

## SERMON ON THE MOUNT (Luke 6:17-26)

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St. Peter's Church in Volo

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The Gospels give us two versions of that great discourse of Jesus that we call the Beatitudes. The first and probably the most well known of the two is found in the Gospel of St. Matthew where we read that after ministering to the crowds, healing all sorts of diseases and casting out demons, Jesus goes up a mountain with His disciples. There He instructs them as the future leaders of His Church. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."<sup>1</sup> And so on.

The second version of the Beatitudes is found in the Gospel of St. Luke where we read that Jesus came down with His disciples from the hills to a level place and there met a great crowd of people "from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon;"<sup>2</sup> this time, both Jews and Gentiles. And there He spoke the discourse that we heard in today's gospel, spoken so plainly and directly that even the simplest peasant could understand what Christ was saying.

Throughout the Old Covenant, God had always called for and rewarded virtue, but this new teaching of Jesus is different in that those who are not rich, or well fed, or powerful on earth, but who are virtuous, will be the ones, who will be favored in heaven. "The Kingdom, as was said by a Jewish sage about this time, is 'the world in reverse,' and the only recompense for the virtuous here below will be hatred and persecution as is always meted out to prophets."<sup>3</sup>

At face value, Matthew seems to interpret Christ's words in a more spiritual sense than Luke, for when we read the "Blesseds are" together with the "Woes to you" in Luke's version we seem to get a very simple message of consolation for those, who are suffering the hardships of this world. "Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."<sup>4</sup> "But woe to you that are rich, for you have received your consolation."<sup>5</sup> "Blessed are you that hunger now, for you shall be satisfied."<sup>6</sup> "Woe to you that are full now, for you shall hunger."<sup>7</sup>

This was, at least in part, the message that Jesus was conveying. It was a sentiment He had conveyed many times in His preaching. The most notable example is the parable about Lazarus and the rich man, which ideally exemplifies how one's life on this earth is flipped on its head in the next, just as in St. Luke's Beatitudes and Woes. Worldly wealth is not evil in itself but how many times did Jesus say that wealth can be dangerous and an impediment because it can lead to selfishness and a false sense of security. Success can tempt one to overlook the need for God and His mercy.

But, in St. Luke's account of this sermon, Jesus was not talking about just the disadvantaged, the suffering and the preferential option for the poor. Material poverty does not in itself make one holy or give one a greater claim to heaven, for even the materially poor can be inordinately attached to what little they have. The poverty of which Jesus speaks in St. Luke's Gospel must be much deeper than merely lack of possessions. It must mean inward detachment from the things of this world. It must mean spiritual poverty because it is only when one is spiritually poor in the sense of total

detachment from this world, that one becomes an heir to the riches of heaven. And those, who are attached to whatever great or small riches they have on this earth, already have their consolation here and often remain bound to things of this world even after death. That's why Jesus addressed "Woe for you!" to them, for if you die still attached to this world in any way, you will not be able to enter the Kingdom of heaven.

So, therefore, although St. Luke's version of the Beatitudes appears to be a simple message of consolation for those suffering the wants of this world, it actually presents us with a multi-layered message that is much more complex and profound. For example, although Luke gives us only four beatitudes in contrast to Matthew's eight, the four that he does give, reflect the four cardinal virtues. The "poor" of this world represent the virtue of temperance by which one shuns the vain and excessive pleasures of this world. The "hungry" represent the virtue of justice, by which one shares in the plight of the lowly and gives to those, who have little. Those that weep represent the virtue of prudence, lamenting the vanity of temporal things and looking to what is eternal. Those, who are hated, excluded and reviled, represent the virtue of fortitude and the perseverance needed when persecuted for our faith.<sup>8</sup>

St. Ambrose points out for us that, even though St. Luke only lists four beatitudes, St. Matthew's eight are actually contained within Luke's four, which are more insightful and direct.<sup>9</sup> St. Luke may have written merely "the poor" but this does not mean just those living in poverty. They are above all, as St. Matthew writes, those who are "poor in spirit," those who practice internal detachment and are satisfied with what they have. They have a fear of the Lord, which enlightens the soul to see its weaknesses and sinful failings. They practice honesty, resignation, patience and charity, while resisting pride, greed, jealousy and anger.

Those, who hunger, aren't just those, who don't have enough food. They are those, who hunger for the word of God, those who hunger for what is right and want what God wants. They will be satisfied because their desires are in agreement with God's will. They will have a deep spiritual joy because they seek justice and holiness despite any obstacles, while those who live by the ways of the world enjoy only the empty joys of sin.

Those, who weep aren't just those, who mourn over the loss of a loved one because excessive or unreasonable mourning can even lead to sin. Here, St. Luke is primarily referring to those, who are "poor in spirit," those who lament our earthly condition. They are troubled by the injustices of the world. They grieve over their own sins, as well as the sins of others and their continued resistance to God's grace. The world lives in pleasure and the noise of empty laughter but those who weep have sorrow for sin—their own and that of others.

"Blessed are you when men hate you, and when they exclude you and revile you, and cast out your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy."<sup>10</sup> "Remember the word I spoke to you," said Jesus. "No slave is greater than his master."<sup>11</sup> Every believer must share the world's rejection of the Son of Man. We are told that "persecution is to be met with charity alone, a superhuman charity which involves detachment from worldly considerations, which demands that absolute surrender of self insisted on so often in Luke." His is a "warning against the temptation to judge oneself better than others, even while meeting hatred with goodness, mercy and generosity of an extraordinary kind."<sup>12</sup>

The “woes,” which followed the beatitudes in St. Luke’s Gospel are a warning of the disaster that awaits the comfortable of this world, who have turned away from God because of it. They are for those who have not endeavored to cultivate virtue and the life of Christian perfection because they have become comfortable with themselves. Jesus tells us that the conditions of this life are overturned in the next.

The Old Law was severe and demanded that everyone conform themselves to its external practices in the minutest detail. The New Law places its emphasis, rather, on the inner dispositions of the soul and made moral perfection, rather than mere external observance, the ideal. The Pharisees observed all of the external practices meticulously to a fault, but Jesus, nonetheless condemned them saying, “You are like whitewashed tombs, which appear beautiful on the outside, but inside are full of dead men's bones and every kind of filth”<sup>13</sup>

In this great discourse on the plain Jesus told his listeners “that they should strive sincerely and disinterestedly toward the good; that they should not parade their good works, their almsgiving or their fastings. Next, that they should seek to amass true wealth, which resides in virtue rather than the treasures sought on earth. Thirdly, that the light of the divine truth should fill their hearts. Trust in providence is the first essential of salvation. ‘Make it your first care to find the kingdom of God, and his approval, and all these things shall be yours without the asking.’ For the Lord is merciful, he will respond to those who beseech him, for he it is who gives us, as a father, our daily bread.”<sup>14</sup>

Lent begins in three days. As you prepare to undergo your Lenten journey keep this passage of St. Luke always at your side as an outline of what you should be striving for in this period of reflection, repentance and spiritual renewal. Don’t be satisfied merely with giving up chocolate and TV. Don’t be like the Pharisees. Strive for virtue. Strive for Christian perfection. And then, you will be called blessed!

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 5:3-4.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 6:17.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel-Rops, *Jesus and His Times* (E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc.: New York, 1956), 184.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 6:20.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 6:24.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 6:21.

<sup>7</sup> Luke 6:25.

<sup>8</sup> From St. Ambrose’s *Expositio in Lucam*.

<sup>9</sup> The Navarre Bible, Saint Luke’s Gospel (Four Courts Press: 1987), 94.

<sup>10</sup> Luke 6:22-23.

<sup>11</sup> John 15:20.

<sup>12</sup> *A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture*. (Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd.: London, 1953), 949.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 23:27.

<sup>14</sup> Daniel-Rops, *Jesus*, 185.