

**Questioning Our Values:
“Rethinking Our Riches”
Luke 6:20-26**

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Buy a cup of coffee from any fast food restaurant and somewhere on the cup you will likely find these words, CAUTION: CONTENTS MAY BE HOT. What you need to wake you up can also scald your tongue. So beware, say the makers, and keep us all out of court.

Something similar could be said about the Beatitudes of Jesus. These formulas for bliss are also bombshells for life. They are flashes of lightening across the landscape of our ordered lives. As William Barclay says, “The Beatitudes of Jesus turn standard values upside down.”

So, now that you have been properly warned, here we go. *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.”*

THE FREEDOM OF POVERTY

Blessed are you who are poor. On the surface, the statement is scandalous. There have been times in my life when I did not have two nickels to rub together. In more recent times, I have been able to live comfortably. In spite of the fact that I like to tell my children about walking two miles up hill both ways to milk cows in the cold of winter without even a bucket to hold the milk, the good old days were not so hot.

There are two words in the Bible for poor. One refers to the poor who find it a constant struggle to make ends meet, to pay the bills, to provide for family. I grew up like that. We were poor but proud. I was taught this beatitude as a child and told to be proud that we did not indulge in drink and dances and delights like our neighbors who cavorted with friends in high places.

The word for poor here in Luke 6:20 is a different word. It is destitute poverty. It is Lazarus begging at the rich man’s gate. It is the prodigal eating with the pigs. It is hitting rock bottom, and having nobody who cares one way or another. What could possibly be blissful about that?

Was it not St. Paul himself who said, *“If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing”?*

What seems scandalous on the surface has a truth at its core that the wise will understand. We are all poor. *“Dust we are and to dust we shall return.”* What a

sobering thing to say to sophisticated people on Ash Wednesday. We wash our faces, put on our makeup, then come to church and have some preacher smear ashes on our forehead. Why would anyone put up with that?

Over the years I've held newborn babies and helped morticians embalm dead bodies. There are striking similarities between birth and death. We are naked. We are helpless. We are dependent on others. One of these days, we are going to die. Somebody is going to ask, "How much did old John leave?" The answer to that question is simple, "He left it all."

We are all spiritually needy. Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling. Naked come to thee for dress, and helpless look to thee for grace. When we can turn to God with our neediness, therein lies our bliss. *"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God."*

THE WOES OF WEALTH

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation."

When you sit down to count your blessings, what do you count? The car you drive, houses you own, the health you enjoy, the employment you embrace. These are a few of my favorite things. How about you?

There are plenty of preachers around who will tell you that God's blessings are health, wealth, and prosperity. If you give enough out of your poverty they will gladly enjoy the bliss. But Jesus said, "Woe!" I don't know what woe means, but here I think it means, stop, step back, pause, take another look, and evaluate. Jesus says if your mission in life is to make money, enjoy it while you can, for what you see is all you get. There is nothing else to live for.

Money is a rival god. Jesus said, *"You cannot serve both God and Money."* Was Jesus prejudiced against the rich? Certainly not. He wined and dined with them all the time. He knew the pleasures that money could buy. He also understood the consuming flame and false security that the love of money inspires.

You see, money can demand our undivided devotion, and provide a false sense of self-sufficiency that is extremely tempting and ultimately devastating. Money has inflated value. We value people in relation to their income, give people status and honor in relation to how much they have.

You are not what you have any more than you are what you do. God loves you for who you are, not what you have. You come to Jesus at the foot of the cross like everyone else. It's just a little farther for you to bend than for others who are already lying on the ground.

The gospel for the rich and famous is the same gospel that saves us all. God loves you. Sin mars you. Christ saves you. Life awaits you. Come, you who are weighted down with the heavy loads of possessions. God will give you rest.

ONE RICH MAN IN THE BIBLE IS NAMED ZACCHAEUS

He was a chief tax collector by profession. All tax collectors in that day had money. He made his home in Jericho, a wealthy suburb of Jerusalem, where the balsam groves perfumed the air for miles. When Jesus finds Zacchaeus, he's up a tree, out on a limb, trying to catch a glimpse of the Lord coming by. Before Zacchaeus laid eyes on Jesus, Jesus saw him. Jesus invites himself to lunch at old Zach's house. The content of their conversation over that fish sandwich remains confidential to this day.

Results of that encounter we see right away. Zacchaeus emerges to make a four-fold retribution for all he's overcharged from business and he announces that his philanthropy, which will amount to one-half his assets, will be invested for the poor.

That day, Zacchaeus got saved. He claimed an inheritance that was out of this world. He tasted of riches unknown. He moved from the department of the lost into the company of the found.

Jesus still makes house calls. He knows the trees we climb and the limbs we hide behind. He calls us by name. Jim, Mary, John, Lucy—why don't you come down? For I am going to your house today. Yes, I want to go to your house today.