Jesus Turns Love Upside-down

In both Matthew and Luke Jesus challenges our conventional understanding of what it means to be "blessed." In our society, we often associate blessings with material wealth, success, or social standing. However, Jesus flips this notion upside down by stating, "Blessed are the poor" and highlighting that true blessings come from our relationship with God. “Count your blessings… yes! But know which blessings truly count!”

These beatitudes reveal that spiritual poverty, hunger, and grief can actually foster a closer connection to God, emphasizing that our fulfillment does not stem from external circumstances but rather from our faith in Christ. We can look at even the worst situations and circumstances and have hope and even joy knowing that God works in and through all things. And we are reminded that our identity and fulfillment are found in the grace we receive through Christ.

1. Read Luke 6:20-26. Consider the sharp contrast between the blessings and woes. Now, flip over to Deuteronomy 11:18-28 and read these verses. How do you think God’s word in Deuteronomy relates to what Jesus is saying in His blessings and woes from Luke 6? Specifically, how does Deuteronomy 11 help us understand what it really means to live a blessed life compared to a life that’s filled with woes?

Understanding Blessings and Curses:

In Deuteronomy, the blessings are tied to obedience to God’s commands, emphasizing that following His law leads to prosperity and well-being. Conversely, the curses represent the consequences of disobedience. Similarly, in Luke, Jesus contrasts the state of those who live for worldly gain (woes) with those who embrace humility, spiritual poverty, and dependency on God (blessings). This suggests that true blessings come from a heart aligned with God’s will, while woes come from pursuing temporary, worldly fulfillment.

Perspective on True Fulfillment:

Living a blessed life, according to both passages, revolves around a deeper spiritual fulfillment rather than material wealth or societal approval.

In summary, living a blessed life, as drawn from these texts, is about aligning with God’s will, embracing humility, and finding joy and fulfillment in spiritual richness rather than worldly measures. On the other hand, a life filled with woes reflects the emptiness of pursuing self-centered desires and the consequences of distancing oneself from God’s commands.

2. The early chapters of Luke help us understand the kind of Savior Jesus is. Wherever He goes, He heals the sick, repairs what’s broken, and offers hope to those who feel lost. In this section, Jesus shares blessings and woes to show that He is here to heal us not just ***physically***, but ***spiritually*** as well.

So, for example, in Luke 6:21b and 25b, Jesus tells us that those who weep will one day laugh. This is a powerful promise for anyone who has lost a loved one, offering hope and joy as we look forward to being reunited with those we've lost to death. This is a ***physical*** blessing, bringing comfort in our grief.

But consider also the ***spiritual*** blessings implied in the blessing and warning about laughing and weeping. For example, in Luke 7:36–50, we see two very different responses to Jesus. One is the woman who comes into Simon the Pharisee's house, weeps at Jesus' feet, and receives a deep spiritual blessing. What is that blessing? In contrast, Simon's attitude reflects the kind of warning Jesus gives in Luke 6:25. What blessing is Simon missing?

Here, a sinful woman approaches Jesus, filled with sorrow for her past mistakes, weeping at His feet (7:38). Her tears symbolize spiritual poverty and despair. She has nothing to offer God but her tears. She shows that her greatest treasure is God's mercy in Christ. But in the midst of this extreme spiritual poverty—she apparently a great sinner—she discovers profound blessing: Forgiveness and welcome from Jesus. Jesus's story about the man who forgives two debtors resonates here because this woman certainly owed a greater debt to God than Simon the Pharisee, who believed himself to be very righteous. But in being forgiven so much, she ends up more blessed than Simon, who's reliance on his own righteousness causes him to not see how much he also needs Jesus. Thus it leads him to forfeit the greater blessing of salvation altogether.

3. If Jesus' blessings and woes sound surprising, let's read Luke 6:27–31, which may sound even more challenging. In this passage, we might naturally ask: Why should we do these things? Why would anyone choose to love their enemies, bless those who curse them, or let others mistreat them and take what belongs to them?

It certainly seems illogical and devoid of any tangible benefit. On the surface, it appears utterly foolish. However, as the title of our Bible Study suggests each week, Jesus came to establish an upside-down kingdom, where the world's wisdom is turned on its head. The three blessings Jesus mentions in the previous section provide a compelling reason to consider this counterintuitive way of living; for embracing this teaching may indeed cause us to experience poverty, sorrow, and ridicule from others, yet Jesus assures us that there is profound blessings to be had in these hardships.

4. To understand the depth of this teaching, we turn to verses 32-36, where Jesus expands on this idea and offers the fullest rationale for embracing such an upside-down approach to life. In these verses, what does Jesus say should be the motivation behind our actions to love and show mercy?

Doing good to those who do good to us doesn't reflect God's love. It merely echoes the behavior of the world. Jesus calls His followers to a higher standard—one that reflects the very heart of God Himself. He loved those who didn't deserve it, extending grace to sinners and even to those who actively oppose Him. It's a love that actually can love an enemy and those who mistreat us, and it serves as a testament to the extraordinary nature of God's character.

Because these verses defy the way the world thinks about love and mercy, they often seem weird, foreign, and even stupid to us—as they contradict our sinful human nature that leans towards self-preservation and retaliation. The world operates on a "quid pro quo" mentality: "I'll do good to you if you do good to me."

In embracing this strange and powerful way to love, we reflect the fact that God's kindness is not reserved for the deserving; it is freely given to all, including the ungrateful and wicked. Moreover, by choosing to love and show mercy even when it feels unnatural, we engage in a counter-cultural act that has the potential to disrupt the cycle of hatred and retaliation prevalent in society. It becomes a powerful declaration of faith in Christ as the one who truly heals and restores this sinful broken world.

5 Cursed, slapped, hurt, robbed, abused, and offended… What Jesus shares with us here presents some of the toughest challenges of living out our faith. When we are hated, we are called to respond with love; when we are cursed, we are to respond with blessings; when we are abused, we respond through prayer. When we encounter someone in need, we generously give; when things are stolen from us, we choose not to seek repayment. These situations can arise in our lives at any given moment. It's an everyday sort of thing.

We don't need any special preparation or advanced theological training to put any of Jesus's teaching into practice. While it may be difficult, it is certainly not impossible. It's as simple as recognizing that, having received mercy, we are now called to extend that same mercy to others. And we are willing to endure suffering because we have One who suffered for us. Finally, we love because we have experienced the greatest love.

Can you think of a specific situation in your life, or that of a friend, where you or they had to make the choice to respond in these ways? How did you navigate that situation? What tangible blessings emerged from responding with love and grace?

If someone is a friend and they bring me a cup of coffee, I take it happily, seeing it as a simple act of kindness. But if that person is my enemy, suddenly, I see the coffee differently. I can't help but wonder what they really want. Did they do something to it? Did they spit in it? Are they trying to trick me? You see, once there's a rift and someone is considered an enemy, it's hard to see any good they do as genuine. I not only struggle to love them, but I also can't accept any love or kindness they might offer.

This dynamic often happens in relationships, even between spouses. A cycle starts where both people hurt each other over and over. Forgiveness and healing never happens. Anger builds up, bitterness develops, and before long, their hearts harden towards each other. In this state, nothing the other does feels right. If a husband brings home flowers, the wife might think, "He's only doing that because he was late," completely dismissing the gesture. Or if a wife does something nice, the husband might doubt it, thinking, "She's just trying to butter me up to get something." Even the kindest actions are seen through a lens of mistrust, treated as possible attacks instead of genuine love.

We might hesitate to call them an enemy, since that feels too harsh, yet our behavior shows the truth: that everything that person says is met with mistrust; we question their intentions, and every action invites our disdain. We assume the worst about them, and as we go down this path, we get stuck in a cycle of resentment. Jesus offers us a way to break this terrible cycle and a chance to rebuild.

6 The following is an example of one of these extraordinarily different ways of reacting to the world that Jesus is describing: This event took place on May 26, 2017 in Egypt, a day when a Coptic Christian church was attacked by terrorists during worship, resulting in the tragic loss of forty-five Christian lives. The next day, a woman who had lost her husband in the explosion was interviewed on an Egyptian TV station. The Muslim interviewer spoke with her about the incident and asked how she

would respond to those responsible for such a heinous act. She replied, “If I could talk to the person who did this… I’d tell that person, we didn’t do anything to hurt you.”

As she began to weep, she continued through her tears, “We didn’t hurt you; you hurt us… But we want God to forgive you, and we also forgive you.” Desperately, she emphasized, “Believe me… we forgive you.” This moment exemplifies extraordinary mercy. In the midst of unimaginable loss, injustice, and hatred, this woman’s choice to embrace forgiveness over the overwhelming anger she could have felt is truly stunning.

Equally remarkable was the reaction of the Muslim interviewer. He was rendered speechless for about ten seconds—which seems like an eternity live TV. Finally, he spoke, saying, “The Coptic Christians of Egypt… they’re made of steel. If it were my father or anyone in my family who died, I could never say something like this. These people have so much forgiveness.” He shook his head and added, “Their faith and their religious conviction… these people are made from a different substance.”

“Made from a different substance.” How might this perfectly describe what Jesus is getting at in Luke 6:27-36?

Just think. Here is an outsider, an unbeliever’s gut-level reaction to the Christian faith in action. That’s exactly what Jesus is describing in our text today. Christians are to be a people who are different from the world—made from a different substance. We are made from something else—something not of this world. We are the body of Christ. We love our enemies, and we forgive them and we show them mercy, which isn’t very easy to find in this world. How odd? How amazing!

7. From confronting bullies on the playground to navigating scheming co-workers at work, we are taught that you cannot let people walk all over you. If you want people to respect you, you have to respect yourself by setting boundaries and protecting yourself; you gotta tell people they can go this far but no farther. Otherwise, you will be taken advantage of. And everyone assumes that being taken advantage of, being played for a fool, being treated with disrespect, being the object of hatred, or simply being dismissed is the ultimate failure in life.

   Yet, in stark contrast to our struggles with this, we look to Jesus, who Himself faced hatred and cursing. He was beaten, abused, stripped, abandoned, and crucified. Yet, all of His suffering was the triumph of God’s love! It triumphs over the cycles of sin and death and destruction. Think of two of Jesus’s apostles—Peter and Paul. How did God’s love in Christ change these two men from enemies into friends?

   Both experienced changes that were nothing short of profound; they went from being enemies to becoming close friends with Christ. Peter, who denied Jesus during His trial, eventually became a leader of His followers and a guiding shepherd. Meanwhile, Paul, who once vehemently opposed Jesus, was transformed into one of His most passionate apostles, traveling the world to spread the message of love and redemption.

   Paul beautifully described this mysterious transformation in his letters, referring to it as a “treasure in jars of clay.” He reminds us that Jesus turns our suffering and sacrifices into a pathway for salvation.

2 Corinthians 5:11

For we who live are always being given over to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our mortal flesh. This means that even in our struggles and challenges, there’s an opportunity for God's love to shine through and create something beautiful in our lives.

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