

Sermon – 27/02/2011 am

Blessed Are You Poor

Study Text: Luke 6:17-21

After choosing the twelve Jesus came down from the mountain and stood on a level place (6:17). The newly appointed twelve came with him. They became his inner circle, men to whom he would give intensive training so they could carry on the ministry. At this 'level place' was a large group of disciples and a great multitude of newcomers from Judea and the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon. They had come with their sick and demon possessed for Jesus to heal. With divine power he healed them all.

Jesus went on to preach the Kingdom of God, firstly to his disciples. The twelve would have been at the head of this group sitting at the feet of their master. 'This is a bit like it was in the days of Moses' they might have thought, when Moses preached just before they entered in the land of Canaan. 'Take heed this day and listen' said Moses. 'This day you have become the people of the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 27:9). You will be blessed if you obey these commands but cursed if you disobey'.

Jesus did not speak of the law but of grace. He told the disciples that the Kingdom of God was at hand. He told some that the kingdom of God was theirs. Others would not enter the Kingdom of God because they had already received their reward.

1. Poor

I was surprised to see one commentator call this passage the 'sermon on the mount'. The beatitudes and other teaching here in Luke 6 are similar to the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5-7, but obviously much shorter. This commentator assumed they were different accounts of the same sermon. It is more likely that Jesus spoke similar words on different occasions. Most preachers have cause to deliver the same basic message on different occasions.

Blessed are you poor for yours is the kingdom of God (6:20). This is how Jesus began his message to the people gathered on the level place before him. Who were these people? They were men and women who had been following Jesus for some time. They came with their sick and they came to hear Jesus teaching. Matthew was there, a man who had left his lucrative trade of tax collecting to follow Jesus. The fishermen who left their nets to follow Jesus were there. Peter would later say to Jesus 'Lord we have left all and followed you' (18:28).

These men had turned their backs on the things of the world to follow Jesus. Jesus assured them that *no one who leaves home or parents or brothers or wife or children for the sake of the Kingdom of God would not fail to receive much more in this present life, and in the age to come eternal life (18:30).* The rich young ruler had walked away from Jesus because of his riches. Jesus promised Peter, and those of the same mind, a place in the Kingdom of God.

There are those who see these words 'blessed are you poor' as a direct blessing on those who are materially poor. These are those who choose to be poor to get this blessing. They take a vow of poverty thinking this will bring them favour with God. 'This is the characteristic Catholic interpretation of this particular statement. Their patron saint is St Frances of Assisi' writes Lloyd Jones.

There are some Protestants also who adopt this line of thinking, not for the voluntary poor but for the involuntary poor. They think that the materially poor in Africa or Asia will go to heaven because of their poverty. But poor people are born in sin like everyone else, and some are very selfish and corrupt.

The first thing to understand according to Calvin is ‘that it is not simply a matter of being poor or miserable’. ‘There are many who experience poverty without being humbled by it’. This is the key – the humbling experience of poverty.

Has this poverty that Jesus spoke of got anything to do with material poverty or does Jesus simply mean ‘poor in spirit’ as we read in Matthew’s account. What he says here is ‘blessed are you poor’ and we must not add to or take away from these words. The truth is that material poverty is often a humbling experience.

Because of our pride we become fiercely independent; poverty destroys that independence. Poverty brings us to a position of asking for help from others, from family, from friends or from society. It may bring us to the position of seeking help from Almighty God. The people gathered before Jesus on the plain were in this position, especially those who were sick and demon possessed, and their families. In desperate need of help they turned to Jesus.

Remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees? It is the sick who need a doctor; those who realize they are sick and need help. Remember the prodigal son. When he was hungry he went to feed pigs for some income. When he was starving he went to his father to ask for mercy.

‘Our Father in heaven, give us this day our daily bread’. This is what Jesus taught us to pray. But how many today think that God has given them their daily bread; how many even stop to pray before eating a meal. Rich people think they have earned all their money and bought the rich food themselves. They see no need to stop and thank God for it. They know no material poverty and no poverty in spirit.

The poor are blessed to the extent that they humble themselves and seek Almighty God. They are blessed to the extent that they do become poor in spirit, realising their own weakness and need for help, not only material but spiritual help. They are blessed to the extent that they hear and obey the words of Jesus: *come unto me you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest.*

‘We must learn’ said Calvin, ‘we must learn that poverty, as our Lord understands the term, must enter within, purging us from all pride and presumption. We must recognise that we are nothing. That person is truly blessed who is poor in their own estimation, who willing abases himself, who sees nothing good in himself, makes no false claims about himself and instead accepts rejection by the world’.

What radical teaching! Is this not completely contrary to the thinking and teaching of the world today? Is it any wonder that so few are coming to Christ today? Should we be praying for poverty in our own life and in our society? Will people in their material poverty humble themselves and become poor in spirit? This is the great challenge of the gospel today.

Is there any hope for the rich? Jesus has a word for them later in this sermon, and it is a harsh word. But those few rich people who do humble themselves and cease trusting in their riches, those few rich people who do become poor in spirit will share in this blessing of Jesus.

The disciples came to hear Jesus preach and to have him heal the sick. They came pleading for Jesus to help them. ‘Lord, have mercy on me!’ they said. This is what poverty in spirit means. It

means to cry out 'Lord have mercy on me a sinner'. Did Jesus ever turn away from such a cry? No! He said 'your sins are forgiven. Go in peace'.

Remember what Jesus said about little children? *Unless you become like little children you will by no means enter the Kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 18:3). Little children are not filled with pride, thinking they can manage to live by means of their own wealth and wisdom. They cry out 'Daddy, Father help me', and the loving father turns to them to help.

For yours is the kingdom of God (6:20). For anyone to enter the Kingdom of God they must humble themselves before the Lord Jesus Christ. *Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up* (James 4:10). We must know poverty in spirit. We must know that we are in a deep pit; we are in the miry clay or quicksand and need One to lift us out. We must call upon the Lord because he is the only one who can save us.

Jesus told his disciples who were poor, and poor in spirit, that this kingdom was theirs now. They did not have to wait any longer. It was theirs now. When Jesus forgave the paralytic his sins he entered the kingdom of God. It is our sin that keeps us out of this kingdom. The moment you confess your sin, and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, you enter this glorious kingdom and remain there forever.

2. Hunger

Blessed are you who hunger now (6:21). Matthew writes *blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness* (Matthew 5:6). Hunger is really a subset of poverty. It refers to intense poverty, like that of the prodigal son. Millions in the world today go to bed hungry. They may only have one meal a day – not because they are on a diet but because there is no food to eat.

Some of the disciples Jesus was teaching were hungry. Maybe they had not had breakfast, or dinner before that. Remember another time when they came to listen to Jesus and the disciples got concerned about food for the multitude. That day some believed in Jesus and their souls were filled with bread from heaven. Jesus not only satisfied their physical hunger but their spiritual hunger also.

A hunger and thirst for righteousness is what Jesus looked for. Some whom he fed from the five loaves and two fish came back for more material bread. Others believed him when he said *I am the bread of life sent down from heaven; he who comes to me will never hunger* (John 6:35).

What is righteousness? 'It is nothing but a longing to be positively holy' writes Lloyd Jones. God is holy and we must hunger for holiness that is from God. We must hate sin and flee from sin in all its forms. We must seek truth and righteousness that are in Jesus Christ.

Lazarus was a poor man who longed to eat crumbs that fell from the rich man's table (16:21). The rich man fared sumptuously every day. He took no notice of the poor man. This is a picture of unrighteousness, of disobedience to the commands of God. This is a lack of compassion when God is full of compassion. We know the respective destiny of the rich man and the poor man in this story. Who was filled or blessed in the end?

3. Weep

Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh (6:21). 'This cannot mean those who cherish some personal grief, but will refer to people who are sensitive to evil, to the world's rebellion

against God and the world's suffering in consequence'. We hunger for righteousness in the midst of so much unrighteousness in the world – and in our own lives.

Blessed are those who weep now, who weep over their own sin and the wickedness of others in the world. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Why? Because he had come to give them light and life but they rejected him. Jesus knew the consequences of that rejection. He wept because the people of that city had no peace and would soon be destroyed.

Hundreds of years before Jesus, Ezekiel was told to go to that city and mark the people who sighed and cried over the abominations in that city (Ezekiel 9:4). Destruction was about to come to the city, and those who did not have this mark of weeping would be destroyed.

Do you weep over this city with all its evil? Do you weep over your own sin? 'Blessed are you who weep now' says Jesus 'for you shall laugh'. Those who weep over sin will not be destroyed when Jesus comes as judge. 'Rejoice in the Lord' said the apostle Paul. He was the chief of sinners but he repented and was forgiven. He wept over sin in his own life and in the lives of others. Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation (II Corinthians 7:10). Paul rejoiced that the Kingdom of God has come and he would soon meet the King.

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