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The Gospel of Luke
XVII. Blessings and Woes
Luke 6:17-26

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Over the course of His earthly ministry, Jesus spoke to us many difficult things, many things we struggle to comprehend, many things we find hard to put into practice. And then there are the Beatitudes – which, to me at least, are all those things and more. How are we to understand these strange words of blessings and woes? One thing I'm sure of – that they are not intended to be understood as ethical exhortations, a how-to list for superior Christians. As in, if you really want to get into the Kingdom, you need to become poor. The Beatitudes are not commandments in any way, shape, or form. But what then are they?

They are declarations, both grammatically and theologically. Jesus is not saying this is what you ought to do, He is saying that this is how it really is in this world God has made – the Kingdom of God here on earth. The Beatitudes are descriptions of the Kingdom of God in our midst already, not prescriptions for that Kingdom. They declare the way things really are under God's heaven, rather than the way things might someday or ought someday to be – again, reality not morality.

But even understood that way, as declarations of how things stand, the Beatitudes confound us. Because they don't line up at all with reality the way we experience it to be – the way we know it to be. Blessed are the poor, the hungry, the sad, the persecuted, Jesus says; and woe to the rich, the satisfied, the happy, and the popular. In what universe is any of that even remotely the case? Since when, and since where, has it ever been a blessing to be poor and a woe to be rich? So, I'm back where I started – that Jesus says many things which are difficult, hard to understand, seemingly impossible to put into practice – and then there are the Beatitudes.

But what if that is precisely the point of these unreal, unearthly declarations – that they should confound us, confuse us, challenge us, even confront us? What if that is their whole purpose – to turn our reality on its head, so as to challenge us to see the world in a different way, challenge us to entertain the possibility that the way we see things about life in this world is not at all the way that God sees things? And that it is our rational and reasonable assumptions and understandings about the way things are and the way things work in this world which are, in fact, confused, upside-down, and nonsensical? And that it is God's way, God's description of how life works which is true, right side-up, and the only right way to see this world and our place within it? What if what Jesus is declaring in those blessings and woes is not some Dr. Seuss, pie-in-the-sky, fantasyland dream, but the truth? And what if we are the ones who have got it all wrong when we think that what Jesus here calls blessings are really woes, and what He calls woes are really

blessings? What if the Beatitudes, these blessings and woes of Jesus, is how it really and truly works, right here and right now, under God's heaven?

*You're blessed when you've lost it all.
God's kingdom is there for the finding.*

*You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry.
Then you're ready for the Messianic meal.*

*You've blessed when the tears flow freely.
Joy comes with the morning.*

Count yourself blessed every time someone cuts you down or throws you out, every time someone smears or blackens your name to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and that that person is uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—skip like a lamb, if you like!—for even though they don't like it, I do . . . and all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company; my preachers and witnesses have always been treated like this.

*But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made.
What you have is all you'll ever get.*

*And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself.
Your self will not satisfy you for long.*

*And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games.
There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it.*

There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular.¹

Here's what I think is being declared to us through these blessings and woes – two things, and both of them deeply rooted in the larger Biblical message. The first is this, and it is found in those blessings: Jesus is declaring through these blessings the great truth that in Him, in Jesus Christ, God's salvation plan and power have broken into this world in a decisive and ultimately victorious manner. That because Jesus our Savior has come, the poor shall indeed now be raised up, the hungry truly now satisfied; those who mourn shall now be comforted, and those who are persecuted for His sake shall now be elevated. The blessings declare that because Jesus has now come, everything that God has long promised to His people is now to be accomplished.

This, in fact, has been what Luke's gospel has been telling us from the very start. Remember the words the angel spoke to the shepherds: *"To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior."*² Remember the prayer of Simeon after laying eyes upon the infant Holy Child: *"Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace . . . for my eyes have seen your salvation."*³ Remember the words of Jesus Himself, the very words with which He began His public ministry:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
and recovering of sight to the blind,
to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*⁴

In this fallen world, for so very long, the poor were without hope, the hungry were without sustenance, the mournful had only their tears, and the persecuted only their suffering. But Jesus has now come, the Savior has now appeared, God's Kingdom has now begun. And the poor shall find they have a home in that Kingdom, the hungry will now be satisfied with a full measure of God's justice and righteousness, those who weep will have their mourning changed into dancing, and those who have suffered for God's sake shall be rewarded, restored, and raised up on high. That's what the blessings are telling us: that in Jesus Christ, the salvation of all things has now begun. Blessed are you if that salvation has been your earnest hope and deepest longing. For a new world is already being brought into being. Such that we – no matter our earthly status – may have new hope, new courage, new joy. That's what the blessings are declaring to us: in the coming of Jesus Christ everything is being made different, everything bad is being made good, everything and everyone who belongs to Jesus is being redeemed. That the story of creation and fall, life and death, and everything in between is now going to have a happily ever after ending after all.

But what about those woes Jesus then speaks – what are they declaring to us? That's the second thing. Simply that our entrance into this salvation, this new world coming, this happily ever after ending Jesus is making possible is found not through our postures of strength, but through the honest admission of our weakness. Not through our worldly status and accomplishment and accumulation, but through our recognition and repentance that we are not as good, not as self-sufficient, not as just and righteous as we have wanted to believe – or been taught by the world to believe. That what the world has framed for us as virtue is, in the eyes of God, often nothing but a cleverly marketed form of vice. What the woes declare to us is that, contrary to what we have believed and been led to believe, piles of money do not make for happiness, many possessions do not make for peace, worldly power does not make for security, and status and popularity do not make for inner satisfaction nor for divine sanction.

These woes of Jesus seek to disabuse us of all the false narratives we have bought into from this world and its ways – so that we might at least see ourselves in God's eyes, see ourselves as we really are, see this world in rebellion against God for what it really is. And so come to discern that we also, apart from Christ, are poor in spirit, still hungry for what will satisfy, still longing to be comforted, and still needing to give ourselves to a Master and a mission higher than just our own comfort.

In other words, the woes are meant to shake us up, and then point us toward the truth of something Jesus said to the Pharisees just a few Sabbath days ago – back when the Pharisees were criticizing Jesus for eating with tax collectors and other sinners. Jesus said to them, “*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick.*”⁵ In other words, those who do not think they are in need of salvation shall not find it; but those who know they are in desperate need of salvation – to them it will be given. The woes Jesus declares to us are meant to help us see that even if we have worldly wealth and possessions and power and fame – everything we could ever have wanted, still we are lacking that one thing we truly and desperately need. Still we are also those who are sick and in desperate need of healing. Which is the only way to enter into the Kingdom of God, the only way to reach the blessings of which Jesus has spoken. On our knees, in repentance and in deep and desperate need.

The woes are shock therapy. Blessed are the rich, says the world. No, says Jesus – that money won’t console you, protect you, or keep death at bay. Blessed are the go-getters who have gotten what they want, says the world. No, says Jesus – all that stuff spilling out of your closets and garages and storage units can’t begin to fill up the hunger inside. Blessed are those who go for the gusto, says the world – good times all the time, whatever makes me happy. No, says Jesus – in the end you will end up gasping, shallow, and sad. Blessed are those who keep up appearances at all costs and play the game right so that all will admire fuss over them. No, says Jesus – that is to live an utterly empty and exhausting lie.

But blessed are we when at last we figure out that we have actually got nothing at all figured out. Except for this one thing: that we need salvation, that we need new life, that we desperately need Jesus and the life of the Kingdom of God. Because that’s the very moment when this strange new reality Jesus lays out in His Beatitudes becomes our new reality. The very moment when the blessings Jesus speaks begin to become ours:

*You’re blessed when you’ve lost it all.
God’s kingdom is there for the finding.*

*You’re blessed when you’re ravenously hungry.
Then you’re ready for the Messianic meal.*

*You’ve blessed when the tears flow freely.
Joy comes with the morning.*⁶

¹ Luke 6:20-26, Eugene H. Peterson, The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), p. 1864.

² Luke 2:11.

³ Luke 2:29-30.

⁴ Luke 4:18-19.

⁵ Luke 5:31.

⁶ Peterson, p. 1864.