

Mark D. Reichert

Epiphany 6 – Luke 6:20-26 – The True Beauty of a Truly Blessed Life
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Each year on October 31st, Lutherans celebrate one of the most important dates in Reformation history: the day in 1517 when Martin Luther posted his 95 theses – 95 statements for scholarly debate – on the castle church door in Wittenberg, where he was a university professor and preacher. That was a very famous scene and the kickoff of one of the most monumental happenings of the entire last millennium. But the truth is, as famous as those theses are and as much press as they get, some theses he wrote the following year are probably even more important to what he did as a Reformer and Bible teacher.

In the year 1518, when Luther was still gaining in fame and infamy depending on how you looked at him, he came to a meeting with his fellow Augustinian monks at the German city of Heidelberg. It was there that he presented 40 theses for his brothers to consider, one of which said this: “A theologian of glory calls evil good and good evil. A theologian of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.”

There Luther described the difference between how the world sees things and how the Lord sees things. This world wants instant gratification, instant glory, that turns out in the end to be only hollow and evil. But the Lord teaches us to look at the whole picture of our lives from here till eternity, to bear our crosses now with patience and endurance as we follow Christ along the path to Paradise. The theology of glory vs. the theology of the cross. A worldly, materialistic perspective vs. a spiritual, heavenly perspective. What’s important in the eyes of mortal man vs. what’s important in the eyes of eternal God. That distinction between the theology of glory and the theology of the cross was a hallmark of Luther’s teaching and has been a hallmark of Lutheran teaching ever since (in fact, maybe you remember talking about this topic during our special worship month back in October). But actually, this didn’t just start with Luther. In our text for today, we see Jesus teaching the very same things about the paradox of the Christian life. While the world may look at us and see only humiliation, we look with our eyes of faith and see rather exaltation. Yes, no matter what the sinful world sees, Jesus in our Gospel lesson for today teaches us the true beauty of the truly blessed life – it doesn’t find its worth only in the here and now; rather, it sees its greatest reward in Christ and our heavenly home.

So one day Jesus gathered together with his disciples and a whole crowd of other people, and he began to teach. He taught them four blessings and four woes, four warnings, for their lives that were almost the exact opposites of each other. Many years before Luther’s day, this was the theology of glory vs. the theology of the cross, and before these people could truly understand Jesus’ spiritual teaching, he needed to debunk some common earthly myths.

So he said, “*Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.*” Maybe that makes some of you squirm. Some of you have some pretty well-paying jobs and pretty large bank accounts, I’m sure. So is Jesus shaking his finger at you here? Not necessarily. In each of these woes, it’s important to look at the second part to understand what he means. The people he’s giving this warning to are people who think of their money as leverage to get others to do whatever they want or to get power over them, or who look at their riches and think, “I’ve really made it. It doesn’t get any better than this.” No, Jesus says that riches mean nothing if they blind us to what’s really important in life.

Then Jesus says, “*Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.*” Is Jesus picking on those of us here who are carrying around a little extra weight in our bellies? No, not necessarily. He’s warning us not to be focused only on filling our own stomachs at the expense of others, and only on physical food that wastes away rather than spiritual food that lasts to eternal life.

Then Jesus added, “*Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.*” What’s so wrong with laughing, you might ask. Jesus really wants us to go around sad all the time? Again, no, not necessarily. But if we look at the sinful world around us that laughs in God’s face, and we laugh right along with it, what does that say about our relationship with God? If we laugh with a blind eye to sin and evil like drug or alcohol abuse, sexual immorality, bad language, dirty jokes, or disrespect for our parents or police or president, we have good reason to take warning from God.

And then finally Jesus says, “*Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.*” Being a Christian isn’t just about smiling and being a yes-man. It’s not about just being liked by other people or being buddy-buddy with anybody who comes around or just being one of the good ol’ boys club. It’s not about using love as an excuse for sin. Now it’s great if people like us and speak well of us but, Jesus says, not if it means going along with the world at the expense of being right with God and his Word.

So do you see the common thread in all of those woes? These warnings are all about being selfish and taking the easy road. It's worrying about me, my happiness, my comfort, my stuff before anyone or anything else, and assuming God's purpose and this world's purpose are just to make me feel happy and good about myself here and now. But no, Jesus says – that's the theology of glory. That kind of thinking is shallow, it's hollow, it's selfishly-centered, and it only leads down the path to destruction, so if you think or feel or recognize any of those attitudes in yourself, take warning while you still can and listen to Jesus. What he teaches us instead is the theology of the cross, and that's so much better in the long run because it first forgives us when we fail and then strengthens us to follow him no matter what. Here Jesus teaches us the true beauty of the truly blessed life, which follows after Christ through thick and thin and finally leads to ultimate fulfillment in heaven.

So Jesus says, "*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*" What makes your life beautifully blessed isn't simply whether you are rich or poor – it's an attitude of selflessness and humble trust. Jesus wants us to be poor in mind and spirit, so that we aren't too attached to the things of this world and we always look to him to provide everything we need. No matter how much or how little we have in this world, we know with every certainty that ours is the Kingdom of God because he's promised it to us and won it for us – that's our most important focus! – so whatever we have here we can use generously in his service until he delivers us home to heaven.

Then Jesus goes on, "*Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.*" What makes your life beautifully blessed isn't just whether you are physically hungry or well-fed – it's an attitude of contentment and focus on what lasts. What our God wants for us is to remember that man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God. We will be satisfied finally and fully around the heavenly banquet feast of the Lamb, and in the meantime we are content with our daily bread and the rich feast we receive through God's Word and the Lord's Supper. *That's* what he wants us to hunger for in our lives! Our God promises to meet all our needs for life and often so much more, so as we walk the path to heaven, we can be sure we'll always have enough for ourselves and enough to share with others food that is both physical and eternal.

Then Jesus adds, "*Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.*" What makes your life beautifully blessed isn't whether you weep or laugh at any specific given time – it's an attitude of hope for healing. When a believer thinks about sin and its consequences, we can't help but feel sorrow. When a

believer experiences loss and heartache, we can't help but grieve. When a believer sees God's Name dishonored in so many ways all around us, we can't help but lament. We want to see God's Name honored and his Will done; that's what his love and goodness deserve in this world! But our God is here with us to comfort us and assure us that it won't be this way forever. This world with all its brokenness and faults will soon pass away, and a new and perfect heavens and earth are coming. We can look forward to that day with joyful hope and eager anticipation, because in that day we will laugh in the purest exuberance. Every bad and ugly thing will be forever behind us, and only good, better, and best will lie ahead.

Then finally Jesus says, "*Blessed are you when men hate you... because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.*" What makes your life beautifully blessed isn't simply whether people hate you or speak well of you – it's *why*. As Christians, people shouldn't like us because we're happy to stand idly by while they do whatever sinful and ungodly things they want. And people shouldn't hate us because we have an unpleasant or abrasive personality. Rather, their reaction to us should have everything to do with our faithfulness to Christ. Hopefully people around us recognize us as friendly, loving, and kind-hearted; that's an excellent reflection of Jesus in our lives. But sometimes being faithful to Christ means standing in opposition to the world and its ways. Very often, the truth is we're either with Jesus and against the world or with the world and against Jesus; but only one of those paths leads to life and the other only to death and destruction. So no matter what the world thinks, how it treats us, and how much it hates us for it, we always stand with Christ because that means we stand with what is true and right and loving and *blessed*. Now that may very well mean carrying our crosses in this life, but even better, by God's grace, it means a crown of glory in the next.

So do you see the golden thread there? The true beauty of a truly blessed life isn't found in selfishness, it's found in faith in Jesus Christ and certain hope for heaven; it's not found in the instant gratification of the theology of glory, it's found in the so-much-better-to-come of the theology of the cross. The true beauty of a truly blessed life might not catch many eyes or make any headlines in this world, because it's a beauty that hides just below the surface. This beauty is the beauty of Epiphany – it's not the fading glory of what's passing away, but the eternal glory of what lasts forever. God grant that true beauty to us and our lives by faith, both now and into eternity. Amen.