

A Sermon for Ash Wednesday
St. Luke Luke 6:20-26
by Peter Bockoven

20 And he lifted up his eyes on 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 shall be satisfied. “Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh. **22** “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! **23** Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets. **24** “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. **25** “Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. “Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. **26** “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

- I. Our Gospel lesson describes Jesus preaching one of his many sermons. It follows Jesus going up to a mountain to pray, and Jesus healing the people in the crowd from diseases and the possession of demons. These things show us that Christ and his ministry brings life and healing. Because Christ's ministry was primarily a preaching of the Gospel. But that wasn't all that Christ taught. Christ's main purpose was to comfort with his gospel; but he also warned people who were opposing him and the gospel. So Christ does in our section. Christ warns some among the crowd, and pronounces “Woes” upon them. And he comforts others among the crowd, and pronounces them “Blessed.”
- II. Here Christ teaches that those who think that they are rich in this life will be disappointed. Because they do not look forward or to or desire to receive those things that last into eternal life. They do not hunger or thirst for the things that Christ would give them: therefore they do not receive it. Not because being rich is sinful — because Scripture teaches that wealth and all earthly possessions are gifts from God — but because they used or regarded their riches in the wrong way: in a way that prevented them from repenting.
- III. And here Christ teaches that those who think that they are poor in this life will be satisfied. Because they look forward to and desire to receive those things that last into eternal life, this being a fruit of faith or trust in Christ, which is the essence of being his disciple. Not because being poor is a virtue that pleases God — for some poor people do not trust in God through Christ — but because they regarded their poverty in the right way: as something given to them, not from an angry God, but from a loving Father in Christ, who will one day relieve his people from all that they suffer from in this life by the glory that he will give them in Christ in eternal life. So the Psalmist writes, Psalm 16: “You will show me the path of life. In your presence is the fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”
- IV. But if riches do not inherently displease God—and if poverty does not inherently please him—why does Christ point out the poor and the rich as distinct groups? Why does he comfort the poor as a group, and warn the rich as a group? Simply because, among the crowd that he was preaching to, there were these two kinds of people: those troubled and burdened, seeking help from God; and those proud and comfortable, not truly desiring

Christ and his gifts. Those who were seeking Christ in this case were the poor; and those who were opposing him were rich. The Gospel isn't teaching us that it is better to be poor than it is to be rich; it is not teaching us that being poor pleases God, and being rich angers God. Instead it is teaching us that if we are to be Christ's disciples, we need to recognize the nature of life in this world, and have a proper attitude toward it. This life is not eternal: therefore we do not set our ultimate hope on it, or anything in it. This life is not eternal: we do not despair when it is difficult, and we do not forsake God when it is easy. In short, in all things, in poverty and in riches, in good times and in bad times, in health and in sickness, we set our hope and trust in God alone, the Father of Jesus Christ, who promises to bless us spiritually and eternally in the kingdom of his Son.

- V. Culturally we tend to go back and forth between desiring a rich life or a poor life: being rich, that is, having much: and being poor, that is, having little. Some desire to maximize their life, attaining all that they can, doing all that they can, living it up to the full. Others seek a life of quiet and peace, having few things, doing few things, living simply and humbly. Is any one way better than the other? Is a busy life better than a simple life? In themselves, no. What matters only, is whether or not one is in Christ. If one is not in Christ, it doesn't matter how rich he is—he will truly be disappointed. If one is not in Christ, it doesn't matter how poor he is—he will never truly be relieved. For Christ is the true remedy we need for all the pain in life: and he is far greater than all earthly riches, before whom all earthly riches are like dirt in comparison. If a poor one is in Christ, then he has the assurance and comfort that his earthly troubles will one day be removed, since God is his loving Father through Christ. And if a rich one is in Christ, then he has the assurance and comfort that all his earthly riches, though they will pass away, will be restored to a far greater degree, since God is his loving Father through Christ.
- VI. Friends, on this Ash Wednesday, the beginning of Lent, we begin a special walk with Christ, as we remember his brutal passion that he endured for us, to rescue us from the world, to save us from sin and death, and to draw us to eternal life through him. This season, with its climax in Holy Week, lays before us the climax of human history, its true high point, until Jesus finally returns. Everything that we need for our life and salvation and eternal happiness is contained in this history of Christ and his suffering, death, burial, and resurrection.
- VII. And to receive this in the right way, this season begins with a reminder of this earthly life: that we are mortal. That we will one day pass away into the dust. That we have nothing of permanency in this life: but all things are transitory. These reminders are given to us, so that we might repent: that is, acknowledge who and what we are by ourself. We are not what we are supposed to be. We are sinners who have offended God. Therefore we deserve his anger. But, in Christ, we are what we are supposed to be. We are God's children, having been forgiven all our sins through the blood of Christ. We receive in Christ not God's anger, but his love, compassion, and mercy.
- VIII. The Gospel urges us then, to repent: to recognize that we, by ourselves are poor ones; and to recognize that we, in Christ, are rich ones. We are poor ones; for whom Christ himself became poor, for whom he hungered, for whom he wept, for whose sake he was hated

and despised. But we are rich ones, to whom God gives consolation through Christ; who have been filled with the fullness of Christ; who laugh and rejoice now in Christ; whom God speaks well of, forgiving them all their sins, for the sake of his Son.

- IX. So, are you poor in this life? Or are you rich in this life? No matter the answer, these things don't define you: for both earthly poverty and riches, just as you will, will pass away. Let the poor one forget his poverty, and let the rich one forget his riches: for we have Christ. God's Son, our Lord.