

Blessed or Cursed?

Luke 6:17-26
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First Presbyterian Church
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Once when visiting Australia, Mother Teresa met a new recruit to the Franciscan order. He had been assigned as her guide and “gofer” during her stay, and was thrilled at the prospect of being so close to this holy woman. He dreamed of how much he would learn from her and what they would talk about.

But during her visit, the friar never had the opportunity to say one word to Mother Teresa. Although he was constantly near her, there were always other people for her to meet.

Finally, her tour was over and she was due to fly to New Guinea. In desperation, the friar spoke to Mother Teresa. “If I pay my own fare to New Guinea, can I sit next to you on the plane, so I can talk to you and learn from you?”

Mother Teresa looked at him. “You have enough money to pay airfare to New Guinea?” she asked. “Oh, yes,” he said.

“Then give that money to the poor,” she said. “You’ll learn more from that than anything I can tell you.”

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” That Franciscan friar thought he could use his wealth to get closer to Mother Teresa, and thus, closer to God. And yet, Jesus tells us that the poor, the hungry and those who weep are closer to God and his blessing than those who are rich and full and laughing.

Why is that? That’s what we will be exploring during our sermon time this morning.

To better understand what Jesus is teaching in his Sermon on the Plain, as it’s called, we have to see the whole picture of what went on that day. Thankfully, Luke does a wonderful job recording those events.

Luke tells us that Jesus “came down ... and stood on a level place with a great crowd of ... disciples and ... people from all Judea, Jerusalem and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.” Tyre and Sidon are non-Jewish, Gentile territories. So this was a group made up of faithful Jews from Judea, Gentiles from outside the faith, and disciples of Jesus following him into a new and fuller faith, the Christian faith.

“And all in the crowd were trying to touch him,” says Luke, “for power came out from him and healed all of them.” It didn’t matter if you were faithful, faithless or seeking – if you touched Jesus, power flowed from him and healed you. It’s as if God’s grace and mercy can not be contained or restrained, in the presence of the Lord.

If that’s true, than why is there so much suffering and need in the world? Well, God’s grace and mercy may be freely flowing, but it really helps when that grace and mercy is extended and directed by you, by us.

In fact, we actually have the power to block God's grace and mercy, just when it's needed most. That's the curse of free will, when it's used for greedy, self-centered purposes. The blessing is that we get to be the hands and feet and heart of Jesus in a misguided and hurting world, and the curse is that not all people choose to be that.

Some people choose to be rich and full and laughing in the face of those who are poor and hungry and weeping.

Take for instance the New Jersey politician who tried to turn a governor's grief to the politician's benefit. The governor I'm talking about was Woodrow Wilson, and he had just lost a dear friend, who also happened to be a state senator.

Shortly after receiving news that his friend the senator had died, Wilson got a call from an important state politician. "Governor," the man declared, "I would like to take the senator's place."

Not missing a beat, Wilson responded, saying, "It's perfectly agreeable to me, if it's agreeable to the undertaker."¹

That's a funny joke. But there's truth in that joke. Those who disregard the suffering of others while building themselves up – they might as well be dead and buried, because their time is coming. For them, there is no sense of heaven on earth. No, they live in a hell of their own making, whether they realize it or not.

And make no mistake; God realizes it! And God will see to their demise, just as he assures the faithful who suffer that they live in the grace and mercy of the Lord, and that they have and will know the fullness of God's blessing and love.

As Jesus 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."

The poor have a full share in the riches of God's kingdom, the hungry have a place at the heavenly banquet, and God will wipe away every tear from the eyes of those who now weep.

"But woe to you who are rich," says Jesus, "for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets."

"Woe to you when all speak well of you...." Only Jesus and those acting in his name are worthy of praise all of it to the glory of God.

Now is no time to be laughing and self-satisfied. Now is the time to be doing the work of the Lord, extending the grace and mercy of God to those in need, and praying that they not only feel the touch – the presence – of the Lord through our acts of caring, but that their hearts

¹ Presidential Anecdotes, Paul Boller.

are touched and changed, touched and changed so as to draw them into the family of faith, alongside us in the blessings and ministry of the Lord.

I'll leave you with this close-to-home illustration, an illustration not only about the need for people to receive material blessings, but also their need to be touched and changed in the process, and thus be spiritually blessed, also.

Several weeks ago, a young woman named Cerria came to the church seeking help for her and her newborn baby, who she brought with her. Cerria told me that the baby's father had become abusive and she needed to leave town, needed gas for her car and formula for her baby.

I gave Cerria enough money to buy formula and filled her tank for her drive to Oklahoma, where she said her dad lives and has a room for them. In the process, I met the baby's grandfather and spent enough time to get the sense that what she told me was true and that her need was dire.

Despite asking Cerria to call and let us know she got there OK, we never did hear from her. Now, was her need real or not? We may never know. But I can tell you that if the only thing Cerria received that day was money for formula and gas for her car, then she missed out.

She missed out on what the Lord truly wanted to give her – not only material blessings through our church, but also the spiritual blessing of being touched deep down inside by the power and presence of the Lord, touched and changed by it.

All in the crowd who touched Jesus were healed that day; all in the crowd who were touched by Jesus were healed for life, a life full of spiritual riches, heavenly food, and unshakable joy.

In other words, when we reach out and touch the Lord, we are healed by the uncontainable power of his grace and mercy. But when we step back and allow ourselves to be touched by the Lord – by the power of his teachings, really touched deep down inside – then we are changed, and in being changed, the world is changed through us, by the power and presence of the Lord. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

You know, Lord, that we come here in differing states of mind. For some, worship has been a way of life for many years. For others, it is a new experience. Some are sure and confident of their faith; others are wavering and uncertain. Some feel good about themselves, while others are almost drowning in personal and family problems.

But whatever our state of mind and heart, we are pleased that you have invited us to be here, and we anticipate your blessing.

God of love, we are grateful for the love you have shown us in Christ and through other persons, for patience with our failings, for kindness in our weak moments, for praise when we have done our best, for forgiveness without counting the times, for those who go with us when the going gets rough, for those who trust us again after we have abused their trust.

For all gifts of love, we thank you, and especially that your love for us is stronger than any other power in heaven or on earth.

We count on your Spirit of love to direct your compassionate heart and healing touch toward those who need it most. And for us, help us to be agents of peace on earth and examples of good will to all, as we live out our calling as followers of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.