

Lesson 18 - Luke 6:20-26
*"Sermon on the Plain I:
 Signs of the Upside Down Kingdom"*
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Introduction

This is an exciting day in our journey through Luke's story of the life of Jesus. Up till now, we have simply been observing the actions of Jesus and listening to his interactions with people like the Pharisees and other religious leaders. Today, we have the privilege of listening in on one of His teaching sessions with his disciples. First we need to hear the words clearly, and so I'll ask Beth Goh to come and read **Luke 6:20-26** for us...

[interaction with Beth...]

Luke 6:20-26

20 Looking at his disciples, he said:

*"Blessed are you who are poor,
 for yours is the kingdom of God.*

*21 Blessed are you who hunger now,
 for you will be satisfied.*

*Blessed are you who weep now,
 for you will laugh.*

*22 Blessed are you when men hate you,
 when they exclude you and insult you
 and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man.*

23 Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their fathers treated the prophets.

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

*25 Woe to you who are well fed now,
 for you will go hungry.*

*Woe to you who laugh now,
 for you will mourn and weep.*

*26 Woe to you when all men speak well of you,
 for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets.*

Helmut Thielicke, the well known German theologian recounts this story:

I once heard of a child who was raising a frightful cry because he had shoved his hand into the opening of a very expensive Chinese vase and then couldn't pull it out again. Parents and neighbors tugged with might and main on the child's arm, with the poor creature howling out

loud all the while. Finally there was nothing left to do but to break the beautiful, expensive vase. And then as the mournful heap of shards lay there, it became clear why the child had been so hopelessly stuck. His little fist grasped a paltry penny which he spied in the bottom of the vase and which he, in his childish ignorance, would not let go.

As Jesus begins now to teach His followers, His main message is about the Kingdom of God. What He wants to say to them, I believe, is captured somewhat in above story. He wants them and us to know that the value of the kingdom of God is far and away greater than anything this world can offer! You can seek every kind of security that you can muster based upon this world and its material goods, emotional stability and personal status, and all of that is like grasping a paltry penny compared to the priceless, eternal value of life in the kingdom of God.

The challenge that comes clearly down to us today from Jesus' teaching here is to consider again where we are looking for our security as we live in this world. Where are we seeking and finding our true value? We live in a world today where millions of people have lots much of what they thought was their financial security and for many of them this has brought on a deep sense of panic and instability. Through this teaching today, I believe Jesus wants to probe some deep questions into our system of values – where do we find this sense of security and hope as we live in this world? Jesus wants to ask each of us – are we grasping at the pennies that this world would seek to offer us, or are we truly receiving the beautiful, priceless vase that is the kingdom of God?

The Context

Let's understand who Jesus is talking to. Verse 20 tells us clearly, "*Looking at his disciples, he said...*" I really like the tone of the phrase. For me it represents clearly this shift in the tone of Luke's writing that we spoke about last week. Up until 6:11, Jesus had been in this confrontational kind of conversation with the Pharisees and the teachers of the law. But now, he is turning to those who really want to follow Him; to those who have been drawn by His amazing teaching ability and by His healing and compassion; in fact, to those who had already given up everything – home, career, family – to follow Him. We can perhaps imagine there was some insecurity in the minds of these followers – 'what have I gotten myself into?' To THESE, Jesus now turns. I believe there is a feeling of intimacy communicated in Luke's description, "*looking at His disciples*". Can you imagine what it must have been like to be in the direct gaze of Jesus!

But we need also to look down to the end of this particular sermon – to 7:1 – where we read, “*When Jesus had finished saying all this in the hearing of the people, he entered Capernaum...*” The picture, then, is one of Jesus intently speaking to His disciples, but all the while knowing that there is this crowd of interested onlookers surrounding the disciples – and speaking loudly enough that all of them could hear. In this way we see Jesus as a genius and a Master Teacher. Briefly, let me say at this point that we can learn something from the example of Jesus here about taking conversations about the kingdom of God into public places in order to stir up interest. Recently, Gary, Brian & I were sitting in a coffee shop and talking about the Lord, about faith and about our lives. Someone from the next table overheard and came and dropped a leaflet off which indicated that he belonged to some sort of group that was trying to promote the notion that the whole idea of God is simply a great big cosmic joke. Well, as soon as we received these leaflets from this fellow, the volume of our conversation increased and we began to share with each other stories of how God had rescued us and how God had worked miraculously in the lives of others – particularly as they were facing death in the face. We were trying to do exactly what Jesus did – to talk warmly about the kingdom of God in public places.

But what did He say??

The Kingdom of God

He opens His teaching with these words: “*Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.*” In order to understand and seek to put Jesus’ words into the big picture, it is important for us to wrestle for a few minutes with this whole concept of the kingdom of God.

Turn back to Luke 4:42-44 where we find Jesus using this term for the first time. “*At daybreak Jesus went out to a solitary place. The people were looking for him and when they came to where he was, they tried to keep him from leaving them. But he said, "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent." And he kept on preaching in the synagogues of Judea.*”

Luke will go on to use this term 31 times in his Gospel. Down through the centuries, theologians and scholars have debated long and hard over the specific nature of the kingdom of God. Some have equated it with the New Testament Church that Jesus came to establish; others relegate it to be a millennial kingdom which will happen sometime in the future. Some have distinguished the ‘kingdom of God’ terminology here in Luke from the term which Matthew prefers, ‘the kingdom of heaven’. Increasingly, though, I believe that most biblical scholars are coming to agree we should be careful not to nail down the terminology to something more specific than what Scripture allows. We

should take the term in its broadest possible context to mean simply that place where God reigns – where His values are upheld.

William Hendriksen suggests: *“In its broadest connotation the term the kingdom of God indicates ‘God’s kingship, rule or sovereignty, recognized in the hearts and operative in the lives of his people, and effecting their complete salvation, their constitution as a church, and finally a redeemed universe.’”*¹

I. Howard Marshall says it this way: *“In Luke the kingdom of God is his activity in bringing salvation to men and the sphere which is thereby created; God is active here and now in the ministry of Jesus and will consummate his rule in the future.”*²

Bruce Waltke wrote an article called, ‘**The Irruption (breaking in from outside) of the Kingdom of God**’ in which he writes: *“Students often ask me, ‘What is the Bible all about?’ My answer is: ‘It is about God’s breaking into a fallen world to establish his kingdom (i.e. his rule) on earth.’”* Although the expression “kingdom of God” never occurs in the Old Testament and its equivalents are relatively rare and late, the concept informs the whole.”³

I want us to be careful not to take such a grand concept as the kingdom of God and put it into a little box that we can understand. There must remain a sense of mystery and awe as we seek to ask God to reveal to us what the kingdom means in its fullness. We will continue to bump into the concept and grow in our understanding as we carry on through Luke’s writing. But for now, let us take at least 2 guiding principles to help us grapple with what we mean when we use the term.

1. **The kingdom of God is that sphere where God reigns.**
 - a. What do we mean? Let’s take the example of our own fellowship – Oaklands Chapel. To the extent that our relationships function according to the values upheld in Scripture – we show love to each other; we put others before ourselves; we reach out to help those in need – in those relationships God’s rule in our lives is evident and so we can say that the kingdom of God is present.
 - i. However, in those places where we refuse to submit to the rule of God – where we become selfish, we harbor grudges; we slander or tear another brother down – in those places, even here in the church, we might say that the kingdom of God is not present because we are not allowing His rule to be evident.

¹ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke*, 273.

² I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 198.

³ Bruce Waltke, *The Irruption of the Kingdom of God*, CTR ILS. 2/1 (Fall 2004) 3-13.

- b. We could use the same grid to look at the world around us and say that there are places and people in which the kingdom of God is evident; and there are places and people where it is apparently absent.
 - c. We can also look within our own hearts and say that in our hearts we want to be fully a part of the kingdom of God, but maybe there are parts of our secret lives where we refuse to allow God to be the Lord; we hang on to selfishness, bitterness, rage, lust – in those places in our hearts the kingdom of God is absent.
 - d. The kingdom of God is that sphere where God reigns.
2. **The kingdom is ‘already’ and ‘not yet’**; it is here but not in its fullness.
- a. Later on in Luke we will hear Jesus say ‘the kingdom of God is within you’, but we will also see much that indicates that there is a full expression of the kingdom of God that is waiting to be consummated.
 - b. In Waltke’s terminology, God is continuing to break into this fallen world to establish and build His kingdom. All of Scripture points forward to a day when the kingdom of God will be established in its fullness and Jesus will be King forever and sin will be totally done away with – but that time is not yet here. We still struggle with sin and darkness in our own hearts and in the world around us.
 - c. Jesus later will teach His disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” This should be our prayer as we seek to become increasingly aware of submitting to His rule in our lives day by day.
 - d. The kingdom has come – but not yet in its fullness!

What does this Kingdom of God look like?

These words in verses 20-26 then are the first record Luke gives us of Jesus teaching about the kingdom of God. There are **4 pairs of statements** - four ‘blessed’ statements matched in an equal / opposite manner with 4 ‘woe’ statements.

I want to look at each of these in pairs and suggest that in every case the values of the kingdom of God are seen to be opposite to those commonly held in the world of Jesus’ day and, I submit, also commonly held in our day. (Hence our title for today, ‘Signs of the Upside Down Kingdom’)

1. **Poverty – Wealth = economic security**

- a. *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God”* (20)
- b. *“But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort”* (24)
- i. We must remember at this point that Jesus is looking at His disciples – those who have just given up everything – career, family, etc. – in order to follow this Rabbi who says of Himself that He has nowhere to lay His head. These disciples have not just joined a get rich quick scheme!
 - ii. Jesus wants them to know right up front that security in the kingdom of God is rooted in something much deeper and more secure than all of the economic prosperity this world can offer.
 - iii. Jesus will go on to say much more about wealth and riches as we go through Luke’s writing. Mostly He will talk about the deceptiveness of wealth and how difficult it is to be rich and at the same time live in the total realization of our utter dependence upon God for everything we are and have.
 - iv. What can we say about how this applies to us here and now? I believe that in our affluent western society we need constant reminders about the deceptiveness of wealth.
 1. In his Screwtape Letters, C.S. Lewis makes this comment: *“Prosperity knits a man to the world. He feels that he is 'finding his place in it' while really it is finding its place in him.”*⁴
 - v. And so let us examine our hearts under the stark words of Jesus. Could it be that we have allowed the comfort and security of our wealth to take hold of us? Could it be that we are hanging onto our physical stuff like the little boy in our story hung onto that paltry penny at the expense of receiving and enjoying the immeasurable blessings of the Kingdom of God?
 1. There is a warning from one of the saints of old, John of the Cross, which applies directly to us: *“Do not let your "eye" be drawn by the false "beacon lamps" - of wealth, or position, or fame, or possessions. Be vigilant over your will and desires, for these are the corrupt forces that dwell within, and keep you from living free.”*⁵
 - vi. It is, I think, harder to live free of possession when you actually have them... and so we must constantly remind each other to think about these matters.

⁴ C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, 142.

⁵ John of the Cross (1542-1591), *Ascent of Mount Carmel*: Book 1, Chapter 3

vii. Proverbs 30 contains a very helpful perspective in this regard:

1. "...give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God."

c. For the sake of time, I would like to look at the final 3 pairs of statements as a unit and ask a question or two...

2. Hunger – Well-fed = physical needs
 - a. "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied"
 - b. "Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry"
 - i.
3. Weeping – Laughing = emotional peace
 - a. "Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh"
 - b. "Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep"
 - i.
4. Persecuted – Well-thought-of = status
 - a. "Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, 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."
 - b. "Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets."

And so all together we have 4 pairs of statements.

Question: Is Jesus really saying in this passage that He wishes for us to experience economic hardship, hunger, emotional turmoil and persecution in the normal course of our lives?? We know that this is not true simply by observing some of His other words recorded in Scripture – for one example think of the words that John records Jesus saying to these same disciples, "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that you joy may be complete" (John 15:11).

What IS He saying? I believe we may see Jesus words as both warning and encouragement.

The warning: be very careful not to look to the physical things of this world for your security and your hope – if you do it will be very short-lived. Become followers of me – not followers of wealth.

The encouragement: If and when you do experience these negative experiences of life (and surely the disciples did experience all of these things deeply – all of them except John were martyred for their

faith), know that the eternal blessings of the kingdom of God far outweigh any sacrifice you will make in this world experience.

Conclusion

We need both the warning and the encouragement of this passage. I trust God will speak into your life experience as you need it from His Word today.

I am aware that there are a number of us in this congregation who have done more than our usual share of weeping over these past weeks and months.

Psalm 30:5b

“...weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.”

Rev. 21:4

“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.”

My friends, let us not grasp the paltry pennies of this world and miss out on the glorious reality of the Kingdom of God!