

Jesus! "How to Be Blessed ... or Not" *Luke 6:17-26*

Take a first look.

I. THE THINKING OF HUMAN CULTURE ABOUT WHAT REALLY MAKES ONE HAPPY DOESN'T ALWAYS ADD UP. And when it does, it may very well be arrived at in an illogical manner. Take the example of me and two of my friends that all went in to the doctor for a memory test for the aging [for their sakes, I will not give their names]. The doctor said to one of my friends, "What is one plus one?"

"Two hundred seventy-four," he replied.

The doctor said to my second friend, "It's your turn. What is one plus one?"

"Tuesday," replied the second man.

The doctor then said to me, "Okay, your turn. What's one plus one?"

"Two," I said.

"That's great!" said the doctor. "How did you get that?"

"Simple," I said. "I subtracted 274 from Tuesday."¹

Sometimes getting the right answer is a complete mystery. As the saying goes, "A broken clock is right twice a day." What do we believe to be right and good? And how do we arrive at those conclusions? Happiness is not meant to be the accidental result of a haphazard approach to life. It is to be rather the settled effect of a life spent pursuing the application of the truth to our present thinking and acting, joined together with the promise of God. Happiness is a result, then, of the blessing of God.

II. SO THIS MESSAGE IS ENTITLED "HOW TO BE BLESSED ... OR NOT." Jesus teaches that true blessing from God is often found in unexpected places, while what the world considers blessing is often a sidetrack or a mirage. Let's hear it from Him.

Take a closer look at Luke 6:17-26.

I. PEOPLE SEEK JESUS BECAUSE THEY ARE SEEKING HIS BLESSING. vv. 17-19

1. *By this time in His ministry, large crowds were seeking out Jesus to find healing for their diseases and deliverance from evil spirits.* They had come from all around, according to Luke, "from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon" (v. 17). The other Gospel-writers affirm this same observation. These people came for specific reasons based personal need. Many of them were sick or "troubled by evil spirits." All who came to Jesus for such help were cured.

2. *The people had also come to hear His teaching.* Indeed, there was something compelling about this itinerant rabbi. He had something to say that was worth hearing. He confronted the people's lives, their shams and pretenses; He pierced through to the inner recesses of their consciences; He offered hope to the hopeless when no one else would give them an opportunity.

A—God still uses a sense of personal need to compel people to Himself.

I—This is what did it for me as a young man of nineteen. I was facing marriage and family life with no clue of how to make it happen successfully. I had basically lived for myself alone for several years, making all of my choices based on what seemed to offer me the most pleasure. Then I was about to become responsible for a wife and a child and I was brought down to my knees, quite literally, with the realization of my weakness. From that vantage point, I did the only thing you can from such a posture. I

¹ Adapted from a joke by John Fehlen, Stanwood, Washington, PreachingToday.com.

looked up. I looked to God in the face of Jesus Christ.

He changed my heart. My desires for drug- and alcohol-induced “highs” dropped away like dead skin. I began to read the Scriptures as though I had never read them before, like they were food for my soul. I wanted to know the truth and to live right. I began to pray as though God wanted to work in my life more than He ever had before. I became radical! Just ask Jeannie, who wasn’t quite ready for all of this yet. It was surely a sense of felt-need that drove me to Christ at that time in my life. This is what has kept me close ever since.

I would venture a guess that this is what compels us to continue coming together for such acts of worship, acts of study and prayer, acts of explicitly Christian fellowship. *We need the Lord! We need each other as God’s people!* And, we aren’t ashamed to admit it and practice our need.

II. PEOPLE WHO SEEK JESUS FIND HIS BLESSING IN UNEXPECTED WAYS. vv. 20-22

Here, Jesus turns to the disciples amid such an intense incident of ministry and delivers something akin to the Sermon on the Mount. This has been appropriately entitled the Teaching on the Plain. It could very well describe the same event of teaching, with minor variations of remembered emphasis. The “mountain” and the “plain” are no contradictions, as the hills in the area had some high mesa-type configurations to them.² However, Jesus doubtless gave similar teaching on more than one occasion, which is why two different gospel-writers picked it up and presented it in their narrative of the Life of Jesus, the Christ.

1. *Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who were poor: “Yours is the kingdom of God.”* What an amazing promise to those who were accustomed to being marginal in their earthly kingdoms! He promised, in effect, that for those who were His true disciples (toward whom all of this teaching was aimed), it didn’t matter what their status might be in their earthly citizenship, or even whether any country recognized their worth or place. Their realm was “the kingdom of God.”

2. *Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who were hungry: “You will be satisfied.”* Whether this is a physical hunger or a spiritual hunger is not defined in this context. Neither does He specify the kind of poverty intended by His first blessing. Such a hunger will bring a person to mourn, not to laugh, because the ache of need gnaws at one’s consciousness.

3. *Jesus pronounced a blessing on those who were mistreated: “Great is your reward in heaven.”* He described what has often been the case over the centuries, what is always the case somewhere in God’s world. People are excluded, insulted, rejected because they confess their faith in Jesus Christ and try to practice it consistently.

A—My friends, do we often feel like we don’t have all that we might need, either physically or spiritually? That we are on the fringes of a post-Christian society? That our values and perspectives are not taken seriously? Some of our brothers and sisters in Christ right now are suffering the sting of persecution that is relentless and determined.

I—What do we really expect from a temporary culture, anyway? “This world is not my home; I’m just a passin’ through” needs to be chanted in our hearts more frequently, it appears. We are charged to make whatever difference we can in the meantime, but we are given no illusion about what to expect while we do.

I am chagrined but not the least bit surprised at what happened to our brother in Christ John Ashcroft several years ago. A shrewd politician, one Joseph Lieberman, prayed in public and affirmed the need for more religion in public life. When he did, the American brokers of information raised a litany of approval. Of course, Mr. Lieberman had already renounced a primary ethical tenet of his professed

² See A. T. Robertson’s *Word Pictures in the New Testament* on this possibility.

Orthodox Jewish faith by turning his back on the pre-born and announcing his agreement with the pro-abortion mentality. His synagogue reportedly took this quite seriously and removed him from their fellowship. We know that he was doing nothing different than his running mate had done in 1991 when he was asked to run as vice president under Bill Clinton. Al Gore also turned his back on the pre-born with his bid for political power.

Yet, when John Ashcroft was nominated for Attorney General of the United States, an all-out “war” was declared against him and against anyone who would support him. Why? Was it because he was not a man who believes in the rule of law? No, everyone admitted that he did. Was it because he had a record that demonstrated a lack of integrity? No, everyone admitted that his record is distinguished in every way. It was for two reasons. He was a deeply devoted follower of Jesus Christ, and He was on record as a defender of the defenseless, a man who had unashamedly stood for the sanctity of human life. If we didn’t think that this was a watershed issue in our culture before John Ashcroft’s nomination, we should think so now.

In 2020, we have very recent memory of the very same furor that accompanied the nomination for the Supreme Court of one Brett Kavanaugh. Why was he perfectly acceptable on every court he had ever served until being nominated for the Supreme Court? He had impeccable training and a distinguished record of judicial service. But he was known as a religious man who thought the Roe v. Wade decision in 1973 that legalized abortion-on-demand in every state in the nation to be a flawed decision based on faulty legal logic. For that, his name was dragged through the mud by all who hold the Roe v. Wade doctrine with fervent religious devotion.

I think that everything said by Jesus in verse 22 applies to the experience of John Ashcroft and later of Brett Kavanaugh. To say that people hated them is no overstatement. They were surely made to feel excluded. That were insulted times without number. People vilified their very names. Why? All because of devotion to Christ and the practical application of that devotion to the central moral issue of our time: abortion-on-demand.

But what should they and each of us be doing today? “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy,” Jesus said, “because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.” We can’t step fully into anyone else’s story to read the true condition of the heart. But, we can examine our own hearts. Are we willing to be faithful to the call of God and to what is true and good and beautiful regardless of the response of other people? Will we live for the Applause of One?

III. PEOPLE WHO DON’T SEEK JESUS’ BLESSING WILL NOT FIND IT ANYWHERE ELSE. Vv. 23-26

1. *Jesus issued a warning to those who are rich: “You have already received your comfort.”* If we think that wealth is the final provider of comfort, we should think again, according to Jesus.

2. *Jesus issued a warning to those who are well-fed: “You will go hungry.”* If we think that the food offered in this life, that T-bone steaks and caviar and even pizza (!) will satisfy our souls, we should think again, according to Jesus. There is so much more that we need to have a fulfilled human life.

3. *Jesus issued a warning to those who laugh now: “You will mourn and weep.”* If we think that being mindlessly entertained, being made to laugh by means of those limitless cable or satellite TV channels, will truly bring us lasting joy, we should think again, according to Jesus. This is not a slam against laughter as such. It is a direct broadside against the idea that laughter is the only value in life.

4. *Jesus issued a warning to those who are praised: “That is how their fathers treated the false prophets.”* If we think that the best thing in life is having everyone say something nice about us is the highest value, we should think again.

A—This is a direct assault on instant gratification, the “supreme good” of our present culture. Instead, Jesus compels us to seek Him first, endure hardship if we must, and reap the eternal reward of faithfulness to Him.

I—William Carey had a rare ability to do just this. His example is a good one for us to consider. In the words of Bill Mills and Craig Parro:

William Carey, often called the father of modern missions, faced a ministry disappointment of overwhelming proportions.

Carey began his missionary career to India in 1793. He labored in that country for 40 continuous years, never once returning to his native England. Carey was a prodigious translator, translating portions of Scripture into over a dozen Indian languages.

One afternoon after 20 years of plodding labor in that country, a fire raged through his printing plant and warehouse. All of his printing equipment was destroyed, but most tragically, many of his precious manuscripts were completely consumed by the fire. Of course, Carey had no computer back-up files or Xerox masters. Twenty years of nonstop labor were gone within a few hours.

How would he respond to this crushing devastation? Carey wrote to his pastor-friend, Andrew Murray, in England:

“The ground must be laboured over again, but we are not discouraged.... We have all been supported under the affliction, and preserved from discouragement. To me the consideration of the divine sovereignty and wisdom has been very supporting.... I endeavored to improve this our affliction last Lord’s day, from Psalm 46:10, ‘Be still and know that I am God.’ I principally dwelt upon two ideas:

1. God has a sovereign right to dispose of us as he pleases.
2. We ought to acquiesce in all that God does with us and to us.”³

That is surely food for thought today. At my age, right now in the spring of 2020, I have watched my life savings, mostly in retirement investments, drop precipitously due to the world-wide effects of the COVID-19 virus outbreak. I read a biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (by Eric Metaxas) a couple of years ago. Metaxas was talking about the circumstances in Germany that became the fertile ground for the toxic weed of National Socialism (Nazism). The German economy had become so bad and the value of German currency had dropped so low by the time that Bonhoeffer’s parents retired from their well-paying jobs, the entirety of their savings bought them a bottle of wine and a loaf of bread. All that careful saving ... gone. Where do we find security if we can’t find it in the guarantees of our esteemed institutions of money and politics? We find it in the Living God, who is still sovereign over the affairs of people and nations.

Take it home (applications).

I. What if this life deals us such a setback, causes us to feel poor, hungry for something better, mournful, insulted and rejected by others?

II. Will we receive the promise of Jesus and take heart?

III. What driving purpose are we living for today? Will it matter in 10 years? 100 years? For eternity?

IV. Now take some time to discuss with your family or others, or just to reflect on them yourself, the questions at the end of the Listening Guide for this message. What has God spoken to your heart today? What are you going to do about it?

³ Taken from Bill Mills and Craig Parro, *Finishing Well in Life and Ministry* (Leadership Resources International), pp. 101-102; submitted by Dave Parsons, Santa Rosa, California. PreachingToday.com.