

One author has written, “Everything that is new will soon be old.”¹ It’s true isn’t it? The “it” thing, the “must-have” item, today’s “groundbreaking” technology, will be rendered obsolete before we know it.

When it comes to fashion, the 70’s was known for bell-bottoms, tie-dye shirts, and mini-skirts. 80’s fashion was just as innovative with its big hair, leg-warmers, and zipper ties. Rest assured, the day will come when the hipster beards, skinny jeans, and eyeglasses will fade from fashion—everything that is new will soon be old.

This same truth can also be applied to technology. My kids think that phones have always been small enough to fit your pocket; these days, a phone that plugs into the wall belongs in a museum. Do you remember when the average person didn’t have a home computer? Do you remember when the world wide web was the exclusive domain of nerdy programmers?

When my wife and I began to date, we lived in separate provinces and in order to communicate, we either spoke on the phone or wrote one another letters. Let me say that again—*we wrote letters*; does anyone write letters anymore? If you’re like me, just about the time you get comfortable with your smart phone, or your computer’s operating system, they change it—the software that runs on your computer today, will be obsolete before you know it. Everything that is new will soon be old.

The problem is that change can be painful. It’s easier to keep the old phone or utilize the old operating system, not because it’s better, but

because we are comfortable with the way things are. We get used to old ways of thinking and being and we resist change—we’d rather stick with what we know. The same is true when it comes to our life with God.

Last Sunday, I concluded my sermon by looking at Jesus’ parable about the old and the new (Luke 5:36-39). Critics were standing up to oppose Jesus because He was breaking with tradition. Jesus invited people to give up what they knew, what made them comfortable, in order to embrace the new world He was ushering in. Then as now, we can become so comfortable with what we know, there is very little room for Jesus in our lives.

We pick and choose what parts of Jesus’ agenda fit into our well-established lives—we digest as much as we can without having to surrender control. I said last week that while we don’t mind Jesus doing a little “home improvement,” many of us don’t want a significant renovation. The truth of the matter is that Jesus didn’t come to renovate your life or mine, He came to redefine the world. New wine requires new wineskins.

In our text this morning, Jesus challenges the way the world works—He exposes what we value and offers an alternative. At this time I’d like to invite you to turn with me to Luke 6:17-26; if you are using the blue Bible from the seat rack, you can find our text on page 837.

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 coastal region around Tyre and

¹ N.T. Wright, *Luke For Everyone*, 63.

Sidon, who had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. Those troubled by impure 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 people 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 ancestors 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 everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.”

As a way of entering into Jesus’ words, I’d like to offer four observations on what we’ve just read, and then we’ll get into the specifics of the text.

1. When Jesus spoke these words of blessing and warning, He was drawing upon a genre that was familiar to His readers. In fact, His sermon was reminiscent of a sermon Moses preached before Israel entered the Promised Land.

With a new land staring them in the face, Moses called Israel to be faithful to God. He spoke about the way of obedience and the blessing God would pour out along this path. Moses also spoke about

the way of disobedience, warning Israel about the consequences of turning from God. Like Moses, Jesus is leading people somewhere new—into God’s kingdom—and Jesus does so, proclaiming blessings and warnings.

2. Second, the immediate context in Luke helps us to understand the point Jesus is making. We need to ask ourselves, *what has been going on in the story so far, and how does our text continue the story Luke has been telling?*

The preaching and healing ministry of Jesus was getting Him into trouble with the religious authorities. In their minds, Jesus has been embracing the wrong sorts of people—those who are sick, those who are sinful, those who are outcasts. There is a fundamental clash of worldviews between Jesus and the authorities—these blessings and warnings further clarify the new world that Jesus will usher in.

3. Third, notice that what Jesus blesses, we consider cursed—He blesses the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and are rejected. Not only does Jesus bless what we consider cursed, He warns against what we consider blessed—material comfort, full stomachs, laughter, and being well-liked. Jesus is waking up people who are sleep walking through life. How tragic it would be, to come to the end of one’s life and to realize that our life was lived in vain. *What are we chasing after? What are we living for?*

4. Finally, there is a symmetry to Jesus’ words—each of the four blessings is paired a corresponding warning. These blessings and warnings announce a great reversal—He’s defining the way the world works, from God’s perspective. Those considered “outsiders”

are the blessed ones, while those considered “insiders” are missing out on God’s blessing.

At this point, I’m going to leave these observations in the background, and make our way through each pairing of blessing and warning. Let’s take a look at the first pairing:

1. Blessed are the poor/A warning to the rich (vs. 20, 24):

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God...But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.” I see at least two difficulties with this pairing—the first is a problem of definition, and the second is a problem of worldview.

First the definition—how do we determine who’s poor and who’s rich? I suppose we could begin paint a simple spectrum—Bill Gates is on one side and a person from the slums in India, Africa, or the downtown Eastside on the other. The problem is that most of us don’t fit into one of these two extremes; as a result, we’re not sure whether Jesus’ words apply to us.

When it comes to comparisons, most of us tend to use our own lives as the baseline, but are we to define “rich” people as those who have a lot more than me, and “poor” people as those who have a lot less than me? To complicate matters further, the poorest among us in Vancouver still have access to education, healthcare, and government assistance; this make our poorest “wealthy” compared the poorest in other parts of the world.

In our contemporary language, the terms “poor” and “rich” aren’t

particularly helpful—they simplify the issue to a matter of economics when Jesus was speaking to the issue of the “haves” vs. “have-nots”. Yes, those who are poor don’t have enough money, but neither do they have power, privilege, social status, or influence—as a result the “have-nots” are too often cast aside on the trash heap of society. Jesus is speaking about those who have money, along with power, privilege, social status, and influence.²

Jesus blessed the poor and warned the rich, but the question is, what was Jesus blessing, and what was He warning against? Jesus cannot be blessing the conditions of poverty; there are far too many instructions in the Scriptures to feed the hungry, house the poor, and stand up for those without a voice. So either Jesus is contradicting the rest of Scripture, or, He’s making a different point altogether.

Jesus does not bless the conditions of poverty, but He does bless the posture that so often accompanies it—an openness to God, a willingness to depend on Him. Blessed are you when you recognize your need before God. Blessed are you when you come humbly, seeking His mercy. Blessed are you when you delight to surrender to Jesus, for then, and only then, can you embrace His kingdom.

In a similar way, Jesus does not curse the condition of wealth, but He does warn against the posture that so often accompanies it—pride and independence. Wealth, power, status, and influence creates the illusion of control, and those who think they can control people and outcomes rarely see their need for God. The advantage of powerlessness is that one is in a much better position to see their need, to seek God, and find life.

² Green, 267.

Jesus is defining what is valuable from God's perspective—His blessings and warnings announce a great reversal. Those considered “poor” are the blessed ones, while those considered “rich” might miss out on God's blessing.

But this leads us to the second problem, the problem of worldview. Let's consider this problem by way of the second pairing of blessing and warning.

2. Blessed are the hungry/A warning to the full (vs. 21a, 25a):

“Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied... Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.”

This second pairing aligns very closely with the first; in the Old Testament Scriptures, those who were hungry were often poor, and those who were poor, were often hungry. Jesus' doesn't introduce a new category here, instead, He continues to define what is valuable from God's perspective.

In Western Christianity, an error occurs when we confuse categories—we regularly confuse the “good” life with the “blessed” life. What is the “good” life? In the West, the “good” life is depicted in terms of abundance—the abundance of money, possessions, friends, influence, power, and control, along with a freedom to do what we want.

The “blessed” life is something different. According to Jesus, the blessed include the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are rejected—according to Western cultural standards, this is the antithesis of the “good” life.

The “good” life is characterized by an insatiable hunger for more material wealth, more friends, influence, power, and freedom. And while the “blessed” life is also accompanied by the hunger for more, this hunger manifests itself in radically different ways: it's a hunger that leads to more listening and less talking, more other-focus and less self-focus, more of Him and less of me, more freedom from sin, so that we are free to obey and follow Him.

If our first mistake is in confusing the “good” life with the “blessed” life, our second mistake is in pursuing the “good” life at the expense of the “blessed” life. Most of us don't like the fact that we actually have to choose between the two—*can't we have both?* We've believed the lie that we can have it all.

Those who hunger now—those who know that the “good” life will never satisfy, those who choose instead to pursue God—will one day be satisfied; they will taste an abundance beyond their wildest dreams. But Jesus warns that the pursuit of the “good” life, will not lead to future satisfaction. Pursuing temporary pleasure, at the expense of eternal reward, is a poor trade-off. In Luke 9:25 Jesus says, *“What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self?”*

Let's move on and take a look at the third pairing:

3. Blessed are those who weep/A warning to those who laugh (vs. 21b, 25b): *“Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh... Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep.”*

The phrase that Luke uses—those who “laugh”—does not appear anywhere else in the New Testament. But in the Greek translation of

the Old Testament, this phrase conveys the notion of laughing flippantly or arrogantly. It seems that Jesus ushers a warning to those who laugh at the misfortune of others, saying, “*they deserve what they get,*” or, “*it will never happen to me.*”

God didn’t choose Abraham because he was influential. God didn’t choose Israel because they were a great and mighty nation.³ God didn’t choose David because he was the biggest and strongest. In a similar way, Jesus wasn’t born into wealth, power, and influence, nor was the early church a collection of society’s elite.⁴

God often chooses the poor and the powerless because they don’t pretend to be God’s equals. The Scriptures remind us that God exalts the humble and humbles the exalted (1 Samuel 2:3-8); God fills the hungry and dismisses the rich (Luke 1:51-53); God chooses the weak over the strong. In so doing, God isn’t trying to make the “non-elite a new elite,” instead, He’s abolishing the old order in favour of something new.

Jesus came proclaiming a new kind of kingdom where the old status symbols—wealth, influence, and power—don’t constitute a life that is blessed by God. In Christ’s Kingdom, blessing and privilege—in whatever form they come—are gladly surrendered for the sake of others.⁵

Jesus blesses those who experience pain and tears as a result of

³ C.f. Deuteronomy 7:7-8.

⁴ C.f. 1 Corinthians 1:26b-29.

⁵ Richard Bauckham, *Bible And Mission: Christian Witness In A Postmodern World*, 51.

following Him, but Jesus says, better to weep now than to value the wrong things, put your hope in the wrong things, and ultimately walk the wrong path. Those who weep now, will one day laugh with joy—following Jesus is worth it; vindication will be ours.

Let’s consider the final pairing before we move to the application.

4. Blessed are the rejected/A warning to the well-liked (vs. 22-23, 26): “*Blessed are you when people 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 ancestors treated the prophets... Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.*”

Jesus addresses the importance that we place on being honoured, respected, having social standing, and being well-liked. In essence, Jesus is saying, “*Better to live for God and to have His approval, than to live for the praise of the crowd.*”

There’s nothing wrong with our desire for acceptance—it’s a legitimate, God-given need—the problem comes when we live for the crowd and think we can win God’s favour too. If Jesus had lived for the crowd, He could have avoided rejection and the suffering of the cross—but where would that leave us? Jesus made a choice to

follow the Father; He did and said what the Father asked of Him. Some approved, but many opposed Him.

It's becoming less acceptable in Vancouver to self-identify as a Christian—just mentioning that you go to church might cause doors to shut in your face. We need to remind ourselves, every day, who we are and who we're living for.

Some would suggest that because I am a Christian, by default, I am a self-righteous, narrow-minded, intolerant, hater. They might go on to say that I am a fool for putting my faith in unsubstantiated myths, when any thinking person can see that there is no God.

Now it's possible that they're right about me, but then again, it's possible that they've got it all wrong. It's possible that they are the ones who are blind; it's possible that they are walking a path that is bankrupt and without hope. I've examined the evidence, I've considered the consequences, and I've made my choice—I'm following Jesus. They will make their choice, and so must you.

If, in following Jesus, we face opposition, it's not because God has rejected us, people will stand against us because they stand against Him. Jesus promises that a great reversal is coming—a day when we will be rescued, vindicated, and ushered into unending joy. Whatever sacrifices we make today, will be repaid 100 fold when Jesus returns.
Even so Lord Jesus, come!

Application—the purpose and power of blessing: In the time

remaining, I want to touch upon a theme that is only implicit in the text but crucial to the Christian life, namely, understanding the purpose and power of blessing.

It's sad, but these days the most frequent use of a blessing occurs after someone has sneezed—*bless you!* Used in this way, to bless is to simply wish someone well, but in the Scriptures, blessings “had the power to change situations and to alter circumstances.”⁶

There are numerous examples where a spoken blessing functioned as a prophetic foretelling of what God would bring to pass. In Genesis 12:2-3, God blessed Abraham and said, “*I will bless you...and you will be a blessing...all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*” This word of blessing was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus—through faith Him, we are blessed and invited to join God's family.

At other times in the Old Testament, a spoken blessing wasn't a guarantee of what would happen, instead, it functioned like a roadmap, pointing a person towards a bright future—God's future. A spoken blessing does not automatically create a new reality, but because of the grace of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit, we are free to receive a word of blessing, align ourselves with it, and live into it. In so doing, to speak a word of blessing enlarges the person who receives it—a word of blessing can change a person's life.

How many words of sarcasm, criticism, and rejection do we hear each day? These words chip away at us—they diminish and destroy. Too many people perish for lack of blessing. God has given you a voice, so use it to encourage, to build up, and bless.

⁶ T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, *Dictionary Of The Old Testament: Pentateuch*, 85.

Proverbs 16:24 says, “*Gracious words are a honeycomb, sweet to the soul and healing to the bones.*” Who do you know that might benefit from a blessing? May the Holy Spirit guide you to the right people and to the right words.

In the Old Testament, the father’s greatest blessing was reserved for the firstborn son, but this no longer applies now that we are in Christ. Jesus is the firstborn Son, and He has received the fullness of God’s blessing—united to Jesus, we now partake of every blessing that has been bestowed upon Him.⁷ We are a blessed people indeed.

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!”

This morning we’re going to conclude by blessing God. Now clearly we cannot add to God or enlarge Him in any way, to bless God is something different. We bless God when we speak of what He is worth; we bless God when we pay Him the honour, praise, and adoration He is due. At this time I want to invite our worship team to come and lead us in blessing God.

Worship

Benediction: *“The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.”*⁸

⁷ Ephesians 1:3.

⁸ Numbers 6:24-26.