

Blessing or Woe?

Jeremiah 17:5-8, Luke 6:12-26 (ESV)

January 9, 2005

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.” “Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.” “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.” “Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.” “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil.” “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.” Blessing or woe? Woe or blessing? Which shall it be for us? Which is it for us?

This seems a strange sermon to us. A great crowd of his disciples was assembled, and a great crowd of other people was there, not only from the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding countryside of Judea but also from the far away and foreign place of the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon. They came to hear. They came to be healed. They wanted to touch him. Jesus had them in the palm of his hand. Did not the pronouncement of woes as well as blessings, let alone the strange blessings themselves, run the risk of emptying the house, of alienating the seekers, and perhaps of dividing the flock? So it would seem. And those things are not to be taken lightly. But he said what he said.

The word of Jesus Christ does not simply draw people together. It separates, and then it draws people together. The word of Jesus Christ does not simply comfort. It pierces, and then it comforts. The word of Jesus Christ is not all sweetness and light. It is a consuming fire, and then it is light by which to see. The gospel of Jesus Christ both attracts and repels. That is the nature of the gospel. If it does not attract, it is not gospel. That should be obvious. But if it does not repel, it is not gospel. That may not be so obvious. That is the strange part. And that is the dangerous part. It is dangerous for preachers today because we preachers do all sorts of other things on our own that drive people away and want to believe it is because of the gospel. Preachers must be held accountable for that. And it is far more dangerous for all of us who are hearers of the gospel, including preachers, because we may find in our pride that we do not want to be forgiven, that we do not want to be helped, that we do not want to be loved, that we do not want to be transformed. That would be a curse indeed.

The pattern from which Jesus started, particularly as we find it in Jeremiah, seems easy enough to understand. “Cursed is the man who trusts in man.” “Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD.” “Cursed is the man who...makes flesh his strength.” “Blessed is the man...whose trust is the LORD.” “The man who trusts in man...is like a shrub in the desert.” “The man who trusts in the LORD... is like a tree planted by water.” All of that makes sense. We may not see it every day. Sometimes the evil appear to prosper. Sometimes the holy suffer. But we understand the distinction. We understand the blessing and the curse. They make sense. In the long run, those who rely on the flesh will fail. Those who rely on the Lord will flourish.

What Jesus does with this is not out of line with what Jeremiah says. It is not discontinuous with it. But Jesus intensifies it and absolutizes it almost to the breaking point. “Woe to you who are rich.” That is trusting in man. “Blessed are you who are poor.” That is trusting in God. When you cannot depend upon your own financial resources, all that is left is trusting in God. “Woe to you who are full now.” That is trusting in the flesh. “Blessed are you who are hungry now.” That is trusting in the God. It may seem to us simple necessity. Jesus elevates it to faith. “Woe to you who laugh now.” That is a sign of self-confidence. “Blessed are you who weep now.” That is evidence of self-awareness and of awareness of one’s need for God. “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you.” What could be wrong with that? “Blessed are you when people hate you.” For those of us who are not hungry, this may seem harder than going hungry. For those of us who want to be liked, this makes the least sense of all. For those of us gathered in the crowd to hear Jesus, this one makes us wonder. What is going on here? What does he mean? What does this have to do with me? These questions are as fresh now as they were then.

Of all the four blessings and four woes, short and cryptic, this one is expanded. This one is elaborated upon. This one has additional instructions and explanations attached. Maybe it can give us a clue to the rest. “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.”

For starters, note the qualifier to the blessing. Being hated, excluded, reviled, and spurned is no blessing in itself. I suspect many people can testify to that. Instead, being hated, excluded, reviled, and spurned has to do with blessing only when it takes place “on account of the Son of Man,” on account of Jesus Christ. I give people plenty of reasons to hate, exclude, revile, and spurn me. Those do not count. The question is, Is there anything in my faith, life, and witness visibly connected to the faith, life, and gospel of Jesus Christ? If anyone were to look at me, could they see anything of him at all? And if so, could they see enough of him in

me to form the basis of any objection? That is where the blessing comes in. If there is enough of Jesus Christ in my life that people hate, exclude, revile, and spurn me on account of him, then I am on the right track.

This is tricky. It can be hard to sort out. I may want to believe that people are objecting to all the Jesus they see in me, when really it is only me that they see. I can give plenty of reason for offense without any help from him. So, it can be hard to sort out. But given that, and once it is sorted out, to whatever extent that people object to us for his sake, to that extent we are blessed. We are blessed not because being hated, excluded, reviled, and spurned are good in and of themselves. Not at all. They are not good. We are blessed because, in the great scheme of things, we have been drawn to the right side of life and history, to the side of the Creator, to the heart of the Redeemer. Thanks be to God.

Moreover, consider the instructions and reasons attached to this expanded blessing. “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.” Not only are these rejections considered blessed, but also they are the occasion for rejoicing. They are the occasion for rejoicing because they are evidence of the reality of Jesus Christ in our lives. Why are we to rejoice? Because our “reward is great in heaven.” Not here, mind you, but in heaven. Why is our reward great in heaven? Because “so their fathers did to the prophets.”

To be hated, excluded, reviled, and spurned on account of Jesus Christ is to in community with, and in continuity with, the prophets of the Word of the Lord in the Old Testament. In fact, to be hated, excluded, reviled, and spurned on account of Jesus Christ is to in community with, and in continuity with, the twelve apostles of the gospel of the Jesus Christ in the New Testament. Indeed, to be hated, excluded, reviled, and spurned on account of Jesus Christ is to in community with, and in continuity with, Jesus Christ himself. He was hated. He was excluded. He was reviled. He was spurned. He was falsely accused. He was wrongly convicted. He was executed. Jesus Christ suffered under Pontius Pilate. He was crucified, dead, and buried. He descended into hell. That, and that alone, makes sense of these blessings and woes.

That first congregation from Judea and beyond could not yet have known this. But we know it. We know where his life was headed. We know what he went through. And we know where he ended up. The cross was not the end. Even the empty tomb was not the end. “The third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty.” That is why there is blessing in him. Suffering is not good in itself. No one is saying that. But through the cross, Jesus won the crown. Through the cross, Jesus won the

victory. Through the cross, Jesus calls us to himself, names us his very own, and pours out his blessings upon us. Is that of interest to you? Or do you still want to try to make it on your own? You cannot have it both ways.

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.” “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” “Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.” “Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.” “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.” “Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.” “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you and revile you and spurn your name as evil.” “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.” Blessing or woe? Woe or blessing? Which shall it be for us? Which is it for us?

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org