

7.45am & 9.30am

'Luke - The Doctor Is In'

13 November 2016

Blessings for the Poor

Luke 6:17-36

Introduction:

Today's Bible passage is about generosity, and it calls us to examine what's really important to us.

The story is told of a pastor who was preaching in his church one hot day, and an elderly woman fainted and hit her head on the pew in front of her on the way down.

The service was halted and an ambulance was called. As she was being wheeled into the ambulance, she called for her daughter in a frail voice.

Her daughter, thinking her mother was about to give her last words, leaned in close to hear.

Her mother said, "My money for the collection is in my purse."

Recap:

We're taking a jump over a section in Luke's gospel as we track Jesus' interaction with the poor, the marginalised and the vulnerable. We left Jesus in chapter five having called Levi the tax collector to follow him as a disciple.

From there, Jesus and his disciples are met with increasing hostility from the religious leaders for the way Jesus treats the Law. They take issue with Jesus for his supposed negligence of the practice of fasting, and of his supposed breaking of the Sabbath law by picking grain to eat and even for healing a man on the Sabbath day. This sounds a lot like their issue with Jesus after Levi's calling, "Why do you eat with tax collectors and sinners?"

If Jesus is really who he says he is, why is not a rigid law-keeper. The answer to that of course, is that the religious leaders haven't really understood the Law, and worship the Law itself rather than the Law-giver, who incidentally is standing right in front of them.

From there, Jesus departs again for private and undistracted prayer time with God. This time, he heads up a mountain. He's clearly desperate for some peace! But there is more to the mountain: as we read further, we will see echoes of God meeting with his people at the mountain at the time of the Exodus, and establishing the old covenant with them.

It's hard to pinpoint exactly which mountain Luke is talking about, but looking at the geography of the area it might be more accurate to say that Jesus went up "into the mountains" in Galilee.

After spending all night prayer, he calls the men who become known as the Twelve Apostles, the "sent ones".

1. The Sermon On The Plain (6:17-19)

We pick up the story in Luke 6:17, where we began our reading earlier.

"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 the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. And those who

were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all.”

(Luke 6:17–19 ESV)

This short introduction serves to give us the setting for the sermon that follows. Putting this whole section together, a reader might notice that the whole event bears a lot of similarity to what’s known as the ‘Sermon on the Mount’, as Matthew records in chapter 5 of his gospel, and Mark records in chapter 3.

Gospel Differences

Just to explain why there is a difference in the way each of these three has recorded the event, we must bear in mind that they each have a **different purpose** in writing.

The purpose that Mark had behind his gospel was give his readers the evidence needed for asking the question, “Who is Jesus?” The answer he wants his readers to come to is that Jesus is the Christ, the promised Messiah of the Old Testament. He writes a short, punchy, fast-paced gospel for this purpose, and barely records the content of Jesus’ sermon.

Matthew, on the other hand, has a very clearly Jewish audience in mind, and writes his gospel with many references to the Old Testament history and spirituality of the Jewish people. When he records the Sermon on the Mount, the location is highlighted, the appointment of twelve apostles, analogous to the Twelve Tribes of Israel is highlighted, and the Sermon itself is neatly ordered, with a clear structure and flow that almost resembles God giving Moses the Law for his people on Mt Sinai.

Matthew is trying to show his readers that Jesus fulfils the Jewish Scriptures.

Luke, in contrast to both, as we said in our first message in this series, is writing a carefully researched history and biography of Jesus' life, so that a man named Theophilus, as well as future readers, might have certainty regarding the things they have been taught about Jesus. It's quite likely that he recorded the Sermon 'as it happened' as opposed to Matthew, who may have supplemented extended blocks of Jesus' teaching from other occasions.

It's worth keeping different purposes in mind whenever we find apparent discrepancies in the various gospels. We could almost say that Mark's gospel is personal, Matthew's gospel is theological, and Luke's gospel is historical and biographical. We might even go so far as to say that Mark and Matthew were written to unbelievers to encourage them to consider who Jesus is, Luke writes his gospel to believers to give them assurance of who Jesus is. These descriptions are not categorical, but they do help us understand what's going on.

We've got Jesus up on the mountain calling to himself those twelve men who would carry his ministry and message to the ends of the earth. Jesus then teaches and heals a great crowd that has come to him. This happens on the plain, away from the cities and the populated centres, even away from Jerusalem. The people coming to him are from all over the region, from Galilee, from "all Judea and Jerusalem" (v17), and even from the coastal areas of Tyre and Sidon.

At one level, the contrast of **Judea and Jerusalem with Tyre and Sidon** represents a southern and northern extreme. At another level, Judea and Jerusalem represent the religious centre of God's people, while Tyre and Sidon represent the far northern extreme of what was once the Promised Land.

You might even remember that when Jesus began preaching in the synagogue in Nazareth in Luke 4, he made a point about how God's care extended to a lonely widow in Zarephath, in Sidon, rather than all the widows in Jerusalem.

Tyre and Sidon may have been a region with a very low concentration of “God’s people”, but these people were not excluded from the gospel message. Indeed, Jesus draws all nations to himself to hear the Word of the Lord, and to experience the power of that Word as people are healed and as demons are cast out.

2. Those Who Have Nothing... Have Everything (v20-23)

The sermon, when we get into it, is broken into three parts. Like any good sermon...

In the first part, Jesus pronounces four blessings:

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

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

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

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

“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.”

(Luke 6:20–23 ESV)

Jesus pronounces four blessings:

1. firstly for the **poor**, for theirs is the Kingdom of God;
2. secondly for the **hungry**, for they shall be satisfied;
3. thirdly for those **who are sorrowful or who weep**, for they shall be laugh;
4. and fourthly and finally, for the **hated and persecuted**, for their reward is great in heaven.

I'm sure you can spot the parallels here between Jesus sermon and the section he read from Isaiah 61 in the Nazareth synagogue in ch4. That's where we first encountered the 'poor' that Jesus references in v20.

What we learnt there is that we can't categorise the "poor" neatly as the materially poor anymore than we can say they are the exclusively "spiritually" poor. This is a total poverty, it's a lack of spiritual and material resource which makes dependance upon God alone essential. And Jesus calls them blessed. They are admired in heaven.

This is clearly the same for the hungry, or for those who are sorrowful, or for the hated or persecuted. Remember, this is how Jesus is describing his disciples, and even highlights how their persecution comes "on account of the Son of Man!" (v22)

But Jesus contrasts this present, pitiful state with a future, fulfilled state.

The poor *now* will receive the Kingdom of God *then*.

The hungry *now* will be satisfied *then*.

Those who weep *now* will laugh *then*.

Those who are persecuted *now* will have a great reward *then*.

Suffering is a normal part of Christian experience. The German pastor **Dietrich Bonhoeffer** once said:

“Discipleship means allegiance to the suffering Christ, and it is therefore not at all surprising that Christians should be called upon to suffer. In fact, it is a joy and a token of His grace.”¹

And so to the presently suffering, to those who in following Christ forsake worldly wealth, appetites, pleasures and accolades, they have a much greater future to look forward to. All is not in vain.

Those who look like they have nothing, in Christ actually have everything.

3. Those Who Have Everything... Have Nothing (v24-26)

In v24 Jesus turns from blessings to woes. The word “woe” is about great distress, grief or sorrow. It’s an old word, and the English word for “woe” is almost identical to the word Jesus uses here.

Jesus says:

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation [comfort].

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

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

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

(Luke 6:24–26 ESV)

It’s not hard to see what Jesus is saying here. This is polar opposite of those who are blessed.

- The **rich**... they have received their comfort
- The **full/satisfied**... they shall be hungry
- The **laughing**... they shall weep

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 100, 101. *in* R. Kent Hughes, *Luke Volume 1: That You May Know the Truth* (Preaching the Word; Accordance electronic ed. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), 221.

- The **well-regarded**... people are fickle

Just a note on the two references Jesus makes the the “prophets” and the “false prophets” in v23 and v26. In the Old Testament, there was a trend amongst God’s people that they frequently rejected the true prophets of God, while chasing after the false prophets who tickled their ears with the things they wanted to hear.

Legend has it that Isaiah was eventually sawn in two. When Jeremiah prophesied the fall of Jerusalem, he was thrown in prison, and then chucked in a dry cistern.

Consider this summary from **Jeremiah** himself:

“An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule at their direction; my people love to have it so,”

(Jeremiah 5:30–31 ESV)

You can rarely have the admiration of God and of the world, because they operate on two entirely different systems of values. Usually, you can either have one or the other.

Of course, if you are hated and persecuted, it is our duty to ensure that it is because of our Christlikeness that people dislike us, and not because of our lack of it.

For those who have worldly wealth, have satisfied worldly appetites, indulge in worldly pleasures and collect worldly accolades, *at the expense of a life entirely dependant upon God*, it doesn’t get any better than this. And in fact, it’s all downhill from here.

English author **John Blanchard** once said,

“A man caught up with this world is not ready for the next one.”²

² John Blanchard, ed., *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians* (Accordance electronic ed. New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), n.p.

- John Blanchard

Typically less tactful, **Martin Luther** once remarked something similar:

“God commonly gives riches to foolish people to whom he gives nothing else.”³

- Martin Luther

Jesus has divided humanity into two groups of people: those who suffer now but will celebrate later, and those who celebrate now but will suffer later.

What’s the difference? Well, it’s simply the relationship people have with Jesus Christ. And you will find yourself in one of these two categories depending on the relationship you have with Jesus Christ.

To give obey Jesus call on your life, to “deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him”, to have your sins paid for in full through the death of Jesus, is to embark on a life that is more suited to future glory than present glory.

That is a choice each one of us has to make. Let me encourage you not to put it off.

4. Therefore... love like you have nothing to lose (Luke 6:27-36)

Now that Jesus has divided humanity, represented by his hearers, into two categories, he then gives them a radical manifesto for social transformation:

³ John Blanchard, ed., *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians* (Accordance electronic ed. New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), n.p.

““But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also, and from one who takes away your cloak do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods do not demand them back. And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.

“If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”

(Luke 6:27–36 ESV)

Let’s break this down.

Jesus makes a shocking opening statement:

““But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.”

(Luke 6:27–28 ESV)

This was a shocking statement for a couple of reasons, one of which was the normal practice under Jewish law at the time.

Everybody believed in the command that Jesus himself upheld, to love your neighbour as yourself. Your neighbour was understood in the Old Testament Law as “your brother” or the “son of your own people” (Leviticus 19:17-18). This was then understood to infer that those who were not fellow Israelites, i.e. your enemies, should *not* be loved.

So for Jesus to extend “love your neighbour” to “love your enemies”, this was like almost irrational.

Love your enemies. And Jesus breaks down that love. If someone hates you, do good to them. If someone curses you, bless them. If someone abuses you, slanders you, treats you wrong, pray for them.

Jesus takes the practical application even further. If someone hits you on the cheek, says Jesus, don't hit back. Offer them the other cheek also.

What?! What's going to happen if you do that? Well, chances are you might get hit again. Is Jesus' simply advocating a peaceful ethic of non-retaliation? Not quite. Let's keep going to see what his point is.

If someone takes away your cloak (as would happen in Jesus' day, if someone took you to court and sued you, the judge might order you to hand over possessions, such as your coat, as recompense); if someone takes away your coat, give them your tunic also.

To put this in perspective, what Jesus is saying is that if someone take your outer garment by force, give them your undergarment as well. But then you're left naked!

Finally, Jesus says that if someone begs from you, give to them. If someone takes away your goods, do not demand them back, instead let them have them. Which reminds me, if anyone has lent me books and wants them back, please come and see me sometime. Or don't.

So what have we got? A symmetrically-bruised, naked, poor and possessionless follower of Jesus! I don't think that's actually what Jesus is going for here, and I'll tell you why.

Do you notice the common action behind each of these practical examples?

Give. Be generous. Give, give, and give. And then give some more. No matter what people take from you, your dignity, your possessions, your joy, your reputation, your time, your money... treat them with love and give to them. Shower them with gifts of whatever resources you have available to yourself.

Jesus says,

“And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them.”

(Luke 6:31 ESV)

Christmas is just around the corner. And with it, presents! Gifts! We love to receive, don't we? Jesus here tells us to focus not on receiving, but on giving. Let others do the receiving we would love to be doing.

From v32, Jesus moves into making three arguments against the status quo we spoke of earlier, where neighbours, kinsmen, are loved and enemies are hated.

If you love those who love you, if you only do good to those who do good to you, if you only give to those from whom you expect receive back, perhaps with interest, what benefit, or credit is that to you really?

All your doing is making the scales balance. Or even tipping them in your favour.

And here's the warning:

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation [comfort].

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

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

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

(Luke 6:24–26 ESV)

Summarising his sermon, Jesus says:

“But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”

(Luke 6:35–36 ESV)

That comment, “your reward will be great”, should remind us of v23, where Jesus said to his disciples:

““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;”

(Luke 6:22–23 ESV)

Jesus isn’t proclaiming a new social ethic of peaceful, ascetic non-retaliation. He is instead proclaiming a new social ethic of radical generosity.

What’s the difference? Quite simply, love. A love which reflects and knows the love of God, demonstrated in the gospel, demonstrated in the deaths and resurrection of Jesus Christ, expressed in the Bible **like this**:

“God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”

(Romans 5:8 ESV)

“In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

(1 John 4:10 ESV)

God didn't love those who first loved him. He loved us when we were unlovely and unloveable.

And for those who have been loved by God, listen to what we have received:

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,”

(Ephesians 1:3 ESV)

“And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

(Philippians 4:19 ESV)

Friends, to put it bluntly, those who are in Jesus have it all. It may not seem like it for the few short years we're on earth, but it will plainly obvious to us for the rest of eternity, when the present struggles and sorrows are mere specks on a distant horizon.

For the Christian, they can and indeed must subscribe to Jesus' new *gospel* ethic of radical generosity. Christians have nothing to lose, and everything, not to gain, but to *give*.

This is the big idea I'd like us to take home from today's text:

Jesus calls us to give generously because we have nothing to lose.

As Christians, we need to spend time focussing on our heavenly treasure, the treasure that we have in Christ, so that our earthly treasure loses its lustre. After all, you can't take it with you.

And when we do that, when we place our security, and our value, and our wealth in what Christ has achieved for us, rather than what we (foolishly) think we have achieved for ourselves, then we will begin to see that what we have is really a gift to us from God, and which we can freely use to ‘pray it forward’, being radically generous to those around us no matter who they are, even if they are our worst enemy, because that’s exactly how generous God was to us.

Let’s pray.