

The Great Reversal
A Sermon on Luke 6:20-31 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ November 2, 2025

We call today's Gospel passage 'The Beatitudes', which means 'The Blessings'. The Beatitudes, especially as they are found in their original form, here in the Gospel of Luke, are Good News. Jesus is repudiating a way of thinking about God and a way of thinking about wealth we call "Prosperity Theology", or "The Prosperity Gospel". According to Prosperity Theology financial success is a sign of God's favor. The logic of the Prosperity Gospel points to the idea that poverty is a sign of God's condemnation. Prosperity Theology is a way of thinking about God and God's work that runs contrary to the central ideas of Holy Scripture.

Prosperity Theology is increasingly popular in the United States. This morning tens of thousands of people in Houston, Texas are preparing to attend worship services at a church called Lakewood Church. Lakewood Church is so large it meets in the former Houston Rockets NBA arena. The pastor of the Lakewood Church is one of the primary proponents of the Prosperity Gospel and has a net worth of more than \$50 million. I'm pretty sure he will not be preaching on these verses from the Gospel of Luke, because the Prosperity Gospel leads in the opposite direction from Jesus' words in the Beatitudes.

As is true in our time, in Jesus' time many people thought that financial success was a sign of God's favor. In Jesus' time many people thought that poverty or physical disabilities were signs of God's condemnation.

Jesus' is directly repudiating this idea when he says, *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.* God's favor is with the poor. God's favor is with those who weep.

Jesus' words in Luke 6 continue the main story lines of the Hebrew Scriptures. The Exodus is the foundational story of the Hebrew Scriptures. When I say that the Exodus is the foundational story, that means that all of the other books and stories in the Hebrew Scriptures are read with the understanding that the Exodus is the main story in the room; the Exodus is the main story in the conversation.

The story of the Exodus describes God being with the children of Israel as they escaped from slavery in Egypt. When Moses was first called by God to lead the Hebrew people out of Egypt, God said to Moses, *I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians.* The children of Israel were poor. They were hungry. They were in danger. They had experienced decades of suffering and weeping. In their time of peril God was right in front of them, leading them through the wilderness in the form of a cloud, and in the form of a pillar of fire by night.

Jesus' teachings in Luke 6 continue this central idea of the Hebrew scriptures; God is especially concerned about the poor. The book of Proverbs is filled with verses about caring for the poor, such as this one: *Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, speak up for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly, defend the rights of the poor and needy.*

Those who have wealth and power have a responsibility to care for those who have less power and less wealth. God is especially concerned for those who are less able to survive on their own; God is especially concerned for those who struggle to survive. These are central themes of the Hebrew Scriptures, which were the sacred scriptures for everyone in Jesus' community, including the twelve disciples. Yet when Jesus' disciples saw a blind man, begging for money near the Temple, they asked him, *Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?* Jesus' disciples were Jews, they were familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures, but they were strongly influenced by the culture around

them, which exalted the rich and powerful. The disciples were strongly influenced by the culture of the Roman Empire, where the image of the Emperor was engraved on the coins.

So Jesus is speaking to his disciples, correcting them, when he says, *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*

Jesus presents us with an understanding of life and an understanding of God's presence with us that is upside down and backwards from what we assume. We assume that the person wearing the golden crown is the one who has been blessed. We revere the individuals who command armies and build beautiful palaces. Our assumptions are incorrect.

The Gospel of Luke is Good News for us because Jesus turns our assumptions about God upside down. We worship a God of compassion and mercy, not of domination. God's concern is not for the rich and powerful. God's concern is for the poor and those who have suffered.

We've heard this idea all year in the Gospel of Luke, beginning in chapter one. In chapter one, Mary, an unwed, teenage mother makes this bold proclamation: *God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He 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 Gospel reverses our assumptions about the purpose of life. Our concerns should be God's concerns. God's concern is for those who have less power, not for those who have more. God's concern is for those who cannot work because they are blind or crippled or too old. God's concern is for those who cannot lift themselves up by their own bootstraps because they are too poor to buy shoes. This is the message given to us by Jesus, and it's especially clear in the Gospel of Luke.

Let's notice that Jesus talks about the rich and the poor, but he doesn't talk about middle income people. In Jesus' time there was not much of a middle class. Most people were poor, and being poor was much scarier than in our time. Being poor meant not having a bed to sleep on and not being sure where your next meal was coming from. In Jesus' time the rich people were like rich people in our time. Being rich meant not having to work another day in your life. Being rich meant not having to cook your own meals or wash your own dishes.

Just like in our time, people in Jesus' time thought the best thing that could happen in your life would be to become rich. People thought that the rich people and the kings were closest to God. People thought the rich people and the kings must have some special connection to God to be so powerful.

Jesus says this way of thinking is exactly backwards. *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.* Those who are poor will be guided and supported by God.

Those who are rich and powerful must be extra careful. Jesus says, *Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.* Disciples of Jesus pay a little extra attention when the powerful leader is surrounded by people who speak well of them. Jesus noticed that leaders often surround themselves with people who shower them with compliments. Jesus noticed that leaders use their power to command the allegiance of their subordinates. God condemns this sort of abuse of power.

Those who are rich and powerful must be extremely careful because of the potential abuse of their power. Those who are rich are not necessarily doomed, but they will be judged based on their behavior. Next Sunday we will read the story of a rich man named Zaccheus. Zaccheus is an example of a rich person who responds to Jesus' message by reversing the course of their life. Zaccheus repented and gave half of his wealth to the poor. The Good News is good precisely because it guides the wealthy and powerful to use their wealth and power to care for those who need it most.

In a few minutes I will invite you to come forward to the front of the Nave, and light a candle in remembrance of one of the Saints in your life. We will honor and remember a diverse group of people:

women and men, people who were rich and people who were poor, individuals who were known and loved by millions and individuals who were known and loved by only a few, people who lived long ago and people who are alive today. We will remember a diverse group of saints, but each person we remember today is a witness to the love and grace of God.

The love and grace of God are expressed in humility. They are expressed in care for those who need it most. They are expressed in compassion, in generosity, in gratitude. The love and grace of God are expressed in these words of Jesus: *Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*