

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

*****Observing The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church**

Life's Blessings, According to Jesus

(Luke 6:20-26)

Introduction: Counter-intuitive...

Of course, you and I know how life works. We know, that is, until we have an *"Aha!"* moment that shows us that what we thought was right wasn't really right at all.

Over the years, God has graciously brought many *"Aha!"* moments my way that have changed my understanding of marriage, my outlook on church, and my approach to living with Jesus.

- *"Oh. So, You're saying, Lord, that my sin problem goes deeper than my behavior? That I need to repent of heart-level, deeply ingrained patterns of thought that deny You?"*

That *"Aha!"* moment changed everything for me.

- *"Hmmm. Jesus, You're more concerned that our church relies on You to make impact outside of the church that is disproportionate to our size than You are concerned that our church becomes large?"*

That was also a game changing *"Aha!"* moment.

- *"So, for me to love Kathy as Jesus loves the church extends to the actions and the attitudes I bring to every interaction with her?"*

Oh. *"Aha, indeed..."*

"Aha!" moments are breakthrough moments when we find a new and improved way to see reality.

Today, Jesus' counter-intuitive words reveal and reverse our understanding of reality. He opens our eyes to life as He sees it. He invites us to a life-changing *"Aha!"* moment.

We are focused on the theme of persecution today. Jake has led us in songs along those lines. We've watched a compelling video. Todd has prayed. Now we turn to Scripture and listen as Jesus speaks to the themes of hardship, suffering, and persecution.

Let's get a running start to all of that by seeing how Luke gets us there.

Leading up to Jesus' words for today...

His account of Jesus' life begins with the birth stories of John the Baptist and Jesus. We'll look at some of those stories as we get closer to Christmas.

Luke then marches us through Jesus' early life. After reading about His baptism by John, Luke gives us a genealogy of Jesus, but one that is different from Matthew's. Luke's begins with Jesus and moves in time all the way back to Adam, the first man, and to God his Maker.

We read about the devil's temptations and of the launch of Jesus' ministry through preaching, healing, and casting out demons.

And then, when we turn to Luke chapter 6, after another miraculous Sabbath day healing, we find Jesus at prayer.

The Setting for Jesus' Words (Luke 6:21-20a)

The Immediate Context

Choosing the twelve (6:12-16)

He was up north in the region of Galilee and He went up on a mountain, alone, and prayed through the night to His Father.

The next day, He called His disciples to Him, climbed with them back up to the top of the mountain, and singled out twelve of them to be His apostles (“sent ones”).

As He and His apostles came down off the peak of the mountain, Jesus was met by a lot of people at a level spot on the mountain’s slopes.

The crowd that gathered (6:17)

[Luke 6:17] And then Jesus came down with them and stood on a level place;¹ and there was a large crowd of His disciples, and a great multitude of the people from all Judea and Jerusalem, and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon.

A level place

It was a diverse crew, made up of **“a large crowd”** of more disciples AND **“a great multitude”** of others who were interested enough in Jesus to make the trek up a mountain.

Luke doesn’t give us numbers, but this was a big group. And the level spot was large enough to allow for a large gathering.

My impression is that this mountain was near the city of Capernaum (Jesus’ home base for ministry), probably overlooking the Sea of Galilee.²

Word had spread about Jesus to the extent that people came from all over the place.

They converged at this mountain by traveling north from the capitol city of Jerusalem and south from the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon.³

¹ Maybe we are to think of Moses coming down to the people from Mount Sinai. (Ex. 32)

² It is possible that the exact spot has been located, but we don’t know for certain.

³ The reference to Tyre and Sidon opens up the possibility of Gentiles being a part of the **“large crowd”** of disciples or the **“great multitude”** of the interested.

And why have they all gathered for this major public event?

The works of Jesus (6:18-19)

[Luke 6:18] [They] had come to hear Him and to be healed of their diseases.

They came to receive from Jesus what only He could give: healing for their bodies and freedom for their souls. And He did not disappoint.

[Luke 6:18]...and those who were troubled by unclean spirits were being cured. [19] And all the people were trying to touch Him, because power was coming from Him and healing them all.

This was one of those remarkable times when Jesus healed large crowds. He was fighting spiritual battles for them. Everybody recognized that in Jesus God’s power was at work.

And when the time for healing had passed, Jesus gave them the other gift they had come up the mountain to receive.

Jesus’ Target Audience (v. 20a)

[20a] And He raised His eyes toward His disciples and began saying...⁴

As He began to speak, we might picture Him seated as a Jewish rabbi would have in the first century. Or, maybe better, standing as a prophet would have.

He was aiming His words at His disciples. For our purposes, these are those who had believed in Him. Others were there, too, and they heard Him.

⁴ In what we read in Luke 6, we find a condensed version of the Sermon on the Mount that Matthew records in Matthew 5-7. There is reason to see Matthew and Luke giving different accounts of the same event. But it is possible that Jesus gave numerous sermons in similar settings with similar content.

But the words are directed for His people - then and now. Jesus is explaining to those who have believed in Him what life with Him is going to look like.⁵

The defining mark of Jesus' opening words (vv. 20-26) is His counter-intuitive way of looking at life. He gives us a matched set of "**Woe to you's**" and "**Blessed are you's.**"

Blessings

Considering "BLESSED ARE YOU..."

For someone in the first century Jewish world to call someone else "**Blessed**" was to say that that someone else had every reason to be happy and that they were happy.⁶

It spoke to someone's upbeat emotional state that followed good things in their life.

Given that understanding, Jesus' first words are jarring.

Blessed are the Poor (v. 20b)

Poor

[20b] "Blessed are you who are poor..."

Jesus was talking here about literal and severe poverty. The Greek word used here (*πτωχοι*) described a person who was destitute, barely scraping by, so poor that he might have to beg.

But Jesus wasn't simply saying that all people who are struck with poverty are or should consider themselves blessed.

He had a subset of poor people in mind here.

⁵ Bible scholar, I. Howard Marshall writes, "*what follows is especially meant for the disciples.*"

⁶ In secular Greek literature, "*blessed*" (Makarios) described the happy, untroubled state of the gods. In Jewish literature, it described the wealthy had had no cares.

All that Jesus says here is to show His people what life will be like for them as they follow Him. The focus is on the hardship and even persecution that will come their way when they follow Him.

So, the "**Blessed**" people He was referring to are those who are poor because of their commitment to follow Him and the poverty that will often follow that following.⁷

Possessor of the kingdom of God

[20b] "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."⁸

The blessedness of the poor who are poor because of being disciples of Jesus is that the kingdom of God is theirs.

That is present tense. These "**poor**" are currently participating in the rule and reign of Jesus - and that's worth being happy about because He leads into abundance, here and now.

But there is also a future-looking aspect to this.

Jesus wants His followers to know that there will be great blessings to come if they are poor in this life for His sake.⁹

And these future happinesses are so certain that we can be happy about our poverty even before the happinesses arrive. BLESSED ARE YOU who are poor, indeed!

Similar thoughts follow.

Blessed are the Hungry (v. 21a)

⁷ Marshall takes the reference to "**poor**" as being those who are so because they are disciples of Jesus.

⁸ In Matthew, Jesus began with "**Blessed are the poor in spirit.**" (Matthew 5:3) The promise in both gospels is the same: the kingdom of God / heaven.

⁹ We remember that Jesus had already said that God had anointed Him to bring good news to the poor (Isaiah 61; Luke 4:18)

Jesus says, **[21a] Blessed are you who are hungry now...**¹⁰

Hungry

Yes, Jesus was referring here to physical hunger, which is often the result of poverty. And hunger is hard. We all crave satiety. It is a rare person who is hungry and happy about it.

We've even got a word - *hangry* - that perfectly describes many of us when we're hungry. We're distraught. Upset. In a bad mood.

But as it was with the "**poor**," Jesus is speaking about people who are hungry because their Jesus-following ways have left them without sufficient daily food.

Jesus knew that hunger would be a reality for many of His disciples. But these hungry people are blessed because of what's to come.

Satisfaction to come

[21a] Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be satisfied.

In the future, hungry people will be hungry no more. They will be satisfied with everything they need.

If it's food, it'll be food. If it's friendship, there will be close friendships. If it's rest or refreshment or serving or leading or making impact, all of that will be provided.

This is a promise that in the future, there will be no unmet longings. God will satisfy every hunger and thirst those who have suffered hunger for Him now will ever know. ¹¹ BLESSED ARE YOU!

Blessed are Those Who Weep (v. 21b)

¹⁰ In Matthew, Jesus includes "**and thirst for righteousness.**" Here, the use of the passive voice indicates that God will satisfy them.

¹¹ See Isaiah 55:1 for a picture of this promise in the Old Testament.

Weeping

[21b] Blessed are you who weep now...

Mourning of all kinds may well be in view. Primarily, Jesus is imagining someone who is weeping because of hardship suffered as His disciple.

Laughter to come

To these, He said, **[21b] Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.**

Weeping will be replaced by laughter.¹²

In the future, the cause of the sorrow a disciple has suffered will be removed. She'll laugh out loud at her rescue. Again, BLESSED ARE YOU!

And Jesus wraps up His "**Blessed are you's**" with this, among the most counter-intuitive statements we'll ever hear.

Blessed are the Persecuted (vv. 22-23)

Persecution that comes to the disciple of Jesus (6:22)

In what I'm about to read, overt persecution is in view. And persecution can take lots of different forms and shapes. It can range from a social slight to murder - and everything in between.

Persecuted people may suffer loss of income, imprisonment, a fractured family, or alienation from friends.

[22] Blessed are you when the people HATE you, and when they EXCLUDE you, and INSULT you, and SCORN YOUR NAME as evil, on account of the Son of Man.¹³

¹² Matthew has "**mourn**" and then "**will be comforted.**"

¹³ Here are the similar statement from Matthew's Sermon on the Mount:

As Jesus says here, disciples will sometimes be hated. And the people who hate Jesus' disciples may well believe that they are justified in their hatred. They believe that hating Jesus-followers is the right thing to do.

When people hate you for Jesus' sake, BLESSED ARE YOU!

We understand what it feels like to be excluded, to be treated as the outsider. Jesus predicts that His disciples will sometimes be left out because they follow Jesus.¹⁴

When you are socially ostracized for Jesus' sake, BLESSED ARE YOU!

He says that His disciples will be insulted. Jesus was,¹⁵ so it follows that those who follow Him will be treated the same.

When you are insulted - face to face, on social media, at work, at school, at home - for living as Jesus' disciple, BLESSED ARE YOU!

If your "name" as a disciple of Jesus is used against you scornfully, derisively, to defame you, BLESSED ARE YOU!

These kinds of persecution have been common for God's people from the beginning.

So, what is Jesus' direction to disciples when they are persecuted?

Great is your reward! (6:23a)

[Matthew 5:10] "Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

[Matthew 5:11] "Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me."

[Matthew 5:12a] "Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great..."

¹⁴ Better than "excommunicate," which was an explicitly Jewish act. The reference is broader than something only Jewish.

¹⁵ See Romans 15:3; 1 Peter 2:21-25.4:14.

Exult when these things happen to you

[23a] Rejoice on that day¹⁶ and jump for joy

It would be hard to overstate the exuberance in view here.

Jesus says that it is perfectly appropriate for the disciple to "skip about," dance with reckless abandon, and "***jump for joy***" when hated, excluded, insulted or scorned.

Your reward is great in heaven

And the disciple should reasonably celebrate because ***[23a]...your reward is great in heaven.***

This idea of a "***reward***" for faithfulness is pervasive in the New Testament.

- The Apostle Paul looked forward to the reward of ***[2 Timothy 4:8] a crown of righteousness*** for having lived in light of Jesus' return.
- Jesus' half-brother, James, promised the reward of ***[James 1:12] a crown of life*** (James 1:12) for faithfully bearing up under trials.

But is it not that we rejoice THAT we are being persecuted. Persecution is always something to be grieved.

Persecution says something terrible about the persecutor and his or her future. Plus, the abuse of someone by persecution is always to be mourned.

We rejoice *because* we know that our reward in heaven is great for having suffered persecution which was prompted because we faithfully followed Jesus.

God will reward us *then* and *there* for anything and everything we've suffered for following Jesus *here* and *now*.

¹⁶ "***That day***" = a day of persecution, much as Ephesians 6:13 refers to an "***evil day***" of spiritual warfare and temptation.

Of course, we rejoice that we are going to heaven. But that's not what Jesus is talking about here.

We are going to heaven and have received the gift of eternal life because we were saved by God's amazing grace when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here, He says to rejoice because in heaven we will receive a great reward.

That reward, while not specifically spelled out, will involve receiving an incomparable **[2 Corinthians 4:17] eternal weight of glory.**

That reward is sometimes called a **"rich inheritance,"** something that God gives to His faithful sons and daughters.¹⁷

It will involve reigning with Jesus in glory and unimaginable joy.

If we're in a situation where we're suffering persecution and we think of the reward to come for faithfully following Jesus in the middle of that persecution, we might just jump for joy.

When I was a kid, I remember my eagerness when mom took me to the dentist.

I didn't much like going to the dentist. But after every dentist visit, Mom would stop off at a donut shop. I knew what was coming after the dentist. (Yes. I'll admit that some very old habits die hard.)

More seriously, it's the joy an expectant mother feels while she is pregnant, nervously rejoicing when the birth pangs hit, knowing that she's soon going to hold her baby.

¹⁷ When the New Testament authors speak of a believer's **"inheritance"** they are usually NOT referring to the gift of eternal life we receive when we believe in Jesus. They are most often referring to a reward that comes our way in the future, for faithfulness here and now. See 1 Corinthians 6:9; 15:50; Galatians 5:21; Ephesians 5:5; Colossians 3:23-24; Hebrews 9:15; 12:23; 1 Peter 1:3-4.

Jesus then says that when all these troubles come your way that lead to reward, rejoice for what's to come - and know that you are in great company.

You're in great company! (6:23b)

[23b]...For their fathers used to treat the prophets the same way.¹⁸

The list of those who suffered persecution in Old Testament times is long.

- Adam's and Eve's son, Abel, was persecuted - murdered - for his righteousness by his brother, Cain.
- The young David was persecuted by the evil King Saul.
- Elijah was persecuted by King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel.
- The prophet Daniel was persecuted by the magicians who served King Darius, resulting in him being thrown into a lion's den.

Read through Hebrews 11 and you'll find the record of men and women who suffered for their faithfulness.¹⁹

When we are treated like these were treated, we prove that we are Jesus' disciples.

The first followers of Jesus suffered for following Him. The book of Acts and history tells us that most of the apostles were martyred.

Jesus' people were opposed nearly everywhere they went so that the Apostle Paul could honestly write, **[2 Timothy 3:12] Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.**

In parts of our world in 2024, as we have already prayed and seen via the video today, Paul's words have never rung more true.²⁰

¹⁸ **[Matthew 5:12b] "...for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you."**

¹⁹ Especially see Hebrews 11:34-38, but the whole chapter is inspiring.

In the Middle East, in much of the Far East, in many parts of Africa, and Central and South America, our Christian family is suffering.

The ministry “Open Doors” which, like The Voice of the Martyrs serves the persecuted church, estimates that around 360,000,000 Christians are suffering persecution today in some form.

On one of the trips I had the privilege to take to Russia in the early 2000’s, I was talking with Igor Petrov. Igor and his brother led the Bible school in Kursk where I was doing some teaching.

He told me that Russian Christians have learned what he called “the rhythm of persecution.” That is, that in Russia, there are brief seasons of freedom to worship and serve Jesus followed by long seasons of persecution.²¹

It is the historical norm for the church of Jesus to suffer for Jesus. The Lord knew that this would be the lot of His followers, so He told them about it in advance.

On the night before He died, He told them, **“If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you.”** (John 15:18-20).²²

Well, they did persecute Him and they have persecuted His people. And we are considering persecution today to better sensitize ourselves to the reality of persecution.

We want to **“remember the prisoners”** (Hebrews 13:3), because they are our brothers and sisters. We want to be intentional about remembering them. We want to do what we can to support them.

²⁰ And not only in our own day. Foxes’ Book of Martyrs, written in 1563 by John Fox, chronicles the persecution of Christians from apostolic times until his own day. Emphasis is placed on the sufferings of Protestants in England.

²¹ There are many groups that give support to the persecuted church. The group that I turn to The Voice of the Martyrs (www.persecution.com). VOM and other groups will inform you, direct you how to pray, and let you know how to provide help to people who are suffering exactly what Jesus predicted here in Matthew 5.

²² Taken together, **“persecuted for the sake of righteousness”** (v. 10) equates to persecuted **“because of Me.”** (v. 11)

In Jesus’ remaining comments, He takes a dramatic turn. He doesn’t give any more, *“Blessed are you’s.”* Instead, He turns to give us a series of *“Woes to you.”*²³

Counter-intuitively, Jesus tells us that present persecution brings future rewards so great that we rejoice, kick up our heels, and dance when persecuted.

We aren’t surprised to read that, counter-intuitively, present comforts aren’t all they’re cracked up to be, if we’re looking to the future.

Woes

Woe to the Rich (v. 24)

[24] But woe²⁴ to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full.²⁵

To be wealthy is to be comfortable. Enjoying the comfort that riches bring is a pleasant way to live.

The wealthy have the consolation of their wealth to protect against hot days (A/C) and cold nights (central heat), to provide for vehicles that work, to put food on the table, and to provide a secure short-term future with savings.

The problem with riches is that we might forfeit the possibility of future comfort (rewards, inheritance, ruling and reigning with Jesus) by our preoccupation with present comfort.

We might live like the child on Halloween night, gorging on candy, ignoring the misery of an inevitable stomachache.

²³ Note that Matthew makes no reference to **“woes”** in his record of Jesus’ Sermon.
²⁴ **“Woe”** (*ouai*)- Old Testament term; an expression of pity for those who stand under God’s judgment. Found often in the prophets.

²⁵ The picture is of someone who had been fully repaid by a debtor so that the debtor no longer owed anything to the lender. Those who are presently rich have received all they are ever going to get (from God).

Of course, it's much worse than that. The child's indigestion will pass quickly.

Jesus doesn't tell us how long we may live with a lack of future comfort, or how severe that lack of comfort will be, or of what future comfort we're depriving ourselves by indulging in comfort now.

I speak as someone who has heat and A/C, a good roof on our house, food in the fridge, two cars that run, and money in the bank.

What do we do with Jesus' words?

His words here protect us from thinking that heaven is going to be like earth, but more so. It's like we decide where we want to be comfortable: Here? Or there? But it can't be both.

So, to the extent that we forsake a life of comfort to follow Jesus as a disciple, to that extent we will be comfortable (rewarded) later. And to the extent that we forsake following Jesus as a disciple now, to that extent we will lose comfort later.

Same thing for being well-fed now.

Woe to the Well-Fed and to the Laughing (v. 25)

[25a] Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.

Full bellies and belly laughs are good now.

I wonder if Jesus is describing people who are indifferent to the needs of others. Is He talking about those who are consumed with their personal happiness to the extent that they don't pay attention to the needs of the least and the last and the lost. Maybe...

And, to the extent that we pursue these things here and now at the expense of living as Jesus' loving, compassionate, serving, disciple, to that extent we forfeit the satisfaction and joy we could enjoy later.

And this.

Woe to Those About Whom Everyone Speaks Well (v. 26)

[26] Woe to you when all the people speak well of you; for their fathers used to treat the false prophets the same way.

It's nice to have people speak well of you. It's nice to have a good reputation. Jesus says it's also dangerous.

And I'll say this as a balance.

Jesus spoke about the importance of being peacemakers. Paul said that Elders who provide leadership to a church are to be gentle, not contentious. (1 Timothy 3:3) James urged that we who follow Jesus are to be "*peace-loving*." (James 3:17)

So, it isn't as if we are itching for a fight. The problem comes with that little phrase, "*all the people*"

In ancient times, "*all the people*" spoke well of false prophets who would say whatever fit the crowd they were addressing. They were ear-ticklers (2 Timothy 4:3) who said what others wanted to hear.

Jesus' disciples are not to do that. They are to speak truth in love, tell people what they need to hear even if it isn't what they want to hear. Disciples will often be known for who opposes them.

We're not out looking to be persecuted. But we shouldn't go out of our way to avoid it, either.

We aren't to speak in such a way that pacifies everybody. And if opposition comes, we aren't surprised. In fact, we welcome it as an indication of God's pleasure.²⁶

²⁶ From *In the Shadow of the Cross* (Glenn Penner):

A summary of the theme of persecution from Luke:

Jesus was persecuted AND Jesus' disciples were persecuted AND the prophets of old were persecuted. Persecution is part of God's plan. It is the rejection of God's

Conclusion:

Jesus' "*Blessed are you's*" and His "*Woe to you's*" are radical and counter-intuitive. If heaven isn't real and Jesus isn't true, they are silly or even harmful.

But we are staking our lives on what we can't see. And the Savior who died for us sees more clearly than we can. He says that we will never regret living and even suffering for Him. Not for all eternity.

Today, we remember our suffering family and pray for them. We will seek ways to help them as we are able. And we will learn from them to live for our Jesus - come what may.

agents. The persecuted stand in continuity with God's prophets, is an integral consequence of following Jesus, is the occasion of divine triumph, and allows Christians to learn to persevere.