

## Teaching of Jesus – Luke 6:17-26 (also, Jeremiah 17:5-10)

"Oh, dear Lord, you made many, many poor people.  
I realize, of course, it's no shame to be poor,  
But it's no great honour either!  
So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?"

(These are the opening lines to the song *If I were a rich man*, sung by the character Tevye (Tev-ia) in the musical and film *Fiddler on the roof*.)

Would it be too hard for us to imagine a similar prayer being uttered by all poor people wherever they are in the world?

Two weeks ago, looking through the Church Times, my attention was drawn to an article on the Joseph Rowntree Foundation annual report on UK Poverty<sup>1</sup>; it was published at the end of January (I downloaded it – it's 176 pages!).

Quoting from the Foreword, "It is a bleak read. It shows that:

- Over 1 in 5 people in the UK (21%) are in poverty – 14.3 million people
- Of these, 8.1 million are working-age adults
- 4.3 million are children
- 1.9 million are pensioners.

These numbers should shock us, but they tend not to. They have become wearily familiar. And as raw statistics, they risk masking the human stories of the grinding, challenging reality for families who face a constant battle just to afford basic items, let alone build lives of dignity or progress."

(The report refers to poverty, deep poverty and very deep poverty – measures of the lowest incomes relative to average incomes. Around the UK, and indeed around the world where similar comparisons are made, these vary according to the society in which the person lives.)

In the Church Times, on the same page as their summary of the UK Poverty report, Tearfund had placed a large advert with a title (in capitals) *BREAKING FREE FROM EXTREME POVERTY*. In developing countries, such as South Sudan to which Tearfund was referring, it is common to refer to absolute poverty – where income is so low that many millions of people cannot meet basic survival needs – food, water and shelter – as well as experiencing a lack of essential services such as healthcare and education.

Well, today we start to look at the teachings of Jesus from the perspective of Luke in his so named Gospel.

And whilst Luke is concerned about many things, he is wary of money. Throughout his Gospel he is using his carefully collected material to show his readers (including us!) what bad effects wealth and

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2025) UK Poverty 2025

comfort can have on the human soul. The effects can be so ingrained that those who are affected don't even know. Those who don't have to worry about their lives end up not worrying about anybody's life.

The theme of poverty and wealth runs strongly through Luke's Gospel, beginning with Mary's song of praise, that we know as the Magnificat, words found only in Luke, it includes – "Casting down the mighty from their thrones, and lifting up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

And at the very start of his ministry Jesus reads from Isaiah (again, unique to Luke) – "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." This was why Jesus had come; this was his manifesto for what he would teach and do; his ministry was to focus on the outcast and marginalised.

When you read the four Gospels several stories overlap. But there are many stories unique to Luke.

It is only in Luke that we find the story of the Good Samaritan, the story Jesus told in response to the question "who is my neighbour." The Samaritan, as opposed to the Priest or the Levite, uses his own money to care for a stranger. "Go and do likewise" Jesus commanded. Loving one's neighbour includes financial generosity.

There's also the story of the rich fool. Do you remember? – the landowner who had such good crops from his farms that he decided to pull down his barns and build bigger ones. But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you. ... So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.' Through this parable Jesus criticises selfish accumulation rather than using wealth for the benefit of others.

It is only Luke who tells the story of the rich man who wears fine purple and eats sumptuously every day, the man with no name, and the beggar named Lazarus, who with his sores, sits at the rich man's garden gate. Through this parable Jesus warns us that neglecting the poor has eternal consequences.

And it is only in Luke's gospel where we can find the story of Zacchaeus's life-changing encounter with Jesus. He immediately commits to giving half of his wealth to the poor and repaying those he cheated. Unlike the rich fool and the rich man, Zacchaeus understands that wealth should be used for justice and generosity.

Returning to the Gospel reading. Whereas in Matthew's gospel there is the Sermon on the Mount, we know this as the Beatitudes, Luke has the Sermon on the Plain, perhaps a level area or plateaux within the same mountainous area.

Luke may be recording for us the same teaching that Matthew has, but he's shortened it for his particular readers. But it could also be a different occasion; after all, isn't it obvious that everything that Jesus said and did over his three years of ministry isn't written down for us? Otherwise, he didn't say very much!

Matthew's version has eight "Blessed are those..." Beatitudes, with a spiritual emphasis.

Luke has four positive “Blessed are you...” Beatitudes balanced with four negative “woe to you...” Beatitudes. The four woes are a reverse of the first four Beatitudes. With Luke’s version there is more of a social emphasis and a warning against wealth.

But what is the meaning of “Blessed” used here? Surely it doesn’t mean that we should wish poverty on someone as a blessing from God?

No! God has not blessed someone with poverty, or hunger, or sadness. It’s not the same as “O Lord, bless the sick” or “O Lord, bless *so-and-so*.” The original texts of both Matthew and Luke uses the Greek word *makarios*, which conveys a sense of being fortunate, favoured, or in a state of deep well-being. It’s a two syllable bless-ed because it’s used as a noun or adjective to attribute the quality of bless-ed-ness to a subject. Understanding this doesn’t make these Beatitudes easy.

Does this mean that poverty is good? Again, no! Jesus is not saying that being poor is good. Rather, he is recognising a dependence on God now, not in the future – the poor have no illusions of self-sufficiency and are now more likely to turn to and to rely on God.

Through the woes Jesus is criticising worldly values – those who are rich and comfortable (especially if they ignore the needs of others) may not see their need for God and are warned of eternal consequences. Actually, in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus is saying, “woe to you,” – you who are rich and comfortable (especially if you ignore the needs of others), you may not see your own need of God, and you are warned of eternal consequences. Put like this, it’s not so easy to hear.

Unlike in the Joseph Rowntree UK Poverty report we’re challenged us to think beyond simple financial definitions of poverty and wealth. Jesus is not saying, “If you have money, woe to you,” or “if you are poor, you are automatically righteous”. Each one of us, whether rich, poor or somewhere in between, is called to put our faith and trust in God, recognising our dependence on him, and recognising that all that we have ultimately belongs to God.

Joseph Rowntree was a Quaker businessman who used his confectionary business wealth to counter social issues of the day. The JR Foundation continues this work advocating for social justice and help for the poor.

This last week a recently married older couple in Swansea donated two houses to a homeless charity. They had planned to include the homeless charity in their wills, but decided that the need was now.

If we can only buy Fairtrade bananas that helps farmers avoid extreme poverty, then that’s what we must do.

Luke’s Gospel challenges each of us, regardless of financial status, to examine our attitude toward wealth, generosity and justice. As we continue through Luke over the next few months, remember what Jeremiah wrote of God, “I the LORD test your mind and search the heart.”

Also from Jeremiah, “Bless-ed are those who trust in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD.”

Amen

James Parsons, 15 February 2025