kelsey, *Dreams: A Way To Listen To God* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978).

² Edited, Michael Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 185-186.

“I ponder,” wrote the Russian novelist Dostoyevski, “What is Hell?” He then answered his own question, “I maintain it is the suffering of being unable to love.”³

This is the fate from which Jesus Christ comes to rescue us. He comes to heal our inability to love by touching us with Holy Spirit’s power that frees and heals and by calling us into a new community where he defines what’s real in contrast with the toxic values of the world around us. We belong to him, and over time Jesus makes us creatively different, *in* the world but not *of it*, living alongside others but with invisible resources and ways of being and thinking they do not yet understand. Our life raises questions, and together we have a call to become a display case for what life in the kingdom looks like this side of its final arrival.⁴ We are salt to create thirst and light that illumines their shadows.⁵

What drove Jesus and poured through him as no one before or since was the love of God the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. It was Trinitarian love with a local address: the white-hot, tender, tri-personal, passionate, probing, kind, fierce and unrelenting, demon-evicting and disease-healing, truth-telling and lie-exposing, history-shaping and death-defying love of the One who made us and who promises, either to transform us into divine lovers or else consign us to the scrap heap of the universe as castoffs who worship at the altar of self. Divine love is after us!

Left to ourselves we are already deformed by sin and will devolve from there into withered souls, fit only for the fellowship of the devil and his angels, the residual image of God in us self-effaced. Read the newspaper for daily examples: three bored teens who murder an Australian athlete out for a bike ride. But with the love of God in Christ we can be transformed into lovers of God and people, even those who may think us foolish and dangerous. Read the Bible and the history of the church for examples. Not a morally spotless person, not a person with no history of sin but one through whom the light shines because of long, steady exposure.

³ Idem.

⁴ For a simply presented but profound treatment of the present kingdom, see James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Life* (Downer’s Grove, ILL: IVP, 2009), Chapter 2, “The Gospel Many People Have Never Heard,” 35-49; on the now and future dimensions, Derek Morpew, *Breakthrough* (Pretoria, SA: Vineyard International Publishing, 1991), “Already-Not Yet People,” 157-168.

⁵ Matthew 5:13-16.

Becoming a holy person of joy and wisdom deeply in tune with Christ, what we sometimes call a *saint*, is kind of like getting a tan. A little exposure at first because you can't stand much, then more and more exposure till the changes can't be hidden. And if the rays of the sun can have such a marked effect on the externals of our epidermis, how much more a consistent, inner exposure to the light of the uncreated God who will have his way with us, one way or the other. In the end God wins; we all adapt ourselves either in or out of the only future there will be. We are not headed towards a democracy but towards a kingdom ruled and pervaded by the Holy Trinity and full of happy souls. All are invited, but none are coerced into the kingdom of love, now or later. So what is hell but God's final monument to how terribly freedom can be misused to turn your back on the light rather than walk towards it? According to Jesus there are finally only two types of people: those to whom God says *Blessed are you* and those over whom he laments *Woe to you*, and now is the day those trajectories are established.

There was once a young man whose search for God led him to seek out a wise priest. He was told to quit his dissolute life, pray and purify his motives. Sick of his sinful history, he made steady improvement; health, courage and joy returned.

One day the director was called away, leaving the young man on his own for a time. Upon return, the priest sought out his promising protégé, "How's it going?"

The young man's face clouded over. He admitted to having given up all his prayerful practices, and of slipping back into his old cancerous habits.

"But why? What happened?" asked the priest.

"I opened the door," the boy answered sadly, "and found the light too bright."⁶

But what's the alternative? Only a darkness so total that Jesus spoke of it in the most sobering terms as emptiness and regret, as unrelieved hunger and unending grief because people found the company of false prophets easier than the disruption of true ones. Thomas Hobbes was right, "Hell is truth seen too late."⁷ So was C.S. Lewis, "The safest road to hell is the gradual one- the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts."⁸

⁶ Brian Cavanaugh, T.O.R., *The Sower's Seeds* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1990), 39.

⁷ Green, *Illustrations*, 186.

⁸ Raymond McHenry, *The Best Of "In Other Words,"* (Houston, TX: Raymond McHenry, 1996), 126.

And that is why the love of God is so annoying and demanding and why you have to constantly fight it off as it crosses your paths in the needs of other people: the poor, the hungry, the grieving and depressed, the excluded and cast off. Every one of these is an opportunity to be touched and transformed by love, a love that will not leave you alone till you breathe your last and your destiny is sealed by the trajectory you've chosen. So don't treat the needs of people, particularly the poor and lonely and unkept, as interruptions and annoyances. They are the curriculum of God calling you to enroll in the academy of love. God is the biggest pest in the universe for those who are determined to walk into the darkness and the dearest friend for those who pray, "Help me to walk deeper into the light."

You see, Jesus Christ is the continental divide of the cosmos. Where we stand with him determines where we stand with God, now and later. Go to the top of a mountain in the Rockies or in the Smokies. Find the site marked *Continental Divide*. A drop of water set in motion to the East of the summit moves to one ocean, a drop a few inches the other side of the summit into another. A minute difference at the divide, a vast difference at the destination. The little decisions of our lives will eventuate in a destiny, in a trajectory that will carry us at death into one of two different worlds. Someone put it this way:

"Sow a thought, reap an action; Sow an action, reap a habit;
Show a habit, reap a character; Sow a character, reap a destiny."⁹

Destiny begins with our thoughts and the habits which serve them, which is why Luke keeps hammering away at the fact that Jesus was a teacher. Yes, crowds came to him to be physically healed and rid of the infestations of spiritual vermin because that's where the pain and torment were, but they also came *to hear*, to be instructed by the divine professor, to have their paradigms shifted and their mental worlds turned upside-down and inside-out by the one who was the living, breathing truth about what God was up to in the world. Jesus is the only map of reality that's ever been validated by God in resurrection; to be aligned now with him by trust and loyalty is to be pointed in the right direction, towards a blessed kingdom; not to be pointed towards him is already to be aimed in the wrong direction.

We will either live in the kingdom of love because we have been shaped by it

⁹ Stephen H. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1989).

and cooperated with it in this life, or we will live in the other kingdom because that's the only place to put us when God reclaims his world and answers the long prayer of his church, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." If so, it means our life has in a twisted and perverse manner- been used to made us less than human, a distortion of the divine image, that we have refused to be touched and transformed by this great love into kingdom citizens. Life is a soul-making enterprise.

Hell is self-chosen; none will be there by accident but only by consistent and persistent resistance to a love that is always strategizing how to crack hard hearts. The second century the church father Irenaeus placed the blame properly: "Those who flee from the eternal light of God (which contains all good things in itself) are *their own cause of inhabiting eternal darkness*, which is destitute of good things."¹⁰ Despite what many trendy pulpit innovators may be teaching, your church - the United Methodist Church- is clear in its teaching on this issue, as we just read:

“The Confession of Faith, Article XII: The Judgment and the Future State: ‘We believe all men (and women) stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and in the last day. We believe in the resurrection of the dead (and then one of two destinies); the righteous to life eternal and the wicked to endless condemnation.’”¹¹

This life is not all there is; this life is preparation and probation; life counts forever because you only go around once, and Jesus Christ is the one before whom we stand at every moment and in the last moment. Every day is judgment day; every day a day to embrace the grace and truth and light God offers; every day we are slowly becoming either the kind of person who is at home with divine love or one with no taste for it at all. This is the struggle we feel every day deep within.

You have to be immensely stubborn to exclude yourself from the great party Jesus promised where the reign of God is unquestioned, where all are ever-satisfied in ever-new ways, where the comedy of laughter is pure and life-giving, and where the rewards are all out of proportion to the various pains of faithfulness to Christ in this life. To arrive in the dark anti-kingdom you literally have to spend your energy

¹⁰ David W. Bercot, editor, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 262.

¹¹ *The Book of Discipline 2012*: 74.

fending off the love of God that enfolds and upholds you every minute.

In the four woes that parallel Luke’s blessings, Jesus describes the anti-kingdom as characterized by having it all now, but then by emptiness and regret, by unsatisfied hunger, by intense mourning and weeping, and finally by being frozen in falsity because you so long believed the comfortable words of the false prophets. It’s not a state you want to enter. Jesus warned against it repeatedly, in fact more than anyone. Hell as a place to be avoided is not some minor theme or late addition; it was his consistent teaching! To aim only at the good life as currently defined by our culture is- frankly- to miss God. Wealth without conscience, luxuriating in the finest cuisine without ever a thought of the needs of others, a life of distraction filled with entertainments and comedy, looking down from your superior perch with a self-satisfied chuckle, in circles where all speak well of you. That is the world and the obsessions that are under judgment and will pass away when the kingdom of God interrupts the world as we have known it in *the great rearrangement*. All false values and false loyalties will die on that day as history is turned upside-down.

So in the text before us, Jesus stands in the future of his Father and from there speaks back into the present a series blessings and woes, congratulations and condolences, celebrating lives well lived in love and condemning lives wasted in a thousand self-centered pleasant diversions.¹² Jesus claims to know and speak for God at the end. And it is his resurrection from the dead that validates all his claims. In resurrection God says, in effect, “Jesus’ words are my words. Listen!”

We will each end up in one of these two columns because each cluster of four describes not four different people but four characteristics of one kind of person. There is no third option, no neutral place to stand for the undecided, the uncommitted, the procrastinator and those who are always seeking but never finding. We are all in this game. Life is for keeps; it matters in which direction you are headed and if your fix on life is taken from the truth north of Jesus Christ. Let today be for you a mid-course correction. There’s has been a lot of death in this church lately, and every time I stand beside a corpse and commend them to God in prayer, I say to myself, “Brother Phil, this is for keeps. One day it will be you! I then ask, What kind of person am I becoming by my daily decisions?” Grave sides are sobering locations.

¹² Charles Talbert, *Reading Luke* (New York: Crossroads, 1987), 70, “The one uttering the beatitude does so from a position within the councils of God with an awareness of the ultimate outcome of history....”

Have you made the choice to respond to the love of God shown in Jesus Christ and to stay on the path all your life, no matter the cost to your welfare and reputation? And so that you may know your location, let's pay careful attention for a few minutes to the community Jesus created and to the two paths he laid out before his followers.

The Healing Community (vv.17-19)

Verses 17 through 19 are one of those wonderful Lukan summaries where he pauses to pull all the pieces together and take our breath away with a kingdom vision of what it was like to be around Jesus. The twelve have been chosen after a night of prayer as the symbol of Israel restored. Together with them and a larger circle of male and female disciples, Jesus comes down from the night of communion with God to face the needy masses. It's a unified church facing a needy world, and look what happens!

Heavenly blessings on a divided church will always be spotty. Here a little, there a little, a flash fire that burns, then goes out. But here, coming down the mountain, was God's army of liberation: Jesus, his apostolic officers, and troops of disciples. Come down to take on the ignorance, diseases, and demonic strongholds of the world. I love it. I long for it. I caught a glimpse of it two decades ago when I marched into Carolina stadium with thousands of other clergy to hear the Pope John Paul II preach a powerful gospel message on basic Christianity. I caught a glimpse of the glory of a unified church and it made my pulse quicken, because I know what comes after unity, and that is the power of the Holy Spirit. The walls must come down before the way can open up. I relish preliminary signs that the pastors of Greenwood are starting to come together.

Crowds were there from all over, a mixed mass of Jews from Judea and Jerusalem, Gentiles from the old Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon. A mixed mob of monotheists and polytheists, pious Jews and pagan Greeks, all bearing the same marks of the fall and all with the same basic needs: a need for *truth*- Jesus the teacher; a need for *physical restoration*- Jesus the healer; a need for freedom from the breaches of *personal evil*- Jesus the exorcist.¹³ And he did it all, but in a particular order. First the freedom of healing and deliverance, and only then the explanatory teaching. First deeds of loving power, then interpretive words about the kingdom.

¹³ Our best studies remain the work of Graham Twelftree, *Jesus the Exorcist: A Contribution to the Study of the Historical Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), *In the Name of Jesus: Exorcism Among The Early Christians* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2007).

My observation is that people listen much better after they've been marinated in the love of God at their point of need.

Luke notes, and without fear of contradiction by those who were eyewitnesses or knew those that were, that on that day Jesus healed them *all*. This is the kingdom at ground level in full display. Now all these people later became sick again and died, but for a season it was as if they'd stepped through some invisible portal into a new world, which they had, and it changed them forever.

I have noticed that Luke distinguishes between healings (which involve the restoration of function) and deliverances (which involve removing a spirit which has set up residence on or in a person). Not all maladies had overtly spiritual roots, though some do even today. I've seen remarkable changes in people who've been involved in the occult after they renounce these practices and turn in faith to Jesus. Most disease, however, is just the personal price we all pay for living in a radically fallen world as a vulnerable human being. Creation is broken at a deep level, and so are we all. Other diseases are unnecessary and self-inflicted. People chose habits which rob their health. But whatever the root and the fruit, Jesus consistently restored people to physical, emotional, and relational wholeness without requiring of them a long questionnaire on their sins. He was therapist, exorcist, healer and confessor, teacher and tutor in the kingdom of God. The spiritual gifts of healing, discernment of spirits, faith, and miracles flowed through him like a deep river. His was a profound partnership with invisible friends. The Father willed it; the Son obeyed, and the Spirit empowered. You get the impression reading across the gospel stories that each situation was customized by the Spirit with whom Jesus was in constant partnership and who supplied him with insight and power.¹⁴

Suspend for a moment the rational skepticism of unbelief and picture the joy and ecstasy of the scene before us. Heaven came down and landed so that all within its force field of love were made whole. Arthritic joints moved with ease instead of creaking with pain. Blind eyes saw. Syphilitic sores vanished. Clef palates closed. Cancers withered. Arteries opened. Women found out later their infertility was gone. Drunkards sobered. Diabetes vanished. Leprosy left. Spirits fled. Sanity was regained. Depression lifted. The power of the Spirit was moving through Jesus like a mighty torrent, and all who dared step into the flow were blessed. Jesus welcomed

¹⁴ For Jesus' perspective, see John 5:19-30.

the masses of broken people and demonstrated the new world.¹⁵

Want to know what the kingdom of God looks like this side of heaven? Mediate on this scene. It gives me hope and makes me miserable. There, at least for a little while, the walls come down between Jew and Gentile, rich and poor as the benefits of the kingdom were broadcast over a fertile field. A new humanity was created. First grace, then guidance. First a healing meeting at the foot of a mountain, then the tough message about a counter-cultural lifestyle and warnings of eternal loss. I believe in healing, though I don't see as much as I'd like; I believe in hell, though I haven't been and don't intend to go; I believe in demons, though I've only fumigated a few minor ones, and I believe that the church has yet to come to terms with the demand of Jesus that we be a different people with a different set of values and practices than the world around us.

Blessings And Woes (vv.20-26)

What is a *beatitude* anyway? It's a common literary form from the wisdom tradition of the ancient world. They teach and warn, even startle and shock as blessings are pronounced on the unexpected. They are short, easily remembered, and have a definite form. First an announcement, "Blessed are...", then the *who* (an individual or group), and finally the *why*, often *coupled with a promise*. Jesus did not create the form; he inherited and invested it with his own kingdom content. It does not confer a blessing but rather announces who already is from God's viewpoint. It's not a direct call to do or be something. Jesus is not telling us we ought to be poor or hungry and broken-hearted or try to be a martyr. A beatitude is not an *ought* or a *must* or a *should* but an *is*, a statement of fact. Simply put, "It celebrates someone's success."¹⁶ It's an awards ceremony, "And the winners are...."

¹⁵ The clever skeptic Marcus Borg writes, "Despite the difficulty which miracles pose for the modern mind, on historical grounds it is virtually indisputable that Jesus was a healer and exorcist. The reasons for this judgment are threefold. First, there is widespread attestation in our earliest sources. Second, healings and exorcisms were relatively common, both within Judaism and in the Hellenistic world. Third, even his opponents did not challenge the claim that powers of healing flowed through him.... By admiring followers and skeptical foes alike, he was seen as a holy man with healing powers" (*Jesus: A New Vision* [New York: Harper and Row, 1987]), 61).

¹⁶ Talbert, *Reading Luke*, 69.

We love beatitudes; it's why we have so many awards shows. Beatitudes are often used in TV commercials, "Happy is the man who watches football drinking a certain beer, for his is all the gusto he can grab." "Congratulations to the one who picks the right mutual fund, for he shall enjoy an indulgent retirement and be the envy of all." "Congratulations to the woman with buns of steel, for she will have no panty line."¹⁷ And a reverse beatitude is a condolence, a woe, or in extreme cases a curse. They tell us who the losers are from God's perspective. But since the world has a different value system than the kingdom, the forms sometimes get mixed, as in the following parody, the *un-beatitudes*:

"Happy are	the pushers,	for they get on in the world.
Happy are	the hard-boiled,	for they never let life hurt them.
Happy are	the complainers,	for they get their own way in the end.
Happy are	the blase,	for they never worry over their sins.
Happy are	the slave drivers,	for they get results...." ¹⁸

Jesus is not laying out the path to the good life or the way to the American dream of me getting mine and then being let alone by my neighbors. In this life there is nothing blessed about being poor, hungry, gripped in perpetual grief, or finding yourself without support. The Lord's audience is not humanity in general but his followers in particular, with others listening in on the teaching, verse 20, "And is lifted up his eyes on *his disciples*, and said..." To follow him as disciples is the right decision with a grand outcome, and they are to be congratulated, even if a high cost is attached. This is because it means living in another world, a world that has not yet fully arrived and is in great tension with the world as it now is.

Remember that first century Palestine was not the free market economy of modern America where jobs are to be found opportunity remains for the diligent. They were under the boot of Rome. Life was a zero sum game because there was only a fixed and limited supply of goods. For someone to have more, someone else had to have less; people of power grew rich by taking from the weak. Two thirds of

¹⁷ The link between beatitudes and TV I owe to Hermann Hendrickx, *The Third Gospel For The Third World, Volume IIA* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

¹⁸ Green, *Illustrations*, 417.

the agricultural produce ended up with absentee landlords and ruling urban elites.¹⁹ To be an artisan family like Jesus' meant you'd already lost your ancestral lands. Life was top down and based on exploitation and religious legitimation of the status quo. Who Jesus blessed are the poor who opted out from under the system of domination to follow him for a new deal. And in doing that, they found the mysterious resources of God opening in a new way. Present tense, "Blessed are you poor, for yours *is* the kingdom God."

Their trust in God's provision in his agent Jesus was not misplaced. In the presence of Jesus the sick were healed, the demonized freed; each day they prayed for and received daily bread. But the rich already had theirs, and felt no need to become followers. They had it all, so why bother. But those who profited from the system of dominations and exploitation of that world would find themselves empty handed when the fullness of the kingdom came crashing down upon them. They would have no place in the new world where justice and love reigned.

Which brings me to a question and a spiritual discipline? What are you trusting in? What is your source? And the corresponding spiritual discipline is generosity. Do you know anyone who is really poor, and what are you doing about it?

Along with poverty goes hunger. I've never known involuntary hunger. But Jesus promises that the hungry among his followers will be satisfied by God's banquet, sometimes through handouts, sometimes with Jesus picking up the tab as in the feeding of the five thousand. There is no evidence beyond the forty days in the wilderness that Jesus fasted. He ate and drank so freely that he was accused of being a drunk and a pig, a *wine-bibber and a glutton*. But to those who had everything, and for whom it was a block to discipleship, Jesus made a promise, "You will be forever hungry. Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger." A life bent on satisfying to the max the appetites of the body, whether for comfort or sex or food always leads to bondage, or as we call it, *addiction*- a craving emptiness.

Which brings me to a second question and corresponding spiritual discipline? What do you really want? What is your heart hungry for? And have you thought about fasting your way free of the distorted appetites that have you bound? It is a paradox that physical fasting increases spiritual hunger, and that putting aside a

¹⁹ Marcus Borg and N.T. Wright, *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions* (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row, 1999), 71.

legitimate but limited good for a season will open us to greater goods. And that silence helps us to hear. And that most of us have very little appetite and capacity for God. As a glutton, as one who often uses food as an emotional sedative and substitute for prayer, I need fasting in my life as a kingdom discipline that my real heart hungers and not just belly hungers may guide my life.

With the third blessing and woe we find a distinction between two kind of tears and two kinds of laughter. “Blessed are you that weep now, for you shall laugh. Woe to you that laugh now, for you shall weep.” Exactly reversed. We may be sad because we hope to receive and have not yet, or we may be sad because all hope is gone. To laugh now in the face of another’s misfortune is different from the laughter God promises to give. So when you see a tear, look for what’s behind it; use discernment. And when you hear a laugh, do not immediately let it become your own. Know the difference between the cynical and self-satisfied laughter of the world and the humor of the kingdom which is life-giving.

Which brings me to a third question and the next discipline. What breaks your heart? Where has the pain of God seared your soul so that hot tears course your cheeks? The discipline here is merciful service, that I choose for the sake of Christ to identify with someone in pain and to wait there with them till God stops the tears and restores hope.

I have a big stake in the last item in each column. Folks, the greatest sin of the preachers are not getting caught with your clothes off with the wrong person or with your hands in the till. That’s low-level stuff compared to the bigger betrayal. The great sin is to shape your message for the sake of popularity or career advancement. It’s telling people what they want to hear rather than what God says across the breadth of the Bible. It is to make the message serve me rather than me serve the message. Many people- I am sad to say- want an easy gospel, a safe religion, one that fits their prejudices, and they will pay well the one who can fill the church with eager ears and make the church look successful. I enjoy genuine affirmation as well as any one. But when everyone is pleased, when all the press is positive, I hear the sobering words of Jesus, “Woe to you, when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the *false prophets*.” This Christian message, when faithfully presented, is cross-grained to conventional wisdom and rubs people raw, including those who preach it. It turns worlds upside-down. It is not a safe or easy message.

Jesus didn’t say that we should go out and unnecessarily offend people by being jerks; he did say that loyalty to him and his agenda would inevitably set us at

odds with a world that was going the other way. The four terms in verse 22 build on one another: “Hate you,” “exclude you,” “revile you,” and finally “cast you out.” “When that happens,” said Jesus, “get happy; jump and dance, go nuts, for you are in good company with me and the true prophets.” It frightens me to think that one day Jesus might look at me and ask, “Why were you more afraid of the people than of me? I gave you a call; when did turn it into a career? When did they domesticate you?” Methodism is really good at this. Suck up to move up. Knock off all the rough edges to make the gospel smooth and easy and non-offensive.

The fourth question is, Has my witness for Christ and his coming kingdom ever drawn any fire? If not, why not? and the corresponding discipline is that of truthful speech. Am I willing to speak up and speak out for Christ in public when an issue is at stake that could cost me personally? Silence can be a form of cowardice, and every public injustice we wink at says to someone, “You don’t matter to me.” Generosity, fasting, service and witness: these are the blessed disciplines that will keep us open to the grace we need in order not to hear a curse but a blessing when we die. We must be formed into a people of love and courage and wisdom. Be skeptical and suspicious of the world’s definition of *the good life*. Rich, fat, happy, and well thought of looks good now, but they’re all in the wrong column according to Jesus.

CONCLUSION

A soldier once approached the Teacher. “I have mastered all of the martial arts,” he said calmly. “I have risen to the highest rank possible for a man of my training. I now wish to learn about God. Can you help me?”

The Teacher smiled and invited the man to sit at the table. “Let us have a cup of tea before we talk further.”

After the soldier sat, the Teacher began to pour tea into the man’s cup. He filled the cup and kept on pouring until the tea was running over the table onto the floor. The soldier watched dumbfounded until he could no longer be silent. “Stop! It is full! The cup will not hold more tea!”

Placing the teapot on the table, the Teacher spoke to the soldier, “You are so full of yourself that there is not room for God. You must be emptied.”²⁰

Do you know where you stand? There is room for you in the blessing of God, now and later. But the only way to inherit such is to follow and obey Jesus, not the values and obsessions and plans our current world has for us.

²⁰ W.R. White, *Stories for the Journey* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1988), 63.
