

The upside-down blessings of God

Text: Luke 6:17-26 for 2/17/2019 by Pastor Bolwerk

¹⁷He went down with them and stood on a level place with a large crowd of his disciples, and a large number of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, as well as from the coastal area of Tyre and Sidon. These people came to listen to him and to be healed of their diseases. ¹⁸Those who were troubled by unclean spirits were also cured. ¹⁹The whole crowd kept trying to touch him, because power was going out from him and healing them all. ²⁰He lifted up his eyes to his disciples and said: Blessed are you who are poor, because yours is the kingdom of God. ²¹Blessed are you who hunger now, because you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, because you will laugh. ²²Blessed are you whenever people hate you, and whenever they exclude 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 of this: Your reward is great in heaven! The fact is, their fathers constantly did the same things to the prophets. ²⁴But woe to you who are rich, because you are receiving your comfort now. ²⁵Woe to you who are well fed now, because you will be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, because you will be mourning and weeping. ²⁶Woe to you when all people speak well of you, because that is how their fathers constantly treated the false prophets.

If you have spoken the English language for any length of time it doesn't take you too long to realize just how upside-down this language can be. There are so many phrases and idioms in our language that use words that seem to be the opposite of what we are trying to say. For example: What is your nose for? It is for smelling. What are your feet for? They are for walking and running. So why do we say our noses run and our feet smell? There are many upside-down phrases in the English language. We drive on parkways, but we park in driveways. People recite at a play, yet they play at a recital. If you want to fill out a form, you have to fill it in. And you have to wonder about a language where your house burns up by burning down.

Yet the English language is not the only thing that can seem upside-down to us. Sometimes God, in his wisdom, speaks to us in ways that seem backwards or upside-down to our human reason. We see that very thing in this text from the Gospel of Luke. In this portion of scripture, as Jesus teaches a crowd of people he speaks of ...

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- I. The world's idea of blessings brings eternal affliction.
- II. God's true blessings flow from worldly affliction.

As we meet Jesus in this text he is in northern Israel, in Galilee. We find him gathered with a large crowd of his disciples. But there are more than just his disciples there. Luke tells us there was also, **“a large number of people from all Judea and Jerusalem, as well as from the coastal area of Tyre and Sidon. These people came to listen to him and to be healed of their diseases”** (v. 17). People have come from hundreds of miles away to see him, from Judah in the south and Tyre and Sidon to the northeast. Jesus starts out teaching and healing the people, but soon the people become more focused on the healing. We are told, **“The whole crowd kept trying to touch him, because power was going out from him and healing them all”** (v. 19). Our Lord certainly wants to help people with their physical problems. Yet he doesn't want people to think that he came only to bring the worldly blessing of healing.

So Jesus shifts the focus of his teaching to help people understand the upside-down blessings of God, blessings that our Lord is bringing to them. Christ says, **“Blessed are you who are poor, [...] who hunger, [...] who weep, [...] when people hate you [...] because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy because of this: Your reward is great in heaven”** (vs. 20-23)!

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That all sounds backwards, doesn't it? How can it be a blessing to be poor, or hungry, or weeping, or hated? But Jesus adds to this upside-down teaching of God when he says, **“Woe to you who are rich, [...] well fed, [...] who laugh, [...] and] when all people speak well of you”** (vs. 24-26). Jesus is saying beware of these worldly ideas of blessing.

The world says if you have money, plenty to eat, laughter, and a good reputation then you are blessed. While there is nothing inherently wrong with any of these things, they can quickly become a problem when they change our focus. If you only focus on money, then you will always be worried about how to keep your money safe or how to get more. If you only focus on food and drink the you will always be looking for next “taste sensation” or trying to appease your appetite. If you only focus on laughter, then you will always be looking for what is “funny.” What do most people find funny? Typically things that God finds offensive; things that hurt the name or reputation of others. If you only focus on people saying nice things about you, then you will always be trying to get people to like you. Yet, what might it cost you to get others to like you? When you are focused on these worldly blessings you are not focused on God's eternal blessings.

While these things may seem good to our rational mind, they can be a danger to our souls. These things can take the focus of our heart off of God, who should be first in our heart and life. God said through his prophet Jeremiah, **“Cursed is anyone who trusts in mankind, who seeks his strength from human flesh, and who turns his heart away from the Lord”** (Jeremiah 17:5).

Trusting in worldly “blessings” may bring a short-lived peace and happiness, but the “blessings” of this world cannot save your soul. The things of this world cannot make you right with God. Worldly blessings cannot keep you out of hell.

Nothing in this world can take away your sin. Nothing you do can undo even one of your sins. The sin you were born with was turning your heart away from God before you even came into this world. And every sin you have committed since then only brings with it the affliction of eternal damnation.

God is the only one who can save you from your sins. So, if worldly blessings turn your heart away from God, then all you have to look forward to is eternal woe, eternal affliction! The world's idea of blessings brings eternal affliction.

To our rational mind the blessings of God really do seem upside-down. What Jesus calls blessings – poverty, hunger, weeping, being hated – those things seem like curses to us, not blessings. This is why Jesus is helping us to see how God's true blessings flow from worldly affliction.

Think about it: What had brought many of these people to Jesus in the first place? Illness, disease, pain, and suffering. What did Jesus do when the people gathered around him? He taught them the word of God. Luke tells us, **“These people came to listen to him”** (v. 17b). Jesus taught the people that he is the promised Messiah who came to save the world from its sin. Christ is the one who would pay for the times the people were focused on worldly blessings. Jesus paid for our sinful focus. Our Lord came to proclaim the good news of forgiveness and salvation. But many in the crowd would not have heard that life-saving Word of God if their affliction had not driven them to seek out Jesus.

Jesus wanted these people to know that he came to give them more than just temporary, physical blessings. He came to give them forgiveness and eternal life. This is why Christ points the people to those things which his blessings flow out of. They flow out of worldly affliction because those hardships are what cause people to turn to Jesus and trust in him for what they really need! Affliction forces people to rely on Jesus for help, for hope, and for forgiveness.

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This is why Jesus says, **“Blessed are you who are poor....”** On those days when I recognize myself as a beggar – when I look at my life and find myself pitifully short of what I need to be rich toward God – those are the days I am blessed. God’s desire for us is to recognize how poor we are on our own. When we realize the emptiness of our spiritual poverty, God pours into that emptiness the riches of his forgiving grace! Out of that affliction Jesus blesses, because in the midst of such personal poverty, **“...yours is the kingdom of God”** (v. 20)!

Jesus says, **“Blessed are you who hunger now....”** When I find myself curiously hungry, even after I have tried filling my stomach and life with all that the world says will give me a full and satisfying life, yet I still feel hungry and empty. In that state of hunger I am blessed. When hunger pangs strike our bodies and souls, Jesus steps forward as the only one **“who satisfies [our] desires with good things”** (Psalm 103:5)! Jesus fills that empty void in our souls with his forgiving love. When everything in this fleeting world leaves you hungry, Jesus invites you to trust in his saving grace, and **“...you will be satisfied”** (v. 21a)!

Jesus says, **“Blessed are you who weep now....”** When I find myself weeping because, after being a believer for decades, I still find my sinful nature winning far too many battles, and when I find myself grieving how human sin like mine has decimated God’s once perfect world, in that grief is when I am blessed. When in our sadness we lift our crying eyes off this decaying world and turn them heavenward, through the tears of that moment God blesses us with words that remind us that nothing **“in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord”** (Romans 8:39)! For all the times in this life our cheeks are wet with such tears, our Lord tells us there will come a day when **“...you will laugh”** (v. 21b).

Jesus says, **“Blessed are you whenever people hate you, and whenever they exclude and insult you and reject your name as evil because of the Son of Man”** (v. 22). When those I love scorn me because I loved them enough to speak the truth they did not want to hear, then I am blessed. In this world there will always be those willing to tell others whatever they wanted to hear. But God has enabled you to love your family and your friends enough to speak his truth to them, even if it means those people reject you. Yes, **“Rejoice in that day and leap for joy because of this: Your reward is great in heaven”** (v. 23a)!

Every affliction that God allows into our lives is there to help us see our total need for our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. This is why Jesus points us to these upside-down blessings of God. Our Lord is not saying we are wrong to enjoy earthly blessings God happens to send our way. Jesus is not demanding we throw away our money and wipe every smile off our faces. He is not looking for ways to keep us from finding joy in this life.

But our Lord is saying this: While we can have *good* days when God grants us such earthly blessings, those are not our most blessed days! Our best blessings are not even in the smallest way dependent on any kind of worldly goodness. As we live under Jesus’ saving grace, our best blessings keep happening even when all of those worldly blessings are missing. On the very days we label as our “worst,” our Lord is asking us to pause and see things for what they really are. The Apostle Paul said it so eloquently when he wrote, **“For Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong”** (2 Corinthians 12:10).

So, teach us, dear Jesus, to thank you for those days when you leave us poor, hungry, weeping, and rejected! Those are the days when you are loving us the most, because those are the days you are working to teach us that our greatest blessings don’t come from within us, and those blessings

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are not dependent on our earthly circumstances. Even though our human reason will never fully understand why, those days that send us running to you, Jesus, are truly our best and most blessed days! Amen.