

A Reversal of Fortunes

Luke 6:20–26

The early public ministry of Jesus was characterized by provocative teaching, remarkable physical healings, mighty exorcisms and daring challenges, not to the ancient Law of God, but to how the religious elite of His day liked to interpret that Law. Eventually, after His fame had spread, Jesus deemed that it was time to formally present His vision for the Kingdom of God.

The first thing Jesus did was to go up a mountain and pray through the night for the next day would prove monumental. First, He would select from His disciples twelve that He would designate “apostles.” He would pour Himself into these men. With the exception of the one who would betray Jesus, these unschooled and ordinary men would change their world. Their eyewitness testimony of Christ would keep the church on a truthful course through the ages. Also following that night He spent in prayer, Jesus would preach this sermon we are now exploring.

I challenged you to prepare yourselves to hear the words of this *Manifesto in the Meadow* as though you had never heard them before. Jesus challenged the spirit of His age and of ours, when He presented the platform for His kingdom. The world has always observed, “Might makes right!” Jesus said that it is the weak that make it. The world believes, “Wealth is power.” Jesus said, “Poverty secures God’s kingdom.” The world says, “Reputation is everything.” Jesus warned against the desire to be adored by others. The world operates on the premise that if something is successful, it must be right. Jesus suggested that if a thing succeeds in the world, it could be hellish. Jesus overturned this world’s values, attitudes and ways of looking at things. Calling this sermon a “manifesto” in no way overstates its impact.

I think this message is distinct from the more familiar *Sermon on the Mount* recorded in Matthew, but not everyone agrees with that. Regardless, the differences between Matthew and Luke must be examined. I ran across a number of writers who use Matthew to explain (or explain away) Luke. For example, where Luke says, “Blessed are you who are poor,” Matthew says, “Blessed are the poor in spirit.” They conclude, based on Matthew, that Luke meant “poor in spirit” all along. When Luke says, “Blessed are you who hunger now,” what he really means is what Matthew writes out more fully, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness.”

I think that’s a cop-out. Matthew records Jesus setting forth spiritual attitudes for entering His kingdom, but Luke records Him directly addressing rich, poor, hungry and well-fed people as they stood in that crowd either loving Him or despising Him. If Luke only meant what Matthew said more thoroughly, his account becomes irrelevant, not to mention, poorly written. It takes the sting out of Jesus’ words, but is that really what we want? I want to know what Jesus had to say. He was clearly addressing danger in the very things that this world tells us to fix our sites on.

A minister was asked to tell a man with a heart condition that he had inherited a million dollars. Everyone feared that the shock could kill him, so the minister proceeded with caution. He went to the man and asked, “Joe, what would you do if you inherited a million dollars?”

Joe responded, “Pastor, I think I would give half of it to the church.”

At that, the minister fell over dead.

Is Jesus saying that poverty, hunger, weeping and persecution are always virtuous and that wealth, laughter, prosperity and popularity are always sinful? No, but neither is He saying that it is perfectly safe to set one's heart on wealth, laughter, prosperity and popularity. We prefer to hear that these pursuits are okay *IF* we just keep things in perspective. That way, we can resume pursuing them with abandon. The fact is, there are always dangers in setting our sites on the things that this world says are worthy of pursuing.

I. A Puny Reward for Pursuing Power (20; 24)

²⁰Looking at his disciples, he said:

"Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

²⁴"But woe to you who are rich,
for you have already received your comfort.

A. Who WERE These "Rich" and "Poor"?

We know that a man's poverty alone cannot make him righteous before God any more than another man's wealth alone condemns him, so if we are to rightly apply this hard saying of Jesus, we must know who these particular rich and poor were. When Jesus came down from that mountain and encountered the kingdom of men on this level place, His own Galilean disciples were there along with Jews from Jerusalem and Gentiles from Tyre and Sidon. There were needy people wanting to receive from Him. There were powerful Pharisees intent on harassing Him.

The Pharisees, who were typically wealthy, believed that wealth was an evidence of God's favor upon a man, and that poverty indicated His judgment on a man. Now, the Old Testament did teach that the ability to accrue wealth was a gift of God, but the Pharisees interpreted this to mean that God positively favored the rich over the poor. The logical result of such thinking was to embrace an attitude of indifference toward the poor, reckoning that they were pretty much in the fix where God wanted them to be. The Jews had a rather long legacy of rich and powerful men who got rich and remained rich by exploiting the poor. The Pharisees were just one more part of that legacy.

This day, Jesus blessed the literally poor and He cursed the literally rich. The blessing to the poor was that they already had a stake in His kingdom. The curse on the rich was that they had already peaked in this life. They had set their sights on getting rich. Now, there remained nothing for them in the life to come to joyfully anticipate. Of course, it is to be understood that these poor people were looking to Jesus for a blessing and that these rich people were not. Obviously, there is some link (albeit not an absolute one) between real poverty and a poverty of spirit that desperately looks to God. But, there is also a link (albeit, not an absolute one) between material affluence and spiritual self-sufficiency. These links cannot be ignored.

B. To What Is Our King Calling Us?

If it is not as simple as saying, "Poverty, good – wealth, bad," then what are we to draw from Jesus' words in Luke without spiritualizing them to mean "poor in spirit" rather than just "poor"? Jesus was greatly interested in how men used their resources to help others. That is why He gave some the ability to accrue wealth. It was not typically the nature of the rich to care for the poor even though the Law of Moses required it. On the contrary, by the time Jesus arrived, Israel had fallen back into their age-old pattern of the rich and powerful looking out for and advancing themselves, often at the expense of the poor and the weak. This was a stench in God's nostrils every time (and there were several) that He raised up a prophet to address it.

Correcting this inequity is a major theme in Luke. Jesus came to restore the fortunes of the little guy even if He had to take the high and mighty down a notch or two. This theme is evident in Luke even before Jesus was born. When Mary learned that she would be the mother of the Christ, she broke out in that famous song we call the *Magnificat*. It begins as an utterance of praise of God. "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ..." (Luke 1:46, 47). Quickly, however, Mary's song takes up the theme of God rescuing the lowly from the mighty:

⁵¹He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

⁵²He has brought down rulers from their thrones
but has lifted up the humble.

⁵³He has filled the hungry with good things
but has sent the rich away empty. – Luke 1:51-53

If we dismiss Jesus' words in Luke as referring to "poor in spirit" *versus* "haughty in spirit" rather than as "rich" *versus* "poor," then, we won't have to examine our status in life or concede that we are all rich and powerful compared to the weak and poor of this age. And, if we aren't forced to concede that we are rich, we won't be forced to examine what we are doing to help the poor. We won't have to ask ourselves if we are truly sacrificing. We won't have to ask when the last time was that we did without something so as to increase our generosity. We will be content with what we are currently doing, probably the same things we have been doing for years.

Of course, if we take Jesus' words to mean what they seem to mean, then we must gaze upon the poor. There can be no pretense that they are not there or that we are not responsible for them.

II. A Paltry Return on Pursuing Provision (21a; 25a)

²¹Blessed are you who hunger now,
for you will be satisfied.

²⁵Woe to you who are well fed now,
for you will go hungry.

A. Who WERE These "Well Fed" and "Hungry"?

Luke does not spiritualize hunger to mean "hunger and thirst for righteousness." That was Matthew's emphasis. In Luke, Jesus speaks to *bona fide* hunger. These were the same characters that Jesus had already addressed in terms of rich and poor. Now, He is simply addressing another of the perils of having too much, which is to lose sight of the distinction between having enough and having what we want, which is not only daily bread but also, enough spare bread in the cupboard to make us feel secure. We lose track of when we've been wholly provided for, and it renders us stingy and odd and not needing to trust.

B. To What Is Our King Calling Us?

During the Great Depression, the government was making small allotments to impoverished farmers for stock, feed and necessary equipment. In the Smoky Mountains, one agent came upon a woman who was trying to eke out a living on two acres of land. Her cabin floors were dirt. She had a few pieces of homemade furniture. Light streamed through cracks in the walls. The agent looked around and asked, 'If the government gave you \$200, what would you do with it?' The woman weighed the question for a moment and then replied, 'Reckon I'd give it to the poor.'

Once again, is Jesus not simply calling those of us who are well-fed to look around at those who are not and to do something? In the ancient Law, landowners were forbidden from harvesting their fields up to the edges of their property or from going over the field a second time to gather anything that was missed. This way, the poor in the land could legally glean anything that was left over. In fact, the Law spelled out a number of provisions that insured that the poor in the land of Israel were cared for. Sadly, this compassion that was inherent to the Law was often missed by the same experts who could be so dogmatic about observing its religious rituals.

Luke 12 records one of Jesus' parables that was, sadly, an apt reflection of how the rich behaved. A rich man's fields yielded a bumper crop, but it never dawned on him to give to others as God had prospered him. Instead, he decided to retire. He would tear down his barns and build bigger ones and live out his days in leisure. What he failed to anticipate was that he was to die the very day he hatched his grandiose scheme. Rather than being ushered into eternity with the words, "Well done!" he was greeted with the rebuke, "You fool!" Jesus added, "This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God" (Luke 12:21).

III. A Pitiful Result of Pursuing Pleasure (21b; 25b)

Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

Woe to you who laugh now,
for you will mourn and weep.

A. Who WERE These "Laughers" and "Weepers"?

Jesus addressed the same crowd with one more peril of wealth; possessing more than one knows what to do with responsibly. God did not prosper any of them so that they could fill their lives with frivolous amusements. This Greek word "laugh" was linked to a mirth that was considered over-the-top for Jewish sensibilities. Still, Luke uses it here, because the rich of Jesus' day were prone to self-indulgence while the joy that awaits those who rely on God is greater than they can imagine. Once again, in God's kingdom, there will be a major reversal of fortunes.

B. To What Is Our King Calling Us?

Luke 16 records another too familiar picture of Jesus' day. A rich man lives as a hedonist. Every day, he dresses in expensive clothes and dines on rich foods. Lazarus, a beggar who lies at the rich man's gate, is a pitiful figure. Dogs lick the sores that cover his body. He longs for the rich man's table-scraps, but Lazarus is simply a part of the landscape. The rich man steps over or around him every day. It never crosses his mind to help him. When both men die, Lazarus is consoled by Abraham. The rich man finds himself in Hell, on the outside of Paradise looking in.

We are missing our budget by a mile, but the fact is no heart has ever been moved by a budget. Perhaps, I need to do a better job of making a cold financial plan represent opportunities for touching a hurting world. Perhaps, we all need to just innately make that connection better. I am speaking candidly, and it makes me nervous. I want you to receive the words of Jesus in the spirit of desiring to be the best possible stewards of your riches, and we are rich. We are responsible for the hurting. If you hear these words as a lecture or as an irritating appeal, it may be because you have become too comfortable with where you are in this matter. Maybe, you have too many recreations, too many luxuries, too many amusements. I am thinking of a cartoon where a man promises the preacher, "I'll give 'til it hurts, but you should now that I have a very low threshold of pain."

Paul suggested that if we have food and clothing we can be content with that, but we are nowhere near content with food and clothing. Our list of “Essentials for Contentment” is a bit longer than Paul’s. Food and clothing are still on the list, but so also are various amusements and luxuries that are every bit as fixed to that list. We have lived so long with so much that we can no longer distinguish between what is essential to godly contentment and what is simply life’s gravy. It might be amusing were it not for the impact our luxuries take on the lost and hurting.

IV. A Perilous Realization from Pursuing Popularity (22, 23; 26)

²²Blessed are you when men hate you,
when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil,
because of the Son of Man.

²³Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

²⁶Woe to you when all men speak well of you,
for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.

A. Who WERE These “Popular” and “Persecuted”?

In this beatitude, Jesus seems to be contrasting these same Pharisees with those disciples of Jesus who would truly cling to Him after He returned to His Father. The world would reject Jesus and it would also reject His disciples. Jesus was giving them advance notice that if they absolutely had to be admired, they would not be able to follow Him very closely. A time would come when they might be put out of their synagogues or lose their property, their reputations and even their lives. Jesus did not even promise that they would live to see their own vindications. The only blessing He promised was that they would eventually be esteemed in the kingdom of God.

The Pharisees on the other hand thrived on the respect of others. In Matthew’s *Sermon on the Mount*, Jesus presents them as models for how *NOT* to exhibit righteousness. They dropped their offerings in the collection boxes at the temple with great fanfare. They made a point to be in a public place at every designated prayer hour so that they could make an extravaganza out of their prayers. When they fasted, they made sure that everyone could see how somber and miserable they looked. Their objective was to be seen by men and admired by all for their great piety.

B. To What Is Our King Calling Us?

Know that you live in a world that sees things differently than Jesus did? Christians today seem utterly shocked when the world ridicules us and misrepresents who we are. It even renders us indignant. How can we be surprised given all that Jesus told us to expect? If, as a Christian, you want to be loved by this world, then just mesh kingdom values with worldly ones to the point that they are virtually indistinguishable. The world has always embraced those who represent a God who affirms them no matter how heartless they are, just as the mighty in Israel preferred false prophets to real ones.

But, if you are interested in living out kingdom values before the eyes of a watching world, know that it will not be easy. You must take up the cause of the weak, the poor and the lost even if it puts you at odds with the mighty. And, know this - it absolutely will put you at odds with your own yearnings for power, provision, pleasure and popularity, at least as the world defines such things.