

The Beatitudes

Luke 6: 17 – 26

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### **Sermon Notes**

The Gospel verses read today are well known to us as “The Beatitudes”. They are similar to the famous “Sermon on the Mount” recorded in Matthew’s Gospel; it is most likely that they were two separate occasions but even if not it underscores the importance of what Jesus said.

Jesus faced people with strong choices: They could either take the ways of the this world and its values, or they could take God’s ways and live by the values of the Kingdom of God. The values of this world include the pursuit of money, pleasure, popularity, prestige and power. The values of God’s Kingdom include poverty of spirit, cleanness of heart, capacity to show mercy, and suffering in the cause of doing what is right.

That all sounds quite stark – or maybe even simplistic. Can we examine it a little? Firstly, let us look at whom Jesus pronounces blessed:

It is a remarkable list, singling out the poor, those who hunger, those who weep, and those who are hated by people. And Jesus Christ says, “Blessed are you!”

The mere fact of being poor and hungry and sorrowful and hated by others does not necessarily automatically entitle one to lay claim on Christ’s blessing. Whilst one needs to be careful of over-spiritualising everything in the Bible, the poverty spoken of here suggests a poverty of spirit which is aware of our needs and dependence upon God; the hunger is a hunger for the things of God; the afflictions are the afflictions that may come from obedience to God, and persecution – likewise. Jesus reminds them that, after all, even the great prophets suffered persecution.

These things can be inevitable consequences of faith in Jesus Christ. At the start of what is now called Christianity, many people literally gave up everything in follow the one they realised was the Messiah, in a world that was otherwise hostile. And Jesus offered them and all who suffered like them, special comfort and consolation.

And to whom does Jesus say, “woe to you”? Woe to you who are rich, to you that are full, to those who laugh now and to ou of whom people speak well.

Once again we need not presume that the mere possession of riches, or a joyful spirit, means we shall not receive the blessings of Christ. In fact, a joyful spirit is encouraged by writers of the New Testament, like St Paul, who described it as a mark of the Spirit of God within us, along with love, peace, patience, kindness etc. Many biblical figures had riches or experienced wonderful times of rejoicing. St Paul, in his letter to Timothy, said that ministers of the gospel should be people well spoken of and in good standing in their community.

So, is there a “disconnect” in all of this? Of whom does Jesus say, “Woe to you”?

They are those who refuse to seek treasure in heaven because they prefer the riches and good things of this world more than they love God. Money is not described as evil in the Bible, contrary to many quotes you will see on that; rather the “the love of money”, is described as being “the root of evil”. In unambiguous terms Jesus speaks of how hard it is for the rich to enter God’s Kingdom because of a tendency to rely more on the things and influence and sense of importance that money confers.

So Jesus notes there are those who prefer what the world offers, instead of believing in Christ, and who will not risk losing the one in order to gain the other. There are those who love the praise of people rather than the praise of God, and who may even turn their back on God in order to keep in step with people they value more highly.

Jesus knew well that there would be many like that, even amongst people who had received healings or other blessings from him. These are strong words!

The lesson for us: We need to acknowledge that in many ways, there is a great divide between the values and the intentions of God and the values and ways of the world. Poverty and hunger and sorrow and persecution are things we struggle to avoid or to overcome in our personal and family circumstances. And riches and fullness and popularity are things we enjoy and strive for.

But when we have said all our explanations of the words of Christ, there remains a difference between the standards of God and the standards of the world.

It boils down to the old question of where our hearts are, where our true intentions lie. As Jesus puts it, recorded elsewhere in the Gospels, "where our treasures are". What are the things we put more value on: things of God or of people? And, do we really believe this, that riches and enjoyment, when sought after MORE THAN CHRIST, are a curse? That the favour of God is worth having MORE THAN the favour of others?

This calls for conversion of life. Not only the once-made decision to follow Jesus Christ, to be a disciple of his, but in the process of being a disciple, that continual conversion of life and heart and intentions being turned TO Christ. For conversion is not about sitting in a church pew or saying a prayer or two; it is about responding to the call of God to be a disciple of Jesus, and in the process having our hearts and minds re-tuned according to God's intentions and values.

In a sense this sermon should be continued next week, where Jesus says some things that we may at times find very difficult to hear, such as "love your enemies"! We will have a guest preacher next Sunday, from St Luke's parish in Howick, so perhaps the theme will be picked up on then...

But I am going to end this morning with this brief comment...