

Luke 6: 20-21

Then he looked up at his disciples and said: 'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.'²¹ 'Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled. 'Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

The basic content of the beatitudes in their oldest form is a word of promise to the poor, built around the affirmation that the kingdom of God is theirs (Luke 6:20). The presupposition for this affirmation is the presence and authority of Jesus. In his messianic activity, the kingdom of God is breaking in and the end-time salvation has arrived. Thus he can offer the kingdom to the poor. But that is not all. The blessings upon the poor as recipients of the kingdom are made concrete in what follows: their present hunger will be satisfied, and their present affliction will turn to laughter. The coming of the kingdom, already begun in the appearance of Jesus.... A total reversal of social status is envisioned, a point made even more vivid by the contrasting woes upon the rich in Luke's Gospel.¹

How shall we understand this promise in its original setting in the life of Jesus? These words must have been addressed to the hungry, powerless, and socially dispossessed people around Jesus. His announcement of the kingdom, with its concrete promise of a better future, must have stirred up long latent hopes for a time when justice would prevail and their present hardships would be past. They saw their present life and condition as a scandal in the eyes of God. But they looked to the future to change this. In this manner the preaching of Jesus was a "revitalization of Messianic hope. "The establishment of God's kingdom meant God was already at work exercising his rule in the world, a rule of love, righteousness, justice, and peace, in which the will of God was done. And what had begun in Jesus' own ministry in his exercise of love and compassion for the poor and acceptance of sinners, was to be fulfilled at when

¹ Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 58.

the final establishment of God's rule would take place and the total reversal of social and religious status would occur. It was this kind of hope that those around Jesus took to heart, and thus understood themselves as the "little flock" who were heirs of the coming kingdom (Luke 12:32).²

The beatitudes promise satisfaction and laughter to the poor, which is exactly what the rich now have (Luke 6:25; 16:19). And this imagery of joy and abundance is also present in those gospel traditions where the image of the eschatological banquet comes to the fore. At the meal in the coming kingdom there will be joy and laughter aplenty. What may be lacking now will then be provided. This also means that not only will the present condition of poverty and hunger and tears come to an end, but there will be a full settlement, a making-good of the present misery. While Jewish imagery of miraculous food on the table in great abundance is not present in Jesus' teaching, one can imagine something of the fine bread from meal, and oil, eggs, honey and wine at the feast.

The hungry will be filled.³

Comparison with the Matthean beatitudes: The Matthean version offers a strongly spiritualized interpretation. Matthew addresses the "poor in spirit" and "those who hunger and thirst after righteousness." Consistent with this are the blessings on the meek, the mourners, the merciful and the pure in heart. The heart is directed toward the inward condition of the recipients of the divine blessing.⁴

In Luke, however, it is quite otherwise. We find no spiritualizing additions to any of the beatitudes. The condition described as blessed belong the stark

² Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 58.

³ Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 59.

⁴ Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 75.

realities of life. The people addressed are simply and literally the poor, the hungry, the weeping and the persecuted. A respected scholar has summarized the differences succinctly in this manner: "Unlike Matthew's inward look to the condition of those whom God approves, Luke's beatitudes have external elements of poverty in view ... They are characterized by an acute sense of the miseries of the oppressed class, and by the expectation of a reversal of conditions."⁵

The second argument supporting this interpretation is drawn from the Lukan woes (Luke 6:24-26). They are notably absent in Matthew's gospel. But Luke has constructed this key sermon so that the opening beatitudes have their antithetical counterparts in the woes. And we were already able to conclude from a comparison with Matthew's version of the beatitudes that Luke has the literary poor and suffering in mind, this understanding is confirmed by the woes. For the woes are addressed to the rich, to those who can laugh, and to the well-esteemed. In each case they are the antithesis to the poor and suffering of the beatitudes. The clear social distinctions drawn here are between the haves and the have-nots, the possessors and the impoverished, those favored by society and those despised. The new and surprising element is the way in which the norms and values of society are turned upside down. The promised blessings belong to the suffering poor, while the coming woes are pronounced upon the contended rich. According to one commentator, this marks the first time in Jewish religious literature that the poor are directly called the blessed.⁶

Jesus directed his ministry from the beginning to the socially and economically deprived persons in society. It was a movement begun among the poor and dispossessed, to whom Jesus promised the good news of the kingdom and a coming time of social reversal. This, at least, is the way Luke understood Jesus'

⁵ Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 75.

⁶ Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 75-76.

ministry, according to the beatitudes.⁷

Who are the poor in the beatitudes? According to Luke, the sermon of Jesus was spoken in the presence of a great crowd of both disciples and multitudes, who had come to hear him and witness his healings (Luke 6:17, 7:1). Yet in Luke 6:20, the beatitudes are addressed specifically to the disciples. Thus, although the people are not excluded, the disciples are the special recipients of Jesus' teaching and the ones who are addressed as "you poor."⁸

Luke does seem to imply that an inseparable connection exists between genuine poverty and faithful discipleship. For this reason, the poor are promised the kingdom of God.⁹

In Luke, the poverty is blessed within the context of their response to the ministry of Jesus and the call to the kingdom of God. Thus, it is not just poverty or riches per se that is blessed or condemned, but poverty in the context of trust in God and riches in the context of rejection of God. The two go in hand for Luke. Nevertheless, there is still something of the powerful prophetic woes against exploitative rich that rings loud and clear throughout this passage. Finally, we must note the direct link between this text and Luke 4:16-21 in the theme of "good news to the poor." In fact, as a few scholars have recently suggested, the Lukan beatitudes may be a kind of early Christian commentary on Is. 61:1-2.¹⁰

Gandhi understood the Sermon on the Mount correctly: talking about non-violent resistance, he said that counter-violence was better than resignation, but that non-violence was better than counter-violence. This is also how Paul

⁷ Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 76.

⁸ Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 76.

⁹ Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 77.

¹⁰ Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 77.

interpreted the Sermon on the Mount: 'Repay no one evil for evil ... Do not be overcome by evil but overcome evil with good (Rom. 12: 17, 21). Page 129.

6: 24-26: Dangers of Wealth

²⁴ *'But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.* ²⁵ *'Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. 'Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.* ²⁶ *'Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.*

Jesus announced "Good news to the poor" in the synagogue of Nazareth. The woes in effect announce the reverse side of the coin, the bad news to the rich. We also remember that the beatitudes in Luke announce God's blessing upon the poor, who are understood in the most literal sense, and that this is quite unlike the Matthean beatitudes with their more spiritualized interpretation of the poor (Matt. 6:3-12). The corresponding woes reflect the same literal understanding. Judgment is pronounced upon the rich, the filled and those esteemed by others.

¹¹ It describes a privileged social and economic status. The woes only state with striking certainty that the future will bring about a complete reversal of conditions, in which the present status of the wealthy will be taken away.¹²

What is the origin of these "woe-sayings?" [It may have come from different sources]. It is significant to note that Luke is responsible for their placement in this opening portion of Jesus' sermon; it is also important to note that Luke has shaped the woes as a literary and theological antithesis to the beatitudes.¹³

In form, they are familiar to certain prophetic oracles of judgment in the Old Testament and the intertestamental literature (cf. Is. 1:4-5, 5:8-23); Amos 5:18; 6:1). But Lukan woes have a different group in mind. They focus on a particular

¹¹ Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 103.

¹² Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 104.

¹³ Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 104.

social and economic class, the rich. It is to this group that Luke addresses his word of warning and threat. ¹⁴

What is the specific content of each woe?

The first woe against the rich has its antithesis in the blessing upon the poor (v. 20). Each are given a reward. The poor receive the kingdom of God, while the rich receive their consolation. But in what sense are the rich consoled?

The verb in the first woe is in the present tense, in contrast to the future tense of the next two woes. This observation, when combined with the literal meaning of the verb which refers to the "receipt for a deal completed," points to the interpretation that the rich have already obtained their reward, that is, they possess what they desire in their present life of comfort and ease. They are not accused of any extraordinary injustice or dissipation. It is simply a matter of fact that they have had it good in this life and so will receive no further good in the coming age. They have used up their portion of consolation here. ¹⁵

The second and third woes further characterize the life of the rich in contrast to the poor. The "filled" and "laughing" are the antithesis of the "hungry" and "weeping." Yet a new element is introduced, namely, the coming eschatological reversal... both promise and threat. It is a promise to the poor, who now hunger and weep, but will then be satisfied and laugh (vv.21-22). But it is a threat to the rich, who now are filled and laugh (vv. 21-22), but then will hunger and mourn and weep. Twice the emphatic "now" foreshadows the complete reversal of conditions in the coming age (vv. 25, 26). Their [the rich]whole life stands under divine judgment, so that they will one day be brought low while the poor are exalted. ¹⁶

¹⁴ Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 104.

¹⁵ Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 104.

¹⁶ Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 104-105.

In the Luke's gospel as a whole Jesus causes the gravest offense by associating with the marginal people, the outcasts and sinners, and by offering good news to the poor and the exploited. Could this be the reason for the hatred, and persecution of Jesus' disciples as well? Perhaps like the true prophets, and like the Son of man himself, they [disciples] spoke and acted on behalf of the outcasts and sinners, the poor and the needy and against the privileged who profited from the injustices of the status quo. At least this interpretation seems possible within the context of the woes against the rich and the whole of Luke's gospel and his concern for the poor.¹⁷

Intention for Luke

Taken as a whole, through these woes, Jesus, as God's final messenger, announces the dawn of the kingdom of God, of which the poor are the blessed recipients and from which the rich are excluded. Although the rich may prosper now, the coming kingdom will bring an end to their present status of privilege and prosperity.¹⁸

If these woes are part of the original Jesus tradition, they would most likely have been directed against those who opposed Jesus' association with the outcasts and sinners and those who rejected his demand for a radical separation from possessions as the cost of discipleship. In fact, a few interpreters have used this text, among others, as evidence that the historical Jesus called for an ascetic lifestyle and a total rejection of wealth as sinful. However, the evidence is overwhelming against Jesus' advocacy of ascetism (금욕주의) and questionable at best with regard to his total denial of possession. This life-style would be more characteristic of John the Baptist or Qumran (7:33-34).¹⁹

¹⁷ Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 105-106.

¹⁸ Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 106.

¹⁹ Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 106.

How did Luke interpret these woes? If they represent his own reshaping of the Jesus tradition, whom does Luke have in mind by the rich and filled and satisfied and esteemed? A few have dared to suggest that Luke was essentially hostile to the rich and powerful and so here preaches a message of eschatological revenge against them. Other text in Luke's gospel, however, will show that he does not reject the rich outright, only their misuse of possessions. Moreover the idea of an eschatological revenge is not in the text. It is true that there is an eschatological reversal of conditions in the coming age. But it is a matter of justice, not revenge. The poor finds their needs met while the rich now experience what the poor once lacked. The rich are not destroyed, nor are they made to suffer anything more than the poor have suffered. It is a matter, that is, of doing justice. ²⁰

We believe Luke's intention is open and clear concerning his intended hearers. We would argue that Luke is thinking of the rich in social and economic terms, with reference to the believing community of his day. It should be noted that both the beatitudes and woes are spoken to the disciples of Jesus (v. 20). Luke [seems to] address these woes to wealthy Christian hearers (or would-be adherents), who have not yet freed themselves from their love of possessions or status. The woes are thus a word of warning to these rich Christians, to the effect that they must change their way of life or find themselves ultimately excluded from the kingdom. ²¹

In sum, the beatitude and woes contain both a promise to "poor Christians" who have abandoned their trust in earthly securities and accepted the call to radical discipleship, and a warning to "rich Christians" that discipleship and wealth are fundamentally in conflict. The announced reversal of roles between the rich and

²⁰ Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 107-107.

²¹ Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor*, 107.

the poor in the coming age serves to underscore the warning and heighten the promise.²²

Jean Kim's note: [While I accept the interpretation of Pilgrim, I would add that Luke might have meant to include all the poor and rich in his society also considering the extremely divided population between the rich and poor and oppression by the Romans and Jewish collaborators and Temple authorities in his day. (refer to Last Weeks).

If we understand how his Roman -occupied society was oppressive and exploitative, we can't blame for Luke what he said. It seems appropriate to think that his blessing and woes were addressed to the rich and poor who are majority of people.

²² Walter E. Pilgrim, *Good News to the Poor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1981), 107.

