

Albany Presbyterian Church
February 16th, 2025

There are passages in the Bible where we encounter extremes of blessings and woes that can be difficult to hold together.

Luke 6, which we read today, has these extremes of blessings and woes. It resembles the Beatitudes in Matthew 5; beatitude meaning blessings. Blessed are you who are poor in spirit; theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted, and so on. In Luke 6:20, Jesus says, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God."

It's similar; in some parts, it is the same, but there are also differences. For example, Luke has only four blessings compared to nine in Matthew.

Another difference is that Matthew's Beatitudes were delivered on the mountain, which is known as the Sermon on the Mount, while Luke's Beatitudes were given on the plain. In Luke 6:20, Jesus looks at his disciples, whereas in Matthew, he addresses the crowd. Therefore, Luke's beatitudes spoken to the disciples on the plain or level ground is often called the sermon on the plain.

Another difference is that Matthew says, 'the poor in spirit' and 'the hunger for righteousness,' which Luke does not mention; for Luke, poverty is not spiritual, and hunger does not refer to hunger righteousness. Luke makes this clear, shifting the focus from the lofty spiritual ideals on the mountain to plain and level ground, to the present moment, here and now.

We recognize the mountain's symbolism in Matthew, which primarily addresses the Jewish readers. This depiction of the Sermon on the Mount resembles the Ten Commandments Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai.

The symbolism of the plane is also depicted in Scripture as a space that represents the harsh realities of the present, typically associated with disgrace, suffering, hunger, and mourning. From this flat, even place, God speaks through his prophet His plans for salvation, restoration, and renewal. And from this plain and even place, Jesus teaches about God's kingdom within the world, the kingdom of God where His presence is actively felt and where God is actively involved in our lives in the present, on the plane. This may also help us understand that the Sermon on the Plane in Luke speaks to the disciples, who may be confronted with the challenges of hunger, poverty, and even persecution. If not during Jesus' time with them, then after His ascension to heaven, the apostles and the early churches faced persecution; Christians were driven from their homes, and their lives were subjected to hatred and discrimination.

As Edward Schweizer says, Luke's blessings and woes serve as a call to action for discipleship. Jesus reminds his followers here what truly matters is not the wealth they possess, whether their needs are met, whether they have the praise from others, or the hardships they endure, including shame or disgrace. Instead, what matters in their lives as the disciples of Jesus is their fervent and sincere hearts that grow in faith in trusting Jesus, following him at every turn, and participating in the salvation work that God has initiated within us all. In all our needs, God will provide and satisfy; but we must trust in God and Him alone.

On Thursday, Annie and I attended a gathering for Open Door, the mission organization we had previously supported, which helps persecuted churches around the world. They reported that one in seven Christians globally continues to face persecution and discrimination, living in fear and under constant threat to their lives. This was truly eye-opening for both of us. During the gathering, a story was shared about a pastor from Pakistan who knew he was being watched every day as he preached the gospel and ministering in the village. One day, soldiers or police arrived, dragged him out of the church, and beat him before expelling him from the village. While in the hospital or prison, Open Door field workers checked in to determine what support he needed and how they could pray for him. He said, "Pray to God that the door to that village will soon open so I can return to continue the gospel work there once more."

But then, we don't live in such a world, and if we are honest, these extremes, the five beatitudes and five curses, or woes, in Luke 6, can be pretty challenging regarding how they apply to us. But these extremes are common in the scripture. Throughout scripture, like Jeremiah 17. Suppose we see this text in the context of the book leading up to this chapter; we find God speaks these words through Jeremiah during a time when the people of Judah are deeply entrenched in idolatry, relying on political alliances instead of trusting in God. In 17:5, God says, "Cursed is the one who trusts in man, depends on flesh for his strength, and whose heart turns away from the Lord." Verse 7 says, "Blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him." And he says he will be like a tree planted by the water, echoing Psalm 1, yet another passage talking about the blessings and woe.

And if we read on, we realize that at the heart of Jeremiah's prophecy regarding these extremes of blessing and curse lies a loving God who is deeply saddened by His people's hardened hearts and constant disobedience, yearning for their hearts to change and their lives to be transformed. This sentiment is expressed in verse 9, which says that the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure; who can comprehend it? In verse 10, the Lord declares that He searches the heart and examines the mind to reward each person according to their conduct, based on what their actions deserve.

Is that also what is at the heart of the curses and blessings in Luke 6, the sermon on the plain, so we may be alert to the ways of our hearts and examine our lives and attitudes? In other words, instead of reading these passages prescriptively, literally, or spiritually, we should read them more holistically, with what Augustine of the 4th century calls the hermeneutics of love.

Augustine explains that scripture has four senses: historical, which refers to past events; allegorical, which conveys a figurative or spiritual meaning; analogical, which seeks a connection between the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT); and etiological, which pertains to the reasons or causes behind events and expressions. Ultimately, Augustine says we are to read the Bible both literally and figuratively, not in opposition but as complementary, guiding us toward Christ and encouraging us to embrace God's love.

It helps because we know that our loving God does not judge us by our wealth. Whether we have a lot or a little, He does not want us to feel sad or mournful; instead, He desires that not one of us suffers from hunger or thirst or experiences hatred or exclusion from their community. A loving God wants to bless us and connect us to Him, like a tree planted by water that sends out its roots by the stream, so the worries and anxieties of this life will not overwhelm us, allowing us to live in His abundance and thrive. This may not be about blessings and misfortunes; instead, it encourages us to reflect on the matters of our hearts.

Just as the people of Judah relied on their idols and placed more trust in those things and people around them more than they trust in God, we, too, can quickly become dependent on our own idols. What is our idol? The idol is everything that you love more than you love God. And so, we struggle to trust God, the ultimate source of life, wisdom, and strength; instead, we rely on other things or other persons. We live in a world where our desire for control, comparison, and dominance can overwhelm us—a feeling Richard Rohr suggests leads to increased anxiety.

As Luke 6 says, if we are the followers of Christ and the people of God, if we believe that God still speaks to us also today, through Jeremiah 17. Perhaps we should take a moment in our lives to reflect on what may dwell in our hearts, recognizing that the Lord God, who searches our hearts and examines our minds, will reveal them to us. Our loving and gracious God will clean us from all the idols of our hearts and reclaim us so we can be like the tree planted in the streams of water, rooted deeply in his abundant mercy and love.