

Your Reward is Great in Heaven
Luke 6:17-26
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Read Luke 6:17-26

"The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times." (Psalm 12:6)

Introduction: #blessed

#Blessed is the online status tag that people use when they're feeling thankful about things in their lives. It's a non-offensive way of thanking God for things in our lives or maybe a humble brag sometimes. I'm not on Twitter, so I don't see a lot of hashtags, but here are some real examples that I found online:

- My friend just texted that she got backstage passes and a limo ride to the Aerosmith concert! #blessed
- I love editing interviews with highly intelligent and eloquent people... This editor feels #blessed
- I had the craziest birthday ever but I'm thankful to be alive. I was in a car accident and the car smacked a tree and my head went through the windshield, but I was able to walk away with my life. God is real and is there for you when you need him. #blessed
- It's absolutely insane to me that less than a year into my career I get to collaborate with one of the biggest designers in the world! #blessed
- Just bought my first house at age 19! #GodisGood #blessed
- District Champions! 6th in a Row! #blessed
- Feeling #blessed to announce that our #littleman has arrived
- Just bought a new house in the LA hills, a Ferrari and a Tesla. #blessed #grindneverstops
- Happy #LoveYourPetDay to these three cuties, #blessed; and finally,
- Remind yourself how #blessed you are. Not how #stressed you are.

We should rejoice with those who rejoice, so go ahead and "like" all of those statuses. It's a good thing to celebrate and realize the good things in your life. I'm not making fun of these. But we're going to see a little bit different views of what the blessed life looks like in today's Scripture passage. When you think about it, you don't really see many sincere posts that say:

- Couldn't afford lunch again, don't know how I'm going to pay my bills this month #blessed
- I was just yelled at, cursed at, and called intolerant because of my faith #blessed

And even more unlikely would be:

- I just inherited a ton of money #woeisme
- We had a great time eating, telling stories, and laughing hard last night #woeisme
- My reputation is getting established around campus, I'm impressing the right people #woeisme

We just don't think like that, do we? Hard things in our lives make us feel bad and happy, prosperous times make us feel great. But Jesus has some challenging words for us that may make us rethink how we view our circumstances. But before we get to the main text, Luke describes the scene in the first three verses,

I. Jesus Heals the Diseased and Possessed (vv. 17-19)

¹⁷ 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, ¹⁸ who

came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all.

Today, you can draw a crowd with texts or tweets if you're offering what they're looking for. But when the Bible says that word had spread about Jesus, v. 17 describes a huge area of hundreds of miles from which people came to hear Him and be healed by Him. Later in Luke we'll meet a woman whose continual bleeding for twelve years had no medical answers, so she reached out and touched Jesus' garment. Jesus stopped and asked who touched Him, because He felt power go out of Him. Verse 19 has that same idea and phrase, that power came out of Him as the crowds touched Him and were healed. Healing power flowed through Jesus so freely, He didn't have to master the right words or concentrate real hard. He was God in the flesh, His godly power spilled out of Him. We've had a few of these summaries of Jesus' healing activities and it's easy to read them quickly and move on, but man, if you stop and really try to imagine what that huge crowd of people getting healed and cleansed of evil spirits – that must have been amazing, the greatest day in many of these people's lives. Whole families and villages were probably changed as Jesus' power restored them.

Verse 17 tells us that this teaching and healing took place after Jesus had come down and was standing on a level place. So what is coming is the Sermon on the Plain, perhaps? It sounds a lot like the Sermon on the Mount of Matthew chapters 5-7, though it is much shorter; it is most likely a separate occasion, since Jesus would have taught things multiple times to different crowds. Whether it is two accounts of the same sermon or of a similar sermon preached two different times, the main thrust of the first seven verses we'll be looking at is a contrast between when we think God has blessed us and when Jesus says we're blessed.

II. Jesus Comforts the Afflicted (vv. 20-23)

²⁰ And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said: *"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹ "Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. ²² "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! ²³ Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.*

Does everybody remember the story of Job? Job was a godly man who always tried to do the right thing. Satan asked God to test his righteousness, saying that he would not be so godly after losing everything. So God allowed Satan to take away all of Job's sons, daughters, houses, livestock and wealth in natural disasters and raiding war parties. Then his wife left him in anger, and he had boils break out all over his body. He had three friends (Eliphaz, Bildad, and Zophar) who came and sat with him in silence for seven days. After the mourning period was over, the friends tried to help him make sense of things. So they said things like:

"As I have seen, those who plow iniquity and sow trouble reap the same. By the breath of God they perish, and by the blast of His anger they are consumed." (Job 4:8-9)

"If your children have sinned against Him, He has delivered them into the hand of their transgression... if you are pure and upright, surely then He will rouse Himself for you and restore your rightful habitation." (Job 8:4,6)

"Because he has stretched out his hand against God and defies the Almighty... he will not be rich, and his wealth will not endure." (Job 15:25,29a)

Do you understand what they were saying? Basically, if you had bad things happen to you, you were being punished. God was correcting you, disciplining you in His wrath because of the bad things you did, so own up to your secret sins, Job. It was a very easy formula: if your life looks bad, figure out what you did wrong. Repent and maybe God will bless you again. It's not a very big

stretch to get from Job's friends, whose theological understandings were very limited, to the prosperity gospel of today that says if you have enough faith, God will give you anything you want, and you're only sick or hurting because you don't have enough faith or are not asking God in the right way.

Wow, does Jesus ever challenge that thinking with what He categorizes as those who are being blessed! Who ever thought the poor were blessed? The poor are just lazy and getting what they deserve, right? You're blessed if you're hungry? No, you're not, you're in trouble. Blessed are those who are weeping, those who are hated and excluded and reviled? It sure doesn't feel like it. But Jesus is reminding us that our values and our perspective should be so radically different from the world's that we seem upside down and backwards.

Ligon Duncan makes the point that most of the ways that Jews had been distinct from the world around them – the way they dressed, the way they ate, their rituals, etc. – would not be the way the Christians distinguish themselves from the world around them. It won't be external things, but the internal things that we value the most, that we treasure the most. Because too often we set our hope on what the world chases after – popularity, ambition, wealth, and success – and running after those things makes us indistinguishable from the world.

“But Jesus is saying, ‘Not amongst My disciples. Even if they are poor, they know that in Me, they can have a transcendent happiness that cannot be taken away from them because of their poverty. And even if they are suffering the pangs of hunger, they know that I will give them a fullness that will never ever abate. And even if they are weeping so hard over the providences that have come into their lives that they cannot control their weeping, I will wipe away every tear from their eyes and no one can do it for them but Me.’”¹

When we read the similar statements in Matthew's account of the Sermon on the Mount, his beatitudes emphasize the spiritual conditions: “blessed are the poor *in spirit*” and “who hunger and thirst *for righteousness*.” Luke just says the poor and the hungry, he doesn't add the spiritual part. But either way we get the message that all suffering and hardships are temporary.² Not only will we be rewarded in heaven, it says that our reward will be *great*. But we don't just get rewarded for being poor and hungry and hated; the key phrase is in verse 22: “*on account of the Son of Man*.” When we suffer those things because we are followers of Jesus, when we are willing to endure hard things because we love Him – those are the times when He promises rewards and blessings.

For most of America's history, I don't think verse 22 was a big threat – of being hated and excluded for being a Christian. That happens to people in China, in North Korea, in the Muslim world, not here, right? There have probably been many instances of people singling out different religions – the Baptists being treated poorly in some area, the Catholics singled out by the Protestants, black churches were bombed and burned. And there was probably plenty of people who looked down on Christians, considering them goody too shoes or uptight fundamentalists, or whatever. But there was a Christian consensus and worldview that does not exist anymore. I think that today we're facing verse 22 in a way that is much more real and much more like what Jesus' followers faced in the first century. That shouldn't make us angry and ready to strike out at “secular culture,” that should make us more willing to look like Jesus and endure suffering with a posture of love and forgiveness. We stand for God's truth no matter what comes. As we sang earlier, through doubts, storms, trials, and hardships, “Christ is the sure and steady anchor” that we can cling to.

¹ Ligon Duncan's sermon “Blessed or Cursed? Weal or Woe?” from September 13, 2009, found at fpcjackson.org.

² Suggested by Thabiti Anyabwile, *Exalting Jesus in Luke* (Nashville: Holman, 2018), p. 117.

In the style of OT prophets, Jesus then pronounced four woes as parallel contrasts to the blessings.

III. Jesus Afflicts the Comfortable (vv. 24-26)

²⁴ *“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵ “Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. “Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. ²⁶ “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.*

When Jesus said “*woe to you*” He was not pronouncing a curse as much as He was expressing sadness over their lives, over their priorities. It means more like “how terrible” or “how tragic” that people are so blind to their true condition.³ Now, I don’t think that Jesus is telling us to never seek money, to never laugh, or to try to get people to speak poorly of us. The emphasis here is that if wealth, popularity, and comfort are your highest goals, the driving forces in your life, then enjoy them now because, as verse 24 says, “you have experienced your consolation.” That’s all there’s going to be, the reward is simply the short-term thrill that you experienced with those things. But you will experience a great reversal in the afterlife. I believe that Jesus is attaching and implying a spiritual commitment to the blessed group and implying that the latter group has no spiritual commitment. And because they have no commitment to the Lord, they are receiving their entire reward and enjoying everything they will here on earth. But woe to you on the other side of death.

The rock group, Van Halen, had a song in the 80s called “Best of Both Worlds.” Some of the lyrics were: “You don’t have to die and go to heaven or hang around til we get born again, just tune in to what this place has got to offer, ‘cause we may never be here again. I want the best of both worlds, a little heaven right here on earth.” I think that Jesus’ response to that song would be: “If you want to have heaven here on earth in the way that you’re talking about maximizing your pleasure and seeking out all the best things, you better enjoy it now, because eternity is going to be miserable for you.”

I struggle with all of these things because I have money, I have a full pantry, I have a good reputation. But I have the hardest time with the “*woe to you who laugh*” because I definitely don’t think that Christians should express their piety with sour faces. But I think Jesus is referring to something more along the lines of folks who live lighthearted lives that never mourn for the hard things of life. Kent Hughes reminds us that “we are called to weep over lost souls... weep over the world’s miseries, over the injustice that falls on so many helpless people... over child abuse, over battered women, over adultery, over divorce, over betrayals... we weep now but look forward to the eternal joy that will be ours in Heaven because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.”⁴

It’s interesting that these blessings and woes come right after Jesus has named His twelve apostles in verses 12-16 because these words were originally to them, right? Verse 20 says that “*He lifted up His eyes on His disciples,*” which meant that His words were very much meant for them. But at the end of this long sermon it says “*after He had finished all His sayings in the hearing of the people*” (7:1), so the crowd was meant to hear it as well. So it’s clearly not just meant for the super-Christians, it’s meant for all of us (in case you hoping there was an escape clause). It had relevance for His first band of followers who, except for Judas who took himself out, would all be persecuted and all but John put to death for their faith in Christ. But it has applied to every age of Christians who will always find themselves out of lockstep with the beliefs and values of the society of their age, including us in this crazy, confusing world.

³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eermans, 1974), p. 127.

⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), p. 226.

I guess what I'd want us to come away from these blessings and woes thinking (and I think this is Jesus' point) is that we should always be second-guessing how we feel about our circumstances in life. We should have a holy discontent. When we think we've got it all together, maybe we're putting our hope in the wrong things. When we are satisfied and feel like life has been good to us, we should wonder if that's really the place that God wants us to be in. When we go through the hard stuff that we wish we could avoid, maybe we should stop ourselves and say, "Thank God He allowed me to go through that. I can't wait to see how He's going to work on my soul and how He'll reward me in heaven for persevering through that pain." Most of us won't say it quite so bluntly, but we live life hoping to maximize happiness and avoid pain. And God says, "A) That's impossible, B) That's shallow, and C) You'll never grow and look like my Son that way."

This has so many points of application. It will change our parenting if we're not focused on just having successful children but godly children. It could change our churches that chase growth, bigger buildings, and external things. It can change us as individuals, as any of Jesus' teachings can.

Conclusion: Thirst

A man named Scott Harrison spent a decade of his life, from age 18 to 28, as a nightclub promoter in New York City. He partied with the most beautiful women, drank expensive liquor, snorted cocaine, and lived in an expensive Midtown loft with a private rooftop patio. For a decade he had it made, he controlled the guest lists for the parties that celebrities, actors, models, and athletes attended. Companies paid him thousands of dollars a month just to wear or drink their products. At 28, he began to feel numbness in different parts of his body that sent him to doctors to get answers. It came at the same time as he started to become disenchanted with his lifestyle, seeing how empty and meaningless it was. He reflected, "When that familiar numb feeling rose up my arm, I could no longer ignore what was all too obvious. I was twenty-eight, and I'd had an amazing run... It took about ten years to pull it off, but somehow I'd managed to become the worst version of myself."

So he reconnected with his parents who are Christians and decided to change his life, maybe just for a year. He had spent ten years pursuing selfish pleasure, he would now "tithe" a year of his life to helping people. He became a photographer for Mercy Ships, a group of doctors who travel to different countries to do life-changing and life-saving operations on people who can't afford them. He found out that many of these people's problems stemmed from drinking filthy water. He found himself obsessed with trying to find a solution to their access to clean water, so he began to partner with various groups that dig wells in African villages. Then he set about raising money by throwing parties in New York, inviting his clubgoing friends, many of whom had never given to a charity before. His vision developed into the group charity:water, and his one year has turned into 14; since 2007 he has been guided by the goal of bringing clean water to every person in the world. He has had to figure out every step of building a successful organization and made a lot of mistakes. But he has also raised tens of millions of dollars and built thousands of wells, making people's lives around the world easier and better. His book *Thirst* recounts his whole story.⁵

Scott traded a self-absorbed life of comfort, pleasure, and easy laughter for one of mourning for the pain of people halfway around the world. Now, in case you take the wrong conclusion from Scott's story: he did not earn heaven by changing his life and doing good works. His life changed, the Lord got ahold of him, and then he committed his life to serving Jesus instead of himself. Your story may not be as dramatic as Scott's, but Jesus calls us to reexamine how we're living and whether we are

⁵ Scott Harrison, *Thirst: A Story of Redemption, Compassion, and a Mission to Bring Clean Water to the World* (New York: Currency, 2018)

gauging how well we're doing by the wrong criteria. Maybe a large bank account, a full pantry, and people's admiration are masking the fact that we are spending our lives chasing the wrong things. Maybe pain, hunger, and people's scorn don't mean that we're doing something wrong; maybe it means that we're being faithful in following God.

Jesus said in verse 23 that *"great is your reward in heaven."* I don't know what those rewards are going to look like exactly, the Bible doesn't really spell them out, but I do look forward to finding out when I get there. But for there to be a reward waiting in heaven, you have to be destined there, and Jesus spelled out how we can join Him in heaven. In John 14, Jesus was talking about the rooms that He would be preparing for His followers in God's house when Thomas asked him, *"Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?"* Jesus said to him, *"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."* Acts 4:12 - *"And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved."* Jesus forsook a life of comfort, feasting, and popularity for a life of poverty and pain, a life that would end with people's anger, scorn, and murderous rage placing Him on a cross. But His sacrifice on that cross would be the way that God dealt with our sins - by Jesus paying for them with His death. Our life in heaven and any rewards there are available because He was faithful through everything the Father sent Him to accomplish, not matter how difficult or painful. We are blessed because He was cursed. He calls us to that same mindset in life, to look beyond our current circumstances to the long-term and eternal ways that we are better off having been faithful and suffered than well-fed and lost. Amen.

Benediction - Romans 8:37-39 - *"No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."*