

**Luke 6:17-26**

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<sup>17</sup>He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>18</sup>They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. <sup>19</sup>And all in the crowd were trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

<sup>20</sup>Then he looked up at his disciples and said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. <sup>21</sup>“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. <sup>22</sup>“Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. <sup>23</sup>Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven; for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets. <sup>24</sup>“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. <sup>25</sup>“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. <sup>26</sup>“Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

I like Matthew’s version better. It seems more spiritual, less course, less confrontative. That’s the one we hear more often isn’t it? From the Sermon on the Mount—Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, etc. And in the Sermon on the Mount, there aren’t any of the troubling “woes.” Those make us uncomfortable, don’t they? I don’t like the texts or sayings in the Bible that tend to divide people into two different groups—the blessed on one side and the cursed on the other. That’s one of the reasons that although I love the parables in Matthew 25, they make me a bit uncomfortable also. Matthew 25, and the parable of the sheep and the goats is one that we are hearing more and more about. The Presbyterian Church has an initiative for churches called the Matthew 25 project. It is intended inspire churches and their members to have a more active faith. We are encouraged to think about the parable of the sheep and the goats at the end of Matthew 25 in which Jesus divides people into two groups, like sheep separated from the goats.

One side is pronounced blessed because they fed the hungry, gave water to those who were thirsty, visited the sick and those in prison, and welcomed the stranger. And when they did this, when they did these things to the “least of these who are members of Jesus’ family,” they did it to Jesus. That’s wonderful. But at the same time the others are pronounced cursed because they didn’t do these things for the “least of these,” and therefore did not do them to Jesus. That makes me nervous, because there are plenty of times when I’m in that group that didn’t feed the hungry or visit the sick or welcome the stranger. I don’t want to be cursed.

The same way, this passage makes me nervous. Blessed are you poor, but woe to you who are rich, blessed are who are full, who are laughing, who are well spoken of. I don’t want to be in that group, do you?

There are several interesting things that I want to take note of in this Sermon on the Plain. In Matthew, Jesus is depicted as speaking from atop a mountain, he is seen as the new Moses, the Lawgiver, coming down from the mountain and delivering the word of God to the people. But Luke pictures this event differently. Jesus comes down to a level place, a plain, before he speaks. And who does he speak to? The passage we read says, “he came down with them and stood on a level place.” Came down from where? Came down with who? It’s important to read this passage in context with what came just before. What happens right before the Sermon on the Plain? If you read right before our passage, Luke says:

<sup>2</sup>Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. <sup>13</sup>And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles: <sup>14</sup>Simon, whom he named Peter, and his brother Andrew, and James, and John, and Philip, and Bartholomew, <sup>15</sup>and Matthew, and Thomas, and James son of Alphaeus, and Simon, who was called the Zealot, <sup>16</sup>and Judas son of James, and Judas Iscariot, who became a traitor.

He came down the mountain, “with them.” With these 12 apostles, to this level place, where he is going to “level with them,” where he is going to speak plainly on this plain. Luke says he said these words “to his disciples.” These aren’t pronouncements for the crowd, these are teachings for his disciples, for those who follow him. These are words for us. He is not dividing the crowd into two groups, one blessed and one cursed. He’s speaking to the group of disciples, he’s speaking to us as a whole. Notice in these blessings and woes, Jesus uses the second person plural. Blessed are you, woe to you. He’s not pointing out some of the disciples who are particularly blessed and then points to others who are in trouble. He’s pointing to all of them, to all of us. Blessed are we when we are poor, when we are hungry, when we weep, and woe to us when we are rich, when we are full, when we laugh. It’s not that some of us are blessed and others of us are cursed. The fact is that all of us are blessed at times, and all of us have woes at times. Jesus is asking to look at ourselves in a different way—when we are poor, it can be a blessing because we are driven to depend on God. When we are rich, it can be a bad thing because we think we’ve got it made and we don’t need God or anyone else.

Actually, I think this is how the parable in Matthew 25 should be read as well. We are not stuck into being either a sheep or a goat, one who is faithful or one who is not, one who cares for the least of these and one who doesn’t. We are both things at different times in our lives, even at different moments. Jesus asks us to consider which we are being and try to be one who is caring for the least of these, and caring for him, more often.

We try to read too many of the passages in the Bible, including the Sermon on the Plain, as Either/Or passages. But if we recognize that in the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus is speaking to all of his disciples, including us, we can begin to see it as a both/and passage. We are not either rich

or poor, we are both. We are both weeping and laughing, we are both hungry and full. And if we realize that we have both blessings and woes, that is when we begin to realize our need of God.

We are talking about forgiveness this month of February. February is so often a month that we decorate with hearts and signs of love for Valentine's Day. But it may be that the greatest act of love is forgiveness. But to be forgiven, we need to recognize our need for forgiveness. If we are in an either/or frame of mind, if we see ourselves as the blessed ones, and those people over there as the cursed ones, if we see our church as the right one and those folks as wrong, if we believe the way we follow God is what God wants and those other faiths as hopelessly flawed and destined for hell, if we see ourselves as deserving of all of God's blessings and other people who are not as good as we are as deserving of God's correction, then where is our need to be forgiven?

Last week we spoke about God's grace and how God is always ready to forgive, out of God never-ending love for us. But do we know we need to be forgiven? Are we ready to accept God's forgiveness? I think we can only accept forgiveness if we have come to the conclusion that we need to be forgiven. In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus turns to his disciples and describes to them that they are both/and. They have blessings and woes, and not necessarily where you would think they are. But both our blessings and our woes should take us to God, where we kneel at his throne, in need of God's forgiveness for our mistakes and in gratitude for God's grace.