

## **“Woe and Consolation”**

I Corinthians 11:17-22, 33, 12:12-13, 26; Luke 6:17-26 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn  
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*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be opened to your good news and our wills bent toward following your Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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One of the basic assumptions about being a Christian, though I'm not sure we say it out loud that often, is that we find good news in the scripture. We call these first four books of the New Testament “the gospels,” coming from the Greek word for “good news.” Certainly, preachers are trained to think of preaching as “sharing the Good News,” and encouraged to find at least a small point of hope to wrap up even the most challenging sermons.

But sometimes “good news” depends on your point of view, and there are few passages of scripture that make this more clear than Luke's take on the Beatitudes. As a general rule, people looking for good news prefer Matthew's version of the Beatitudes, because they have more blessings, and more importantly, no woes. It's the woes that are the problem, right? Luke doesn't have Jesus just handing out blessings to people who clearly need them. Luke's Jesus is setting up a tension, a division even, between who is blessed and who needs to watch out. And if we're on the wrong side of that tension, it's harder to feel like we're hearing good news. So let's look at the perspectives in this passage for a moment and see if that helps us find our way to good news.

First of all, it's important to examine our assumptions about what Jesus is doing here. We tend to think of the Beatitudes as Jesus expressing God's will and plan for the world: "You are suffering, but God is going to lift you up." But what if we set that assumption aside and considered other possible applications? On one level, it's possible to see the Beatitudes as telling us not how it will be or how it should be, but just how it is. There are four categories here, and I think this descriptive understanding can apply to at least two or three of them.

The divisions set up in Luke's Beatitudes are poor versus rich, hungry versus full, weeping versus laughing, and defamed versus flattered. Jesus tells the hungry they will be filled, and the full that they will be hungry. This isn't something we will need to wait for heaven to see happen. We all know that we've been full before, but then later we're hungry again. That's just how life goes. We've all wept at some point in our lives, only to later have a day when we're laughing again. We've even experienced our convictions and opinions gaining us positive attention in one context, only to make us an objection of derision in another context. So maybe what Jesus is really warning us about is not the hazard of laughing itself, but the danger of living like our current state is going to last forever, which we often tend to do when things are going well. It's not a condemnation against having enough to eat, but a caution against smugness and self-satisfaction.

But does this work with the distinction between poor and rich? Our experiences of personal wealth or deprivation do not usually follow this same pattern.

There are some folks who go through dramatic economic shifts throughout their lives, but most of us don't. And we certainly wouldn't assume that's normal. In fact, it seems likely that a lot of us would have trouble identifying with either designation. We don't think of ourselves as poor, but we certainly wouldn't claim to be rich either. Where does the vast realm of the middle class fit into the Beatitudes? On the one hand, in a world where 2/3rds of the population lives on less than \$10 a day<sup>1</sup>, we probably fall toward the richer end of the spectrum. But in comparison to those whose wealth runs the world, we are mere peasants, happy to be able to afford our Netflix and Hulu subscriptions, even if we're struggling with the rent.

Jesus' Sermon on the Plain, which this passage is just the beginning of, does not imagine such a world. Here there are only poor and rich, one blessed and the other warned. It is passages such as this that inspired liberation theologians such as Gustavo Gutierrez to identify the gospel principle called "God's preferential option for the poor." It's not that God loves the poor more because they're better than the rich; it's that God chooses them precisely because they're poor. And this is a distinction that Christianity has struggled with for centuries. This poor versus rich category doesn't seem to be a question of which point in your life; it seems to be set at birth, for the most part. You're either one or the other, with no bouncing back and forth between categories, even as the middle seems to sag lower and lower. Indeed, if economic mobility is God's will, then our world seems stuck in defiance, with systems

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty>

that seem designed to help the rich get richer, while the poor get poorer. The gospel makes clear where God chooses to abide in such a situation. So how do those of us living with well more than \$10 a day find good news in the face of this? Are we condemned? “You have received your consolation,” Jesus said. And poor consolation it is, when we see others receiving Jesus’ blessing. It does not feel like good news. It’s not that we want to be poor, because we definitely don’t! The rhetoric around money in our society makes poverty seem like the worst possible thing, even as the threat of it erupting in our lives, because of medical bills or rising rent, paralyzes us. Are we economically unstable enough to obtain Jesus’ blessing? Or is there a way into that good news that doesn’t involve bankruptcy?

I am a firm believer in God’s preferential option for the poor, as my theological convictions are primarily rooted in liberation theology. And yet, to assume the rich are condemned and leave it at that, with no good news on the table, is to ignore one of the most powerful theological tools we have. The path to good news is through the door of solidarity. Paul would have us understand that solidarity is the most basic of Christian practices. If we’re looking for good news in the midst of Luke’s Beatitudes that seem to separate us into opposing camps, we need to listen to Paul’s teaching about the Body of Christ. In the Body of Christ, Paul says, there are not two groups, one full of the people who are weeping and one for the people who are laughing. Rather, we are all weeping with those who weep and laughing with those who laugh. We do not let some go hungry while others are full to the point of

discomfort. Rather, we wait for and on one another, making sure that everyone is fed, for that the only way to celebrate the Lord's Supper. In the community of Christ, the division of poor versus rich isn't an issue, because we share our resources so that all are cared for. And when we find ourselves trapped in systems that perpetuate and exacerbate inequality, we work together to resist them, for we know – from scripture and from our own experience of living in community – that such division is not the will of God.

It's not that those of us who are economically stable can just choose to read Matthew's Beatitudes instead of Luke's. We can't just stop at verse 22. Rather, we must dig deeper into how the divisions between poor and rich have burrowed into our lives and our hearts and root them out by committing to deeper practices of solidarity with the poor. That is how we gain access to God's good news. That is how we enter into Jesus' blessing. I would say it's as simple as the kindergarten lesson to share, but we all know it's not that easy. Some kindergartens have lots of nice, clean toys, and some only have broken cast-offs. And some children don't have access to kindergarten at all. If we want to live within the good news of Jesus, we need to share more effectively and pro-actively than usual. That is the gospel living Christ is calling us into. That is our true consolation, the blessing that is good news for all. Hallelujah and Amen!