

6th Sunday of Ordinary Time – Year C

Luke 6:17, 20-26: The Sermon on the Plains

¹⁷ And he came down with them and stood on a stretch of level ground. A great crowd of his disciples and a large number of the people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon (¹⁸ came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and even those who were tormented by unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ Everyone in the crowd sought to touch him because power came forth from him and healed them all.) ²⁰ And raising his eyes toward his disciples he said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours. ²¹ Blessed are you who are now hungry, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who are now weeping, for you will laugh. ²² Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude and insult you, and denounce your name as evil on account of the Son of Man. ²³ Rejoice and leap for joy on that day! Behold, your reward will be great in heaven. For their ancestors treated the prophets in the same way. ²⁴ But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. ²⁵ But woe to you who are filled now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will grieve and weep. ²⁶ Woe to you when all speak well of you, for their ancestors treated the false prophets in this way.

Introduction. Luke places the choice of the Twelve just before the “Sermon on the Plain” so that it can take on the character of an official instruction for the whole church assembled under its leaders. The importance of Jesus’ decision in selecting the Twelve is underscored by mention of his all-night vigil. The fact that there are Twelve is itself important, because these Christian leaders are to rule over the renewed Israel in place of the patriarchs of old (Luke 22:29–30). The Twelve are called “apostles,” from the Greek word *apostello*, meaning “to send out.”

Luke's “Sermon on the Plain” sets forth Jesus’ apostolic instruction/ethic for daily life in detail. The sermon begins with a recognition of the disciples' blessing as a result of God's grace. The rest of the sermon gives the ethical response to being such a beneficiary. Disciples are to live and relate to others in a way that stands out from how people relate to one another in the world. They are to love and pray for their enemies. Righteousness requires that they respond wisely to Jesus' words by building their lives around his teaching. In sum, disciples are to live and look different from the rest of the world, even as they reach out compassionately to that world.

A Summary of Jesus' Ministry (6:17-19). Luke sets up the sermon by summarizing Jesus' ministry activity (4:14-15, 31-32, 40-41). Jesus ministers on a plain. The term *topu pedinou* refers to a level place, but can refer to a plateau area in mountainous terrain (Mt 14:23 compared to 15:29; Is 13:2 LXX; Jer 21:13 LXX). Beyond this no specific locale is given. Jesus' ministry reflects the compassion and love he claims God has for humanity. So he heals people of disease and exorcises demons. The text emphasizes the power that flow out from him. Whether they are apostles, disciples or part of the crowd, all sorts of people receive Jesus' ministry. Jesus' teaching and ministry extends beyond insiders. He attempts to reach those outside his new community.

The Sermon on the Plain. At this point in his narrative, Luke incorporates part of the same material that Matthew had included in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5–7). But instead of staying on the mountain to deliver his discourse, Jesus comes down from the mountain like Moses descending to deliver the law to the people (Exod 34:15). As before, people crowd around him to hear the word of God and to be healed (5:1, 15).

A Prophetic Call of Blessing and Woe (6:20-26). Jesus' authority was not limited to his healing activity. He also taught with authority. Nothing indicates this more than the blessing and woe section of the Sermon on the Plain. It recalls the Old Testament prophets (remember that in the synagogue in Nazareth Jesus had taken on the mantle of the prophet Isaiah). Jesus thunders the truth with promises of blessing and judgment. The four blessings are followed by four parallel woes. This balance reflects the theme of reversal that Luke has presented elsewhere (1:50-53; 16:19-31): God does not always see things as we do. He looks at the heart, not at externals. He gives promises for those who enter into grace humbly, while warning of judgment for those who remain callous.

The key to the section is found in the remarks about the Son of Man and the comparison to the faithful and unfaithful of old. When Jesus speaks of the poor or rich, he is not making carte blanche statements about people with a certain social or economic standing. His remarks assume both Old Testament and spiritual roots. Jesus is not advocating a political or social philosophy, he is calling people into a spiritual relationship that God imparts to those willing to enter his new community. Yet, entrance in to this new community has political and social consequences.

Thus the beatitudes and woes serve as a call to be responsive to God in light of his promise of faithfulness to those who are his. The call to love unconditionally in verses 27-36 is a hard one to follow if we cannot trust that God will one day exercise justice. The premise of the sacrificial spiritual life is the promise of God's faithful justice. The beatitudes indicate the kind of person God desires as his child. These blessings are not a works salvation but represent an invitation to let God mold his children into who they ought to be. So God assures those who are needy that he will care for them.

Jesus offers promises to the poor, the hungry, those who weep and those who suffer religious persecution. God sees their spiritual commitment. To people such as these God promises the kingdom now and blessing later, including enough to eat, laughter and heavenly reward. Unlike Matthew, Luke includes woes, not just blessings. Jesus divides humankind into two camps (3:15-18--the purging Spirit of fire). In contrast to the blessed stand the rich, those who are well fed, those who laugh and those who receive praise. Their fate is sorrow, hunger, mourning and a life like those who followed the false prophets. The contrast is stark.

We are familiar with the beatitudes: "*Blessed are...*" There is an evolution of the meanings of "blessed" (*makarios*). In ancient Greek times, *makarios* referred to the gods. The blessed ones were the gods. They had achieved a state of happiness and contentment in life that was beyond all cares, labors, and even death. The blessed ones were beings who lived way up there in some other world. To be blessed, you had to be a god. That word took on a second meaning. It referred to the "dead". The blessed ones were humans, who, through death, had reached the other world of the gods. They were now beyond the cares of earthly life. To be blessed, you had to be dead.

Finally, in Greek usage, the word came to refer to the elite, the upper crust of society, the wealthy people. It referred to people whose riches and power put them above the normal cares and worries of the lesser folk -- the peons, who constantly struggle and worry and labor in life. To be blessed, you had to be very rich and powerful.

When this word, *makarios* was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, it took on another meaning. It referred to the results of right living or righteousness. If you lived right, you were blessed. Being blessed meant you received earthly, material things: a good wife, many children, abundant crops, riches, honor, wisdom, beauty, good health, etc. A blessed person had

more things and better things than an ordinary person. To be blessed, you had to have big and beautiful things.

In all of these meanings, the “blessed” ones existed on a higher plane than the rest of the people. They were gods. They were humans who had gone to that other world of the gods. They were the wealthy, upper crust. They were those with many possessions.

Jesus uses this word in a totally different way. It is not the elite who are blessed. It is not the rich and powerful who are blessed. It is not the high and mighty who are blessed. It is not the people living in huge mansions or expensive penthouses who are blessed. Rather, Jesus pronounces God's blessings on the lowly: the poor, the hungry, the crying, and the hated. Throughout the history of this word, it had always been the other people who were considered blessed: the rich, the filled up, the laughing. Jesus turns it all upside-down. The elite in God's kingdom, the blessed ones in God's kingdom, are those who are at the bottom of the heap of humanity.

But despite such opposition, disciples are blessed, since God promises to care for them. They belong to his kingdom and are under his rule. The poor here are like the Old Testament *anawim*, the pious poor. These beatitudes serve to comfort and reassure those who belong to God. They stand in a long line of the faithful, including the prophets of old. It is often the case that standing up for Jesus and the truth brings ostracism, but God has promised blessing to his children.

The woes also reflect prophetic tradition. A woe warns of condemnation. Here Jesus addresses the judgment of God to the callous rich and others who are comfortable with their state in life while being unconcerned about the needs of others. The lack of a genuine spiritual dimension in their life is seen in the comparison Jesus makes between them and the false prophets. For those who do not engage God on the divinity's terms there looms nothing but the terrible expectation of a day of reckoning. One of the dangers of wealth is that it can lead one to believe a life of independence is possible--a view that Jesus teaches is arrogant and misguided (12:13-21). The world's values are not God's values. The reversal portrayed in the beatitudes and woes reflects the idea that “the one with the most toys” often loses. God's blessing can be found in surprising places. It rests on those who rest in Him.

Notes

6:17 *them...crowd...people*: While the verse indicates three different groups: “them” = the newly chosen apostles (*apostolos*), “a great crowd of his disciples” (*mathetes*), and “a great multitude of the people (*laos*),” there seems to be no distinction between the groups. They have all come (1) “to hear him” and (2) to be healed from their diseases (v. 18).

6:18 *from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon*: This suggests that the people were both Jews (from Judea and Jerusalem) and Gentiles (from the coast of Tyre and Sidon). Luke continues to accent the universality of Jesus' concern that all be afforded salvation.

***healed...cured*:** Two different words for “heal/cure” are used: *iaomai* (from which we get the English suffix -iatrics, like in pediatrics;) and *therapeuo*, (from which we get English words like “therapeutic”). Classically, *iaomai*, is more connected with the art of healing. Related words are translated with: “physician,” “surgery,” “curable”. *therapeuo* originally referred to a servant or attendant (a meaning still found in the Acts 17:25). Such a person might care for a sick person, which led the meanings of “to tend (the sick),” “to treat medically,” “to heal, cure”

6:19 power came forth from him and healed them all: Both Jesus' touch and his power are frequently related to healings. The word for touch (*hapto*) has an active meaning of “to light” or “to ignite.” It is used this way in Lk 8:16; 11:33; 15:8. In the middle voice, it can mean “to take hold of,” “to touch.” In the ancient world it refers to passing on the fire from one source to another by touching to two things, e.g., spreading the light at a candlelight service. There is a sense that the “touch” expressed by this word, passed on a power (*dynamis* in 5:13; 6:19; 7:14; 8:44, 45, 46, 47; 18:15; 22:5) that brought healing. In these verses Luke has emphasized Jesus' authority and power in his deeds. Next it will be emphasized in his words.

6:20 Blessed: *makarios* – see detailed commentary for notes of the evolution of the word and its used in this Lucan context

you who are poor: The poor (*ptochos*); “destitute” might be a better way of translating this word. Of the different Greek words that depict the poor, this word refers to the most destitute and poverty stricken of them all. It implies a continuous state of poverty. This does not refer to those who may not have enough money to buy everything they want; but it refers to those who have no money, who have no job, who have no possessions, who are on the street begging for the essentials of life. This is the word used of “Poor Lazarus” (16:20, 22).

Kingdom of God: “Yours is the kingdom of God” can be translated: “The kingdom of God belongs to you” or, with a more active sense of *basileia* “God rules over you.”

6:21 you who are hungry: *peināō* in OT and NT use refers to hunger, not as the need for food, but as the lack or withdrawal of the fruits of labor. This term is used for the effects of famine (Gen. 41:55), exhaustion on a campaign or journey (Judg. 8:4-5; Dt. 25:18), or persistent hunger.

will be satisfied: also translated “will be filled” (*chortazo*) is the word that is used of the feeding miracle (9:17). Jesus filled up the hungry crowd. It is the word that is used of the desire of the “prodigal son,” who would have gladly filled himself with the pig's food. He discovered there was a much better meal to be had back at his father's house. It is the word that is used of Lazarus who longed to fill himself with the food that fell from the rich man's table. It is the plight of the poor not to be able to fill themselves with food.

You who are now weeping: “Weeping” (*klaio*) is a term that has an emphasis on the noise accompanying the weeping. This isn't just a simple sob that one can barely hear, but loud weeping, perhaps even wailing. It is used of the sound of parents at a child's death (7:13; 8:52). It is the sound Peter when he realizes that he denied Jesus three times as Jesus had predicted (22:62). It is the sound Jesus makes when he sees Jerusalem (19:4).

laugh: The word for “laugh” (*gelao*) occurs only here and in v. 26. The meaning most fitting here is “the sound that reflects happiness and joy,” rather than a laughter that indicates ridicule.

6:22 hate you ... exclude and insult you, ...denounce your name ...account of the Son of Man: These terms all point to the experience of rejection. The word “exclude” (*aphorizō*) carries the sense of the modern word “marginalized.” Notice that in the arrangement of the verbs, the movement is from attitude (hate) to action (exclude and insult) to speech (denounce).

6:23 your reward will be great in heaven: Luke uses the term “reward” (*misthos*) of the wages due a laborer (10:7) or payment for a deed (Acts 1:18).

6:24 woe: *ouai* is especially associated with the OT prophets in the LXX as an expression of disfavor.

rich: The rich (*plousios*) appear often in Luke -- in many instances in opposition to the poor: 12:16; 14:12; 16:1, 19, 21, 22; 18:23, 25; 19:2; 21:1. Yet in Luke there is also the examples of Zacchaeus properly using his wealth (21:1) and the possibility that the rich man, by helping poor Lazarus, could have saved himself from future torment (16:19-22).

you have received your consolation: “Receiving” (*paraklesis*) is related to the word *Paraklete*. The related verb, *parakaleo*, literally means “to call to one’s side.” The reasons for “calling to one’s side” are varied and lead to a number of meanings for this word: “to invite, to help, to encourage, to console, to exhort, to request, etc.” Thus the noun takes on a variety of meanings. The two most common meanings are: (a) to ask for something which is being especially sought, e.g. “to ask earnestly for, to demand, earnest request,” or (b) to cause someone to be encouraged or consoled, either by verbal or non-verbal means, e.g., “to encourage, to console, encouragement.” Is it that the rich already have everything they could ask for; or at least think they do. The encouragement or consolation they need for their lives they find in their wealth. They have no need for God in their lives.

6:24-26 These woes, for the most part, reflect the opposites of the blessings: poor vs. rich, hungry vs. filled up, crying vs. laughing, hated, etc. vs. spoken well of.

Detailed Commentary

Setting of the Sermon on the Plain. This passage is the introduction to a new major section of the book of Luke (6:17-9:50; See Commentary for Luke 5:1-11). While previous passages have dealt with the early ministries of John the Baptizer and Jesus, and have only referred to the teachings of Jesus, here for the first time the actual content of his teaching to the crowds is presented. Also, for the first time teachings are addressed directly to Jesus’ disciples.

There has been a steady progression within Luke from a focus on God’s work in the world in Jesus (the infancy narratives, chs. 1-2), to the preparation for Jesus’ ministry by John the Baptizer (3:1-20), to Jesus himself and his own preparation for ministry (3:21-4:13). Then Luke begins to highlight how Jesus and his teachings were received, beginning with the hometown folks in Nazareth (4:14-30) and concluding with the choosing of the twelve, who were among those who responded by leaving everything to follow him (6:12-16). In this section, Luke begins expanding that dimension of response by focusing on Jesus’ teaching related to the “ethics of the Kingdom,” the responsibilities and consequences of being disciples. Luke continues this focus on discipleship until the journey toward Jerusalem begins (9:51), where it takes on a slightly different tone.

Today’s passage is part of Luke’s compilation of Jesus’ sayings in which, much as Matthew has done, he collects together sayings of Jesus and arranges them in a “sermon” (for convenience, I will use the term *sermon* recognizing that this is a collection of sayings arranged by Luke). As we have been doing throughout our study of Luke, it is helpful to compare Luke with the parallel passages in Matthew to help understand Luke’s concerns here (there are no parallels in Mark or John, although some of the same sayings are found scattered throughout the books).

While questions about origin, sources, and redaction of the text are certainly valid and interesting, it will probably be sufficient here simply to acknowledge the fact that Luke and Matthew differ in how they have constructed these sermons. For example, whether Luke or Matthew was original and the other adapted it, or whether both adapted the material from a

common collection of sayings (the posited “Q” source or document) is probably not as important for understanding Luke’s message as simply focusing on the differences themselves.

That Matthew and Luke are recognized as different at this point can be seen even in the names usually given to the two sermons: Matthew’s collection is known as the “Sermon on the *Mount*” (Mt. 5:1-7:27), while Luke’s is known as the “Sermon on the *Plain*” (Lk. 6:17-49). That simply reflects the fact that the physical settings for the two collections of sayings are different.¹

This physical settings likely have to do with the individual writers’ emphasis, and how they use different metaphors and features to communicate that emphasis. The book of Matthew was closely connected with Jewish elements in the early church, so he presented Jesus in the imagery of Moses. As Moses had once brought the *torah* from a mountain (Sinai), so Jesus now brought the new authoritative *torah* (“it has been said . . .but I say”) from a mountain. The theological purpose of the geographical setting was to establish the authority of Jesus as a lawgiver in the tradition of Moses.

For Luke, the geography serves a different theological role here. The mountain was the place of piety and worship, the place Jesus retreated to pray (6:12) and the place where God was encountered (9:28). For Jesus to be on the mountain to pray, and then return to “a level place” was a way to anchor his actions in communion with God, yet to identify him with crowds on the level of ordinary, everyday human existence. The issue for Luke was not authority, but the outworking of the implications of the Kingdom in everyday life. Prayer and piety are crucial to provide a basis in God’s presence for Jesus work, but the message of the Kingdom and the arena for Jesus’ work is the “level place” where the crowds are milling. That is a central element in Luke’s Gospel.

The crowd itself is interesting. Luke presents it as a mixed group of people with different reasons for being there. There was “a great crowd of his disciples.” Since this immediately follows the choosing of the Twelve (6:12-16) they are no doubt included in this number, but the focus here is not specifically on the Twelve. There are also “a great multitude of people” from Judea and Jerusalem to the south as well as from the Phoenician territory (Tyre and Sidon) to the northwest. Clearly this tells us that Jews from all over the area were there.

However, there is some ambiguity in the reference to people from Tyre and Sidon. Since this area borders Galilee on the west, the people from this area could have been Jews, and some scholars interpret “people” of verse 18 to mean the “people of God,” *i.e.*, Jews. However, it seems much more likely that Luke intends to refer to Gentiles by placing “Tyre and Sidon” with “Judea and Jerusalem.” In the only other pairing of the Phoenician towns in Luke (10:13-14), they are contrasted with Chorazin and Bethsaida, two Jewish towns just north of the Sea of Galilee. In that passage Luke draws the contrast between the Jewish towns that failed to respond to Jesus even though he had done “deeds of power” there, and Tyre and Sidon that would have gratefully responded to such actions had they had the chance.

¹ Of course, it is possible that Jesus repeated the same message twice on two different occasions, and each writer chose a different one to record. However, given the many other differences between the various Gospels, it seems much more likely that each writer is emphasizing different theological points for a particular community of faith that had particular needs. They are each shaping the Gospel tradition in their own way to address those needs. As we have observed before, that does not in any way falsify the tradition or render the biblical text any less authoritative.

Luke has already mentioned Sidon in an illustration that only makes sense if it is considered outside Israel and inhabited by non-Jews (4:25-26). Both Matthew and Mark make references to Tyre and Sidon in reference to Jesus' work among Gentiles (Mt. 15:21-22, a Canaanite woman; Mk. 7:25-30, a Greek Syrophenician woman), which suggests those areas were synonymous with Gentiles. All this seems to indicate that Luke intends in this passage to describe a mixed group of people, Jews and Gentiles, as he also refers to Jews from various places, disciples and crowds, and those who came for healing and those who came to listen to Jesus' teachings.

This means that there are three identifiable groups of people in the crowds. While we should be careful not to take this into allegory, there does seem to be some intention on Luke's part to distinguish the groups. First, there are the just-chosen group of Twelve disciples who would carry on the ministry of Jesus. Much of what unfolds in the next chapters will revolve around these twelve. Next, there are the larger crowds of disciples who are followers of Jesus, who have responded to his ministry, but who have not received a special call from Jesus. And then there are the others, both Jews and Gentiles, who are there for various reasons but who have not yet become disciples. It is this mixed group that provides the setting for the "sermon."

Luke is again careful, as he has before, to emphasize Jesus' *actions* in connection with his *words*, and so he places the sermon in the context of reports about healing (v. 19). It is part of the central message of Luke that the proclamation of the word of God must also be accompanied by faithful response worked out in real life. For Jesus, as well as for the apostles in Acts, his words of teaching were affirmed by his deeds (vv. 18-19); the actions gave authority to the words. And for those who would follow him, hearing alone would not be enough. This connection between hearing the words and acting on them will become the climax of this entire sermon in Luke (6:46-49).

The Blessings and Curses. The portion of this sermon included in this Sunday's reading are the blessings and woes Jesus pronounced to the crowd. While Matthew's Beatitudes give us only nine blessings, Luke has carefully paired four blessings with four woes or curses, even to using the same words in corresponding pairs. Luke draws the contrast in the pairs between groups of people: (1) poor-rich, (2) hungry-full, (3) those who weep-those who laugh, and (4) those who are hated-those of whom people speak well.

In addition to simply pairing the blessings and curses and thus contrasting the groups, Luke also reverses the groups of people within each saying, so that, for example, in the blessing the hungry will be filled, while in the corresponding woe those who are filled will become hungry. This serves to highlight not only the positive reversal that is a blessing for one group, as Matthew does, but also the corresponding negative outcome on the opposite group.

We have already noted that the idea of a reversal of fortune is an important theme for Luke (see the Commentary for Luke 1:39-55, the section on reversal of fortunes in the *Magnificat*). That is, Luke uses this Old Testament idea as a way to proclaim and define the new future that Jesus is bringing into the world. Here, he is again using that motif to continue explaining the nature of discipleship.

There is no way to know for certain whether Luke was using the similar sequence of blessings and curses in Deuteronomy as a model for these (28:3-6, 16-19), but the similarity seems more than coincidence. While there are certainly differences between them, it seems fair to ask what the similarities might reveal about Luke's focus.

The context in Deuteronomy is a covenant ceremony in which the people are called to faithfulness in obeying the *torah*, the instructions of God that shaped and gave identity to the people. The promise there to those who faithfully obey God will be that “God will set you above all the nations of the earth.” While in the historical context of the OT those blessings are translated into physical security, there is still the dimension of “mission” as the people of God (28:8-10):

“The LORD will affirm his blessing upon you, on your barns and on all your undertakings, blessing you in the land that the LORD, your God, gives you. Provided that you keep the commandments of the LORD, your God, and walk in his ways, he will establish you as a people sacred to himself, as he swore to you; So that, when all the nations of the earth see you bearing the name of the LORD, they will stand in awe of you.”

Likewise, the curses warn that failure to obey God’s instructions will lead to “*defeat and frustration in every enterprise you undertake*” (28:20). The emphasis is clearly on the responsibility of the people to follow God and his instructions faithfully as the only way to fulfill who they are as God’s people. It is this dimension of a strong call to faithfulness that echoes in Jesus’ words and in Luke’s pairing of the blessings and woes here.

And yet, in Deuteronomy the blessings and woes are dependent on how the people would respond. That is, the people themselves would bring on either blessings or curses by how they lived. Here in Luke, they are simply pronounced by Jesus on groups of people depending on their **physical condition** *not* on their **behavior**. Unless we assume absolutely no connection to the OT ideas, which is unlikely given Luke’s heavy use of the OT to this point, this echo of a call to responsibility and yet an emphasis on the physical condition of the people introduces a tension into the text. If the people of God in the OT were to be blessed based on *obedience*, what is the significance of Jesus pronouncing blessings on the people now simply because they are poor, or hungry, or weeping, or hated? The answer to this is not immediately obvious, but raises the possibility that there is a direct connection with being poor and being a follower of Jesus.

It is easily observable that Matthew’s version of the blessings are much more “spiritual” than Luke’s. Where Matthew speaks of “poor in spirit” (5:3), Luke has simply “poor” (v. 20); where Matthew says “hunger and thirst for righteousness” (5:6), Luke clearly means simply those “who are hungry” in a physical sense (v. 21). It has usually been assumed that this reflects Luke’s social agenda, that he is presenting a Gospel for the poor and oppressed. There is certainly this dimension in Luke, a concern for the powerless and outcast of society. And since there is little question that Luke is talking about real physical needs here, we dare not spiritualize away those physical needs. We must take seriously the fact that this is real poverty, real hunger, real weeping, and real hatred.

Yet, at this point in Luke, this is not really a social agenda here. In fact, a closer examination will reveal that Matthew and Luke are not as far apart as they appear at this point (which also might warn us of reading too much of our agenda into Luke). The sayings are in the context of discipleship, which Luke has been emphasizing in various ways since Jesus’ visit to Nazareth. He will continue dealing with the nature of discipleship through the conclusion of the Galilean ministry (ch. 9), and then set the tone for the journey to Jerusalem by opening that trip with a discussion of discipleship and the sending of the seventy (9:51ff). The sayings are also in the

context of the nature of the Kingdom, another motif established early in the book with the *Magnificat*, *Benedictus*, and *Nunc Dimittis*, and developed in the Nazareth narrative.

As in Matthew, in Luke, Jesus begins by directing the blessings at general groups (“the poor,” “the hungry”) and then concludes the sequence with second person references (“you”) that relate to persecution or rejection. Also, both specifically identify the “you” at the very beginning of the sermon as “his disciples” (v. 20; Mt 5:1). That does not necessarily mean that Jesus is addressing only disciples in the crowd. But it does indicate that what he is going to say has reference to disciples. This suggests that in both Matthew and Luke the blessings have special meaning for disciples, or those who would become disciples. This again hints that the two Gospels may be closer together here than we often think.

This puts some restrictions on how widely we can define the groups in the blessings and woes. They are not just any poor anywhere, or any hungry, or any who weep, or anyone who is hated. And by contrast, it is not all rich, or all who are full, who are being referenced. The context here makes it clear that there is some connection between being disciples and the blessings and curses, that the “poor” are directly related to those who are hated “on account of the Son of Man” (v.22).

The time references in the sequence of sayings are also of interest. There is an intriguing blending of present and future. This is especially highlighted in the second and third pair with the repeated “now” followed by a *future* condition; there is a condition “now” that “will be” changed into the opposite. This clearly gives these sayings an eschatological dimension; there will come a time when the inequities of the present will be resolved. This dimension is reinforced in the fourth blessing by the reference to “that day” (v. 23), a common way of referring to a future act of God (see The Day of the Lord).

And yet, in the first pair, the emphasis is decidedly on the *present*. The poor *already* have the kingdom, and the rich *already* have their consolation. This term has been used once before in Luke, to describe the hope for which the old man Simeon was looking, and which he saw in the infant Jesus (2:25). The implication is that the “consolation” that the rich already have in their riches and security may cause them to miss the consolation of Israel manifest in the Kingdom that Jesus is bringing, and which is available to the poor (v. 20) in ways that it is not available to the rich.

The final sequence of blessing/woe moves to Luke’s overriding concern here. That this is close to Matthew in general content and tone, and that the teachings which follow also go a similar direction as Matthew, suggests that both reflect Jesus’ own emphasis, even as it has been adapted somewhat differently into the Lucan and Matthean communities.

The theme of the last blessing is clearly rejection “*on account of the Son of Man*” (v. 22); that is, rejection because of following Jesus, because of becoming a disciple. One cannot read this without thinking of Jesus’ own experience of rejection by the home town folks at Nazareth that has set the tone for his ministry. The very ones who should have most readily accepted him, drove him away. For Luke, as well as for the other Gospel writers in different ways, following Jesus, following the path of discipleship, is costly and will often result in personal loss and suffering.

Luke draws the contrast sharply between the present condition of rejection, that also encompasses being poor and hungry and weeping, and the fact of the present possession of the

kingdom and the future reversal to joy (v. 23). It is a statement of faith that external criteria or appearances are no measure of possession of the Kingdom. In fact, there is some indication that the opposite of external appearances is closer to the truth. This should not be taken as glorification of poverty or suffering. That would be just as much an excessive overreaction as those in the early church who were so zealous to “take up your cross and follow” Jesus that they sought martyrdom as a sign of obedience. Poverty, hunger, weeping, and hatred are not something to seek. But they are far more fertile ground for receiving the kingdom. And they are a likely result of following Jesus.

This point is underscored in the references to the prophets in both parts of this last pair of sayings. Faithful prophets of God, especially Amos, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, were ridiculed for their message, especially by other prophets like Hananiah (Jer. 28:1-17). Yet history confirmed that their message was God’s message. And Micah gave a strong warning against prophets who feared to speak the truth and became too comfortable with kind words and the approval of the people (Mic. 2:6-11).

Again, the background of Jesus’ visit to Nazareth becomes more clear. Jesus introduced a prophetic theme there (4:24) that caused an immediate reaction from the people. While the disciples are not called “prophets” here, and are assigned no prophetic role, Luke seems to be drawing an analogy between the OT prophets who spoke the truth, and the disciples who will **live** the truth (as outlined in vv. 26-49). The point is that truth, in whatever form it is presented, is not welcome in a world that is governed by self-interest, and whose values are decided by the rich and satisfied who have need of nothing. There is a subversive element to the truth, and the only recourse people have is to silence it by hatred, exclusion, vilification, and defamation. And yet those “poor” who are rejected are the heart of the kingdom of God, because they join the poor of the world who have no other future except God’s future.

A Final Thought

The following quotes come from Walter Pilgrim (*Good News to the Poor: Wealth and Poverty in Luke-Acts*).

The clear social distinctions drawn here are between the haves and the have-nots, the possessors and the impoverished, those favored by society and those despised. The new and surprising element is the way in which the norms and values of society are turned upside down. The promised blessings belong to the suffering poor, while the coming woes are pronounced upon the contented rich. According to one commentator, this marks the first time in Jewish religious literature that the poor are directly called the blessed (Hengel Property). [p. 76]

...we have argued that the Lukan beatitudes are addressed to people who are literally poor and persecuted. Yet their poverty is blessed within the context of their response to the ministry of Jesus and the call to the kingdom of God. Thus it is not just poverty or riches per se that is blessed or condemned, but poverty in the context of trust in God and riches in the context of rejection of God. The two go hand in hand for Luke. [p. 77]

“For Luke, the kingdom belongs to the poor, but the rich share in it by virtue of their treatment of the poor and needy” (Thomas Hoyt, *The Poor in Luke-Acts*, p. 167) [quoted by Pilgrim on p. 160]

Who are the poor for Luke and what is the good news proclaimed to them? If, as we have shown, the poor includes those who belong to the lowest social and economic level, what is the good news addressed to them? We would suggest three dimensions of this good news in Luke-Acts.

- The assurance that God is for them
- The promise of the future -- the promised eschatological reversal
- The promise of the present -- The hope for the poor in the present for Luke lies in the fellowship of a new community, where justice, equality, and compassion are living realities. [pp. 160-162]

While the basic message of Jesus' ministry in Luke's gospel centers around the theme of good news to the poor, his extensive discussion of wealth and poverty is addressed primarily to the rich. We have interpreted this to mean that Luke is using this material to speak to well-to-do Christians in his own day. What Luke has in mind is nothing less than an urgent call for a new evaluation of possessions and their place in the Christian life and Christian community.

Luke has two major themes regarding possessions. The first is a warning about their radical danger to Christian discipleship. ... the danger of possessions carries with it a summons for rich believers to take heed, to be on guard and to be open for the necessity of an urgent reordering of priorities in their lives

The Lukan response to possessions is not the call to total abandonment, but what we choose to term the discipleship use of one's wealth. What Luke commends for Christians in his day is a style of life in which possessions are placed radically at the service of those in need. While possessions in themselves are not evil, their true worth is to be measured by their use. [pp. 163-165]

Luke addressed himself to the rich Christians in his day. He does not insist that they give up all their possessions, nor does he require an elimination of all economic differences in the community. But Luke does say this to rich Christians: "Your abundance and the poverty of other Christians are not in accordance with God's will or with the spirit of Jesus. You must relinquish your abundance for the sake of the poor and work toward greater economic equality in God's world." Back to the tough question once again, can one remain wealthy and be a faithful Christian? We interpret the Zacchaeus episode as Luke's no/yes response. No, in that the rich cannot go on living as before. A new ordering of priorities is necessitated. The rich cannot be saved with their riches intact. They must get free from the burden and seduction of wealth and spend themselves in the service of others. Only costly sharing of wealth will do as a response to the call of Jesus into a life of discipleship. "But yes, the rich can be saved, as they are freed by God's unconditional grace in Christ to trust the Father for life's sufficiencies and as they respond in love to make friends with their wealth through wise and sacrificial giving, remembering always the poor and the powerless. [p. 170]