Blessing and Woe: Luke 6:17-26

Thank you for doing something a little unusual by rating yourself along the scale between rich and poor, hungry and full, weeping and laughing, slandered and well spoken of.

My goal was straightforward – to help you engage with these words of Jesus you have just heard, to find yourself amongst those to whom He is speaking, whom He either declares blessed, or on whom He pronounces woe. I don't want you to think Jesus is talking to someone else – the person next to you, perhaps, and not you.

It helps to know He is talking to you so that you can feel the surprise or discomfort of Jesus' words.

Surprise, because Jesus words don't just go against what our culture takes for granted – that it is the rich who are to be envied, whose lives are to be reckoned blessed and whose lifestyle is to be imitated. They also go against our experience. When, if you have ever experienced them, has being poor ever felt desirable, have we thought that weeping, or being slandered and excluded gave us a sense of inner happiness at our good fortune – made us think we were blessed. How can Jesus say the poor, the hungry and the weeping are blessed?

And for some of us Jesus words are not just surprising, but uncomfortable. I know there that there is a lot of variation in our material circumstances amongst the congregation. Some of us may be supplementing our meals by visits to the food bank, worried about whether we will be able to afford the rent, accumulating debt on our credit cards. But others of us, perhaps quite a few – might be like me.

Here is where I placed myself on the that scale – at least for the first three, I left the last because I don't really know what others might think about me.

But I am towards the rich end of the scale. I no longer have to work for a living, we own our own home, we can take holidays – as well as drink water from the tap and benefit from universal health care

I have never been really hungry or worried about my next meal – eating too much is my issue

And while knowing grief from time to time I generally have a lot to be cheerful about.

Now I don't think my circumstances are particularly exceptional, and even if yours are not exactly like mine because of the stage of life you are at, you are moving in that direction, the direction of a respectable middle class Australian life.

But in Luke 6 I hear Jesus saying woe to the rich

Saying that pursuing the goals of our society – shared by rich and poor alike – to secure ourselves by being materially prosperous, to be well fed – think of all those food shows, to insulate ourselves from trouble by our wealth, pursuing those goals will in the end impoverish and disappoint.

That is uncomfortable

Surprising and discomforting words

What are we to do with these words of Jesus – that on the one hand seem to fly in the face of our experience, and on the other hand sound so unsettling.

There are many ways I guess we could respond, straight away, just on hearing Jesus' blessings and woes – responses that you may already initiated in your thinking

We could dismiss them as out of touch with reality, go on with our lives as if he never spoke them, or as if they have no bearing on our lives.

If we are believers we could immediately spiritualise them. Say His words are all about our hearts and have nothing to do with our material circumstances. That approach is a great temptation for believers in the prosperous West.

Or we could do the opposite and say that His words are entirely about material circumstances and either change our politics to identify the good with the poor and wrong with the wealthy, or if we are not politically inclined resolve to pursue blessedness by abandoning everything and look for a strict monastic community to join, or become an ascetic hermit

Or maybe we will hear them and start to feel vaguely guilty about our prosperity, and change nothing.

All of those responses are both premature and inadequate

What we are going to do is ask and answer three questions.

Firstly, who is Jesus talking about? Who are the poor and the rich, and what does he mean when he says one is blessed and pronounces woe on the other?

Secondly, when we know what Jesus is saying we ought to ask whether Jesus should be taken seriously on this, taken seriously today in entirely different economic circumstances. Should he be believed when pronounces blessings and woes.

Thirdly, if Jesus is to be taken seriously, how can we all, including the materially well off, living as we do in a culture that admires and pursues material prosperity, be found amongst those Jesus calls blessed? What might need to change?

1. **What do the words of Jesus mean?**

Context:

Luke 6: [17] After coming down with them, he stood on a level place with a large crowd of his disciples and a great number of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and from the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon. [18] They came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those tormented by unclean spirits were made well. [19] The whole crowd was trying to touch him, because power was coming out from him and healing them all.

Jesus speaks these words after He has started to have conflict with the Pharisees and chosen His apostles. His words are directed to his disciples v.20 – a group much larger than the 12, but they are overheard by others, some of the great number who have come to find healing for their diseases and relief from the affliction of evil spirits.

He speaks them on, says Luke, a level place – and for those who know their bible that seems to differentiate this occasion from Jesus' 'sermon on the mount' recorded in Matthew 5-7. There is a lot of overlap between the content of that famous sermon and Jesus' words recorded here, but there are also differences, not just in wording but also in emphasis. That sermon doesn't speak the blessings in the second person as Luke records here

So for example, in Matthew 5 Jesus says "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven", and here Jesus says "Blessed are the poor, for yours if the kingdom of God", and only Luke records these woes.

Every gospel is selective and it is better to see Luke 6:20-49 as a summary of a distinct occasion of Jesus' teaching in which the Lord Jesus speaking to a similar audience covers a lot of characteristic themes, teaching given on a lot of occasions in slightly different ways.

That is the way with travelling preachers, especially before printing and the internet, and where audiences changed with changing locations. You go over the same material but often with variations. This sermon in Luke

should be understood in its own right, in its context in Luke's gospel – which has a lot to say about rich and poor.

Jesus starts by saying

[20] Then looking up at his disciples, he said:

Blessed are you who are poor,
because the kingdom of God is yours.
[21] Blessed are you who are hungry now,
because you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
because you will laugh.

The poor

Who are the poor Jesus is calling blessed?

Notice it is not poverty that is called blessed, it is the poor.

It is estimated that 90% of the population of Palestine at this time were landless day labourers. They were materially poor, with few possessions and little reserve. They could be plunged into complete destitution by sickness, drought, lack of work, or harsh taxation.

And in the next two blessings Jesus is describing prominent consequences of their material poverty. They were often hungry, vulnerable to fluctuating grain prices, and earning that day the money needed to purchase that and the next day's food. If they had no work that day, hunger followed.

And like the poor all over the world theirs was often grief. It is the poor who have less immunity, whose children, malnourished, are more susceptible to infections that will kill them. It is the poor, needing the money, whose work is often more dangerous, who are more likely to be injured or killed at work. And it is the poor who are often oppressed, their economic vulnerability exploited by rich landlords forcing them into unfair labour agreements, who find it difficult to get redress in the courts. Weeping at loss, weeping at their powerlessness, weeping at the injustice they suffer, weeping at their present hopelessness

The poor are people who know their need, who are not tempted to think they have it all together, can solve all their problems by themselves

But the poor Jesus blesses are not just materially poor. We see that in the Old Testament associations of the word poor that influenced the Judaism of Jesus' day, and in the final blessing spoken by Jesus

Often in the Old Testament the poor are the pious poor, those who look to and depend on God for their rescue, for help in their need, who in their poverty have no where else to turn

Psalm 34: [6] This poor man cried, and the Lord heard him
and saved him from all his troubles.

Psalm 70: [5] I am oppressed [Greek poor] and needy;
hurry to me, God.
You are my help and my deliverer;
Lord, do not delay.

And God had committed himself to defend and protect them

Psalm 72: [12] For he will rescue the poor who cry out
and the afflicted who have no helper.

It is these poor to whom Jesus declared in his first sermon he had come to preach good news in fulfilment of God's promises.

Luke 4: [16] He came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. As usual, he entered the synagogue on the Sabbath day and stood up to read. [17] The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him, and unrolling the scroll, he found the place where it was written:

[18] The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me
to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to set free the oppressed,
[19] to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

Jesus said He came to those who are not just materially poor but in their desperate need were looking to God, not to themselves, for deliverance.

And in the final blessing Jesus says to the poor, the hungry, the weeping

[22] Blessed are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you, insult you,
and slander your name as evil
because of the Son of Man.

The poor Jesus blesses are those who are committed to the Son of Man, to Jesus, so committed they are willing to suffer for their loyalty to Him.

Understood in the light of the Old Testament the blessing pronounced in Luke is in agreement with Matthew's version of this blessing – the poor in spirit are those who have no resources in themselves, nothing to gain God's interest, spiritual beggars who can only look to God and rely on His generosity

The poor Jesus declares blessed, those whose position is desirable, are those who, knowing their need, are looking to God to deliver them, deliver them through the King, the Christ, God had promised and now sent into the world – Jesus, who preaches good news to the poor.

So the poor are not an exclusively socio-economic category, but as the commentator Bock says as "it is the poor in general who sense their need in the greatest way and, as a result, respond most directly and honestly to Jesus."

Why are the poor blessed?

Why does Jesus say that in God's world these are the fortunate ones to whose ranks everyone should want to belong, who can know in themselves the happiness of enjoying God's favour.

[20] Then looking up at his disciples, he said:

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

[21] Blessed are you who are hungry now,
because you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
because you will laugh.
[22] Blessed are you when people hate you,
when they exclude you, insult you,
and slander your name as evil
because of the Son of Man.

[23] "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy. Take note—your reward is great in heaven, for this is the way their ancestors used to treat the prophets.

Jesus gives three reasons why the poor who trust His word, the poor who are his disciples, committed to living by His word, can know themselves blessed.

Firstly, because of their present possession. Theirs is the kingdom of God. The promised reign of God, that reign when God would bring peace and justice, is theirs now – because in trusting and following Jesus they are the people of the King. In turning from trusting themselves to rely on Jesus they had a place now in His reign.

Secondly, they are blessed because they would enjoy the future reversal the establishment of God's reign through Jesus will bring.

God's people were looking forward to that reversal. Mary, distilling the teaching of the Old Testament, in rejoicing in what God had done for her in granting her to be the mother of the Son of God, had sung

Luke 1: [51] He has done a mighty deed with his arm;
he has scattered the proud
because of the thoughts of their hearts;
[52] he has toppled the mighty from their thrones
and exalted the lowly.
[53] He has satisfied the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.
[54] He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering his mercy

Those who depend on Jesus for the deliverance God brings will find their hunger, their emptiness, exchanged for plenty, their tears for joy

And thirdly the poor are blessed because relying on Jesus, being willing to suffer for their commitment to follow Him, to be openly His people, they are included amongst the faithful whose reward is great

[22] Blessed are you when people hate you,
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because of the Son of Man.

[23] "Rejoice in that day and leap for joy. Take note—your reward is great in heaven, for this is the way their ancestors used to treat the prophets.

So certain is the kingdom He brings and makes theirs our Lord commands them to rejoice, to rejoice in being recognised as His followers. On that day they can know themselves amongst the prophets, faithful to God in the face of the opposition they experienced in their day, faithful in speaking the message God gave them, and whose faithfulness Jesus himself vindicates in bringing the salvation God promised through them.

Jesus says that the poor are blessed because He, the Son of Man, is the deliverance God had promised to His poor, those who because of their poverty were in desperate need and whose helplessness drove them to turn to and depend on their God, and they will not be disappointed.

He brings the kingdom and gives a place in it to all He wills

He brings the great reversal

Theirs is joy now in following Him, and great reward then

It is blessing that is present and future, now and not yet

The question, an acute question for those hungering now, weeping now, experiencing hatred and exclusion for Jesus' sake now, is can Jesus be trusted? Should he be believed as He makes these declarations, believed by the poor then, by us now?

But before we answer that question let's think about the rich.

The rich

Luke 6:[24] But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your comfort.
[25] Woe to you who are now full,
for you will be hungry.
Woe to you who are now laughing,
for you will mourn and weep.
[26] Woe to you
when all people speak well of you,
for this is the way their ancestors
used to treat the false prophets.

Jesus' declaration of woe is a warning. Jesus is saying it will not go well for you, there will be trouble for you, certain trouble for it is trouble God will bring.

And again, as in the blessings, it is the one group he is speaking of, described in four ways.

The rich are the wealthy, the materially prosperous in this life. They lack for nothing, are well resourced, well connected and self reliant.

And as their economic condition is the opposite of the poor, so is their experience of life.

There present condition is that they are 'full', have more than enough of the good things of life – of food, of friendship, of experiences

They go through life 'laughing', not a care in the world, satisfied, immune from the trials and griefs of life, indifferent to the sufferings of others because of their own self satisfaction, perhaps even because of their confidence in their own capacity to handle whatever will come their way.

And they are not excluded or slandered. All speak well of them. They are admired

This is the rich – preoccupied with the present, their lives full; preoccupied with their possessions, putting their trust in them; preoccupied with their self-interest, untroubled by the circumstances of others, by the poor they live amongst and by whose labour their wealth is sustained; confident in their own capacity, needing no-one greater than themselves.

And Jesus says woe

While all might envy them, even think they are blessed, Jesus says exactly the opposite is true.

Why?

Because they have received their comfort. They wanted wealth and comfort in this life, and they have got what they wanted, and that is all they will get, now and in the future. Trusting in themselves and wanting to preserve their privilege, they have no place in the Kingdom for they have no place for Jesus – a property less preacher, whose word they see no reason to engage with or follow.

And it is woe to them for there will be a God given reversal. They will exchange their abundance for want, their self satisfied good cheer for mourning and weeping.

Their money cannot buy them pardon in the judgement or live beyond death, but it can stop them turning to the one who can give them both, forgiveness and life.

Woe to you who are rich.

Again, it is a generalization. It is not possession of wealth in itself, but the attitude and actions it gives rise to, the self reliance, self preoccupation, self security, that is a contradiction of love and trust of God and love of neighbour

There are rich people in the gospel who are saved. Zachaeus, Joseph of Arimathea, Nicodemus, the last two members of the Jewish elite.

But possession of wealth and that attitude of self-confidence and preoccupation with the present that makes one resistant to the teaching of Jesus are almost inseparable.

In fact Jesus teaches it is only a great act of God that allows the rich to be saved.

Remember what Jesus said after the rich ruler, challenged to stop trusting in his possessions and sense of his own goodness to trust Jesus alone, walked away?

Luke 18: ***24*** *Seeing that he became sad, Jesus said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!* ***25*** *For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God."*

26 *Those who heard this asked, "Then who can be saved?"*

27 *He replied, "What is impossible with man is possible with God."*

With God it is possible. Some rich can be saved by God's power and grace, but woe to you who are rich is a generalization which is a warning to those who are rich now, and to those who aspire to be rich.

TO the rich Jesus is saying Wanting to keep all you have now instead of giving it all up to follow Jesus, will impoverish you eternally

Trusting in your wealth for security and satisfaction will ensure you will lose both

And it is a warning to those who aspire to be rich – and in our culture that may well be all of us.

We are conditioned to think that material prosperity is something that should be pursued, because it will make us secure, give us the opportunity to fill our lives with enjoyable experiences

Our conversation as a society is full of talk about money

Property prices, and how to invest

Superannuation, and how to get more of it

Or about the cost of living, and how lack of money is making our lives difficult

Not to mention the lottery and powerball

And many of us are forced to store up treasure on earth in our super, whose balances we are encouraged to watch and anticipate the reward of a stress free retirement because we have enough money

We may not want to be super-rich, just comfortable – enough to be secure, live a satisfying life, escape the griefs of the poor

But Jesus says woe

A warning sharpened and applied particularly to Jesus' followers in v. 26

[26] Woe to you
when all people speak well of you,
for this is the way their ancestors
used to treat the false prophets.

The you is the you Jesus is speaking to – his disciples

Always the temptation – to be seduced by wealth, to pursue security and comfort in this life, by telling the rich what they want to hear

That God will not judge their proud trust in themselves, their pre-occupation with accumulating and keeping their wealth at the expense of the poor, their boasting in their own wisdom and virtue

Or the temptation to not make ourselves the odd one out by telling those around us who have set their hearts on being rich that that is ok, an ambition God endorses

But if we do that, if we endorse their complacency or ambition that will only lead to their disappointment and destruction, we will be like the false prophets of old who said peace, peace when there was no peace

Who encouraged people to be wise in their own eyes, to put their confidence in themselves and secure themselves from their threatening neighbours by their alliances with idolatrous powers, and abandon the wisdom of trusting God and doing what He said

The false prophets who prevented repentance and in so doing ensured their own destruction and the destruction of those who trusted them

Woe to you who are rich – that is a serious warning, one that should make us search our hearts to see where our trust is, review our ambitions and plans to see if we are different from the world around us

If Jesus can be trusted

And that was the big if for Jesus' first hearers, and it is for us

For Jesus' words are surprising – we don't think the poor blessed, and they do go against the values and ambitions of our culture

Should Jesus be believed when pronounces blessings and woes?

Yes because Jesus has secured for the poor the Kingdom He preaches and ensured the judgement he warns of.

Telling the rich that they are not the ones to be admired and envied, that they will in the end be losers, is kind of offensive

Getting under the skin of the rich and powerful never ends well, and it didn't for Jesus

He had no powerful friends to stick up for him when his religious enemies accused him before the Roman governor Pilate, when the rich, the high priestly family, moved against Him

As we know, they had him killed, and you could not get more poor and powerless than Jesus was on the cross. He didn't even possess clothes to cover his nakedness.

It looked like it was the rich who were blessed – got their way, secured their world and continuing wealth from Jesus' critique – and the poor had woe.

But it was God's plan that Jesus should die.

His plan that through His death for their sins, His death in their place, Jesus would turn aside God's just wrath from the sins of His people

would reconcile them to God through bringing forgiveness to all who trust Him

And reconciling us to God, bringing us peace with Him when before we were His enemies, guarantees to all who trust Him, to all who believe that He died for our sins and rose again, a place in God's eternal kingdom

As Paul wrote to the Romans

Romans 5: [9] How much more then, since we have now been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from wrath. [10] For if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, then how much more, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.

Coming to enjoy living under the reign of God, at peace with God, now – is the situation of the poor

Those who abandon trust in themselves to put their trust wholly in Jesus, God's King, live in His kingdom now as they humble themselves to live obediently to the Lord, Jesus, who rules us by His word.

And they will share in His kingdom forever, raised by Him to live in the new heaven and earth, where they will be full, share forever in the feast God provides for His people, and they will laugh with joy as God wipes every tear from their eye.

And that death and resurrection also means the woe Jesus pronounced should be taken seriously, for the Jesus who spoke that woe is exalted now as the judge of all. It is His judgement that will prevail

And God saving us through the death and resurrection is an expression of His determination not just to save His people but to humble human pride, to have no place for those whose confidence is in themselves, who want to believe they can live in God's world without God.

In saving through the foolishness and weakness of the cross God is humbling human wisdom and showing the weakness of human strength

And in calling people to Himself through the gospel of the cross He is bringing to nothing any human boast, anything that people pride themselves in and rely on outside of trusting the Lord Jesus.

1 Corinthians 1: [26] Brothers and sisters, consider your calling: Not many were wise from a human perspective, not many powerful, not many of noble birth. [27] Instead, God has chosen what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen what is weak in the world to shame the strong. [28] God has chosen what is insignificant and despised in the world—what is viewed as nothing—to bring to nothing what is viewed as

something, [29] so that no one may boast in his presence. [30] It is from him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became wisdom from God for us—our righteousness, sanctification, and redemption— [31] in order that, as it is written: ***Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.***

The reversal Mary sang of, the reversal Jesus promised, the blessing of the poor and not the rich, has started now through the preaching of the cross, so that our only boast, our only cause of confidence, will be in our God Himself – not in our wealth or power.

Jesus should be believed, wholly. And if that is the case

How can we all be found amongst the blessed? What might need to change?

Being found amongst the blessed starts by doing what we should – believing Him, taking His word seriously.

For some of us today might be the first day we have done that, as you have heard Jesus say that what you have been living for up till now – the accumulation of wealth and experiences, securing yourself and your happiness by your own efforts – will only end in ruin.

What should you do? Ask Jesus for mercy, to be forgiven that trying to find your life in wealth and your own rule and ignoring God your Creator, the source of all our good, forgiven for living a thankless life.

Ask Jesus to forgive you – talk to Him, he lives

And to be given grace to live a new life, committed to living by Jesus word, having your ambitions and life directed by Him

Finding your security in His love and promise

Not sure about that, come and talk,

But if we are already believers, all of us need to recognise how powerfully shaping of our attitudes to money and security our society is, and ask for grace not to be conformed to our world by transformed by Jesus' word

To abandon the destructive and impoverishing ambition to be rich, to find our security in money and not in the Lord Jesus

Remembering Jesus' word that you can't serve God and mammon, material wealth, and resolving to seek first His kingdom and His righteousness

Test your heart, and your decisions

If we are poor, counting every cent, wondering if we will have enough at the end of every pay period to pay our bills

Show you believe Jesus by being grateful He says you are blessed

Give thanks that you are now His, and your reward will be great

And don't give way to envy of the rich our society cultivates in u

And don't be anxious about your future

Trusting Him you are already a beloved subject of the heavenly kingdom, and your Lord has said seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all that we need will be given us

Matthew 6: [33] But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.

If we are materially well off, on the rich side of the scale, like me

We have to show our trust is in Jesus, not in our wealth, by using what is entrusted to us as He commands, knowing our wealth is not our own but His, just as we are

There will be quite a lot about that next week as we look at the next section of the sermon, and it is quite challenging

But in the meantime meditate on how Paul's instruction to wealthy is finding expression in your life

1 Timothy 6: [17] Instruct those who are rich in the present age not to be arrogant or to set their hope on the uncertainty of wealth, but on God, who richly provides us with all things to enjoy. [18] Instruct them to do what is good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and willing to share, [19] storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of what is truly life.

Are you living a self focused life, pursuing your own interests, resentful of people's needs, keeping your money to yourself

Or Are you doing good, rich in good works, generous and willing to share

Be concrete – run through the credit card or bank statement, and add it up – where is the money going. It might surprise you

Store up treasure in heaven, look to God for the reward, not to the present

And brothers and sisters, this is something we need to help each other in

World is very present

Immersed in the world view of the prosperous

WE need to help each other stay the course

2 ways

By resisting letting the worlds values creep into our common life, coming to value the rich above the poor, feeling uncomfortable about their presence – James has a lot about that, and we need to guard against it

For that is not Jesus' way, as James says

James 2: [5] Listen, my dear brothers and sisters: Didn't God choose the poor in this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

And secondly, by being willing to talk with each other about how we use our money

We can be very guarded about our decisions about money or our anxieties about it, and Scripture warns about some of us having the word choked by the "deceitfulness of wealth" [Mark 4:19].

Don't let that happen to each other.

Because the Lord Jesus is very clear, and His word is sure

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

But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your comfort.