

# Yours is the Kingdom of God

**Passage:** Luke 6:17-26 | From the series: Luke

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**Date:** 4/12/26

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Good morning and happy Sunday! My name is Dan, and I am one of the pastors here. As always, it is a joy to worship with you all and to open the Word together, as we are about to do.

If you are new with us, let me just take a moment to orient you to what we are about to do. We believe that this book, the Bible, is the inspired Word of God. It's a beautiful story, full of wisdom and truth. And God has given it to us so that we could know him and so that we could know how to live life the way he designed it to be lived, in order that we might experience abundant life in Christ.

When we gather on Sundays, we take a portion of our service to learn from God's Word together so that we might know God and grow as people of love in him. Right now, we are in a long series in the gospel of Luke, a book that tells the story of the life of Jesus. And this morning is a great time to jump in with us. The passage that we are going to look at this morning, Luke 6:17-26, is the beginning of one of Jesus' most famous teachings. It is often called the Sermon on the Plain. If you are familiar with the Gospels, you will recognize much of what Jesus says here from his even more famous teaching in Matthew's gospel: the Sermon on the Mount.

This teaching, which we will look at for the next three weeks, is all about the nature of the kingdom of God. More than a set of commands, this is an operating manual for how God designed life to work - wisdom for experiencing the good life. And as we will see, it is nearly the opposite of everything that we might think. That is certainly the case in our passage for today, in which Jesus gives good news to the poor, a warning to the rich, and an invitation to all of us.

Last week, I got an email from my credit card company inviting me to an exclusive international trip to participate in a tour of Michelin-starred restaurants, fancy hotels, and iconic sites. Intrigued, I began to look into it a little bit. The trip wasn't free, of course. In fact, it wasn't even being offered at a discount. What was the selling point, then? *Access*. This one-of-a-kind trip was available **ONLY** to fellow holders of this particular credit card.

As you might guess, this credit card has an annual fee attached to it. *Access* isn't free after all. And the trip itself was going to cost an arm and a leg. *Access* isn't cheap, either. But, man, did this trip look *luxurious*.

More than selling an expensive, one-of-a-kind vacation, this marketing campaign was selling a vision of the good life. It was offering a kind of gospel, a message of good news. And here was the message: As a holder of this credit card, you are somebody. And as a somebody, you have an

opportunity that is not available to everybody. And if you are willing and able to pay enough, you will be given access to an experience that will reinforce the fact that you are, in fact, *somebody*.

The gospel of Luke was written to a man named Theophilus. Theophilus was a Roman official - a man of wealth, status, and power, who had become a follower of Jesus. He was, without a doubt, a *somebody*. As Luke writes to Theophilus, he is trying to explain to him how he fits into this new community of Jesus' followers that came to be known as the church. Already at this point in the gospel, just six chapters in, we get the sense that this community is unlike any other community that Theophilus has ever known. In fact, of all of the prominent people in the book so far, not one of them has been a "somebody." Mary, the mother of Jesus, is poor, young, and unnoteworthy. John the Baptist lives in the wilderness, eating locusts and honey. The leper, the paralyzed man, the man with the withered hand. Countless others who are sick, demon possessed, and otherwise at the end of their rope - all "nobodies" by any definition. Yet all of them are made to feel like *somebody* in the kingdom of God.

Now, as Luke introduces Jesus' most important sermon in the book, he makes explicit what has thus far been implicit. And his message, as we will see, is every bit as relevant for us today as it was for Theophilus when he first read it 2,000 years ago.

There are two key questions addressed in our text today. The first is this: *Who gets access to God?* Like the invitation from my credit card company, is it those who pay the annual fee? Those with the wealth, status, and power to buy their way in? Or is there a different set of criteria? Who gets access to God?

The second question is this: *What is the nature of the good life?* Where is true joy really found? What does it take to be *happy* in this life?

If you have ever asked those questions, you are in a good place this morning. I also think that you might be surprised by the answers that we find.

With that, let's jump into our text. Luke 6:17-26. Just before this passage, Jesus went up to the mountain and called his twelve apostles. Now they come down from the mountain. Let's start by looking at **Luke 6:17-19**.

*And he came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the seacoast of Tyre and Sidon, who came to hear him and to be healed of their diseases. And those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. And all the crowd sought to touch him, for power came out from him and healed them all.*

As Jesus and his twelve disciples come down from the mountain, they end up on a "level place." It is this phrase, "a level place," that has earned the sermon that follows this scene the title, "The Sermon on the Plain." Yet, these verses do more than just set up the location for Jesus' sermon. They also tell us something about his audience. We know the twelve disciples are present. We also see a "great crowd of disciples" - other followers of Jesus who gathered to be with him. And a third

group of people, a “great multitude of people” from all over Israel and the surrounding regions. Among this large and diverse group of people are many who are sick and demon-possessed. These people are desperate to get to Jesus so that they can hear from him and be healed by him. They recognize Jesus’ power and authority in his words and in his deeds.

We don’t know exactly what this great crowd of people believed about Jesus, but this description reads like they believed he was some kind of magician—someone with magical powers that could only be released when he touched people.

Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus heal people in a number of different ways. Sometimes he does heal people by touching them, but sometimes he just speaks. Sometimes he is close to them; sometimes he is far away. In every case, he heals not because he possesses magical powers, but by the Spirit of God.

These crowds, it seems, did not have a full understanding of who Jesus was. They didn’t understand exactly how his healing power worked. Their theology, in other words, was not perfect. And yet, Jesus looks at their imperfect theology and their seeds of faith, and he heals them. He pours out his grace on them. He allows them to come, meets them where they are, and heals them by the power of God.

This summary of Jesus’ ministry teaches us that Jesus does not reserve his grace for those with perfect theology. A seminary degree is not necessary to get access to Jesus. Rather, what Jesus is looking for is *faith*. Jesus is looking for people who come to him to hear him and be healed of their diseases. Broken people, sinful people, people in need of hope and healing - who believe that Jesus has something to offer them.

Don’t get me wrong - God wants us to have proper theology. He wants us to believe true things about him, about ourselves, about the world, about salvation. But that theology is not a prerequisite to experiencing healing in Jesus. The only prerequisite to receiving healing in Jesus is faith - believing that Jesus is the one in whom healing is found.

## **Blessed are the Poor**

With this large crowd of disciples and other people gathered around, Jesus begins to teach them. As I mentioned earlier, this sermon that Jesus gives is called the Sermon on the Plain, and it is very similar to Matthew’s longer and more famous Sermon on the Mount. It is possible that Matthew and Luke both summarize the same sermon of Jesus in two different ways. It’s also possible that Jesus taught the same general message in multiple different ways on multiple different occasions. At the end of the day, it doesn’t really matter. However, it is helpful to notice some of the similarities and differences between Matthew’s and Luke’s versions, so I will note a few of them as we go.

For now, let’s jump in. **Luke 6:20-23:**

*And he lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and said:*

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

*“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied.*

*“Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.*

*“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! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.*

Jesus' message begins with a series of statements, all beginning with the phrase, “blessed are...” Blessed are you who are poor, you who are hungry, you who weep, and you who are hated.

This set of statements is known as the beatitudes. While some have taken these statements to be prescriptive, as in “you must be poor, you must be hungry, you must be weeping,” to enter the kingdom of God, it is better to understand them as descriptive. The umbrella description, the overarching category, is those who are *poor*. The crowd that gathered before Jesus was a crowd of Jewish peasants. They were, by and large, people living in poverty. We already saw that many of them were sick as well, quite possibly making it difficult or impossible to work and provide for themselves. On account of their condition, most of the people in this crowd would have known what it was like, at some point in their lives, to not know where their next meal was coming from. They were familiar with hardship, with grief. They were people with messy lives.

However, Jesus is not addressing all people who are poor. Rather, he is addressing people who are poor and who have experienced persecution because of their connection to Jesus. He is addressing the poor who have come to him in search of help and healing.

To these people, he says, “Blessed are you.” Fortunate are you. Happy are you. All of you who are poor, hungry, weeping, and hated by people - you are in a good place.

To which we might say, “Jesus, what are you talking about? What are you talking about? It's not good to be poor. It's not good to be hungry or to be grieving. Who wants to be hated by people? This is not a description of the good life.”

And yet, it is to these people that Jesus gives this promise: yours in the kingdom of God.

There's a musician named John Guerra who captures this idea really beautifully in one of his songs. Reflecting on these words of Jesus, he writes:

Blessed are the poor who have nothing to own,  
For their hearts have a road to the kingdom of God  
And their souls are the songs of the kingdom of God  
And they will find refuge, for theirs is the kingdom of God.”

What Guerra is drawing attention to—and what Jesus is trying to say—is that there is a kind of road, a path to God, for those who recognize that they can't provide for themselves. It's actually easier for them to come to God than it is for those who have resources—those who can take care of themselves. Because when you have nothing, you know you need help.

And that posture—that dependence, that need—is exactly what opens us up to the kingdom of God.

Here is what Jesus is saying: Access to God is not determined by one's social or economic status. Being down and out does not keep you from the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not some exclusive club that is only available to people with money, with power, with influence. You don't have to know the right people. There is no badge required for entry or resume needed to get an interview.

In fact, it is quite the opposite. It is these poor people, these people who are sick and desperate and in need, who have turned to Jesus in their darkest hour - these are the people who have access to the kingdom of God. These are the people who have the opportunity to experience true joy, both now and forever, in the presence of God.

And make no mistake, Jesus is talking about people who are literally poor. It is interesting here to compare Luke's version with Matthew's. Matthew speaks about those who are "poor in spirit" and those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness." Luke speaks about those who are economically poor and literally hungry - people who don't have enough food to eat or proper clothes to wear. And we know this because of what Jesus says next

## **Woe to the Rich**

After addressing the poor with words of comfort, Jesus addresses the rich with words of warning.  
**Luke 6:24-26:**

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

*"Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry.*

*"Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.*

*"Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.*

The language that Jesus uses here is strong language. "Woe to you" is a warning of the coming judgment of God. As with the blessings, Jesus is addressing one group of people with four attributes: the rich, who are also full, who laugh, and who are spoken well of by people.

Yet, in contrast with the poor people who found themselves coming to Jesus for help, these rich people seem content to take care of themselves. They are likened to the false prophets of old,

those who followed God with their mouths while neglecting what he cares about most - love, justice, compassion, and holiness.

The two categories of people here, then, are those who are poor who place their hope in Jesus, and those who are rich and place their hope in their resources.

The warning in these words is that, just as being down and out does not cut off your access to God, so too being wealthy and well-liked doesn't guarantee access to him. Rather, Jesus says, wealth actually makes it harder to find our way into the kingdom of God.

So let me ask you: which group are you a part of? The poor or the wealthy? Those who trust in Jesus because they have nowhere else to turn, or those who are content to take care of themselves?

When Linzy and I first got married, we did not have much. We were living just outside of Chicago while I was in seminary, and we were making \$35,000/year. Sure, that was 15 years ago, and it wasn't the Bay Area, but \$35k still didn't go very far.

Early on, we developed the practice of doing a monthly financial check-in. I was the one who managed our money more closely, so I would look things over and give Linzy a report on where we were at. Every month, the report started the same way: "Well, the good news is we are still filthy rich."

I wasn't kidding, either. Now, don't get me wrong. Our income was low, and our buffer was small. We were not independently wealthy, and we had no prospects of becoming so. But we had a roof over our heads. We turned a nob, and the heat radiated through the room. We had a fridge with food in it and enough money in the bank to pay rent for a few months. We had family and friends who could lend us money if we needed it. We were filthy rich.

Then I think about my life today. I live in Silicon Valley, where real estate is bonkers, and I still have a roof over my head. I have a fridge with food in it and another small one to keep my wine chilled. Two cars sit in my driveway every night. I get on a plane multiple times every year to visit my family. I am so filthy rich.

Now, don't get me wrong. If I compared my income or net worth to most people in Silicon Valley, to most people in Palo Alto, Mountain View, and Sunnyvale, probably to most people at PBC, you would not call me rich, much less filthy rich. But that doesn't make it any less true.

Most of us here at PBC have much more in common with the rich people that Jesus warns than the poor people that he comforts.

Now remember, Jesus isn't saying that it's better to be poor than it is to be rich or to be hungry than it is to be full. On the contrary, Jesus longs to give all of us all that we need. But he is saying that it is more dangerous to be rich than it is to be poor. Because our wealth can be an obstacle to our faith, and poverty can be a road to the kingdom of God.

So what do we do? Where do we go from here? Let me give us two suggestions:

First, **trust in God, not in money.** Be aware of the dangers of wealth. Your money is an obstacle to your faith. Just recognize that, and pray fervently that you would never begin to trust in your money for your security. Trust in God, not in money.

Second, **open your eyes, your hearts, and your wallets** to the poor and marginalized. Recognize that the kingdom of God is *full* of people like this. It is so easy to overlook the “least of these,” to be unaware of the needs of those around us. And I get it. We all live busy lives with plenty of things to occupy our time and attention. But Jesus is inviting us to open our eyes to the needs of those around us. To be fully compassionate, as he was. To welcome these people into our hearts and our lives. To use the money God has given us to help care for their needs. And to use our positions of power and influence to fight for justice. So open your eyes, open your hearts, and open your wallets to those around you who are poor, marginalized, and in need.

It has been said that Scripture is meant to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. As you hear these words of Jesus, consider what you need most. Are you comfortable? Let these words of Jesus challenge you. Are you suffering? Let these words comfort you.

At the end of the day, what we have in these words of Jesus at the beginning of the Sermon on the Plain is an invitation and a promise. The invitation is to come to Jesus. To trust in him and him alone. To allow him to meet your needs and heal your wounds.

And we have a promise. If we come to Jesus in our need, in our wants, in our weakness, we can receive these words: **Yours in the kingdom of God.** All who recognize their need and come to Jesus are welcome.

## **How Do We Find Happiness?**

There was a major study that came out in 2010 looking at the relationship between happiness and income. It became widely cited for years. And what it found was that as income increases from zero upward, happiness increases as well—but only up to a point.

Right around \$75,000 a year, happiness seemed to plateau. After your basic needs were met—food, shelter, clothing—more money didn’t really add much to your life.

And honestly, as a preacher, I loved that. I thought, *Perfect—Jesus was right, and now we’ve got the data to prove it.* But in the last several years, that research has been updated. With better data, they’ve found that the plateau doesn’t really exist. In fact, as income increases, reported happiness continues to rise.

And that forces us to wrestle with a question: Jesus, were you wrong? Because the reality is—money can solve problems. Money can make life easier. Money can give you access to things you wouldn’t otherwise have.

But here's the key: Money can solve money problems, and money problems are real problems.

But they are not the only problems, and they are not the most important problems. Money can't fix a broken relationship. Money can't heal addiction. Money can't deal with the sin and brokenness in our own hearts. Money cannot restore our relationship with God.

And that's what Jesus is getting at. The things that matter most in life—the deepest needs we have—cannot be met with money. Jesus says, *real life is found in me. The good life is found in me. The things that matter most can only be accessed through me.*

And so he invites us to come—whether we have much or little—to receive from him what only he can offer - healing, forgiveness, and the life of the kingdom of God.