

Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 17, 2019  
Luke 6:17-26  
"Jesus Gets the Woe so You Get the Blessing"

Is it better to be dirt poor or filthy rich? Horribly hungry or completely satisfied? Racked with grief or bubbling with laughter? Hated by all or liked by all? The answer seems simple enough: You don't find a lot of self-help books on how to ruin your portfolio, devote yourself to starvation, make your life more tragic, or how to make an enemy out of everyone. These are all things that we try to avoid. Yet, when Jesus preaches to His disciples in our Gospel lesson, He declares that it is a blessing to be poor, hungry, weeping and hated. Even more startling, He declares that it is a woe to be rich, satisfied, laughing and of good reputation.

What is Jesus getting at? After all, He poses the same Words to you. So, is it better to be poor or rich? Hungry or satisfied? Grief-stricken or joyful? Hated or loved? The purpose of this sermon is to answer these questions, and we must answer them in two ways: The way of the Law and the way of the Gospel.

There's no doubt about it: Jesus declares blessing to the poor, hungry, weeping and reviled; and woe to the wealthy, satisfied, happy and popular. Part of this is because Jesus is declaring to the people that things are not as they appear: Those who are successful in the world aren't necessarily blessed by God; and those who seem to suffer all misfortune may indeed have His eternal favor.

For instance, He says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" and on the other hand, "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation." Wealth has its share of temptations, to be sure. In order to gain riches, one might have to resort to all sorts of sinful practices: Ignore wife and children, worship the job, take the credit for the work of others, and work for the ruin of your competitor, just to name a few. The road to wealth is littered with all sorts of ways that make it necessary to ignore the Lord's commandments. Once wealth is achieved, the road is hardly any more sanctified; the parable of the rich fool is only one of the warnings that Jesus gives in regard to wealth. Those who have riches may well put their trust in them and reject the Lord's grace; or they may spend so much time with their luxuries that they have no time for the Lord and His Word. Those who fall prey to the temptations of riches will certainly face God's wrath and woe. The poor will not be so tempted.

Likewise, Jesus says, "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied" and, in contrast, "Woe to you who are full, for you shall be hungry." A full stomach was hard to come by in Jesus' time; and although we take it for granted, a full stomach on an ongoing basis is a sign of wealth. In a nation where media spends far more time dwelling on diet plans and the dangers of gluttony than hunger and famine, this is a woe to take seriously. With this blessing and woe, Jesus warns against the peril of placing worldly luxuries-in this case, food-over and above obedience to Him. The hungry are not tempted to dwell on a full belly if they have no food to fill it with.

And then, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh" and "Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep." Ours is certainly an age where people seek out enjoyment and pleasure, where depression is to be avoided at all costs, and where mourning and weeping are to be kept in a closed room because death is too much of a downer. Jesus issues the warning that those who devote themselves to a pursuit of worldly pleasure, and ignore the importance of repentance and confession, will face God's wrath and woe.

And finally, "Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and spurn your name as evil on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day and leap for joy for behold your reward is great in heaven, for so their fathers did to the prophets." And on the other hand, "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets." The Lord says, time and time again, that His message of sin and grace will be rejected by the world. Thus it panned out for the prophets. Therefore, one who enjoys immense popularity with the world perhaps is not being faithful to Christ and His Word. The one who is rejected is far more likely to be the faithful one.

So, with these four blessings and four woes, the Lord warns us about the dangers of wealth, a full stomach, laughing and popularity. He explains why the one who is poor, hungry, grieving and rejected is blessed.

But you and I know that it's not that easy. Some people are poor because they're just too lazy to hold down a job, or because they've done some incredibly foolish things that have cost them their livelihood. The Lord surely doesn't bless sloth and foolishness, does He? Furthermore, while those who are poor don't suffer from trust in wealth, they are certainly afflicted with covetousness and envy for what others have-and perhaps resentment toward the Lord. Likewise, the one who is hungry may well have destroyed his chance at success by poor job performance, even crime. The Lord doesn't bless felonious behavior, does He? Some will mourn and be sad because by their choices to indulge in all sorts of sins, they've completely ruined their lives with no hope of recovery. They may be saddened out of guilt for harm brought to others. Is this what the Lord chooses to bless? And, frankly, some people are unpopular because they're rude, boorish, pushy and irritating; when people supposedly speak ill of them, they are only saying what is honestly true.

Clearly, then, Jesus is not saying that those who are poor are more righteous in God's sight than those who are wealthy; both have their sins and vices to deal with. The idea that all poor are noble and all rich are evil is in keeping with the writings of Marx and Lenin, not the Word of God. All possess the same sinful nature.

Well, then, perhaps the Lord is telling us that we need to make sure that we don't become too rich, too satisfied, too obsessed with pleasure, or too popular. This is closer to the truth, but this is still Law. And in the end, you will find no comfort there. Let me illustrate.

Jesus warns about the perils of wealth, and so we respond that we'd better be careful about that, and isn't it a good thing that we're not filthy rich like the real shakers and movers in this

nation? But please note: Jesus never stipulates how rich "rich" means. Compared to the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, I daresay that we're not exactly a wealthy bunch. But compared to the slums of Calcutta or the shantytowns of Iraq, we have wealth beyond the wildest dreams of many in the world. Are you sure that you're poor enough to be blessed with the kingdom of heaven? Are you sure that you're not rich enough that you haven't already received your consolation?

Jesus warns about the perils of a satisfied belly, and these are words to take seriously in a land where effective diet methods seem a much greater concern than hunger. So we may well respond that it's a good thing we're not gluttons who live only for the next meal. But given the ongoing famines in nations like North Korea or Ethiopia, are you sure you're hungry enough to be blessed? Are you sure you're not too satisfied now?

Likewise, Jesus warns about those who laugh now, who pursue pleasure and ignore the fact that this world lives under the curse of sin. We may well respond that, unlike all those unbelievers, we certainly, soberly realize our need for forgiveness. But don't you still delight in some worldly entertainment and some of those secular luxuries? Are you sure you mourn the state of this world enough to be blessed?

And as we've spoken of just recently, we can expect that, as a congregation and as individuals, some will be offended at us for the Gospel that we proclaim. On the other hand, there are no picketers outside calling for the dissolution of St John Lutheran Church. Are you sure that we're proclaiming the Word purely enough to invite the rejection that the prophets faced? Are we excluded enough by the world to be included by Christ and His blessing?

The Law of God declares that you are to be poor, hungry, sad and rejected to be blessed by God. But it doesn't stipulate a level. Just how poor, hungry, sad and rejected do you have to be?

This is the purpose of the Law, to accuse you-to make sure that you know you can't trust in yourself. Jesus does not preach His Law to make you say, "I am doing well enough." He preaches His Law so that you say, "Am I doing well enough? In many cases, the answer is, "No." In the rest, I can't be sure, and that's just as bad. I want to be sure that I'm blessed by God, because faith is sure."

That's the answer of the Law.

Of course, you probably know that this is insufficient. "Pastor, we're well aware that we're not saved by our works-we're not saved by being poor or rich, but by Jesus. It's Him that we need." And in saying that, you are absolutely right. In fact, that is exactly what Jesus is saying with this Gospel lesson, when we answer the questions according to the Gospel.

Who has been perfect in all that He does? Only the Lord Jesus, of course. He has been perfectly poor, hungry, mournful and hated.

As far as poverty hear this Good News from St. Paul in 2 Corinthians 8: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." Taking on human flesh is enough of a step down for the Son of God; yet He stepped even lower in that He was born to poor parents and grew up to be a Man with less of a home than foxes or birds (Matt. 8:20). He then became even more poverty-stricken, for He exchanged His perfect righteousness and holiness for our sin at the cross, and suffered God's judgment for us there. Jesus became perfectly poor for you.

As far as hunger, hear this Good News from Luke 4: "Then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness, being tempted for forty days by the devil. And in those days He ate nothing, and afterward, when they had ended, He was hungry" (Lk. 4:1-2). Not only did Jesus go hungry, but He did so while constantly tempted by the devil for forty days; and throughout those forty days of hunger and temptation, Jesus remained perfectly sinless. Why? So that He might remain the perfect Sacrifice for your sin. Jesus was perfectly hungry for you.

As far as mourning, Jesus wept at the death of Lazarus, for He knew the wages of sin. Likewise, He lamented for Jerusalem (Matt. 23:37) because they had rejected God's Word and stoned His prophets. The Lord Jesus grieved the sinfulness of man and mourned death-so much so that He died in our place so that He might raise us up from the dead. In other words, Jesus' weeping was perfect for He wept over sin even as He delighted in doing His Father's will and went to the cross (Heb. 12:2).

And reviled? Spoken ill of? Hear the crowd cry to Pilate, "Let Him be crucified!" "His blood be on us and our children!" (Matt 27:22, 25). So reviled was He that the crowd demanded that an insurrectionist be spared and the holy Son of God be put to death. Oh, yes: At the cross He was rejected by man-and forsaken by God for our sin. Yet perfect in His love, He prays that His Father would forgive them.

Do you see? Throughout His life and journey to the cross, Jesus is perfectly poor, hungry, mournful and reviled-and perfectly sinless. And, therefore, perfectly blessed. And at the same time, at the cross, He suffered all of God's woe for all the sin of the world.

Now, if only He'd take away your woe and give you His blessings. That's exactly what He does.

Hear this Good News of woes and blessings: The Savior takes away from you and the Savior gives. The Savior takes away your sin and suffers its woes on the cross. He becomes the perfect Sacrifice whose blood is shed so that you can be forgiven. But even as the Savior takes away your sin and woe, He credits you with His blessed sinlessness. He shares His merit with you, so that you might be holy and blameless in the eyes of God.

In other words, how can you be blessedly poor, hungry, mournful and rejected? You can't-not by your own works, reason or strength. But with the forgiveness of sins, the Lord gives you credit for His perfect obedience, and His merit covers up your sins. Thus St. Paul writes in

Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me." If Christ dwells in you with the forgiveness of sins, then He brings with Him all of the blessings He has earned for you.

And you can be sure that Christ dwells with you. When you were baptized, He joined you to His death and His life, sharing both with you. By His Word proclaimed, the Word made flesh continues to dwell among you. And at His Supper, He puts His body and blood into you for the forgiveness of sins. Are you baptized? Do you hear the Word? Do you receive His Supper? Then you can be sure Christ dwells with you, and so every blessing of His is yours.

If you and I are to seek perfection by being poor enough or sad enough or enough of anything, we will never reach perfection, but face only woe; that is the message of the Law. But the Gospel declares this: Blessed are you, because your Savior Jesus Christ has been perfectly obedient in your place, and covers you with His merit now. In other words, blessed are you because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen