

Jer. 17:5–10

Ps. 1

1 Cor. 15:12–20

Luke 6:17–26

The Plain Gospel

Goal for the Session

Adults will articulate implications for discipleship and witness evoked by the blessings and woes pronounced by Jesus in Luke 6.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Luke 6:17–26

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Gay L. Byron

Jesus focuses his eyes (*ophthalmoi*) on the disciples after the healing excursion in verses 18–19. The reference to eyes in this passage (v. 20) should not be glossed over as insignificant. It is not so much that the people are able to see God in this encounter with Jesus. The subtle undercurrent and the word of hope in this passage is how the disciples (and presumably all those would-be followers of Jesus) are seen by God! So the raising of the eyes by Jesus is a symbolic metaphor for the watchful eyes of God, who is ultimately responsible for the blessings and curses that are at the heart of this sermon.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” David L. Ostendorf

This is the raw, unvarnished, faith-rattling declaration of the realm of God. The realm of God rests among those who have nothing but God. Jesus’ Sermon on the Plain—these wondrous yet stark beatitudes—jar us out of our faithful complacency. The God Jesus speaks of is not always the God we proclaim. Our human inclination is to fit God into our own small definitions, cultures, and places. But God is always breaking down the barriers we construct to keep God in or out. Here, once again, God is calling us back.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Howard K. Gregory

The sermon seems to be addressed not to the people in general who have gathered around him, but to the disciples—to the church. Pastorally this highlights the fact that the very nature of the sermon, the values and ethics that it expresses, are apparently not intended to be a moral code binding on the society in its widest sense. Rather, it is for those who have made a commitment to follow Christ. At the same time, the fulfillment of the demands of this sermon will not be the outcome of personal effort and resources, but of divine grace. The good news is that our fulfillment of the demands of the sermon is the enabling work of the gift of grace, the gift of the Spirit.

NOW WHAT is God’s word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Peter Eaton

[Jesus] is speaking not just “on the plain,” but *plainly*. We can trust Jesus to be absolutely “on the level” with us every step of the way, telling us the truth of our lives as he sees us. We hear this truth only through our participation in a community—the community of lifelong partnerships and families, the community of the eucharistic fellowship, the community of those who pray and discuss the Scriptures together, the community of service, the community of mutually committed members.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

Luke 6:17–26

Focus on Your Teaching

What persons or groups might adults in your group identify as “blessed”? Why? How might their assessments compare to those whom the wider culture perceives as “blessed”? Consider the same questions for those viewed with contempt, or at least as not blessed. In today’s passage from Luke, Jesus pronounces a series of blessings and woes that contradict the conventional wisdom of his day. In doing so, Jesus challenges adults in every era to weigh the consequences of his pronouncements for living the gospel. Be aware that some adults may be offended by Jesus’ words on being poor and being rich.

Holy God, attune my ears and spirit to this Word you bring to me, and this session you would have me lead. Amen.

YOU WILL NEED

- newsprint or markerboard, markers
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- 8 slips of paper, pen
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for February 24, 2019, unless it will be emailed to participants

For Responding

- option 1: pens, lined paper
- option 2: copies of Resource Sheet 1

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, make a chart with two columns on newsprint or the board. Title one column “Blessed” and the other “Not Blessed.” For Closing, print each of the blessings and woes from Luke 6:20–26 on a separate slip of paper. If you are using Responding option 3, you may want to bring some basic information about the “prosperity gospel.”

Welcome participants as they arrive.

Ask adults to look at the words on the newsprint or board as they consider their response to the following question:

- ✿ What sorts of things would you see as signs or evidences of being blessed or not being blessed in everyday life and community?

Encourage adults to write down one or two words or phrases in each column based on their reflections. When all have had opportunity to write down their thoughts, invite general observations about the relationships among what was written in each column, as well as any connections between the two lists. Relate that today’s session will explore a passage from Luke where Jesus teaches about being blessed.

Pray aloud:

Holy God, may your Spirit speak plainly through these words, so that we may be more faithful in following Jesus. In Jesus Christ. Amen.

EXPLORING

Ask adults to turn to Luke 6 in their Bibles and ask a volunteer to read aloud Luke 6:17-19 aloud. Ask volunteers to offer word pictures of what this place might have looked like.

Discuss:

✪ What were the people in the crowd expecting from Jesus?

Form two groups. Have each group stand or move their chairs to opposite sides of the room. Designate one group as those who would have been the least well-off (poorest) among the crowd who listened to Jesus that day. Designate the other group as those who would have been the most well-off (wealthiest) among that crowd. Direct each group to listen to Jesus' words through the filter of their assigned identity. Stand in the middle. Turn toward the group identified as least well-off and read aloud Luke 6:20–23. Next, turn toward the second group and read aloud Luke 6:24–26. Have each group discuss the following amongst themselves:

- ✪ How did you experience Jesus' words that addressed your situation?
- ✪ When you go home, what will you tell your friends and neighbors about Jesus? Why?

In the Old Testament, "to bless" means to impart some gift or favor that enhances or secures life. "Blessed" is thus not a synonym for happy, but rather a state associated with knowing that oneself is held in favor—most importantly, by God.

Gather the two groups, and ask each to provide a brief summary of its discussion. Afterwards, consider how each group in Jesus' time might have responded to what they heard Jesus saying to the other group.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Blessings and Woes in Context). Have individuals silently read the first paragraph. Ask for any questions or needs for clarification about it.

Form four groups, assigning each group one of the four sets of verses. Explain that each team will discuss their assigned verses only, using the following questions as a guide. Encourage someone to take notes for a report back to the whole group.

Gather the whole group. Have each small group offer a brief summary of its conversation. Invite adults to identify the common threads among the verse sets that emerged in the reports. Discuss:

- ✪ What calling might those original disciples, at whom Jesus is looking when he speaks, have experienced when they heard this teaching about blessing and woe?

Invite participants to imagine Jesus walking from that plain into your sanctuary, down its main aisle, and into your pulpit. From there, he looks at each member of the congregation. The only words he speaks are those blessings and woes announced in Luke 6:20–26. Discuss or reflect silently on the following question:

- ✪ What is Jesus seeking from your congregation—seeking from you—as you live as disciples and witnesses today?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session:

1. **Blessings and Woes, 2.0** Adults will compose contemporary statements of blessing and woe to help them recall Jesus' teaching. Comment that a key task of discipleship involves hearing and applying the ancient words of Jesus in the contexts of life and community today. Distribute paper and pens. Instruct participants to rewrite the blessings and woes Jesus announces in a way that directly addresses the times and culture in which they

EASY
PREP

live while remaining faithful to the spirit of Jesus' teaching. Discuss the results in pairs. Encourage adults to review this list at the beginning of each day to discern what Jesus' call to discipleship might seek of them that day.

- 2. Nothing but God** Adults will focus prayer on trusting God as they follow Jesus. Note that Luke's account of Jesus' blessings and woes challenges modern-day disciples to consider the trust in God that undergirds Jesus' teachings. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Luke 6:17–26) and ask a volunteer to read aloud the "Where?" excerpt. Invite adults' honest reactions to what is said there, particularly regarding "those who have nothing but God." Talk about how such words might impact the meaning of discipleship, and how they might shape the church's witness in the world. How does trust in God's grace shape witness? Invite adults in their daily prayers this week to ask for guidance as they ponder: What might stand in my way of following Jesus so fully?
- 3. Broaching the Perils of Prosperity** Adults will examine more deeply how the woes pronounced by Jesus in Luke 6 challenge conventional wisdom about prosperity, particularly wealth as a sign of God's blessing. Discuss Jesus' teachings about riches in the focus scripture in tandem with the so-called "health and wealth" or "prosperity" gospel in our own day. ("Prosperity gospel" is a general term to describe a belief that true faith in God will be rewarded by great material success.) Discuss: In society today, in what ways is wealth described or promoted as a sign of God's favor? How does Jesus' teaching in Luke 6 respond to this mindset? For disciples today, what is a faithful view of wealth in light of Jesus' teachings?

This activity may engender strong resentment from those who perceive it as an absolute condemnation of wealth. It may help to keep the focus on how and why this blessing and woe are held together in Luke for the purpose of discipleship.

CLOSING

Gather in a circle. Invite brief comments on how participants reacted to Jesus' blessings and woes.

Pass out the slips of paper notes to volunteers willing to read, keeping one for yourself. Note that each paper contains one of Jesus' blessings or woes. Explain that the closing prayer will take the following form: After each blessing or woe is read aloud (in no particular order), individuals may offer a brief prayer, silently or aloud, for the group named in the verse or for into what it means to follow Jesus. Invite adults to be in a spirit of prayer. Read your verse, and let the prayers begin. Close this time of prayer by saying: *And let the people of God say, Amen!*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for February 24, 2019 or email it to participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

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Blessings and Woes in Context

When examining Luke's "Sermon on the Plain," it is helpful to consider Matthew's "Sermon on the Mount." The two accounts, while similar, are by no means identical, and the differences go beyond the topography of "plain" and "mountain." An important element within Luke involves the pairing of Jesus' blessings and woes.

Directions:

Provided below is a summary of Jesus' teaching about blessings and woes. Each of the four groupings contains: 1) the blessing as pronounced in Matthew 5; 2) the blessing as pronounced in Luke 6; and 3) the statement of woe in Luke 6 that contrasts with the blessing. Each element can be identified by typeface:

- ✻ Matthew 5:3, 6, 4, 11–12 normal type
- ✻ **Luke 6:20–23 bold type**
- ✻ *Luke 6:24–26 italic type*

Group 1

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

Group 2

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be filled.

Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

Group 3

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep.

Group 4

Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. . . . for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. . . . for that is what their ancestors did to the prophets.

Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is what their ancestors did to the false prophets.

Discussion questions for all groups:

- ✻ What differences are there between Matthew's and Luke's versions of the blessing?
- ✻ How might those differences lead to varying interpretations of that blessing?
- ✻ In what ways does the statement of woe relate to the blessing with which it is paired?
- ✻ If you could ask Jesus one question about this pairing, what would it be?