

“Beatitudes for Our Time”
Luke 6:17-26
Dr. Christopher C. F. Chapman
First Baptist Church, Raleigh
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Some of you know that I was in a number of bands many years ago. One of them won the best band competition at the Kentucky State Fair in 1981 and thus performed on live television, but lest this sound like bragging, our prize was a blue ribbon just like the prize cow won that year. It had spaces on the back to note things like weight and class.

Anyway, another band I was in performed Contemporary Christian music. We didn't last long, though we had fun, but our fate can be summed up with one story. Our drummer told us about a band from Ireland, four guys our ages who were Christian but decided not to work in the Contemporary Christian world, but to address global concerns in a way that might have broader appeal in mainstream music. “Doesn't that sound interesting?” he said. “Yes,” we said, “But it will never work.”

Well, as it turned out, we were wrong about that. The band, you may have heard of them, U2, has done pretty well. Those guys are still going strong and they are still faithfully pursuing their mission of addressing global concerns in ways that have broad appeal.

The latest evidence of this reality is a recent song entitled “American Soul” on which Pulitzer Prize winning rapper Kendrick Lamar performs. It begins with these words.

Blessed are the arrogant, for theirs is the kingdom of their own company.

Blessed are the superstars, for in the magnificence of their light we understand better our own insignificance.

Blessed are the filthy rich, for you can only truly own what you give away... like your pain.

Blessed are the bullies, for one day they'll have to stand up to themselves.

Blessed are the liars, for the truth can be awkward.

They are provoking words which take on even more weight in the context of the whole song. They are beatitudes for our time, updates on the biblical versions. At first glance, they may seem a bit edgy, more pointed than what we find in the Bible. But the truth is the biblical beatitudes are pretty edgy too. They are not as warm and fuzzy as they might at first appear or as we might think we remember them.

There are two versions of the beatitudes in scripture - one in Matthew, one in Luke – and there is a third version in the Gospel of Thomas, but we know Matthew’s version best for obvious reasons. He includes nine beatitudes or words of blessing while Luke only has four to which he adds four woes. One scholar has said the Lukan form of these Jesus sayings has suffered from benign neglect. They have suffered from neglect, but I don’t know that it’s benign. It seems quite intentional. We’d rather have more blessings and fewer woes!

But the truth is the beatitudes in Matthew are a complex mixture of blessing and challenge too. They are not warm and fuzzy happy-sayings that guarantee smooth sailing throughout life. They offer blessings to the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek and others, blessings to people who struggle in various ways, but the blessings are often future-oriented. And some of the blessings are for those who take risks, like peacemakers, and those who are reviled and persecuted for their faith. Even if there is a future blessing for such people, their path is not easy. So, there is hope for the suffering and outcast, encouragement for the faithful, but it is not a straightforward warm and fuzzy experience.

Luke’s version of the beatitudes is different in several ways and even more pointed. The setting alone is significant. In terms of geography, it doesn’t seem like a big deal – a plain rather than a mountain – but symbolically there is a significant difference. In scripture, mountains are the site of holy moments, divine revelations, the giving of the Law to Moses, Jesus’ transfiguration, etc. Plains are the site of ordinary life in all its messiness, places where there are corpses, disgrace, idolatry, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation and mourning (Jeremiah 9:22; 14:18; 30:4; Daniel 3:1; Joel 1:10, 20; 2:22; 3:19; Habakkuk 3:17; Zechariah 12:11). Such level places can also be the site

where the glory of God is revealed, but the fact that Luke places this sermon on a level plain presents a Jesus who speaks words of hope and challenge right from the midst of the suffering of this world.

This much alone, as I say, matters; it prepares us for a pointed message. Then, Luke states that Jesus is speaking to his disciples. This may or may not be the case in Matthew. The message is not just for them, but it is first for them. Then, Luke offers four words of blessing – for the poor, the hungry, those who weep and all who are hated and reviled because of their faith in Jesus – and four words of woe – for the rich, the well-fed, those who laugh and those who are spoken well of.

The blessings are for people who suffer in the present age. The woes are for those who benefit from current realities. It is a reversal of fortune very much like Mary predicts in the Magnificat when she sings of Jesus with these words, “He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty (Luke 1:51b-53).”

What we are talking about is a whole new realm, a complete reversal of fortune. For the poor and oppressed, those in pain and grief, there is a word of hope, assurance and justice. They will be part of God’s kingdom, be filled, laugh and be rewarded in heaven. For those who are comfortable with current realities, some of which come at the expense of others, there is a word of challenge and woe. Franciscan Richard Rohr said that Jesus came to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. So it seems in this passage. It is a pointed message.

The question is – what exactly does it mean for us? First of all, what does this hope mean? The Greek word translated as “blessed” is *makarios*. It does not refer to an absence of struggle but to a kind of deep-down contentment that the details of life cannot take away. It is an inner happiness that has a connection to God. Jesus says the poor and hungry will experience this kind of blessedness, those who grieve will be happy and laugh, those who are hated on his account will leap for joy.

In other words, there is special place in the heart of God for all who suffer and thus they will be blessed richly. It is a good word if we

are the ones suffering, if we are hurting and outcast and misunderstood, if we have taken risks for our faith and what we believe to be right and suffered as a result. We will be blessed, Jesus says. But this blessing seems to future-oriented. So, how does it help us now?

In an article included in a recent issue of *Journal for Preachers* (Lent 2019, pp. 5-6), Lutheran pastor Mary Hinkle Shore suggests an answer. There are times, she says, when it helps to know the end of the story at its beginning, like when the middle of the story is going to get scary. It's like watching a ballgame we have recorded and know ends well. It may take away the suspense, but it also takes away the anxiety. Knowing that there is a rich blessing at the end of our earthly journey, whether somewhere in this life or in the next, makes a great deal of difference for how we experience challenges in the present.

The question is – how do we know we can trust the promise of a glorious ending? It all depends on whether we trust the one making the promise. Shore references an article written by theologian Richard Lischer in which he says a promise cannot be detached from the one speaking it and then explains his point with this story (“Preaching and the Rhetoric of Promise,” *Word and World*, 8-1-88, p. 73).

If I am out of work and on relief, and the owner of the local grocery store promises me a job in two weeks, whether or not I now adopt a stance of hope in the world depends on the character of the one who promises. Does he have a history of faithful actions from which I can abstract the quality of faithfulness and ascribe it to him? Are there testimonies to his faithfulness? If so, my life has already changed. It changes with the issuance of the promise.

The beatitudes are promises and Jesus is the one who issues them. There is no more trustworthy source. The hope may be for the future, but our lives are **changes (d)** already. It's a bit like the promise in the reading from 1 Corinthians 15. If Christ is raised, then we too will be raised. It is a future hope, but if we trust the maker of the promise, we trust the promise, and thus our lives are changed today.

But what does the word of challenge found in Luke's version of this sermon mean for us? We can make sense of the hope and how it helps us, but how does the woe help? For starters, it is not a final word of judgment. It is a statement of reality, a list of natural consequences of self-interested action. And there may be some implication of a choice as found in the words of Psalm 1 and the reading from Jeremiah.

Both of these texts contrast the experience of a person or nation placing trust in God with the experience of a person or nation not placing trust in God. There is an implicit call to action, an opportunity to choose. There may be one here too, but it does not apply with equal ease to all four blessings and woes. Surely we are not called to seek out poverty, hunger and grief, though we are called to faithfulness.

So, the application may need to be a bit more refined. Perhaps woe is extended not to all who are doing well right now, but to those who are doing well at the expense of others. The tricky thing is sorting out when our comfort comes at the expense of others. There are obvious ways in which people with power can exploit those without it, ways the rich can take advantage of the poor, but there are also less obvious ways that are no less significant, systemic ways, structural ways.

So, the question for us here is not just, "Where and how are we comfortable?" but, "When might this in some way, perhaps indirectly, be at the expense of others?" and then, "What might we do differently?" If these woes are not a final word of judgment but rather a call to action, then they might help us just as much as the words of blessing. The key lies in identifying where and how we need to change.

One potential area has to do with race. It is common in dialogues about race to ask everyone to acknowledge that he/she is a racist. Many good people cringe at this request. I do. I grew up in a family where racist words and deeds were not allowed. I never knew a time when I thought another person was inferior because of the color of his/her skin.

But to participate in racism, to perpetuate it or simply not resist it, we don't have to act in overtly racist ways. We simply have to comply with the systemic racism of our culture. You don't overcome the impact of 250 years of slavery and another 100 of Jim Crow in a few years or decades. The system is still infected. There is still such a thing as white

privilege. There are blessings we experience and curses we do not simply because of the color of our skin.

I have never worried about my whiteness presenting a barrier to education, work or anything else nor have I had to worry about how our children will be treated by anyone because of their race. We worry about other things, but we don't worry about race. There is no easy way to fix to these realities, and we may not agree on all of the details of analysis, but we can at least feel uncomfortable about where things are.

Another area of life we might reflect upon has to do with economic disparities. We are all rich by the world's standards. We tend to think that what we have is a function of our hard work and intelligence, and this is part of the story. But much of our experience is due to when and where we are born. If we are female, black or Native American born in this land 200 years ago, it doesn't matter how hard we work or how smart we are. We will not acquire wealth or power. The same goes for many born today in parts of Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. And in any context, our experience depends on other people. Even those who pull themselves up by their bootstraps have help.

There is an economic simulation game where everyone is given resources, there are bargaining rounds and after each round, participants are divided into classes and given bonuses. There are winners and losers and a lot of rash talk, but what the participants don't know until the end is that they did not begin with the same amount of money. Inevitably, the people who end well began with more. There are a few rare people who move up a class, but not many. What we begin with determines where we end, as in life. As with racial concerns, there is no easy way to fix to these realities, and we may not agree on all of the details of analysis, but we can at least feel uncomfortable about where things are.

Some, no doubt, are unsettled by U2's beatitudes, but those who read the biblical beatitudes with understanding, especially in their Lukan form, are unsettled too. They are words of blessing, even the woes, just the kind of blessing that one who goes to a cross might bring. Jesus did come to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable, but even the affliction is intended to help us, if we will let it.