

Prayer

Lord God, You are there in the midst of all our trials, and You are standing close by as we endure all our difficulties. It is because You are Lord, and because You have made us and placed us within this world that You know how to help us. You alone know how to deliver us from pain, suffering and strife. Encourage us in our faith, therefore, so that we are confident to accept Your salvation and place our trust in You, Lord God. For You are our Maker, Redeemer, Comforter and Guide, and we praise you. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Watch the people you see around you carefully. Look for any who appeared to be in distress, and pray for them. You do not know their need, but you can still pray.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the courts of justice:** *Pray for those who will appear in court today. Pray that justice will indeed be done, and be seen to be done.*
- *Pray for countries in Northern Africa, where there is popular unrest, especially Egypt, and Tunisia. Pray for the governments of these countries*
- *Give thanks to God for the air you breathe, and pray for those who suffer from pollution*

Meditation

Speaking as a Christian,

It should not be possible for us to live life
without reference to the Creator.

It should not be possible for us to work each day
without serving others as Jesus did.

It should not be possible for us to speak to others
without a true love for all people.

It should not be possible for us to relax and play
without releasing all things to our Lord

It should not be possible for us to sleep at night
without the assurance of the father's love.

It should not be possible for us to worship God
without submitting all we have to our Lord.

Bible passage - Luke 6:20-26

Then He turned towards His disciples and said:

'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ 'Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

²² 'Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, insult you, and dismiss everything about you as evil on account of the Son of Man. ²³ Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, for look, you have a great reward in heaven! Now this is what their ancestors did to the prophets!

²⁴ 'But woe to you who are rich, for you have received all your help.

²⁵ 'Woe to you who are fully-fed now, for you will be hungry.

'Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶ 'Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you. Now this is what their ancestors did to the false prophets!

Bible Study

Review

These words mark the beginning of Jesus' teaching in Luke's gospel, and they introduce the idea of God's Kingdom (6:20). After bursting onto the public scene in Galilee (4:14f.), Jesus began to demonstrate His power and authority, and people were beginning to believe that He was indeed the Messiah. The Messiah was expected to establish God's Kingdom and rule, so it is not surprising that Jesus began to teach about the Kingdom. People wanted to know what He had to say about it.

This teaching consists of eight, mostly brief sayings, and they remind us of the Beatitudes found in the 'Sermon on the Mount' in Matthew's Gospel (Matt 5:1-11). There are clear similarities, but Luke presents Jesus' teaching in a very different way. He reports Jesus as pronouncing four blessings followed by four woes, with each 'blessing' matched by a 'woe'. Furthermore, Jesus' use of a group of four is interesting, because we might have expected three. In truth, the number four is more important in the Bible than we imagine, so we will look at this some more, later on in the study.

The first three blessings are pronounced upon the poor, the hungry and those who are sad, and each are assured of blessing in God's kingdom. To begin with, it is good to know that God's intention is to bless those whose life is a struggle for whatever reason. The harder teaching is found in the following three woes, which reveal a parallel but opposite truth. The Kingdom is not a place for those who dominate this world now; the rich, the well fed and those who are happy. This teaching presents a stark contrast, which is contrary to people's worldly expectations. But what does it mean?

We need to think carefully about what Jesus was saying. He was not telling His disciples to tell all rich people that God will have nothing to do with them, neither was He guaranteeing a place in His Kingdom for all who suffer, irrespective of their faith or what they have done. The teaching explains a basic truth about God. On the one hand, He works to bring justice to the poor, hungry and sad. On the other hand, such help is not needed by the rich, fully fed and happy, who consequently do not need Him. This is powerful confirmation of God's support for the needy, but a timely warning to the 'haves' of this world. For the Father does not reject them out of hand, rather, He is concerned about their rejection of Him.

In the fourth blessing and the fourth woe, Jesus warns the disciples not to put too much store by what people say about them. People's attitudes will be no indicator of God's blessing or approval because they stand for something the world rejects. Jesus' words are dramatic, He says, '*they will dismiss everything about you as evil*' (6:22). It is difficult for any of us to know that the people around us will reject us for our faith, but Jesus reminds all His disciples that throughout history, God has done His work through those who have endured such rejection. He is talking of course about the prophets of the Old Testament.

There are several ways for us to apply this teaching. We could seek poverty, hunger and sadness as a way of trying to gain God's blessings. Some have attempted this throughout history, though it is by no means certain what blessing they have gained. Another way would be to take hold of the teaching about the liberation of the poor and the oppressed, and seek to put this into practice. However, to do this would be to focus on one part of the message to the exclusion of the rest. The passage is also a warning to the self sufficient of every time and generation. It explains that those who reject God in this life have consequently rejected life in the next; they have already received their benefits and their prospects are bleak.

As with so much of Jesus' teaching, it is wise to keep an eye on every aspect of what He says. Nevertheless, there is one overriding feature of this passage. This is Jesus' first teaching about God's Kingdom rule on earth, and it turns all worldly preconceptions upside down. This will prove to be a major characteristic of all Jesus' teaching.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What is the significance of Jesus' use of four sayings?
- Who are the poor and who are the rich?
- What does the Old Testament example of the prophets reveal about this text?

Notes on the text and translation

V20 **'He turned towards His disciples ...'**

Other translations:

'Looking at His disciples ...' (NIV)

'The He looked up at His disciples ...' (NRSV)

The difference between the translations may seem slight, but it is worth exploring the proper sense of the phrase. The Greek words speak of Jesus *'lifting up his eyes towards'* the disciples. This is not how we would speak today. The Greek suggests that Jesus is looking intentionally at the disciples with purpose and expectation; the words of His teaching are addressed primarily to them, and through them, to us.

V22 **'dismiss everything about you as evil'**

Other translations:

'reject your name as evil' (NIV)

'defame you' (NRSV)

The Greek phrase here translates literally as *'reject your name as evil'*. The meaning of this phrase depends on the ancient concept of the name representing a person and everything about them, and it is not how people speak about themselves today. The phrase *'dismiss everything about you as evil'* captures the sense of the phrase correctly without departing too far from the text. It helps the reader understand what Luke was saying here far better than a more literal translation.

V24 **'you have received your help'**

Other translations:

'you have already received your comfort' (NIV)

'you have received your consolation' (NRSV)

I have chosen to translate the last word of this phrase as 'help' because this is a perfectly accurate translation of the Greek word here ('paraclesis'), and it makes so much more sense. Jesus is making an obvious point here, and this is made clearer by this translation.

Going Deeper

What is the significance of Jesus' use of four sayings?

It is well-known that ancient people placed special value on the numbers three and 7. Today, we think of these as prime numbers, which are indivisible. In ancient times, they were regarded as having special significance as perfect or holy numbers. For example, the phrase 'on the third day', is found in a number of places of Scripture, and refers to more than just the resurrection of Jesus (Gen 31:22, Exodus 19:11, Hosea 6:2).

We do not always spot the fact that the number four has special significance in the Bible as well. In ancient times, there were said to be four corners of the world (Is 11:12, Ez. 7:2, Rev 7:1), four corners of the tabernacle (Exodus 25), or of an altar (Exodus 38), four likenesses of God in the vision of Ezekiel (Ezekiel 1-3), four winds of heaven (Daniel 7:2), and four Gospels of the New Testament. A number of prophets use the number four for emphasis, being one more than the perfect number 3 (see Amos 1,2, Jer 15:3 Zech 1:18 etc.)

If we look at the structure of the sayings in this passage, it seems that Jesus used a method very similar to that of Amos in the Old Testament. He gave three blessings (6:20-21), and then added another; this fourth blessing is significantly different from the first three, and could be argued to be the main focus of Jesus' teaching. In the second half of the passage, the structure is remarkably similar. The first three woes are brief and to the point, and they mirror the first three blessings. The fourth woe is emphatic and although it is brief, its theme mirrors the fourth blessing.

If we examine the structure of the passage in this way, our presumptions about what it means may be changed somewhat. Our first assumption may have been that this teaching is about God turning worldly values upside down, but we are now faced with the idea that the thrust of Jesus' teaching is about the rejection of the Son of Man and His disciples. One aim of this teaching seems to be that of encouragement towards the disciples, for Jesus wanted them to know that although they would face persecution, they would receive a great reward in heaven for their perseverance in faith (6:23). He wanted them to be focused on heavenly things not earthly (6:26).

In addition, it may be wise to make sure that we do not interpret verse 22 as being primarily about personal feelings. Jesus does not say *'blessed are you when people hate you'* in order to bolster the self image of Christians. He says this as a matter of fact, something that should be accounted for when becoming a Christian. Those who want to follow the Son of Man should know that He was persecuted and they will be too.

In all this, we should remember that Jesus taught not on the debating floor or the philosopher's lecture room, but in the sharp atmosphere of the public arena. His teachings are addressed to the needs of the wide variety of people around Him, so we should not therefore allow ourselves to be coloured by one interpretation. We need to look at the passage from the widest possible perspective.

Who are the poor and who are the rich?

The message of this passage is not popular, but Jesus had not come to preach an attractive message, He came to preach the truth. The truth, as Jesus knew in His day, and as we know full well in our own, is that the poor are always with us. Different societies and cultures throughout the centuries have sought to hide the poor. Often, they are not written about in the annals of history, or they only appear as the fodder for war or the adventures of Kings. In generations that are more recent, they appear as the 'proletariat' in communist revolutions. Interestingly, it can be argued that such revolutions have occurred because the church has not practised its historic mission for the poor, and those who are disadvantaged have consequently risen up against their oppressors.

The Bible demonstrates that God's concern for the poor has been consistent throughout history. The earliest laws given to the people of Israel are to be found in the book of Exodus, where we can read *'you shall not pervert the justice due to your poor'* (Exodus 23:6). Later laws about the celebration of festivals within Israel are designed to ensure that the poor are not neglected and have a place within the community (Leviticus 19:10), and other laws required just wages throughout Israel (Deuteronomy 24:12).

More than this, we find that God often works through people who know they are relatively poor. The neglected wife Hannah gave birth to the famous prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 1,2). The prophets chosen by God frequently came from those who were poor. Certainly, the example of the prophet Elijah and Elisha have always encouraged men and women of God to turn away from worldly things to simple things, in order to live a life that is focused upon God. A prime example of this is John the Baptist (Matt 3, Luke 3).

In the light of this, Jesus' teaching is not radical, or new, it is the logical consequence of God's revelation throughout history. But Jesus does not announce a blessing on poverty, hunger, or sadness themselves. He pronounces a blessing on people who are poor, hungry or sad, and there is a big difference between these two. It is not as if we should aspire to poverty, hunger, or sadness on purpose. Rather, we know that when these things come, then if we are right with our Lord, we will find them to be a blessing. This is a difficult message, but an important one. God's people are to persevere through troubles within this world, and this is why Jesus speaks about persevering through criticism, like the prophets of old.

What does the Old Testament example of the prophets reveal about this text?

The Bible also tells us that the prophets suffered to deliver God's message. This is referred to by Jesus in verses 23 and 26.

The people of Israel frequently did not accept the message of the prophets, and they endured personal suffering of many kinds. The prophet Jeremiah was thrown into a pit (Jeremiah 38:11f.); Amos was thrown out of Bethel (Amos 7:12), Daniel was thrown into the lions' den (Daniel 6). They certainly knew all about, hunger, despair and poverty. In our passage of scripture, Jesus effectively commends the prophets and holds them up as an example of godliness. They are Jesus' example, which the disciples are encouraged to follow.

In contrast to this, we do not often read those passages of Scripture, which describe how false prophets were frequently encouraged and accepted by the people of Israel. They were often employed by Israel's Kings. It was demanded that they preach what was required of them and so bolster the position of their employers in the eyes of the people. This is part of the background to the struggle between King Ahab and Elijah found in 1 Kings 17 and following chapters.

We also see false prophets in the stories of the great prophets. Jeremiah struggled to make his prophecy known, because another prophet named Hananiah was close to the King, and this prophet gave the king the opposite advice to that of Jeremiah. He found himself in conflict with Hananiah on frequent occasions, and after there was a fight between the two of them in front of the King, Jeremiah was thrown into a pit. Though he was eventually rescued, his suffering was unimaginable (Jeremiah 28).

In this passage, Jesus teaches that the benefits of the kingdom outweighed all earthly joys, and trouble and strife in this life are recompensed by good things in heaven. This, of course, is great news for the poor, and all those who seek to promote the words of God, such as the prophets. This passage has nothing but

blessing and hope for those who deservedly expect God's kingdom to come in glory and power and bring them to justice.

Application

This teaching of Jesus is presented in the form of two extremes. But we should be careful about trying to apply as it stands without looking carefully at its deeper meaning. The teaching certainly encourages those who are poor, and it is a warning to those who are rich. However, the rest of the Bible does not teach that the poor have access to the Father simply because they are poor; neither does it teach that the rich are rejected because of their riches. As a whole, the Bible teaches that people are accepted by God on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ. This teaching is not a definition of who comes into the kingdom, but a warning to everyone of what will happen if they ignore God and think that they have provided for themselves, and an encouragement to all who are poor and who struggle with life, because God wants to help them.

If we are to apply this teaching, we must work out whether we believe we are numbered as the poor, or as the rich. This is crucial. For centuries, people of all kinds have tried to find ways of identifying themselves as poor in God's eyes in order to qualify for God's blessings. You may have come across some such arguments. One is to suggest that the word poor in this passage means those who are spiritually poor, and not those who are poor in terms of standards or possessions. Some scholars try to construct this point from the Greek word used by Luke in this text, but the plain fact is that the Greek word you hear really does mean 'poor', just as we use the word 'poor' today; it means people who lack the necessities of life.

Nearly everyone who stands before this teaching is rich by the standards of this world. Those who are truly poor will know it, but most Christians in the Western world live comfortably, and those of us who know that we are rich also know in our hearts that we are numbered among the 'haves' of this world. We cannot get out of it, this passage, warns us that the kingdom of God stands in stark contrast to our way of life, and the many riches we possess, even if we regard our incomes, our televisions, our mobile phones, and our homes as essential to life. If we accept that this passage is a warning to us personally, then we may perhaps hear what Jesus says, and take it seriously. Unless we understand that all of our possessions are but nothing before God's throne of grace, including our heritage of faith and our benefits of life in the Western world, then we have not yet submitted in full to the love of our Father.

Jesus longs for us to relinquish our dependency upon the things of this life. Yet, if we submit to Him, we do not have to worry about this, for He will guide us and help us to do His will. When we do this, we may well find that God is calling us to practice His will in daily life, by doing all in our power to alleviate suffering, help the poor, and comfort those who mourn. Surely, this is our call.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. If you count yourselves as rich, how can your group help the poor, especially those who live nearby in your own town, village, or city?
2. If you count yourselves as rich, what does this passage say about God's will for you?
3. If you count yourselves as poor, what does this passage say to you about your attitude towards the rich?
4. If you count yourselves as poor, what does this passage say about God's will for you?

Personal comments by author

It is so easy to misinterpret this text. People have suggested that this teaching condemns the rich, and others suggest that God's favouritism of the poor means that they are accepted in His kingdom irrespective of their faith. Some have sought to become poor by living in the desert, others have sought God's blessing by becoming celibate and rejecting the things of this world. When they have become rich, some people have assumed that they are no longer acceptable before God, and have left the church and rejected faith. How tragic, it seems that people are always trying to find alternatives to the truth about God as found in Jesus Christ. People may only find peace with God through faith in Jesus Christ, and all other teachings in the Bible are designed both to help us understand that fact, or to live out that faith within the world.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Take time to think carefully about whether you consider yourself to be rich or poor. What does this passage of Scripture teach you? If you feel uncertain, it may be helpful to discuss this with someone else. Always seek the advice of others if you are uncertain.*
 - *Use the references provided in your Bible (if they are provided), to look at other teaching. Look carefully to see whether these other passages add to what you have found here.*
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Final Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, you understand the human heart. You know whether each person is rich or poor, and You know the truth about what each one possesses in this world, and what each one possesses in the next. Assure us of Your love, we pray, and guide us both to learn from Your Word, and to do Your will. This we ask in Your name. AMEN
