



## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany**

**February 17, 2019**

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### **“Backwards”**

*(Luke 6:17-26)*

Rev. David K. Groth

**Every day, everywhere, by everyone...  
sharing the grace of the Good Shepherd.**

**Collect:** O Lord, graciously hear the prayers of Your people that we who justly suffer the consequence of our sin may be mercifully delivered by Your goodness to the glory of Your name; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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Backwards. It's all backwards. Blessed (happy) are the poor? The hungry? Happy are those who weep? Blessed are those who are hated, excluded, reviled and spurned? Who wants to be "blessed" like that?

Conversely woe to those who are rich? To those who are full, who laugh, and who enjoy a good reputation? It's backwards! It's all backwards.

Keep in mind we have heard these words so often they've lost their sharp edge; they don't startle us anymore. But with each of these blessings and curses Jesus is challenging you to rethink your assumptions. No stars twinkling silently in the night here; these are white hot flashes of lightning followed by cracks of surprise and amazement. Jesus takes the accepted standards and values and turns them on their heads. The people whom Jesus calls happy the world calls wretched; and the people Jesus calls wretched the world calls happy. What gives him the authority to say these things? Why should we listen to him?

Luke tells us. Great multitudes of people were following him, to listen to him and be healed of their diseases and cured of unclean spirits. This alone is a reason why you should take the time to listen to him.

Not everyone is worth your time. Not every article in the newspaper is worth reading. Not every email, tweet or Facebook post is worth opening. However, if someone suddenly appears on the scene and is drawing massive crowds to hear him, and are witnessing hundreds of miracles that no one can explain away, it's probably worth listening to see what he has to say. That is, if anyone has earned a few minutes before the mic, it's Jesus.

So let's do that. Let's give him a chance to speak to us. We'll consider each blessing with its corresponding woe. V.

20, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. . . V. 24, But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” Well we know there are no automatic passes into the kingdom of heaven simply by virtue of being poor. Scripture interprets Scripture, and Scripture teaches very clearly that it’s grace and faith that save us, not poverty. And only unbelief condemns us, not wealth.

“Blessed are you poor” he says. We don’t usually think of poverty as a blessing. But those who are physically poor are also usually more aware of their spiritual poverty, more aware of the riches found only in God. Poverty makes it easier to give up on one’s self and one’s own strength and wisdom, and look to God for grace and strength and salvation. Poverty has a way of turning our heads to God for daily bread, but also for the Bread of Life.

Conversely, the Bible has no argument with wealth; wealth in and of itself is not evil. It’s what wealth does to us. The rich (and most of us are rich) are tempted to trust more in their wealth than in God. We don’t pray so fervently for daily bread because we could live for a very long time on what’s in our pantries and freezers before we ever have to dip into savings. Moreover, if amassing wealth becomes a man’s passionate pursuit and sole ambition, there’s a chance he’ll succeed, and he will have obtained what he was after. However, for his everlasting future he will have stored up exactly nothing!

I’m thinking of the parable of the rich fool who said to himself, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.” But as Christians, our goal is not to live comfortably, but usefully. Our goal is not to live for self, but for others. Our goal is not to amass wealth for the sake of amassing wealth, but to use everything God has given us in service of others and for the benefit of his kingdom.

Being wealthy is not evil; but you still need Jesus. You don’t have to repent for being successful; you do have to repent for being selfish and smug and for feeling self-

sufficient.

Jesus continues. “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied . . . Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.” This one may well have a spiritual component to it. There are in us and about us two hungers: hunger for bread, but also hunger and hunger for God. If we neglect them, either one, we perish. Augustine wrote, “Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee.” That is, there are some hungers that cannot be satisfied by raiding the fridge. There are some aches and pains that cannot be assuaged with opioids . . . some thirsts that cannot be quenched with booze.

Notice also the tense. “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be satisfied.” At some point in the future, those hungers and aches and thirsts will be satisfied. Of course, Jesus is pointing to that never-ending feast in heaven with the best of meats and the finest of wines. We live in that tension. Already, but not yet. It’s already been won for us in Christ. It’s already been given us in Christ. But we are not yet there. We live by the promise. The best . . . that’s still to come. We get teasing tastes even now, but we live mostly in hopeful expectation.

Jesus continues: “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. . . Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.” Scripture calls us to lament our sin for sure, but also grieve over the sin of those around us (Ezek. 9:4). It should make us sad; what sin has done to our world and what it’s doing to our country, how that which is evil is called good, and that which is good is called evil (Is.5:30).

God’s laws are spurned as moth-eaten, ignorant and intolerant; worldly values are lifted up as enlightened and informed. I’m thinking of the most recent abortion laws that were passed. Have we lost our minds as well as our hearts? How is it reasonable that an infant is not considered a person? What exactly is the ethical difference of doing an abortion at twenty-nine weeks verses thirty-nine weeks? It’s like the Dared Scott decision where African American slaves were considered less than persons and therefore could never

be citizens of the United States. When we mock God's laws, we mock God himself. What's happening in our country should grieve us. Psalm 119:136, "Streams of tears flow from my eyes for your law is not obeyed" (v. 136). Let your heart grieve for your country, and for so many in this country who have grown so cold to the One who created them and loves them still. Grieve for them, because those who laugh at God and his Word today, one day they will mourn and weep, and he will not be there to wipe away their tears.

Jesus said "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh" not in mockery or jest or derision over the ruin of others, but in the joy of salvation, and in deep gratitude for the eternal citizenship given us by grace. Jesus is pointing us to the joys of heaven where there is no more reason to grieve, where we will laugh, not a little giggle, not a snigger or embarrassed chortle, but full throated, unrestrained, gut-splitting laughter for the joy of heaven.

Finally, Jesus says, "Blessed are you when people hate you and exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of me." "On account of me." Those are the key words. This is no promises that God will bless us when people hate us for being jerks. But if all that comes on account of him, because we're faithful to him, then "rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for your reward is great in heaven."

Let's be careful about that word "reward." Don't think of it as a payment for something you've done. Jesus taught this reward is based on God's goodness, not the amount of work done. Think of the parable of the laborers in the vineyard; those who did very little work having been hired at the end of the day were still given a full day's wages, because of the goodness and generosity of the owner of the vineyard. Any reward our heavenly Father gives us is an expression of his grace.

Jesus continues, "woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets." What's wrong with having a good reputation? Well nothing,

so long as it was gained by being good and kind and gracious and faithful. However, good reputations are often earned in other ways.

In his book *Confessions* written in the fourth century St. Augustine talks about his life as a young man. “I was ashamed to be less dissolute than my companions were. For I heard them bragging of their depravity, and the greater the sin the more they gloried in it, so that I took pleasure in the same vices not only for the enjoyment of what I did, but also for the applause I won. Nothing deserves to be despised more than vice; yet I gave in more and more to vice simply in order not to be despised. If I had not sinned enough to rival other sinners, I used to pretend that I had done things I had not done at all, because I was afraid that innocence would be taken for cowardice and chastity for weakness. These were the companions with whom I walked the streets of Babylon. I wallowed in its mire” (p. 46). (It’s remarkable how the 4th century can sound just like the 21st.)

We can seek the favor of the crowds, or we can seek God’s favor. Usually we cannot do both. If all people speak well of you, consider the possibility there may be something wrong with you. You may not be taking a stand for the truth. You might be hiding your light, because darkness cannot stand the light (Jn. 3:19ff).

Conversely, if you are paying the price for being faithful, hear again the words of Paul: “I consider our present sufferings not worth even comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). And in 2 Corinthians 4 he calls them light and momentary afflictions which are preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (2 Cor. 4:17). So Jesus says, “Blessed are you when people hate and exclude and revile and spurn you on account of me. Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven.”

This passage is revolutionary. It feels backwards. But he didn’t just say these words. He lived them out. He became poor so we might become rich. He fasted so we might be filled. He wept so we might one day laugh heartily

and eternally. And he suffered hatred and exclusion and revulsion and ultimately crucifixion so that we would have a great reward in heaven.

Until then Jesus is challenging us to follow him in his ways, and not the world in its ways. Amen.

