

Reading: Luke 6: 17-26:

¹⁷ He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coastal region around Tyre and Sidon, ¹⁸ who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure spirits were cured, ¹⁹ and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.

²⁰ Looking at his disciples, he said: “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

²² Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.

²³ “Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

²⁴ “But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.

²⁵ Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶ Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

Okay let's admit something here, we are sitting here in this beautiful setting and we just listened to the scripture according to Luke. It is similar to Matthew's interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount with a slightly different take.

Did anyone here in the back of their mind say....What on earth was Jesus talking about in today's lesson. Blessed are the poor? Happy are the hungry? Fortunate are the tearful? I have yet to meet those happy, contented poor homeless. I never heard anybody say, "Isn't this great, I'm starving!" I have never seen a person sobbing their heart out with a smile of joy on their face. Have you?

It makes me uneasy the way Jesus speaks about rich, easy going folk who enjoy a good time and are well respected in the eyes of almost everybody. "Woe to you!" says Jesus and implies that whatever you have now, you better enjoy it while you can, because when tomorrow comes you're going to have to pay for it. Big Time. Woe to you rich.

On a worldwide scale the U.S. and Canada are well off. Both nations still have robust Gross National product, income, life expectancy, health care, educational opportunity, and military might. In terms of what this world calls rich, if you live in the United States and Canada, you are fortunate.

This is not the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the average life expectancy is 49 years, where 55% of child deaths are due to malnutrition, where armies from six neighboring countries, are fighting for possession of the nation's resources and not one of them cares about the plight of the common people.

Even today Zambia, the HIV/AIDS epidemic has reduced life expectancy from 70 years to 39 years in a decade. Where the number of orphaned children caused by the epidemic is estimated to be 500,000 and is estimated to double that in the next 8 years.

Blessed are the Poor? Happy are the hungry? Fortunate are the tearful?

Everything is inside out and upside down and back to front.

It does fit in rather well though with how Jesus described his intentions at the beginning of His ministry. Remember His first sermon back in Nazareth? "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, Because.... he has anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor: He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, And recovery of sight to the blind.

Do you remember what happened shortly afterwards? The elders of the church tried to throw Him off a cliff! Understandable when you think He's been predicting the downfall of the rich and powerful. He wasn't "Mr. Popular" with them!

There are those who would suggest that, reading the gospels, Jesus only got what was coming to Him when they crucified Him. I mean what did He expect? Insulting the religious authorities, trampling on their traditions, speaking words they would interpret as blasphemous and suggesting even that most sacred of all institutions, the temple, would come tumbling down? Proclaiming himself a King in the process of building a Kingdom? To them Jesus was not Good News, but Bad News.

If they didn't take action, their whole world could be turned upside down and inside out.

But to the poor, He was a hero. Where Jesus stood and spoke to the masses, Jesus reached out to those who had no say in the way they were controlled and governed. They lived a life of having the life of zip, zero, nada. They did not choose for the Romans to come and conquer their land. They had no vote. They were in this little troublesome corner of a vast empire, governed by incompetent puppet rulers, religious Pharisees and Sadducees on the take, desperate to impress the powerful people back in Rome.

They were poor, not only materially but also in terms of rights and expectations and almost every other area of life. They were the downtrodden. They were the imprisoned ones.

Life was not smiling down good fortune upon them. Those who had once been described as God's children, felt like God's orphans.

Consider also the corrupt state of religion. Jesus calls the Pharisees "Brewed of Vipers." He describes the temple as "A den of thieves". He accuses the teachers of the Law and the intellectual Saducees of not knowing the Scriptures..

Put yourself in the position of the poor. You go to hear Jesus speaking. He heals people you may have known... from diseases they had been suffering from for years but could never afford to go to the doctors for.

You see in the crowd that crazy demon possessed guy everyone had written off as bad news, now looking calm and in his right mind. You hear all these stories about God looking for the lost, rejoicing over those who would come to Him in childlike faith.

Glory to God you are blessed, Jesus tell the down trodden! Such a message would surely lift your heart. God can do wonders for you! Be poor and you are in!

As for those of us who have what is to become of us? The scripture says :

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Let me put it to you this way.....It's trouble ahead for those who think they have it made, What you have is all you'll ever get.

It's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself, Your 'self' will not satisfy you for long.

It's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games, There's suffering to be met and you're going to meet it.

Just as there is nothing great or wonderful about poverty or tears, there is nothing great in riches or laughter. The blessing the poor receive comes because they are in a situation of complete dependence upon God. The poor are more apt to seek God, pray to God, cry out to God, and God is their focus each and every day.

The woe of riches is that blind those who have it all. If the rich say I got my wealth on my own, not because of a loving God had anything to do with it.

I don't need God, I have all the material comforts I need. I don't need to serve God, I pay to have people serve me. It was me... not God who created my special comfort zone. My lavish lifestyle.

God, is for those who are poor and weak. When it comes to faith and religion, the poor will fall for anything they told... if it gives them hope.

So those of us who have a comfortable life style and still thank God each and every day for all he has provided to get you where we are today, then Jesus isn't scolding you for having wealth.

Jesus is directing this teaching to those who don't take the time to care. Those who never not turn to God, ever.... because they have so much they don't need to be in fellowship or worship. Woe be to those who gloat at all they have, woe to those who find joy in all their toys which in turn keeps them from focusing on God.

Jesus pointed out in the parable of Good Samaritan, where the priest and the teacher of the law are so busy pursuing their personal agendas and their wealth that they just walk on by when faced with the desperate needs of others.

Jesus loves all of us. Rich or poor. Jesus is reminding that if we get too smug, too uppity, where we can't pause to be thankful, or ask for forgiveness, where turning your nose to the air in arrogance then think again.

So go for, live lavishly, be arrogant.... For when we stand before you God in heaven, do you wish to be recognized by all you gained on earth, or how you were loved and cared for others.

Matthew 16: 26 says, “ And what do you benefit if you gain the whole world but in the end lose or forfeit your own soul? Or what can one give in exchange for his soul?”

When Jesus says that it was easier for camel to go through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God, He wasn't pulling His punches. When He told the rich young man to go and sell everything he had and give it to the poor, He meant for that man to go and do just that. Jesus knew, in a way we fail to understand, the destructive power of having all we need and denying there is a God.

He faced that temptation in the desert after his baptism. The Devil offered Him it all. All the world. 'All yours Jesus, if you'll just get with my plan and kick this 'justice for the poor' nonsense out the door.' Jesus said “Man cannot live by bread alone”.

This passage of scripture we've been looking at, isn't meant to be easy listening whether we are rich or poor. Unless we look to God as do the poor, or the hungry, or those in mourning, it's meant to make us feel uneasy. It is Jesus' call to get our priorities in line with God's.

It's meant to make us search our hearts and challenges us to consider what we really believe.

Do you love God? Is Jesus your Savior? Do you believe God is involved with every facet of your life or not? Do you find more joy in material you things over praising God?

Those are questions we may never find a complete answer for until we reach the other side of eternity. But if you are still struggling with your faith with God, regardless of your status in life we do have a simple rule to follow. It's called love. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and soul" and "Love your neighbor as much as you love yourself". Let us pray...

Loving God, help us not to compromise our commitment to serving others, because our comforts shield us from their cries. May we heed these words of Jesus regarding the seductive power of materialism which at times sap our spiritual energy away for worshipping you.

May we allow God's Holy Spirit to turn our lives inside out and upside down so that we can be part of the process of making things the right way...the way to gaining a place in God's Heavenly Kingdom. Amen

