

Luke 6:20-38: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Luke chapter 6 verses 20 to 38. And leap for joy, for behold your reward is great in heaven, for so their fathers did to the prophets.

But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets. But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.

To one who strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also. And from one who takes away your cloak, do not withhold your tunic either. Give to everyone who begs from you, and from one who takes away your goods, do not demand them back.

And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them. If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them.

[1 : 3 0] And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. And if you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you?

Even sinners lend to sinners to get back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good and lend, expecting nothing in return. And your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High.

For he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your father is merciful. Judge not, and you will not be judged. Condemn not, and you will not be condemned.

Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.

In Luke chapter 6, in a passage described as the Sermon on the Plain, we find Luke's version of the material that we find in Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. This, presumably, was a message given on several occasions.

[2 : 3 6] A number of people have suggested that Matthew and Luke are in tension with each other at this point. But as Jesus is a teacher who is travelling from place to place within Israel, it should not surprise us in the least that he gives the same material in various sermons on various occasions.

There are, however, a few differences. Luke has four Beatitudes, corresponding with the first, the fourth, the second, and the eighth of Matthew chapter 5. He also parallels them with four woes.

In the case of Matthew, there are woes that correspond with the Beatitudes in chapter 5, but those woes are found in chapter 23. They're woes that are declared to the scribes and the Pharisees.

Various biblical books are structured in a way that highlights the blessing-woe opposition. We can think about it at the end of Deuteronomy. In the book of Psalms, it begins with, Blessed is the man who does not walk, etc.

The book of Proverbs has this sort of juxtaposition in its first few chapters, particularly in chapter 9. Leviticus has blessings and woes in chapter 26. Such oppositions are common throughout the material of the law, the material of the wisdom literature, and also in the material of the prophets.

[3 : 49] And they take on a different flavour in each. In the case of the law, there's an emphasis upon divine sanctions. In the case of wisdom, there's an emphasis more upon the different natural outcomes of wisdom and folly.

And in the case of prophecy, the emphasis is upon what God is going to bring about upon people who are rebellious as opposed to those who are faithful. Luke more strongly emphasises the theme of reversal in the Beatitudes and Woes, even than Matthew does.

The blessings and the woes in Luke are symmetrical and paralleled. The theme of the reversal of fortunes is also present here. We've seen this already in the Magnificat, and we see it later in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and it's found at various other occasions within the Gospel.

The Beatitudes and the woes particularly do recall the Magnificat. In chapter 1, verses 46 to 53, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now all generations will call me blessed. For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

[4 : 59] He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of humble estate. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

We're seeing many of these themes returning at this point in the Beatitudes and the Woes. The point of the blessings and the woes is not to say what people should do, so much as it is to declare the way that things are.

And the message is very surprising. It goes against what we might expect. It seems, as we read through much of Scripture, that the blessed are those who are rich and prosperous and rejoicing. But here it's quite the opposite.

Those who are rich are not the ones who are blessed. Note that unlike Matthew's Beatitudes, these are also directly addressed to the disciples. Not blessed are those, but blessed are you.

The Beatitudes are paradoxical, and there's a danger of de-eschatologising them, of forgetting that these statements only make sense if God is imminently going to act in history. The people are blessed because God is going to act in their favour.

[6 : 06] This is not just an implicit set of imperatives. It's less about ethics than about what God is about to do. For instance, we should not pursue being persecuted. Persecution comes to the righteous, but they don't pursue it.

God is about to visit his people, and those who have hungered for his advent will be given cause to rejoice. Their objective condition will change. And Luke has poor rather than poor in spirit.

And we might feel a bit uncomfortable about the fact that he doesn't invite spiritualising here. We might want to be assured that he doesn't mean the poor literally. He means the poor in this spiritual sense.

But we should be made to feel uncomfortable. The poor are the marginalised, the rejected, those who do not fit into the system of this world in some way or other. And there's something fitting between the material conditions of the poor and the spiritual condition of being poor in spirit.

Jesus elsewhere talks about it being easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. The poor then cannot just be spiritualised.

[7 : 10] On the other hand, however, we should be aware of simply suggesting that the poor in spirit and the poor materially are one and the same group of people. There are rich people who are poor in spirit and there are materially poor people who are outside of the kingdom.

The epistle of James highlights the way that poverty and riches, in a very literal sense, played into the early church's understanding of its relations. Let the lowly brother boast in his exaltation, and the rich in his humiliation, because like a flower of the grass he will pass away.

For the sun rises with its scorching heat and withers the grass, its flower falls, and its beauty perishes. So also will the rich man fade away in the midst of his pursuits. James chapter 1 verses 9 to 11.

There James captures something of the paradoxical way in which Christians should relate to physical poverty and riches. James warns the Christians he is writing to against giving excessive regard to those who have riches.

Chapter 2 verses 2 to 6. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, you sit here in a good place, while you say to the poor man, you stand over there, or sit down at my feet, have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?

[8 : 28] Listen, my beloved brothers, has not God chosen those who are poor in the world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom, which he has promised to those who love him? But you have dishonoured the poor man.

Are not the rich the ones who oppress you, and the ones who drag you into court? And then in chapter 5 verses 1 to 5, this great statement of judgment against the rich. Come now, you rich!

Weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you, and will eat your flesh like fire.

You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the labourers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts.

You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. While we often want to soft-pedal the teaching of the New Testament relating to riches and poverty, we should not do so.

[9 : 30] Its teaching is all the more important because of how much it unsettles us. A further thing that comes out in Luke's Beatitudes and Woes is this emphasis upon division and judgment in society.

There is going to be a reversal of fortunes in the future, and there is also going to be a great division, a great divergence of these two groups. Some are going to weep. Some are going to laugh. Some are going to have all their riches taken from them.

Others are going to inherit all. The disciples of Jesus are supposed to rejoice in the face of persecution. In persecution, Jesus and his disciples are aligned with the prophets that went before them.

And of course, after Christ, the disciples are aligned with him in their persecution. Jesus charges his disciples to love their enemies. This, while a teaching that's often ascribed to Christ as a radical break with what went before, is a teaching that we can find grounded in the Old Testament.

Leviticus chapter 19 verses 17 to 18 presents the great golden rule in the context of loving your enemy. You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason frankly with your neighbour, lest you incur sin because of him.

[10 : 39] You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against the sons of your own people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself. I am the Lord. Where is love for neighbour most clearly tested?

When your neighbour is your enemy. This is one area where the universalism of a liberal approach, which sees the duty of love as this universal posture towards all mankind, can often go awry.

Because the greatest test is not in our relationship to the person who's in the far distance. It's the person who is nearest to us. That is where we find the greatest challenge of love.

The greatest challenge of love is not our posture towards people in far distant continents. It's how we relate to those people under our own roof, those people in our own neighbourhood, the people in our own families, the people who are close to us in a way that irritates us.

Those are the people we are most likely to hold a grudge against, to hold anger and harbour hate against in our hearts. And speaking with Leviticus, those are the people that Christ calls us to love.

[11 : 41] We must resist starting the cycle of vengeance. We turn the other cheek. If someone takes our cloak, we do not withhold our tunic. We are not acting as people who are preoccupied with our own rights.

Rather, we look to the Lord as the one who defends us, who provides for us, the one who will avenge us if we are mistreated. Generally, as human beings, we have a desire for reciprocity. If we do things, we expect something back in return.

But as Christians, we are supposed to do things expecting nothing in return. And there is a paradox here again, because as we do that, our reward will be great. The principle in the Old Testament, he who gives to the poor lends to the Lord, applies here.

As God guarantees our reward, we are freed to act in a non-calculating way. We can cast our bread on the waters, not knowing how they would ever return to us, but trusting that in God's providence they will.

Not only will our reward be great though, we will also be sons of the Most High. We will have those characteristics that reflect God's own character. Judge not, and you will not be judged.

[12 : 48] Condemn not, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. With the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.

There is a sort of reciprocity here, but the reciprocity is one secured by divine action, not our claim upon our neighbour. The principle of not judging is one that we find in various occasions in Scripture.

We see it in the hypocrite of Romans chapter 2 verse 1. Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another, you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things.

There is the principle in Deuteronomy chapter 19 verses 18 to 21, concerning hostile false witnesses. The point of Jesus' statement about not judging is not a matter of not making moral judgments.

There are many occasions in Scripture we are called to do just that. Rather, it's not playing the judge, not putting ourselves in the position of God, exalting ourselves as the righteous arbiter over all others.

[14 : 19] And the emphasis here is upon condemnation in particular. Again, looking at the epistle of James, chapter 2 verses 12 to 13. So speak and so act as those who are to be judged under the law of liberty.

For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment. We are those who will face judgment ourselves. And the judgment in view is primarily eschatological judgment.

And there's a suspension of judgment on our part, which occurs as we submit to the judgment of the Lord. It's the same thing with vengeance. We do not seek to avenge ourselves, nor do we seek to realize the full reality of future judgment in the present, because we recognize that vengeance is God's.

And ultimately, it will be secured by him. The principle of not judging also highlights hypocrisy. We might think here of the parable of Nathan given to David. And David's judgment, which is very fierce, and then Nathan responds, you are the man.

We can be caught in our own judgments. Rather than being people defined by judgment and condemnation of others, however, we should be people who are primarily defined by forgiveness.

[15 : 28] As we forgive others, so we will be forgiven. There's also the importance of sorting out our own lives first. This accusatory you is often a way in which we deflect attention from our own issues.

Condemnation of others can be a way in which we secure our self-righteousness. A question to consider. How does Jesus model his own teaching that he gives in this passage?