

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – February 17, 2019

[Luke 6:17-26](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Luke 6:17-26 (From *Homiletics*; “Bobos for Jesus”, February 11, 2001)

Before Luke begins his presentation of Jesus' lengthy "Sermon on the Plain" (6:20-49), he sets the scene. Unlike Matthew's version, in Luke a large and varied crowd of listeners has gathered to seek healing from Jesus' hands and to hear truth from Jesus' preaching.

Three types of individuals make up this multitude. First, there are those specially chosen companions of Jesus known as the apostles. Second, there is a larger group who have declared themselves disciples and have already committed themselves to Jesus and his witness. Third, there is a portion of the crowd that is as yet uncommitted to Jesus in any way. Some scholars have suggested that the pointedness of the "woes" in Luke's beatitudes section indicates that many of these listeners may have been actively hostile toward Jesus and his message.

Luke's setting is both personal and poignant. Note how Jesus moves down to "a level place," which means he is standing smack dab in the midst of this needy crowd. Luke stresses that their needs are two-fold in nature. On the one hand, are those who came for physical and spiritual healing - to be cured of diseases or of possession by unclean spirits. On the other hand, the crowd also came "to hear him" - they were as hungry for the word as they were for the works of Jesus.

Before Luke begins the recitation of blessings and woes, he masterfully intertwines this public discourse with a private lesson specifically for Jesus' chosen disciples. Although surrounded by a crowd, Jesus "looked up at his disciples" (v. 20a) before he began to speak. By using his eyes to hold his disciples' attention, he lets his closest companions know that these words are of particular importance for them.

Luke's rendering of the first three blessings found in verses 20b-21 differ from Matthew's version in a significant way. In Matthew's text, these blessings appear much more spiritual in nature. In Matthew the "poor" are the "poor in spirit;" "the hungry" are those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness;" those who "weep" and yet will soon "laugh" are those who "mourn" and will be "comforted."

Luke, who positions Jesus squarely in the center of the sick, possessed, smelly, milling crowd, presents a list of blessings that are distinctly physical in their focus. The poor, the sick, and the possessed - those who stood listening - could easily identify with the physical nature of Jesus' blessings.

The poor (ptochoi) refers to those who are "so poor as to have to be," that is, those who are completely destitute. In Jesus' first messianic pronouncement in Luke's gospel (4:18), he quoted Isaiah 61. His primary messianic function was "to bring good news to the poor." Jesus does not find any blessing in being poor; he does find that God's promise makes the poor blessed.

In pronouncing this blessing, Jesus demonstrates two aspects of his messianic authority. First, he reveals that the kingdom of God is near. He proclaims his authority to declare this kingdom of God as the special possession of the poor. Upon those who have nothing in this world, Jesus bestows the whole of the kingdom. In contrast, the "woe" declared upon those who are rich in this world stipulates that these rich ones have nothing to look forward to at all. Having "received their consolation" (apechete) - that is, they have all their receipts - they have no future claims whatsoever.

The second blessing is intimately related to the first. For where there is poverty there is surely hunger. Again, Luke's text emphasizes a bodily condition, not a spiritual malaise. The particle nun (now) focuses this beatitude because while hunger didn't describe a social status like poverty, for many, hunger was a constant in their lives. Jesus' blessing promises that this unwanted companion will be banished and instead the hungry will at last "be filled." Their hunger is for "now," but God will give complete and unwavering satisfaction. The "woe" that parallels this "hunger" blessing (v. 25) is also focused by the particle nun. The fullness enjoyed by those sated now is as temporary as it can be. A hungry future awaits them. The underlying reference in both this blessing and woe is probably to the messianic banquet. The kingdom of God was often described as a feast with humanity in fellowship at the table with God (see Luke 13:28f; 22:16,30; and 15:20-24).

The third blessing Jesus proclaims upon those who "weep now" (again the nun particle focuses the time and place). The Lucan term klaio ("to weep") expresses general sorrow, not some specialized mourning over the ways of the world. This is the weeping that accompanies everyday life and its losses. Luke contrasts this weeping with ordinary laughter (gelasete) in his elevated declaration that those with tears will be "comforted" (paraklethesontai).

The parallel "woe" text declares those now laughing have a messianic future of mourning and weeping ahead of them. The laughter derided by this woe is a smug self-satisfied laughter that is indifferent to the plight of others. It may even suggest a kind of idolatry of pleasure-seeking that refuses to consider what the cost may be to others.

Luke's final blessing/woe proclamation switches to the second person. In the context of this Sermon on the Plain, the linked declarations in verses 22 and 26 would seem to be directed by Jesus to his chosen disciples or to those who have at least established themselves in some sort of relationship with him.

What kind of reception can Jesus' followers expect? How about being hated, excluded, reviled and attacked? Being "defamed" ("casting out your name as evil") probably refers to an official excommunication from the synagogue - an attack leveled by one's entire community. Jesus' surprising revelation to his disciples is that this experience of rejection is in fact a sign of blessing. The "woe" that disciples are warned away from is the experience of being accepted, the disaster of having "all speak well of you." Jesus contrasts the historic treatment of genuine and false prophets to demonstrate his disciples' own acceptance or rejection by their communities.

The false prophets, those crowd-pleasers who used smooth words to hide evil intentions, stand as a warning to all who may be tempted to accommodate the gospel message to make it more acceptable to everyone. Jesus' "blessing" reassures his followers that their personal rejection is no reflection on their genuine witness of the gospel.

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

Reflection Questions on Luke 6:17-26

1. Compare and contrast this passage – the beginning of Jesus’ “Sermon on the Plain” in Luke – with its parallel in Matthew, the better known “Sermon on the Mount” (Matthew 5:1-12). What do you notice when looking at these two passages side-by-side? What might the differences say about the way that the two gospel writers understood and presented the good news? (If you have access to a copy of *The Gospel Parallels*, this would be a great time to use it!)
2. To whom is Jesus really talking when he speaks in vv. 20-26? Is it to “The Twelve”, whom Jesus chose in the verses immediately before this reading begins and with whom he had just come down from the mountain in v. 17? Is it to the larger group of disciples and followers he met in coming down to the plain? Or is it to the even larger “multitude” of people from all over who had come to hear him and be cured? Does the intended audience matter to how it is received?
3. Where do you find yourself amidst the “blessings and woes” of vv. 20-26? Do you hear these words as good news or something else?
4. What does it mean to be “blessed”? For instance, consider the phrases, “Count your blessings,” or “We have been blessed with so much.” Surely these beatitudes, even more than Matthew’s, could lead us to question what this often used designation really means...

What questions do you have?

What do you “wonder” about when reading these passages?