

JESUS' RX FOR SUCCESSFUL LIVING

Luke 6:17–26

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The Scripture today is found in Luke 6:17–26. Actually, it stems off of the action begun in verse 12 of that chapter, where Jesus went out into the hills to pray and prayed all night. When it was morning, He then did two things. He first named the Twelve to be apostles. And then, secondly, He gave the sermon, often called the Sermon on the Plain or the Sermon on the Level Place. We'll look at the first part of that sermon today.

“He went down with them and stood on a level place. A large crowd of his disciples was there and a great number of people from all over Judea, from Jerusalem, and from the coast of Tyre and Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by evil spirits were cured, and the people all tried to touch him, because power was coming from him and healing them all. Looking at his disciples, he said: ‘Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. 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. But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. 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. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for that is how their fathers treated the false prophets’” (Luke 6:17–26, NIV).

I'm reminded of a little plaque that adorns many a pulpit desk, which reminds me of a minister as he opens his mouth to preach: “Sir, we would see Jesus.” That's something that I'm always

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praying as I minister...that we would see Jesus together. It's when Jesus is shown and when Jesus is present that people are attracted to Him. That's why, as you open the gospel today, you'll find people coming to Jesus from all over. They were walking as far as 90 to 100 miles from Jerusalem up to Galilee to hear Him. They were coming from names that are in the news still today—Lebanon, Tyre and Sidon—walking that distance in a southeastern direction, over to Galilee to hear Jesus. They were, interestingly enough, not going there, not walking, just to see Him do His works of healing, but the Gospel of Luke explicitly tells us that they were coming also to hear Him. Here were people who wanted Jesus' words and actions to shape their life. So we come to this Sermon on the Plain.

There are many who feel that this Sermon on the Plain, found in Luke 6, is a Reader's Digest, a condensed version of the Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5–7. It very well might be. The outlines are similar, and there's a great deal of material that is omitted in Luke 6 that is found in the Sermon on the Mount. Probably both sermons are actually condensations of what Jesus would have actually ministered. It takes only three minutes to read the Sermon on the Plain aloud. Everyone knows you can't preach a good sermon in three minutes. It's doubtful that Jesus preached that sermon in three minutes. What we find in the Gospel of Luke is the essence of what He said. The condensed, boiled-down version.

The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5–7 only takes about ten minutes to read aloud. As lengthy as that sermon is, it still would not have reflected the totality of what Jesus said, but rather the condensed version. It very well may be that Luke 6 is condensed from Matthew 5–7. The other possibility is that Jesus gave the same sermon more than once. That wouldn't surprise me, because in Mark 1:14–15 we read that in Jesus' tour of Galilee, when He first began

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preaching, He went around preaching in all their synagogues and saying, “The time is fulfilled. The kingdom of heaven is at hand. Repent and believe the gospel.”

Four points to Jesus' message. Wherever He went, He preached the same sermon until it became drilled into His disciples, that it was the essence of what He was saying. So, because Jesus traveled from place to place and preached many times, it should not surprise us that we should find the content of one sermon parallel to another sermon. It would also be very helpful for the disciples to learn through repetition. I certainly didn't get the Sermon on the Mount the first time I read through it. And you didn't either. It took us many times through it to get the drift of what Jesus was saying. It's the same thing with the Sermon on the Plain. It takes hearing it more than once to really live it in our hearts.

When we open the Scriptures to the Sermon on the Plain, we find that it begins just like the Sermon on the Mount, with a section of beatitudes. That is, Jesus is concerned first with our character. He's saying to us, what kind of person are you becoming? He's not concerned about our activity first. He's not concerned about the gifts and talents we have as His followers. He's concerned about the modeling of our life. In the inner essence of our life, what are we? He articulates, in the sermon in Luke, four qualities of being that He wants to be present in the disciples. The sermon is to the disciples. “Looking upon the disciples” it says. We find these four qualities of being that are matched by four woes or four opposite qualities He does not want present in our life.

The blessings that He gives are upon the poor, the hungry, the weepers, and the persecuted. The first blessing, the blessing upon the poor, is matched by the first woe. It is a woe upon the rich. The second blessing upon the hungry is matched by the woe upon the well-fed. The third blessing upon the weepers is matched by a woe upon the laughers. The fourth blessing upon the

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persecuted is matched by a woe on the popular. Jesus says that a person who lives by the beatitudes, by the blessings, winds up like the prophets—persecuted. And the person who lives by the qualities articulated by the woes, winds up like the prophets—patronized. One style of life produces rigor and hardship. The prophets were persecuted. The other style of life produces the prophets about whom it is said, “They’re just wonderful people,” and it results in the patronized of the prophets.

When Jesus gives these blessings upon the poor, those in the liberation theology movement have picked up on this—and we especially see this in South America now and third world countries all over the world—that are saying, “What Jesus is saying is that that the poor have a right to take from the rich who have everything and redistribute the goods of society. Therefore, Jesus is “endorsing” liberation theology by promoting this kind of social consciousness among the oppressed. Leaving aside, for a moment, the whole discussion that God stands abhorrently of those who withhold from the poor and who exploit the poor, which we know Scripture is very strong on, at the same time, the liberation theologians ignore the next paragraph, “Love your enemies.” He doesn’t say, “Take your gun and kill a capitalist for Jesus.” But He says, “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,” and teaches a different inner attitude when you are oppressed. A subject in itself, but I didn’t feel like I could talk about the Sermon on the Plain without saying at least that much about it.

What this message means to us:

The word “blessing” is sort of a technical word that we’ve somewhat squandered in our language. TV personalities will close their show by saying, “God bless you.” There’s not a whole lot of content in that. Or when somebody sneezes we say, “God bless you!” And if somebody gets a new car for their sixteenth birthday, “God blessed!” This word, “blessing,” is used in the

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New Testament fifty-five times. Never once does it refer to something that is outside of us that is a good or a benefit or a product received. It refers to an inner condition of life that has two components: the first is that God approves; secondly, it produces an inward state of joy. So when Jesus is saying, “Blessed are the poor,” He is saying, “This is what God approves—this character disposition is what God approves. And what God approves, therefore, produces the consequent inner state of wellbeing and joy. With that in mind, we want to try to look at Jesus’ prescription for a successful life. In the beatitudes and the woes, He gives four qualities of what He deems to be a successful life.

I. The first quality that He articulates is the quality of absolute and complete dependence upon God.

That’s the whole meaning of the term “poor.” Matthew goes on in his account of the Sermon on the Mount to tell us that the word “poor” is qualified by “blessed are the poor in spirit.” Jesus is not endorsing poverty for poverty’s sake, but is talking about an inner disposition. There are really two kinds of poverty.

A. The one kind of poverty, a lot of people in this room know about. It’s when you want to go out and eat you find that the revenue source will only buy you a Big Mac and French fries. And that is poverty! Which I indulge in periodically.

B. But there’s a second kind of poverty. That’s the kind of poverty Jesus is talking about, backed up by the particular Greek word that Luke employs. It is the idea of destitution. Sort of like what we see in Ethiopia. The kind of people who don’t even have enough to get Big Macs, and don’t have enough to get anything. They are totally destitute, totally thrown upon the mercy of others. Totally dependent upon what someone else will do for them. That’s the idea that Jesus has here. Blessed are the destitute. Why is this such a big thing? Why does God approve the destitute?

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Because it's a condition of discipleship. We don't get into the kingdom of God unless we are destitute. Unless we say, "Lord, there's absolutely no way that I can earn salvation. There's nothing I have that can bring that. There's no way that I can qualify on my own merits to be Your disciple. And in spite of whatever's in my bank account, and maybe I have millions of dollars in my bank account, whatever is there is not enough to buy eternal life. I'm a beggar when it comes to that."

So life in Christ begins when we say, "Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling." Lord, I can't do anything about my relationship with You, about the sins I've committed, about my need for eternal life. If anything's going to be done for me, it has to be done by You. Jesus is saying, "Blessed are the poor."

Whereas, the opposite, "Blessed are the rich," in the very literal sense is that "they've had it." Everything has been had here and now. Not only does the life of a disciple begin with a condition of destitution, but we're meant to live the Christian life with that kind of attitude. Not the attitude of haughtiness or of "I've got it together" or "Look at all I can do and look at my merits and talents and abilities," and that kind of thing. The Laodicean church got into that sort of thing. They got a lot of money in their bank account and were feeling rather good about the status of their church. Jesus writes them and says to them through, the apostle John, "You say, 'I am rich: I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked" (Revelation 3:17). That is to say that the kind of life the Lord blesses is the kind of life that is lived out in continuing dependence upon Him and doesn't get smug and self-satisfied with the attitude, "I've done all the growing I need to do. I know everything I need to know. That's all there is." The Christian life is completed by attitude of destitution. Because, either by the coming of Christ for me or His raising me from the dead, if I

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die, I am a totally dependent person on what He's going to do for me. There is no motor that I could strap on my back and follow Him with—under my own power—when He returns again. When He spits out of the skies and comes for me, if I'm alive, no jetpack is going to get me to where He is. I'm dependent upon Him for being raised. If I've had to lie down in death, there's only one person who's going to spring me out of that coffin and bring me back to life. That's Jesus. So all the way through, Jesus says, "Absolute dependence upon God is necessary in your life."

It's interesting as you read on in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus gives the story to match the first beatitude with the first woe. He tells the story of the rich man and Lazarus. It's the only parable Jesus ever told where a character is named. The person named is a guy who had been a beggar and who'd had the dogs come and lick his sores. Those of us who have been in the Orient have actually seen that happen. I think of the irony of that. The rich man who was in hell, had on earth had everything. I'm sure that, if you'd had asked him for his calling card, he would've handed you a gold embossed card with his company seal or logo on it and a very prestigious address. He would have been on the board of directors of various charities and organizations and be the kind of person to look to. But Jesus says, "Because he doesn't have God in this age, then in the age to come, he doesn't even get a name." And because Lazarus—who didn't have a name on earth that anyone knew—trusted in God, in the age to come, he has a name. Blessed are the destitute, for theirs is the kingdom of God. God gives them His reign and His rule.

II. The second quality that Jesus approves is a lifestyle filled with hunger.

"Blessed are those who hunger now, for you will be satisfied... Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry" (Luke 6:21,25). Jesus is not putting an endorsement here on a rigid kind of asceticism, in which you go around looking glum all the time because you haven't eaten.

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He heavily criticized the Pharisees for their fasting habits. We know that Jesus knows how to enjoy a good meal. In Luke 5:29, Levi threw a feast for Jesus and Jesus went and enjoyed a good meal. His disciples had been charged with not fasting like John's disciples and the Pharisees. And Jesus Himself had the accusation made against Him that He came eating and drinking. So this phrase "blessed are the hungry," does not denote the idea that Jesus was going around with a long, lean look on His face.

In fact, there are some people who mistakenly think that Jesus is the author of glumness. He's not. Jesus recognizes, though, that there are all kinds of hungers. There is not simply hunger for food, which is a very real hunger, but there is also hunger for acceptance. Maybe that describes you. You wish you would be accepted by someone. Hunger for a kind word, hunger for an embrace, hunger for praise. Maybe you're involved in a family situation with a child who is difficult and you wish that there would be a breakthrough between that child and you.

You don't have to be in war to be a prisoner of war. I know prisoners of war within our own congregation. You are in a captive situation in which you really have no choice but to remain. You cannot escape and you don't know when you are going to be liberated from that. You're hungry for more freedom in your life. But Jesus says that there's something that's more important than hunger for praise, hunger for food, even hunger for freedom, if that's what you're looking for. There's a hunger after righteousness. That means a hunger for God Himself.

What the Lord is saying to us in this beatitude, in the way the beatitude is found in Matthew's Gospel is, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness..." He is saying to us that when you pray, it may be necessary for you to pray at times, "O Lord, instead of rearranging my circumstances, rearrange me in the circumstance and help me to hunger after You and be like You in this pressing thing." I heard someone say this week that a symbol of Christianity is not a

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circle. A circle gives the idea of inclusiveness and symmetry and order—it's perfect. But the symbol of Christianity is a cross. There's conflict in the center. I thought about how true this is. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is not buying into this circular idea of "everything's wonderful." But in the middle of our being a disciple of Jesus Christ, there's conflict. Conflict between what He wants us to do and what we want to do. Conflict. Jesus says, "Blessed are you when you hunger for righteousness, when in the midst of your conflict you're wanting to be like Me in that conflict."

III. The third quality that Jesus looks at is that we have a heart and eyes of compassion.

"Blessed are those who weep now for you will laugh" (Luke 6:21). The corresponding woe is, "Woe to you who laugh now for you will mourn and weep" (verse 25). The weepers and the laughers. We know, again, that we cannot take these words to promote the idea that Jesus came to bring a kill-joy attitude. We know that people loved to be in Jesus' presence and He was criticized because people had such a good time with Him. I cannot believe, as some have taught, that Jesus never laughed, or that He never expressed a grin. I can't accept that of Jesus. His words are too filled with joy. I don't think He made up jokes just for the sake of being funny. But He could see the ridiculous side of life, like, why take the piece of sawdust out of your brother's eye when you've got a log in your own? That's kind of a ridiculous statement. There is a whole book that's been written called *The Humor of Christ*. So that statement, "Blessed are those who weep," is not a putdown on joy. Rather, it is a weeping that is sensitive to evil, to a sense of injustice, to the plight of others, and to suffering in the world. Of a person who remains tender to the things God is tender about, who does not become callus in his life and lack the quality of mercy.

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I had the most wonderful thing happen this week—I probably shouldn't tell this because it could be misunderstood—a person, not a member of this congregation, sold a piece of property and wanted to give a tenth of it away. He came in contact with a member of this church, who encouraged him that it was a good idea. Being a faithful member of this church, he said, “Why don't you give it to the Christian Center?” He said, “Maybe some of it could go there, but they could pass on the rest.” The check came in, and when I saw it, I about jumped out of my shoes. Then came the designation. The church actually got about six hundred dollars of it, and fifteen thousand dollars was designated for Mother Teresa's Mission of Mercy in Calcutta. The theological orthodox in me says that's a different theology. But the compassion side of me says, “Inasmuch as you've done it to the least of these, you've done it unto Me” (Matthew 25:40). I thought—as I signed our check and sent off those fifteen thousand dollars to Mother Teresa, “We're probably the only Assemblies of God church in the world who's ever sent a fifteen thousand dollar check to Mother Teresa.” I love to see that dear lady when she comes on TV. You just sense instantly, “Here's a person who's in touch with the compassion of Christ.”

When we think of compassion, it's probably easiest for us to think in terms of the person out there—the orphans, the famine victims—but I think every one of us could think of someone for whom we feel like weeping. Maybe every one of us could think of something that we should weep for in our own life. What Jesus is saying to us is, “Stay sensitive. Keep a heart and eyes of compassion out toward others, toward the distant others and toward the near others and family and toward yourself as well.” Jesus is telling His disciples, “If you're going to follow Me, you cannot live the carefree life. You're going to have occasion to weep.” Paul says to the Galatians, “I am in travail.” And the word he used for “travail” is the same word used to describe child labor pains. “I am in child labor pains until Christ is formed in you,” because in following Christ,

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he picked up burdens he wouldn't have had if he hadn't been a Christian. Jesus is saying to His men, who had just begun following Him, "By following Me, you're going to pick up burdens and loads you've never picked up if you hadn't followed Me. But come along and join Me as I minister to the hurt of the world."

IV. The fourth thing that Jesus tells us about successful living is that we need absolute loyalty to Him above the opinions of others.

"Blessed are you when they hate you, exclude you, insult you and reject you" (Luke 6:22).

Notice the qualifier "...because of the Son of Man." Jesus never intended for us to be weird for the sake of being weird.

I used to hear, when I was a kid, a lot of sermons on God's peculiar people. Being a peculiar person. We had a lot of people that looked peculiar, alright. But I'm not so sure that the peculiarity was for His sake. It was more to give us a barometer by which to measure one another's holiness. But Jesus says, "Because of Me, you're going to stand out." On the job, in the office, in the classroom...I think everybody here knows what it is when you let your Christian witness shine. When it comes time to tell the jokes and do things and have certain kinds of conversations, you find yourself withdrawing or giving a positive witness.

I was talking to a guy one day on the golf course. He'd been assigned to our group and kept saying the name of the Lord in a way that was not in praise and it took me a few holes until I began to say to myself, "If he can use it in damnation, I can use it in praise." So he'd miss a putt and say something. I'd make a putt and say, "Praise the Lord!"

We need those times in which we stand up for Jesus, even if it makes people look at us a little cross-eyed. William Barclay says, "These blessings and woes of Jesus are bombshells because they take the accepted standards of the world and turn them upside down. The people Jesus

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would call happy, the world would call wretched. And the people Jesus would call wretched, the world would call happy.” Jesus is saying to us, basically, “If you set your energies and your heart to obtain the world’s values, you’ll get them, but that’s all you’ll get, nothing more.” I love the value Jesus placed upon human life. It’s reflected in these beatitudes and throughout all His teaching. His emphasis is, the purpose is more important than things. There are people who somehow think they’re better persons because they’ve got all kinds of things. Jesus is saying, “If that’s your view of life, that you’re important because of the things you have, how poor you are, that your identity is to be determined by things and quantities.

If I were to tell you, “The Lord’s coming for you at six tonight and you can pack one suitcase and take that with you.” What would you put in that one suitcase out of all your life? I don’t know if the Lord’s going to come at six o’clock but I know when He comes, you’re not going to get anything in a suitcase. You’re going to have to go without the suitcase. The only thing you can take into His presence is what He’s done in you. Jesus, knowing that is upon us, says, “Why invest all your priorities in the accumulation of things that makes up life—all these trappings – when it’s you that is really important. You are rich—even if you don’t have a thing—if you’re in Me.

So Jesus promises us this life. Someone has said, “If you follow Jesus, you will have a life of unparalleled inner joy and unparalleled outer turmoil.” The two things He promises His disciples: that they’ll be joyful and they will be in trouble, because the cross is at the center of the conflict. Total reliance upon Him, a lifestyle filled with hunger, a heart and eyes of compassion and loyalty to Him above other’s opinions.

I was driving down the freeway, coming back from the airport, a few weeks ago. There was a car that was driving in all four lanes. It was obviously a drunk. I’d never seen anybody drunk

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driving. I wish someone, a policeman from our congregation, had been with me and we'd had authority. I started following this guy. Everybody was getting out of his way and slowing down. I said to myself, "That guy's got to get off the road before he kills somebody." I drove up right behind him and started weaving with him with my bright lights on and my hand continually on the horn. I thought, "If there are any patrolmen around, they'll hear and see this—two crazy people going down the road." I got the guy to slow down a little and he weaved a little less, but I still couldn't get him off the road. I realized I was scaring everybody in my car. I finally pulled over. I'd like to straighten out this weaving.

Last night I had a dream. I at another church, in the vicinity of the south, where they have a basement and rooms off to the side. Some of our pastoral staff was off in a room to the side. We had the table set for kind of a picnic dinner. In the side room, there were several people. They'd closed the door for a while, to get a moment's rest, I guess. They didn't come for lunch. I thought something was wrong. I went to open the door and they were passed out and gas was coming out of the room. There was carbon monoxide in the room. I instantly recognized what was happening and let out an incredible scream, "Help!" I was just about to run across to the door on the other side—risk my own life to get some air circulating—when I woke up.

I got to thinking about both of those stories when I came to this section of Scripture. Jesus realizes that we're just wobbling and weaving down the road of life. His Word is saying, "Get straightened out." There are others of us who have gotten carbon-monoxidized with life. A drowsiness and heaviness has come upon us and we don't realize we've even passed out and gotten away from the Lord. It's so easy, as a disciple of Jesus, to settle into a spirit of lethargy and to inwardly grow cold to the Lord, while externally we're going through all the religious motions. I believe the Lord, therefore, appoints this teaching to us to talk about the kind of

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prescription for a successful life that He wants for us as a sort of wake up call. He says to us, “Are you absolutely depending upon Me in your life? Are you trusting Me wholly with your decisions? Are you trusting Me with the conflict you’re involved in? Are you staying sensitive to the need of others? Sensitive to the need within your own life? Are you staying hungry for what’s right or have you gotten hungry for other things that has brought a stupor to your life? Are you hungry toward Me? Are you ready to be loyal to Me about everything else, including your own will?” He says that to us to get to us if we’re weaving or to wake us if we’re sleeping.

Closing Prayer

Lord Jesus, we thank You that Your Word speaks to us so clearly. I want to take this moment to pray for Your flock. We are the sheep of Your pasture. Lord Jesus, I pray for those in this body today for whom these last few moments have been moments of the opening of the inner heart and they say, “That’s me! That’s me that’s going to sleep in my relationship with Jesus. Stir me up.” I think, Lord, of what You said to the Ephesian church, that they were to remember and return to their first love. Let us do that in our heart no matter what our external conditions may be, whether they are plentiful or sparse. We want the basic condition of our life to be one that absolutely relies upon You and clings to You and seeks Your righteousness and remains tender and strong toward You. Do that for us Lord. We give You thanks. In Christ’s name. Amen.