

Sixth Sunday after Epiphany – February 17, 2019
Good Shepherd Ev. Lutheran Church

Pastor Charles Heup

Luke 6:20-26 (NIV)

Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. (21) Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. (22) 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. (23) "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. (24) "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. (25) Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. (26) Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Friends in Christ,

Things are not always as they seem, are they? Many of you have probably seen this optical illusion. Which line is longer? A? or B? In reality both lines are exactly the same length. Now what do you see? Do you see You? Or Me? How about this? Do you see Good or Evil? At times, our eyes deceive us don't they. Things aren't always as they seem to be.

Now let's try some word associations – Does the word suggest something good or bad? Poor, hungry, weeping, being hated. How about rich, well fed, filled with laughter, being loved by all? Most people would agree that the first list of words was bad and the second was good. But Jesus has a different perspective on things – it's a perspective worth remembering because sometimes we wonder things like, "God, if I'm a Christian, why does my life seem so hard? Why am I still experiencing so much pain? Why does it seem like everyone else has it so much easier than I do?" Sometimes we need someone to help us see the difference between what is illusion and what is reality. Well, in our text for today, Jesus offers us that very thing. Here Jesus addresses a number of real life issues and helps us see them as they really are. This evening (morning), as we consider our sermon text let's listen as

Theme: Jesus Speaks of Blessings and Woes

1. He helps us to put our woes into perspective with a promise for those who are hurting
2. He helps us to put our blessings into perspective with a warning for those who are not hurting

First, Jesus offers a promise for those who are hurting -- be it physically, emotionally or financially. Jesus says, for example, "*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*"

Now, I should probably say that there are a lot of people who misunderstand Jesus' words. They take Jesus to mean, "If you are someone who is poor here on earth, then you'll be going to heaven when you die." Or to put it another way, "The harder you have it here on earth, the more injustice you face in life, then the better you'll have it in heaven." But those ideas just don't fit with the rest of Scripture. God never said that poverty is a one-way ticket to paradise. You could be the poorest person on the face of the earth and it still wouldn't make you right with God. You'd still be a sinner. You'd still be deserving of God's condemnation. Unless you live a perfect life, you have no ticket to heaven-unless of course, somebody lived a perfect life in your place. And that's exactly what Jesus Christ did for all mankind-rich or poor, well-fed or hungry.

The bottom line is this: there is only one thing that will put a person in heaven. And it's not poverty, or hunger, it's not sorrow or persecution. The only thing that will put a human in heaven is faith in Jesus Christ as Savior!

Now since it's faith that saves and not poverty that leads us to ask what does Jesus mean by the promise in our text? "*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God?*" One way to understand this passage would be to take it in a spiritual sense – understanding it to be similar to Jesus' words in Matthew 5, where Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God." While it is true that in order for a person to be saved, he must recognize that he is a poor, miserable sinner I'm not sure that that's the kind of poverty or the kind of hunger that Jesus is referring to here in Luke's gospel. This account seems to be different than the Matthew account. Here Jesus seems to be referring to real financial poverty, and physical hunger in contrast to real riches and physical satisfaction. As I hear Jesus words in this text I'm reminded of the parable of the Rich man and poor Lazarus. That parable stressed the importance of listening to the Word of God. But in it the rich man was told, **“remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.”**

In our text for today Jesus is talking to people who are already Christians. Luke specifically tells us that Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "*Blessed are you who are poor....*" Jesus is speaking to people who are already saved by grace, through faith in Jesus and who also may be poor, hungry and hated. So Jesus' point is not "you Christians are going to go to heaven because you're poor." Rather, it's "you Christians are going to heaven, even though you may be poor, or hungry or hurting."

My friends, do you see what those words mean for your life? Suddenly, some of those things that seemed so important, those things that are so highly regarded in the eyes of the world-aren't! So your family hasn't been featured in Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. Who cares? Heaven is your home. And if, this past Christmas, you didn't find the keys to a luxury car under the tree, so what? God has given you the Keys to the Kingdom. And maybe all you have in the cupboard is a package of Ramen noodles. Yet you know that you have a place reserved for you at the Lord's eternal banquet feast.

Or maybe you have been doing a lot of crying lately. Your heart is heavy as you think of people who are sick, people who are hurting, people who are dying. And yet, because you know that Jesus has destroyed death forever, you can still be joyful. You know that Jesus has taken the sting out of death. You can say with the Apostle Paul, "*I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us.*"

Or maybe you are being openly ridiculed for your Christian faith. Maybe you're regarded as some kind of prude for your views on pre-marital relations or you're labeled a male chauvinist for holding to a Biblical view of the roles of men and women.

My friends, when the world looks at things like poverty, hunger, sorrow, persecution-they'd say that all of them are bad. They all seem to be things that should be avoided at all costs. They're all things that might lead a person to say, "God, that's not fair." And if that's all there was to the picture, I guess I'd agree. But that's not all there is to the picture, is it?

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, Jesus has opened our eyes to see the big picture, the eternal picture. God has led you and me to see that we were once on the path to hell. And now, by the sacrifice of Jesus, we are on the path to heaven. We've been adopted into God's family and have God's promise that he will not only take care of our needs in this life, but will take us into life eternal when we die. That's what is real! That's the vision God has given us by faith. And it's that vision that changes our attitude about everything else in life. No matter how bad the day you're having, no matter how little you have in your cupboard or your checking account, or your garage, still you can say with Jesus, "I will...*Rejoice in that day and leap for joy.*" Why will I rejoice? "*Because great is (my) reward in heaven.*"

Now just as surely as Jesus has helped us put our woes into perspective with his promises to he will help us put our blessings into perspective with his warnings for those who are not hurting.

You know what I mean by those who aren't "hurting," right? We look at people around us and say "That guy certainly isn't 'hurting.'" Well, here in our text, Jesus addresses four such categories of people. He says, "*Woe to you who are rich... Woe to you who are well fed... Woe to you who laugh now...*" And finally, "*Woe to you when all men speak well of you*".

Let's take a little closer look at each one of these warnings. First, Jesus says, "*Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.*" With those words, is Jesus condemning all rich people? No. The Bible gives us many examples of believers who were very wealthy. Job, Abraham, and David to name a few. No rather, Jesus is condemning all those who think that riches are their life. He's speaking to those who think that accumulating wealth is the purpose or goal of life. In fact, in this section, Jesus speaks to four groups of people whose goals or purposes in life are out of whack.

He speaks first to the person who says, "My goal in life is to be rich. I want to be able to retire at age 55 with a net worth of \$1 million plus." Goal #2: "I want to be well-fed. I want to be able to go out to the finest restaurants. I want to be able to indulge in every culinary delight. That's the purpose of my life." Goal #3: "I want to laugh now. I want to just have a good time. I want to enjoy myself. I want to laugh at whatever delights my sinful nature. Goal #4: "I want everyone to speak well of me, that is, I want to be popular. I want everyone I meet to like me-no matter what I have to do to win their favor."

So, what is Jesus' saying to these people? He's saying, "Friends, if the goal of your life is have the best here and now, if that's what you treasure more than anything else, then you may well achieve your goal, but it will be very short-lived. You may have comfort, you may have pleasure in life, but you won't have it in the life to come. Listen to how Jesus takes each one of these things that look so good to the world and says, "they'll all come to an end." "*Woe to you how are rich, for you have received your comfort,*" that is, your life of luxury will not extend beyond the grave. You who are well fed now-will go hungry. You who laugh now, will mourn and weep. And you who want everyone to adore you-well, that's how the world has treated false prophets for centuries. Everyone loves someone who tells people what they want to hear. But Christians who are true to God and his word-they aren't always the most popular kids on the block.

So what's Jesus' point? Isn't he asking us to search our hearts? Doesn't each one of us here need to ask, "What is the purpose of my life? What is my goal in life? Am I here to merely get ahead? Is my goal to be comfortable? Do I see my value in terms of what I drive or where I eat? Has my desire to get ahead in life led me to cheat God through my meager offerings? Am I devaluing the eternal gifts he's given to me by failing to use them for the purposes he intends?"

I don't know about you, but this section of God's pricks my conscience and convicts me. That self-centered, materialistic sinful nature is all too evident in my life. Too often, I have defined my happiness in terms of what I am or own. Too often, I have set my goals in terms of my pleasure, my enjoyment rather than God's mission for me. I've been more concerned with being comfortable than being committed to what he would have me do. At times, I've been guilty of seeking worldly rather than heavenly treasures and pleasures.

Is there any hope for someone like me? Yes, there is. And it begins with a sincere confession of my sins. It means saying, "Lord forgive me for my misplaced priorities in life. It means praying, "Change my heart, O God. Let me see things as you see things. Let me see what is real. Help me see through the optical illusions that the Devil has set up. Let me see that you have already given me everything that is truly valuable. Let me see that, in Christ, I truly am "blessed."

That is my prayer for you as well. Namely, that God help you see how truly blessed you are. But not only that you see it. But that you also believe it. And live with an attitude that shows how thankful you are for it. In Jesus' name. Amen.