

**St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church**  
**Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany**  
**February 11, 2007**  
**Luke 6:17-26**

*Sermon by Pastor Paul Janke*

**Jesus Defines True Blessedness**

1. Poverty
2. Hunger
3. Sorrow
4. Persecution

*<sup>NIV</sup> Luke 6:17 He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon,<sup>18</sup> who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured,<sup>19</sup> and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all.*

*<sup>20</sup> Looking at his disciples, he said: "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.<sup>21</sup> Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.*

*<sup>24</sup> "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.<sup>25</sup> Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.<sup>26</sup> Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

Today's Gospel lesson tells us about the setting in which Jesus preached his Sermon on the Mount. The Lord was in Galilee, where he had gone up on the side of a mountain to pray. After his prayers, he chose his twelve apostles. When he came down to a level place on that mountain a great crowd had come to hear him and be healed of their diseases. They came from Jerusalem and Judea down in the south, and from as far west as Tyre and

Sidon on the Mediterranean coast. And Jesus responded to their needs. Many people tried to touch him because, as it says here, "*power was coming from him.*" The sick and even the demon-possessed were cured.

I would think that as you observed what Jesus was doing with these miraculous healings there was also an inclination to think about *what else* such a miracle-worker could do. *Why, he could make me rich. He could make sure I'd never go hungry again. In fact, he could remove everything that makes me feel sad. He could protect me so perfectly that I'd never again have to be assailed by people's insults or suffer their rejection.* How blessed he could make my life!

But this view of Christ's kingdom is founded on Utopian dreams, not on the words of Jesus. Jesus does want to bless us; he has more blessings in store for us than we can imagine. But this blessedness does not always take the form of material wealth or full stomachs or good times or having everyone speak well of us. In fact, as **Jesus Defines True Blessedness**, he provocatively describes it in terms of poverty and hunger and sorrow and persecution—things that seem to be the exact opposite of blessedness. But let's look more closely at what the Savior is saying.

### 1. Poverty

*"Looking at his disciples, (Jesus) said, 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.'"* To understand this beatitude, picture in your mind a beggar. Imagine Lazarus (Luke 16) lying at the gate of the rich man, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Or imagine some contemporary beggar, dependant on the kindness of strangers to hold body and soul together. Got it? But how could this be something the disciples of Jesus should seek? It sounds like something to be avoided. It sounds frightening and dangerous. If Jesus really wanted to bless us, he should promise to make us rich—or at least comfortable!

But there's a kind of poverty that Jesus does want us Christians to pursue. Call it a poverty of spirit. It's the humble recognition of what we'd be and where we'd be without God's grace. We are nothing and we can contribute nothing in this matter of getting saved. Without Jesus, we're just sinners bound for hell. Furthermore, we ourselves can't do anything about it. We don't have the power or the wealth to change this verdict. Our only hope is

Jesus and his mercy. He's the way and the truth and the life. Through him alone we come to the Father.

In the last of the letters to the seven churches in Revelation 3, Jesus said to the church at Laodicea, "**You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.**" (3:17) In affluent Laodicea the early Christians faced the same temptation Christians face today in an affluent country. We can be tempted to think that if we've got a nice house, a nice car, a closet full of nice clothes, and something set aside for retirement, well, then we've got everything we need. But this is the very attitude that caused Jesus to say, "**But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.**" The materialistic take on life is shallow and deceptive. Lavish material wealth without Jesus is still poverty, and the worst kind of poverty because it's eternal.

Far better to confess ourselves to be poor. Rather than making it our life's mission to seek the comforts of this life, far better to seek Jesus and his righteousness; he alone can make us spiritually rich. It's been reported that when Martin Luther died, there was a note in his pocket that said, "We are beggars. This is true." But in this poverty is blessedness, for the kingdom of God belongs to beggars who plead not their own merits, but the merits of Jesus.

## 2. Hunger

The second beatitude here in Luke 6 suggests another image. It is the image of a hungry child, for Jesus says here, "*Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.*" Most of us can't claim much experience with hunger. We have more food than we can eat. But there's a kind of hunger that a Christian will always want to have. It's a hunger for God's Word which declares us righteous and for his sacraments which satisfy our souls with Jesus' promise of forgiveness.

America is a place where very few people suffer from physical hunger. Food is plentiful and relatively inexpensive. But meanwhile we also appear to have fewer people showing the signs of *spiritual* hunger. The psalmist sang, "**My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.**" (42:2) He expressed a desire to go and meet with God. The apostle Peter urged that, like newborn babies,

we crave the pure spiritual milk of God's Word, so that by it we might grow up in our salvation. But while we may have a lot of cravings, the craving for the teachings of Scripture isn't always among them. Like a man who's had more to eat than he should have, we sometimes wave off opportunities to hear and study the Word: "No more for me! Thanks!" But actually we're more like an anorexic person, badly malnourished, but still claiming we're not hungry.

What can create this hunger? God's law can. It can show us how seriously malnourished our sinfulness has left us. It can show us the folly of believing that we have the resources to satisfy this hunger of ours. And God's gospel can create this hunger, too. The promises of God like we read in this morning's First Lesson from Jeremiah invite us to trust in the Lord and promises that those who do will be like a tree planted by the water, leaves always green, never failing to bear fruit. Those who hunger and thirst for Jesus and his Word will be satisfied.

### 3. Sorrow

In the third beatitude, when Jesus says, "*Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh,*" he suggests an image like the one in the next chapter of Luke's Gospel, the woman who sat at his feet and wept. Jesus had been invited to dinner at the home of a Pharisee and as he reclined at the table this woman who had led a sinful life wept so profusely that she was able to wash Jesus' feet with her tears. Like poverty and hunger, sorrow is something that we would ordinarily not wish to experience. So why does Jesus extol it by saying, "Blessed are you who weep"?

Jesus is not wishing tragedy upon our lives, but he does want us to know that there is a place for sorrow in the life of a believer. Consider the words of the prophet Amos. Amos was a farmer from the Southern Kingdom who was commissioned by God to go to the Northern Kingdom, called Israel or Samaria, with a message of repentance. He said in one place, "**Woe to you who are complacent in Zion, and to you who feel secure in Samaria...You drink wine by the bowlful and use the finest lotions, but you do not grieve over the ruin of Joseph.**" ("Joseph" was another name for the country of Israel.) Amos came to Israel when that country was enjoying prosperity. For a good many people, life was pleasant. They had the leisure sit on nice furniture enjoying nice music while having nice meals. Nothing

wrong with that! But they weren't bothered a bit by the sins so prevalent in their country or by the fact that they themselves were being drawn into the same sins. The sorrow for sin that's a mark of repentance was absent.

Does this sound familiar? Don't these 2,800 year-old words apply to our country? Respect for authority, for life, for marriage and morals, for property and reputation—for the Almighty God himself— continues to plummet downward. We've just about lost our ability to be shocked by sin and, truth be told, we easily become complacent about own sins. But if we were to take our sins seriously, if we were to do more than a cursory examination of our own hearts and lives, we would know why that woman wept so profusely as she stood at Jesus' feet. We are so far removed from God's ideal! We have so justly merited his anger! Yet God's desire is not to leave us weeping uncontrollably, but to comfort us with the gospel of Jesus. **"I will praise you, O LORD,"** Isaiah wrote, **"Although you were angry with me, your anger has turned away and you have comforted me. Surely God is my salvation."** (Is. 12:2) *There is cause for the laughter that follows the weeping in the life of a believer.*

#### **4. Persecution**

At this point I hope you're beginning to think, "OK, I can see the blessings of pleading poverty of spirit before God, of hungering for Jesus and his righteousness, and of weeping over my sins in heartfelt repentance. I see that." But then we come to the last in this series of beatitudes. *"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."* The image here is of a Christian standing in the dock, where the defendant in a trial stands. The prosecutor is an ardent opponent of Christianity. But is it possible to put a good face on the persecution of Christians? It hurts to have family members or co-workers mock our devotion to Jesus. It's not pleasant to have people call us narrow-minded or bigoted when we stand up for Biblical morality or profess that Jesus is the only way to heaven. And this is just the mild stuff; we haven't even gotten to the tens of thousands in other parts of the world who face death for their confession of Christ.

But there's this consolation: When persecution comes our way for our confession of Christ, it reminds us that we do belong to Christ. Unbelievers don't persecute unbelievers, but those who belong to Christ. The history of

persecution goes way back to the prophets of the Old Testament. Remember, the next time someone tries to make you feel small because your Christianity has been showing, those opponents are really saying something very nice about you. They are saying you're a Christian. So "*rejoice and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven.*"

Here in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus isn't saying that it's wrong to have accumulated some wealth or to be well fed or to laugh or have others say nice things about us. These things are all blessings from God. But if our wealth should ever keep us from confessing our sins, then we'd be better off without it. And if our desire for a good life should ever keep us from confessing our Savior, then that desire for a good life is standing between us and our eternal salvation. Yes, there is a sense in which it's good to be poor and hungry and sorrowful and persecuted. Rightly understood, these are the attitudes of the citizens of Christ's kingdom. It is such who will rejoice and be forever comforted in heaven. Amen.