

**Sermon: Blessings & Woes**

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven Aucella

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Based on **Psalm 1; Jeremiah 17:5-10; Luke 6:17-26**

Happy are those whose delight is in the law of the LORD, who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread. That is the rearranged first verse from Psalm 1, which is only six verses long. Together, we just spoke portions of it in our call to worship. Then in Jeremiah and in Luke, we heard some blessings, curses, and woes, and they are all related to our relationship with God.

When someone offers us a critique – whether we want one or not – we tend to only hear the negative stuff. It doesn't help that in Jeremiah, God leads off with a curse, essentially saying, 'Cursed is the man who trusts in man.'

We might dwell on this awhile but then Jeremiah gets to, 'Blessed are those who trust in the Lord, whose trust *is* the Lord.' The curse and the blessing are polar opposites. Trust in people or trust in God. Be like a shrub in the desert or like a tree planted near water. It's ours to choose, but maybe we can't hear the blessing because we're too focused on the curse.

In the background here is the Exile, where those sent to Babylon and those who remained in Jerusalem were both trying to figure out the New Normal. Would they respond as if they lived in a desert, or would they plant themselves like trees next to a flowing river? Would they be able to put their trust and faithfulness in a God who seemingly has abandoned them? Only one response, a heartfelt response, would do.

Meanwhile, Luke take us down a similar path. In today's reading he gives us Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, also known as the Sermon on Level Ground, in contrast to Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Level or not only matters if we know where Jesus was before this, so again, we have to back up a bit. Previously, Jesus and some Pharisees argued about what is lawful on the Sabbath – specifically, gathering grain when you're hungry, and healing people when waiting a day wouldn't matter one way or the other, but you do it anyway. Pharisees hate that.

‘During those days he went out to the mountain to pray; and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles’ (6:12-13).

*Then* he came down with the disciples to a level place, where he met a great multitude of people from everywhere, implying an inclusive crowd. The point is, *he* came *down* to the *people*, and after speaking to them and healing all those who needed it, he raised his eyes and looked at his disciples. Had they thought about it, they and the crowd around them would have realized that *they* were looking at *God*.

But, really, it’s more about how *they* were seen by God.

And that’s when Jesus offered them four blessings and four curses, or woes.

In Matthew’s Sermon on the Mount, Jesus only presents blessings; the woes came later. Matthew also qualifies some of his blessings, whereas Luke just lays them out there. In Matthew, where Jesus says, ‘blessed are the poor *in spirit*,’ in Luke he says, ‘blessed are the poor,’ period. Luke is much more direct and grounded than Matthew.

Now, a word about a word: ‘Blessed,’ in Greek, ‘*makar-ioi*,’ corresponds to the Hebrew ‘*ashrei*,’ meaning ‘fortunate.’ In Jewish tradition, the poor, the hungry, and so on, were not viewed as cursed or impure, but as deserving recipients of divine and *earthly* care. They lived the saying, ‘there but for the grace of God go I.’ That’s what this is about. Being poor or hungry or grieving were all seen as temporary conditions that could happen to anyone, not a persistent situation for any one group of people. If you were poor, God, at least, was watching over you. Preferably, so was your neighbor.

Also, Jesus is talking about the here and now: yours *is* the kingdom of God; you *will* be filled; you *will* laugh. On the woes side, the rich *have* received their consolation; if you’re full now, you *will* be hungry. What goes around, comes around.

In the same vein, no one ever thought being poor was a blessing, and especially not now. The poor and the hungry know the reality of their situation. For them, a full stomach and a comfortable place to sleep – that’s a blessing. We can all agree that the poor and hungry could use some help. These are preventable situations, sometimes caused by bad luck, a bad harvest, or a bad decision. In some countries, bad governance and economic systems, not to mention systemic greed, get in the way of people accessing a better life, and sometimes, it means willfully hurting your neighbor.

So, Jesus turns the world upside-down: leave everything to follow in God's ways and the kingdom is yours, right now, even if people hate you because of your choice. Discipleship is contrary to the way of the world. Trust in what is human or trust in God, and woe to you if you take comfort only in yourselves, because, says Jesus, you will find it more and more difficult to trust yourselves to God's grace and mercy.

The good news is, God is ever-faithful. The Bible tells us repeatedly what God requires of us, but we need constant reminding about our part in the covenant. Sometimes, we get it right between the eyes, as in Amos 5, who said:

Seek good and not evil,  
that you may live;  
and so the Lord, the God of hosts, will be with you,  
just as you have said.  
Hate evil and love good,  
and establish justice in the gate;  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
*I will not listen to the melody of your harps.*  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. (14-15; 23-24)

Or even more bluntly and forcefully, in Micah 6:

*He has told you, O mortal, what is good;*  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to *do* justice, and to *love* kindness,  
and to *walk humbly* with your God? (6:8)

Woody Allen once said that the heart 'is a very, very resilient little muscle.' On the other hand, he also said, 'I don't want to achieve immortality through my work; I want to achieve immortality through not dying.'

Jeremiah wrote that the heart is *fickle* above all else, a sentiment with which Woody would agree. Jeremiah emphasizes that the heart is the center or source of sin and piety; the path to wholeness and to a relationship with God begins here, in our heart. Are we ready for God to test our minds and search our hearts? God does this all the time. For this, we need to trust in God, and pray that by God's grace, God will choose to dwell within us. As Jesus said in the very last verse in Matthew's Gospel, 'Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age' (28:20b).

Amen.