

## IT IS GOOD: LIVING A CROSS-SHAPED LIFE

Luke 6:17-26

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When I left seminary and began my first full-time job in a church, I realized, after a few months, that it felt very strange to me to not be receiving grades. After 12 years of public school, then four years of college, then three years of graduate school, I was accustomed to gauging how I was doing every nine weeks, or every time a teacher returned a paper or exam to me. After a few months on the job, I didn't know how to assess my job performance.

I remember preaching a sermon in that sanctuary, and watching a gentleman fall asleep. Then he walked through the line at the end of the worship service, shook my hand, and said, "Good message, pastor." What did that mean, exactly? I know he was just being polite and kind, but I wanted to say, "Does that mean you had a good nap?" What was my grade for that sermon?

Imagine, for a moment, what it would be like if we received report cards in adult life. What if your children gave you grades based on your performance as a parent? What if there was a grade spouses gave to each other, every nine weeks? Scary, I know, but also perhaps - a good way to check in with one another, to touch base before problems become insurmountable?

What if we were given report cards assessing how well we are doing at living the Christian life? It's terrifying, on the one hand. On the other hand, I long for an easy checklist: so many points for making a pledge, so many points for volunteering to usher, for shoveling a neighbor's driveway, for inviting someone to church. Check it off and relax.

Our passage for today is the opposite of an easy checklist. Jesus describes the Christian life in eight ways. He gives us four blessings, and four woes. Frankly, he seems to complicate things quite a bit in this passage, known more familiarly in Matthew as the Beatitudes. The poor are blessed? The hungry are blessed? But woe to rich and happy people?

In order to begin making sense of these words and applying them to our life today, let's take a step back and put this message in the context of Jesus' ministry.

Long before anything Jesus said was written down, people shared his stories among themselves. Then bits and pieces began to be recorded, and then Mark wrote his gospel. Luke and Matthew followed. They each had access to Mark, and to the other written miscellaneous material, and they each had their own sources of stories people had told them about Jesus. This is why we have different versions of the same stories.

Matthew writes his gospel for a Jewish Christian audience. He thinks of Jesus as a new Moses. He sets his version of this sermon "up the mountain," just as Moses received the Torah on Mount Sinai. In Matthew's gospel, we read a long section of teaching we call "The Sermon on the Mount." Luke, on the other hand, presents Jesus as a figure in the ancient prophetic tradition, less a new Moses and more a new Jeremiah. And while prophets may pray on mountaintops, as Jesus frequently does in Luke, their prophetic preaching is done down among the people, in the nit and grit of everyday life. The author of Luke describes Jesus this way: "He came down with them and stood on a level place." What's more, prophets famously declare new life in such "level places" — think of Isaiah announcing, "the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain"; and likewise, think of Ezekiel's famous "valley" or "plain" of dry bones God restores to life. In

other words, as Luke tells it, Jesus walks, and heals, and teaches in the valleys and on the plains, meeting us exactly where we are.\*

This two-minute film shows you the place where the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain were delivered. (<https://www.worshiphousemedia.com/mini-movies/56875/promised-land-mount-of-beatitudes>)

Jesus stands on the level ground, one of the people, looking them in the eye, and says these words, which I'm reading this time from the Message version of the Bible:

**You're blessed when you've lost it all.  
God's kingdom is there for the finding.  
You're blessed when you're ravenously hungry.  
Then you're ready for the great banquet.**

**You're blessed when the tears flow freely.  
Joy comes with the morning.**

**But it's trouble ahead if you think you have it made.  
What you have is all you'll ever get.**

**And it's trouble ahead if you're satisfied with yourself.  
Your *self* will not satisfy you for long.**

**And it's trouble ahead if you think life's all fun and games.  
There's suffering to be met, and you're going to meet it.**

**"There's trouble ahead when you live only for the approval of others, saying what flatters them, doing what indulges them. Popularity contests are not truth contests—look how many scoundrel preachers were approved by your ancestors! Your task is to be true, not popular."**

Jesus doesn't give us a checklist. These are not commandments. Jesus isn't saying, "Go be poor." Instead, Jesus is describing human life. I wince at some of the descriptions, because some of them hit pretty close to home. But if I'm honest, when I'm most humble and vulnerable, I see the truth of it.

Poor people aren't happier than rich people - that's a very simplistic way to look at this message. This passage does not romanticize poverty. Hungry people certainly aren't

more satisfied than people who are well-nourished. This isn't a simple parable about how poor people are more spiritual than rich people.

But it **IS** true that when we recognize our needs, we are closer to God. I know many of you pray every day, especially prayers of gratitude. You acknowledge the gifts that are all around you. But many of us pray **most** fervently when we need or want something, when we have exhausted our own resources.

When we think that we're completely self-sufficient, that we don't need God, that we don't need other people, that we can make it on our own - and darn it, everyone else should, too...well, in those moments we're about as far away from God as possible.

This passage makes me uncomfortable. I don't like reading, "Woe to you who are rich, woe to you who are full." I know that compared to most people in the world, I **AM** rich. And I've never known real hunger. Why is Jesus making me feel guilty?

I sat with these words for a long time on Friday and Saturday as I was writing this sermon. "What do these words of woe have to say to us?"

We have the basic necessities of life, yes, and we're grateful for food and shelter, for education and safe communities, but our lives are far from perfect. I found myself talking back to this passage and asking, "Do you know, Jesus, how we struggle with self-doubt, how we worry about our future, our relationships, how hard it is to juggle work and family? Do you know the fears that wake us up at night, do you see our loneliness?"

The answer came. Yes. Yes, Jesus knows our lives. Jesus knows fully what it means to be human, and he loves us. And that's why he's given us these warnings. He's

saying, "Be careful. Be full of care. We who have financial security - do we realize what a privilege it is? It can easily blind us to God's presence in our midst. It can easily blind us to our neighbors and their needs. It's so easy to place our trust in our things, rather than in God." When our privilege separates us from other people, when our privilege leads us to think we're better than others or don't need one another, then our privilege is separating us from God and from our true selves.

Jesus is reminding us that we often find God when we're at our most needy, when we're sliding close to rock-bottom. And he knows that there is in some of our lives, some of the time, a hunger that food cannot satisfy, there is an emptiness that no amount of shopping or buying or spending can fill.

Jesus is teaching us that the true blessing is found when we realize that we are all connected, that we need each other, that our lives find meaning when we see one another through the lens of justice and compassion, working towards a time when all people will live on the **level playing field**, with equal advantages and opportunities.

We are calling 2022 A Year to Reconnect, and one way to imagine Reconnection is to look at the shape of the cross. We are called to reconnect with God - that's the vertical connection, and we are called to reconnect with one another - that's the horizontal connection. The beauty of the cross-shaped life is that one movement leads to the other. The closer we feel to God, the closer we feel to God's people. When we truly love God's people, we are truly loving God. And both of those movements send us deeper into our own souls, connecting with our own God-given purpose.

God is not keeping score, there is no grade book, you won't receive a report card. Living the Cross-Shaped Life is a reward in itself, a life of joy, meaning and purpose.

I want to close with a prayer I've written in the form of a blessing, inspired by this passage of scripture. Let us pray.

Blessed are we when we are overwhelmed by the magnitude of the world's problems, yet know there is probably more we could do to make a difference.

Blessed are we when we are challenged by God's word, a word that pricks our conscience and causes us to acknowledge our privilege.

Blessed are we when we are exhausted by the burdens we are carrying, and blessed are we when we remember that Jesus has promised to help us carry them.  
Amen.

\*Insight from the Salt Project blog