

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 02/13/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Sixth Sunday After the Epiphany

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, February 13th

Luke 6:17-26

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Blessings and woes

During the Third and Fourth Sundays After Advent the Gospel lection featured Luke's first recorded sermon by Jesus in the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. Here Jesus read from an amalgam of verses from Isaiah that revealed the blueprint of His ministry: To bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to the captives, recovering sight to the blind, set at liberty those who are oppressed and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor. During this sermon Jesus proclaimed, *"Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."* (Luke 4:14-30). The Gospel lection for the next two Sundays feature the second recorded sermon given by Jesus in Luke (6:17-49). This second sermon is given to a much larger audience and builds on the first. It is commonly referred to as the Sermon on the Plain and has parallels to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7). What Jesus teaches is revolutionary and makes a mockery of the world's values. This week we review the first part of the Sermon on the Plain and reflect on what these radical teachings mean for us today.

Luke 6:17-26 Commentary

As context, after Jesus calls His first disciples (5:1-11), He cleanses a leper (12-16). Luke returns to the theme of opposition to Jesus with five accounts of controversy (5:17-6:11). Next is a section on Jesus teaching his disciples (6:12-49) and it is within this section that the text is located. The section begins with Jesus spending all night on the mountain in prayer. In Luke's Gospel, prayer occurs at every major event in Jesus' life. As a result of His all-night prayer vigil, Jesus first calls all His disciples to Him, chooses twelve of them to be Apostles (sent ones), then comes down from the mountain to minister to the multitude and preach a life-transforming sermon (6:17-49).

¹⁷ And 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 and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, ¹⁸ who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all.

The opening verses locate the events on a level place down from the mountain. For obvious reasons this event is referred to as the Sermon on the Plain and has parallels to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount (chapters 5-7). There are also allusions to Moses coming down from Mount Sinai with the Ten Commandments. Thus, here are the "ethical standards" for disciples of Jesus. These are the behaviors expected in the Kingdom, not the behaviors required to enter the Kingdom. Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is longer than Luke's account and there are

some differences. Some commentators explain such differences by recognizing that just like itinerant preachers today often use the same core material with different audiences, Matthew and Luke may have accounts of different sermons occurring at different places. Other commentators note that Matthew and Luke were both writing to different audiences and would have emphasized certain elements differently. Matthew's audience was Jewish whereas Luke's was most likely Hellenists and Gentiles.

It is interesting to note there was a great crowd of Jesus' disciples AND a great multitude of people from a wide area. The people from the regions of Tyre and Sidon were most likely Gentiles.

²⁰ *And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said:*

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

After the healings Jesus begins His teaching. From the text it is clear the intended audience for this sermon is His disciples. The sermon begins with four Beatitudes (from the Latin *beatus* meaning happy, blessed) and four woes. Blessing in this context is more than a temporary feeling of happiness; it is more of a sense of well-being that comes from being in the right relationship with God. The Beatitudes are not conditions for entering the Kingdom but are blessings that are pronounced on those who have already entered the Kingdom.

The first blessing involves the poor. The equivalent in Matthew is "*poor in spirit*" (Matthew 5:3) - those who recognize they need God's help rather than being self-reliant. The assumption here is that Luke is similarly referring to the "pious poor" and not simply those who are economically/materially poor. This is further supported by the fact that the word used for poor here in Luke and in the Septuagint translation of Isaiah 61:1 which Jesus quoted in his first recorded sermon in the synagogue in his Nazareth is the same Greek word - *ptōchoi*. Also note the present tense: "*is*" the kingdom rather than "*will be*".

²¹ *"Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.*

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.

The second blessing involves those who are hungry now. In a similar way to the first beatitude, this is not just physical hunger but spiritual hunger - hunger to be in a right relationship with God. The equivalent in Matthew is "*those who hunger and thirst for righteousness*" (5:6). Such will be satisfied, spiritually and physically.

The third blessing is directed to those "*who weep now*". The equivalent in Matthew is "*those who mourn*" (5:4). The spiritual parallel refers to those who are sensitive to the effects of sin and evil in the world. For those who weep now will no longer weep when the Kingdom is consummated.

²² *"Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! ²³ Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.*

The final unexpected blessing is for those who are persecuted on account of Jesus. The response should be one of rejoicing (see Acts 5:41) because their reward is great in Heaven. Such are in good company. The prophets were treated the same way. The world is always at odds with the Kingdom.

Jesus now pronounces four woes (more like expressing a regret than a threat) against what the world typically considers as blessings.

²⁴ *"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.*

Jesus speaks out against our tendency to both delight and trust in the things of this world more than God. William Barclay notes how the word used for "have" is the word used for receiving payment in full for an account. In other words, if you choose to direct all your energies to what the world values, you will receive your payment in full - but that's all you will ever get. The dangers of riches are a common theme in Luke. If all you have is worldly wealth, then you are very poor indeed!

²⁵ *"Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.*

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

This continues the caution to the rich. Those who think they need nothing are paupers in faith. Those who think they have no need of God will one day realize they are spiritually hungry. Those who have only worldly wealth are empty inside. Similarly, "*laugh now*" refers to the boastful laughter of the callous rich who care nothing for the plight of those around them. Such will mourn and weep when God's judgment comes.

²⁶ *"Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.*

The final woe is against seeking the approval of the world. The true prophets were despised, tortured, and killed. Only the false prophets were spoken well of.

Reflections

Given its familiarity, we perhaps miss how revolutionary Jesus' teaching was relative to the time and place He lived. This teaching to His disciples must have turned their world upside down. Today is no different. This teaching still turns our world upside down. There are some difficult instructions in this first part of the Sermon on the Plain. Some may tend to see this as support for the social gospel. Yet in interpreting the text in the context of other Scripture we perhaps recognize that blessings on the poor and woes on the rich is an over-simplification. Equally erroneous, however, is to ignore the cautions of complacency against those on the fringes of society. What is clear from the text is that what we are called to be goes against the grain of worldly values. Therefore, if we confuse human ideals of social justice with the Kingdom or attempt to build the Kingdom by our own hands, we fail as disciples.

The irony is that we become more blessed, even in this world, by taking Christ at His Word. While the world may promise us comfort, we must not mistake such comfort for blessedness. Jesus promises us that if we follow Him as His disciples we will be tremendously blessed in this life, even experience a taste of the Kingdom, but we will be in constant trouble with the world! Therefore, if the church begins to resemble the world, then this is perhaps a good indication we are failing as disciples.

Jesus began His Sermon on the Plain by lifting up His eyes and looking at His disciples. As we ponder the lessons from the blessings and woes from the Sermon on the Plain, we must not forget that Jesus is also looking at each one of us.