

ENGAGE

- As you approach the text you may find these questions and thoughts to be helpful.
 - What would you define as receiving a blessing?
 - How would say, being a blessing is different?
 - How powerful do you perceive a “Woe” being given to you to be?

EXAMINE

Luke 6:17-26

The “sermon on a level place” (Luke 6:17-49) is one of the longest teaching discourses in the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts.

Luke portrays Jesus as the final eschatological prophet who announces the partial manifestation of the Realm of God in the present and points to its completion at the apocalypse. While the early church expected that coming to take place fairly soon, Luke prepares the community for a delay.

Jesus’ followers are to live in the present on the basis of the values and practices of the Realm. In Luke 6:17-49, the Lukan Jesus spells out representative qualities of living as eschatological witnesses of the Realm of God in the midst of the old-age. However, people do not live in the Realm on the strength of their own will. God empowers the eschatological community with the Holy Spirit.

Jesus stands on “a level place” (or “a plain”). Matthew sets a similar sermon on a mount to emphasize that Jesus received those teachings from God (Matthew 5-7). The geographical setting has a different function in the Gospel of Luke. Some prophets use the word “level” that provides the background for its use in Luke-Acts (pedinos in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Torah, Prophets, and Writings). The word “level” often refers to places of corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning (see Jeremiah 9:22; 14:18; 30:4; Daniel 3:1; Joel 1:10, 20; 2: 22; 3:19; Habakkuk 3:17; Zechariah 12:11). Jesus teaches the way of the Realm in the midst of the world as such a level place.

At the same time, the prophets foresaw God renewing the level places. The glory of God (salvation) would be revealed in them (see also Isaiah 40:4, 18; Ezekiel 3:22, 23; 8:4). While standing in a broken level world Jesus teaches the ways of the present and coming renewal via the Realm of God.

Sources

Jesuswalk.com

holytexures.com

warrencampdesign.com

Today's preacher might trace continuities between life as broken level world then, and life in the broken level places of today. How is our world similar to the level places of the prophets and Luke? As the text unfolds, of course, the question becomes, "How do we manifest the values and practices of the Realm in the midst of the level places of life?"

Whereas Matthew begins the sermon on the mount with nine beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12), Luke 6:20-26 begins the sermon on the plain with four beatitudes and four woes. The word "blessed" here refers to being aware in the present of having a place in the movement towards the Realm. To be "blessed" does not mean an absence of struggle. Indeed, as 6:22-23 indicates, to be in the community moving towards the realm can invite hatred, exclusion, being reviled, and being defamed as others reject the Realm and its witnesses. To be blessed is to live through such opposition aware that the struggle is temporary and that "your reward is great in heaven," that is, that God will gather the faithful into the Realm.

To live under the verdict of "woe" means condemnation -- suffering under curse in the present and receiving final consignment to eternal punishment after the apocalypse. The woeful may not experience apparent discomfort during this life. But they mistake the wealth, overflowing tables, good times, and clubby relationships for God's highest purposes. Like the rich person of Luke 16:19-31, they will awake to a fiery existence.

Although the Lukan Jesus does not directly urge listeners to make a choice between the ways of blessing and woe, the fact of these two possibilities implies such a choice. Luke wants listeners to choose the way of blessing.

In my view, the references to poverty, hunger, and weeping in Luke 6:20-21 are double entendres. At one level, Luke has in mind people in these broad social categories. At another level, we see from the parallel beatitude in 6:22-23 that Luke also has the followers of Jesus in mind.

The church includes people who are poor for whom the community sharing all things in common is the means whereby God provides for them (Acts 2:44-45; 4:34). Although Luke rarely uses the vocabulary of "hunger," Luke pictures people "hungering" for the Realm (see Luke 13:22-29; Acts 2:37; 8:31-38; 10:30-33; 13:42-52). Like other end-time writers, Luke depicts people weeping because of the qualities of life in the old age (see Luke 7:13, 32, 38; 19:41; 22:62; Acts 9:39; 21:12). Jesus himself is hated, excluded, reviled and defamed, as is the church in Acts, especially Paul.

To be sure, condemnation awaits those who do not repent. But a longer view of Luke's attitude towards persons with wealth and high social standing reveals a pastoral concern: Luke wants such folk to avoid condemnation by repenting and joining the movement towards the Realm, which means putting their material resources at the service of the community (see Luke 3:10-

Sources

Jesuswalk.com

holytextures.com

warrencampdesign.com

14; 8:1-3; 12:13-21; 18:18-27; 19:1-10; Acts 2:42-47; Acts 4:35-5:11; 6:1-6; 20:33-35). Luke intends to shock persons with wealth into repentance and sharing their money and goods.

Many Eurocentric congregations in the long-established denominations are in a peculiar relationship to this passage. For many are aware that today's world is a fractured "level place" in the Lucan sense described above. But few such congregations are deeply hungry for (much less weeping for) the level of social transformation implied in the Realm. Only a few contemporary Christians and congregations are hated, excluded, reviled, and defamed because of their witness. Indeed, my impression is that most congregations today in the long-standing denominations are in situations more like that of those of Luke's world who had wealth, were full, and laughing, and were in good social standing according to the standards of the old age.

In such a context, the preacher's calling may be to help the community to recognize its actual point of identification with the text (with those of means, etc.), to realize the consequences of continuing that identification, namely punishment, and to think afresh about how it might begin to move more towards witnessing to the Realm. To do so is to experience the blessing of Luke 6:20-23.

Instead of studying each of the blessings first and then each of the woes, we'll be looking first at a blessing and then its corresponding woe. They come in pairs.

HEBREW PARELLELISM

The Hebrews often expressed themselves by parallelism. For example, we see:

"Bless the Lord, O my soul,

and all that is within me.

Bless his holy name." (Psalm 103:1)

Lines 1 and 2 are parallel. In the first line he uses the word "soul" (Hebrew *nephesh*), in the second a word meaning "midst, inner, internal" (Hebrew *qereb*).^[2] Is the psalmist trying to distinguish between the words? No, he is saying the same thing another way. We find this often in the New Testament, too, even though these Hebraisms have been translated into Greek. For example:

"Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined,

and every city or household divided against itself will not stand." (Matthew 12:25)

Sources

Jesuswalk.com

holytexures.com

warrencampdesign.com

This is Hebrew parallelism, and you see it thousands of times in the Old Testament prophets, Psalms, and Proverbs especially. To rightly interpret the Scriptures we need to recognize it as a common form of expression.

Another variety of Hebrew parallelism is called "antithetic parallelism," that is, a positive paired with a negative. This is frequent in Proverbs:

"Listen to your father, who gave you life,

and do not despise your mother when she is old." (Proverbs 23:22)

The "Blessings and Woes" passage we are studying in Luke 6:20-26 follows this sort of antithetical parallelism. First the positive, and then -- even more symmetrically than Psalm 1 -- a negative for each positive.

Poor vs. Rich (6:20, 24)

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God." (6:20)

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort." (6:24)

The first shocker is Jesus' word of the blessedness of the poor, and a hopeless future for the rich. I'm not sure the poor would agree, and the rich would probably laugh.

But Jesus is talking about a different kind of wealth than monetary wealth. Jesus told a parable about the farmer who was so wealthy that he planned to tear down all his barns and build new ones so he had enough room to store all his grain. He measured his wealth in possessions, but Jesus' commentary on his life was that he was "not rich toward God" (Luke 12:16-21).

Hungry vs. Well-Fed (6:21a, 25a)

"Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied." (6:21a)

"Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry." (6:25a)

Jesus is appealing to the gut instinct to survive, the hunger for food that his listeners can easily identify with. As an agrarian society, all of them had faced very lean years where there wasn't enough food to go around. They knew what hunger is. And they have all felt envy for those who eat well during famine and drought. What Jesus is saying? He is saying that the tables will turn. There is a food that is even more important than bread. It is a spiritual food that satisfies the soul. In John's Gospel, Jesus says, "he who feeds on this bread will live forever" (John 6:58b).

Weeping vs. Laughing (6:21b, 25b)

The third blessing/woe pair is weeping and laughing.

Sources

Jesuswalk.com

holytexures.com

warrencampdesign.com

"Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh." (6:21b)

"Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep." (6:25b)

Jesus is talking about a different kind of weeping than just from pain and struggle. We see a theme in the Old Testament and New of those righteous people who grieve for the unrighteousness they see all around them. God directs the Prophet Ezekiel: "Go throughout the city of Jerusalem and put a mark on the foreheads of those who grieve and lament over all the detestable things that are done in it." (Ezekiel 9:4; also 2 Peter 2:8; Psalm 119:36). Those who share God's broken heart for his world now will in the future laugh and rejoice at the great Marriage Supper of the Lamb (Revelation 19:6-9) when we sit down at the table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob -- and Jesus -- in the Kingdom of God and enjoy their fellowship and feast heartily -- forever (Matthew 8:11).

Luke 11:37-53

Jesus, now thirty years old or more, is a widely acclaimed, popular rabbi. While teaching, a prominent Pharisee in the local community takes an interest in Jesus. What a marvel, this Jesus, the man ponders. Though he's obviously unschooled according to Judaism's elite rabbinical education, he has a huge following. I must admit that he has a somewhat primitive grasp of Old Testament Scriptures; of course he heals, too. He'd make an interesting dinner guest. Perhaps my friends and I can even teach him a thing or two about appreciating our deeper understanding of the Law.

The Pharisees were a sect of Judaism, made up largely of laymen rather than priests or religious professionals. They were zealous to obey every minute law that God had given, and to please him fully. To the Pharisees, the Law (a.k.a. the Torah) is preeminent; they take it very seriously. But they've since developed a system to obey "the commands" of the Law, as opposed to the Law itself, by following an accepted interpretation of that Law called "the Tradition of the Elders." This tradition forms a sort of "hedge" or "fence" around the Torah's actual provisions, so that by obeying the Tradition of the Elders one wouldn't break the Law itself.

Jesus' Rebuke of the Pharisees (vv. 37–44)

Jesus had just finished speaking when a Pharisee asked him to come to his house to eat. What surprised the Pharisee was the fact that Jesus didn't wash prior to eating. This isn't the kind of "washing up" that our mothers insisted we did before eating meals, nor is it the washing of dirty hands that good hygiene requires. For Pharisees, a failure to wash before a meal amounted to ceremonial defilement. Theirs was a washing that was required by Pharisaical tradition, rather than by the Law.

Sources

Jesuswalk.com

holyttextures.com

warrencampdesign.com

The Pharisee's surprise is all the more interesting in the light of what Luke has already written in chapter 7, wherein Jesus was also invited to dinner by Simon the Pharisee (v. 40). This is the occasion when Jesus' feet were washed by the "sinful" woman who accomplished her task using her tears and hair. Note that Jesus pointed out to Simon that he hadn't greeted him with a kiss, washed his feet, or anointed his head. The Pharisees were meticulous with unnecessary washing, but careless in beneficial and practical washings.

It's possible that in today's passage the Lord's failure to wash was purposeful, deliberate, perhaps a new phase in his ministry. The Pharisee would have had to provide for the ceremonial washing. Seemingly, all of the others at the table that day must have excused themselves and gone to wash ceremonially. Jesus, however, remained where he was. They may have waited, politely, for Jesus to also wash, only to realize that that wasn't going to happen. Jesus began to eat without first washing. He didn't forget to wash, he likely refused to wash. He seems to have not washed ceremonially as a matter of principle, taking a firm stand against Pharisaical traditions, which had become more important than the written Word of God.

We'll focus next on "Cleaning the outside, but not the inside" (vv. 39–41). Jesus' host is surprised that Jesus doesn't ritually, ceremonially wash his hands before eating. He responds by asserting that their practice of cleansing the outside of a cup and dish had an external character focus. Apparently the cleanliness of the outside of pottery was distinguished from and considered more important for ritual purposes than inner cleanliness. Jesus uses cups and dishes as an analogy regarding the Pharisees' character: They're very concerned with outward purity and observance, yet their hearts are full of greed and wickedness.

Every Pharisee wasn't wicked and selfish. Likely, some were sincere, godly people. But Jesus is characterizing the entire movement to expose its essential flaws. The Pharisees' understanding of religion was essentially selfish — performing every requirement of the Law, in order to justify themselves before God and receive salvation. Motivated by greed, many performed good works, not for others' sake but to ensure their own salvation. Jesus' statement in v. 41 — "But now as for what is inside you — be generous to the poor, and everything will be clean for you" — talks about how to cleanse one's inside character, by turning the analogy of "dirty and clean pottery" to "food-containing dishes that can be given to the poor."

Jesus' Hearty disciples: What's the message for us? It's that love and mercy require us to help the poor. Indeed helping the poor is one antidote for greed and selfishness.

Sources

Jesuswalk.com

holytexures.com

warrencampdesign.com

Six Woes Directed to the Pharisees and the Experts in the Law (vv. 46–52)

- Three stinging woes directed to the Pharisees — First of all, a "woe" isn't so much a stinging rebuke as it's an expression of grief. When we say, "Woe is me," we're not rebuking ourselves, but expressing grief.

The first woe of our Lord concerns the Pharisees' focus on the fine points, while missing the fundamentals; they majored in the minors. Luke addresses Jesus' statement about tithing (v. 42a), which is another important antidote for greed. However, the Pharisees succeed in turning tithing itself into an isolated, selfish act. Tithing is the practice of giving to God's work one tenth of one's net income. But while tithing itself is good, it's not enough. Jesus lampoons the Pharisees' scrupulous tithing practices. In Jesus' caricature (and perhaps in real life), the Pharisees would go out into their herb gardens and pluck one leaf for the tithe for every nine leaves they used in their meals. Luke follows in v. 42b with Jesus' reprimand of the Pharisees neglecting justice and mercy, both of which are foundational. If you neglect justice and mercy toward the poor, Jesus calls on you to prioritize your mind-set of mercy toward them. Jesus didn't criticize the keeping of the Law's small points — the tithing of mint, rue, and other garden herbs — but he said that the major thrust of the Law — justice and the love of God — must be fulfilled.

The second woe concerns the Pharisees' preoccupation with position, prestige, and the praise of men (v. 43). According to Jesus, the Pharisees were "full of greed and wickedness" (v. 39), though they weren't publicly regarded as such. These hypocrites loved the praise of men while being placed in positions of privilege and honor. In short, they sought the praise of men, rather than the praise of God, driven to win man's approval, rather than God's. Interestingly, Jesus accused the Pharisees of desiring "greetings in the marketplaces." It was in the marketplaces that they'd have contact with those they considered "unclean," probably those from whom they received honor and praise. In their minds, this very defilement necessitated the ceremonial washings that they so diligently observed.

The third woe is the most painful and pointed. Jesus accused the Pharisees of being a source of defilement, rather than of purification: "Woe to you, because you are like unmarked graves, which people walk over without knowing it" (v. 44). In the Law, which the Pharisees revered (Numbers 19:16), the Israelites were taught that a person was rendered ceremonially unclean when coming into contact with a grave. The Pharisees thought of themselves as holy; they saw their contribution as leading the nation in the direction of holiness. Jesus told them that the exact opposite was the case; they were both unclean (sinful) and defiling to others. Those who

Sources

Jesuswalk.com

holyttextures.com

warrencampdesign.com

made contact with the Pharisees were thus rendered unclean, which was a most stunning blow to the self-righteous Pharisees.

- **Three additional woes directed at the experts of the Law** — As we know them today, "experts in the law" are considered "lawyers." However, "lawyers" conveys an inaccurate picture of these men, who were not lawyers at all. If the Pharisees were the "laymen" of this large group committed to practicing and producing holiness, the experts in the Law were the "clergymen," who were theologians and teachers of the Law, i.e., the "horse's mouth" of Pharisaism.

Because the "experts in the law" were but a subset of Pharisees, one of its "experts" (v. 45) felt that Jesus' words were applicable to them, too, so he sought to have Jesus clarify his teaching in their favor, since Jesus didn't mean to condemn the experts. (Or did he?) Jesus' answer is a follow-up to his first three woes, with three new woes specifically addressed to these experts.

The first woe directed against the "experts in the law" was that their teaching produced a burden, not a blessing (v. 46). What God had graciously given they'd perverted by their teaching to become an unbearable code of conduct, so complicated they couldn't even understand it, let alone obey it. In contrast to their teaching, Jesus' "Law" was light (Matthew 11:28–30). While Jesus said that he was "gentle and humble in heart" (Matthew 11:29), the hearts of the Pharisees were full of wickedness and greed (v. 39). The difference between Jesus' teaching of the Law and that of the Pharisees' was that his teaching was motivated by compassion, theirs by self-seeking and sin.

The second woe is directly related to the first. Note that it's the lengthiest "woe" (vv. 47–51). As already noted, the experts in the Law and the Pharisees both majored on the minors, prioritizing the small details, missing the design, while focusing on the Law without the prophets. After all, it was the prophets who called Israel to address the major matters of loving God and men and of mercy and justice. In his second woe directed to the experts, Jesus shows us **how strongly the Pharisees resisted the prophets. Not only did they reject their teaching, they were guilty of being accomplices in the prophets' deaths.**

How could these experts in the Law be guilty of the blood of prophets whom their forefathers had slain? First, they'd rejected the teaching of the prophets, just as their forefathers had done. Second, they were presently rejecting Jesus' teaching, which was consistent with the teaching of the prophets; soon they would kill him. And third, some of those prophets and apostles yet

Sources

Jesuswalk.com

holytexures.com

warrencampdesign.com

yet to come — namely Jesus' disciples, after Jesus' death and resurrection — will be rejected, persecuted, and sometimes killed by them. All of this puts these Law experts in the same category of sinners, along with their forefathers. The very things they condemned, they were guilty of themselves. because the experts in the Law have taken away the key to knowledge (Luke 11:52).

The third woe is the capstone: "Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering" (v. 52). Jesus said that they'd taken away "the key of knowledge," which likely was the divinely revealed knowledge of the Scriptures. The experts in the Law, the ones self-appointed to teach the truth of the Law to their nation, were the very ones who were withholding, indeed, concealing that truth. They set aside the written Law for their oral law using man's distorted interpretations of the Scriptures. They also set aside the prophets and all of the inspired insight that God had revealed through them. They made themselves so-called experts who discouraged men from studying the Word of God for themselves.

Questions

Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

1. Are you pretty comfortable with where you are spiritually? Do you think there might, might not be a god out there somewhere? Have you ever said something like this, "I don't really follow a god, but I'm a really spiritual person." Or, "I get everything I need from my heart."
2. Or... Do you think that you are poor without God? Are you nothing without him? The word poor makes you think beggar. Have you had a moment where you fell down and begged God to forgive you?

Jesus says, "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied."

3. Do you feel spiritually full? Do you do your one hour of church a week and call it good. Do you pretty much know the jist of the Bible and are satisfied with that?
4. Or... Do you live for diving into the Word of God? Do you get excited when you learn a new truth that you can share with another? Do you carve out time every day for time with the Lord as if you would go hungry without it?

Jesus says, "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

5. Do you trot through life laughing away footloose and fancy free? Do you think you are a pretty good person? How about that dude next to you? Do you care about him?

Sources

Jesuswalk.com

holyttextures.com

warrencampdesign.com

6. Or... Do you "weep" when you think about how you have sinned against God? The very God who gave you life... Do you "weep" for loved ones that do not know Jesus?

Jesus says, "Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man."

7. Do most people like you when you tell them about Jesus? Oh... You don't tell them? They probably like you then, huh? Do people even know you are a Christian? Do you at least tell them that God loves them? They probably still like you for that...

8. Or... Do you tell those you love how God hates sin? That all people sin against God. That there is nothing they can do to get back in the good graces of God. That the ONLY chance they have is to acknowledge their sin, repent, beg for forgiveness, and trust in Jesus? Do they like you then? How could giving food to the poor bring about spiritual cleansing, as implied by v. 41?

9. Did Jesus fault or compliment the Pharisees on their scrupulous tithing?

10. Where did he find fault with them? (v. 42)

11. In what ways do you see Pharisaical attitudes in yourself?

12. What are you doing to counter them?

Sources

Jesuswalk.com

holytexures.com

warrencampdesign.com