**Roses and Thorns**

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**路加福音Luke 6:17-26 2/16/2025**

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Pray: The Lord tests the mind and searches the heart. In this moment of proclamation, O God, may our hearts and minds be receptive to you and your way. Amen.

In the past, when I would lead a student mission team out for ministry, at the end of the day, we would often gather together for a time of relaxation and team building; sharing of experiences and reflections. This time usually began with sharing the day's experiences. Each person would share one positive thing and one challenging thing from the day. Sometimes this is referred to as “highs and lows”, but the students' favorite term was "roses and thorns," which reminded us that even in the same flower of the day, there is both beauty to behold and possibly prickly things that may bring discomfort.

In today's gospel passage, we find a series of roses and thorns described by Jesus to His disciples and the crowds around Him. In the Gospel of Luke, they are referred to as "blessings" and "woes." This is similar to part of the long sermon in Matthew chapter 6. The Sermon on the Mount in Matthew contains 107 verses, whereas in Luke, Jesus only delivers a 32-verse sermon known as the Sermon on the Plain. These verses might be familiar, as they echo the famous Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, but Luke offers a different interpretation.

Luke’s words are more grounded in present reality. Thomas Frank points out that it is worth noting that Luke's position is different from Matthew's. In the Gospel of Matthew, we see Jesus take His disciples up to the mountain, overlooking the world around them and showing them the bigger picture. But in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus is with them on a plain. His words are simple, direct, and specific. One translation of the location is that He "was on a level place," which suggests that from Luke’s perspective, this conversation is entirely in line with the reality of human existence, and Jesus speaks to us plainly about it. He is saying to the disciples and the crowd: What are you doing right now? People here are sick, dying, and tormented by spirits—can you come down and help them with me?

In these passages, Jesus "levels with us," viewing us from His perspective, telling us the truth of life, and helping us recognize our responsibility — to become part of God's Kingdom through how we respond to the things we see in the world.

In the early chapters of the Gospel of Luke, Jesus begins His public ministry, engaging in very important work. After being baptized by John in the Jordan River, Jesus faces the devil's temptations in the wilderness. He preaches in His hometown (though not welcomed warmly!). He heals the sick, calls His first disciples, proclaims the good news, and engages in debates with the religious authorities.

After calling and naming His twelve apostles on the mountain, Jesus then comes down and begins preaching again on a level place, a flat land.

This time, the purpose of Jesus' message was to subvert the world. What we hear today is part of that world-changing sermon. In English, it is called the Beatitudes, which we translate as the "Eight Blessings." The word comes from the Latin "beatus," meaning blessed, truly happy, or deeply fulfilled.

First, let’s look at what constitutes a blessing, or a “rose”. Jesus points out that it is the poor, the hungry, those who weep, and those who are excluded and persecuted. Don’t you find that strange?

"Did I hear that right? He said the poor are blessed? I thought poverty was a sign of God's punishment for laziness!"  
"Did I hear that right? He said the rich are woe? I thought prosperity was a sign of God's favor toward me!"  
"Did I hear that right? He said those who are satisfied are woe? I thought a rich table of food was a sign of my pleasing God!"

However, they did hear correctly. Jesus knew exactly what He was saying, and He knew His words would subvert the world... if anyone was willing to listen.

These blessings are far from the typical list of blessings we might expect. We often associate the word "blessing" with happiness or good fortune. But in Greek, the word *makarios* carries a deeper meaning. It goes beyond surface-level or material possessions; it is more closely related to the experience of being united with God eternally in the first century, connected with righteousness, and maintaining a proper relationship with our Creator.

"Being blessed" means living with a strong awareness of God's presence. It is not about escaping struggles but about facing the reality of God's realm coming to fulfillment. In each blessing, struggle is accompanied by the hope of reversal: hunger will be sated, and weeping shall turn into laughter.

We are familiar with Jesus' words. They have the power to overturn our world, if we dare to listen, and dare to live them out.

God calls us to be part of the kind of Kingdom that Christ established. Before this passage, Jesus was surrounded by a crowd of people seeking His healing. Throughout the Gospels, especially in Luke, we find that Jesus cares deeply about the true needs of the poor and the suffering. We see Jesus demonstrate His love and compassion with great power, and He calls His disciples to do the same.

We can reach out to those who are hungry and feed them, whether through volunteering at a homeless shelter, serving at a senior community, or, like last week, participating in the PHPC fundraising by donating canned food and dry goods to fill children's backpacks so they have something to eat over the weekend when school lunches aren't available. There are other ways too. Comforting those who are weeping through a phone call, sending cards, or visiting them, offering friendship and care that can bring them joy and laughter. These are simple yet meaningful ways in which we can enjoy the blessings of Christ's teachings.

This is already challenging enough, but the Gospel pushes us even further, as Luke adds four corresponding woes to these blessings. These are the “thorns”; they provide examples of things that are about to be overturned. These woes, unique to Luke, are difficult to accept, especially when we realize they may be describing us. Jesus speaks very freely and plainly, calling on the audience—and on us—to rid ourselves of complacency, to move away from the security and honor we rely on, and to recognize that God's reign here and now is not just about our own accomplishments. In fact, these very accomplishments may well be our downfall.

For most of us, we still worship idols of power, money, control, and instant gratification. We want everything—we want it right now—we want everything to go our way!

However, Jesus came to overturn our world, insisting that it is the poor, not the rich, who will inherit the Kingdom of God; it is those who mourn, not the wealthy, who hold a special place in God's heart; it is the hungry and the thirsty, not the comfortable and complacent, who will find true satisfaction; it is the sick, the sinners, and the outcasts who will find a home in God—while those who are self-righteous, self-indulgent, and boastful must wander in the desert of isolation, cut off from others.

I believe Eugene Peterson's interpretation in his book *The Message* can help us understand the meaning of these verses well. He writes verses 24-26 as follows:

"But if you think you’re better off than others, trouble is ahead. What you have is all you’ll ever get. If you’re content with yourself, trouble is ahead. Your self-satisfaction will never satisfy you. And if you think life is all fun and games, trouble is ahead. You’re going to end up in tears." (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, Luke 6:24-26)

To be faithful to the Gospel, Luke calls on us to let go of our preconceived notions of happiness and be willing to embrace the upside-down reversal that Jesus presents. The Sermon on the Plain in the Gospel of Luke is meant to wake us from our complacency and inspire us to take action.

These four pairings—blessing and suffering, roses and thorns—challenge us to look at our lives and the world with new eyes. They require us to examine our values and reflect on what we will hold on to in living faithfully. These scriptures provide very practical guidance for disciples, including us, who today call ourselves followers of Christ. They urge us to realign our relationships and to reverse the social, economic, and political injustices around us so that we can live more fully under God's reign, right now.

In the 1930s, church leaders in Germany faced such an opportunity. After Hitler came to power, he used fear to dismantle rights and democratic processes. Many took for granted the merging of Christianity, nationalism, and militarism, equating patriotic sentiment with Christian truth. This quickly led to calls for the establishment of a racially pure nation, with Hitler's rule seen as God's will for the German people.

But there were also those who resisted this trend, including several pastors and theologians like Karl Barth. After a regional meeting, they gathered representatives from the Lutheran Church, Reformed Church, and United Church at the Gemarke Church in Barmen at the end of May 1934. They made six declarations, all based on Scripture, to issue a statement of faith, calling the church to return to its faithfulness to the Gospel.

The collaborative work on this document helped unify the church's faith and re-establish loyalty, opposing the popular messages they saw as a threat to the Gospel itself. The *Barmen Declaration* can be seen as a modern counterpart to the blessings and woes, declaring what God's reign should look like and firmly opposing things that threatened the Gospel Jesus proclaimed. It is similar to the *Declaration of National Policy* issued by the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan in 1971, as well as *Our Appeal* in 1975 and the *Human Rights Declaration* in 1977, both also issued by the PCT. These documents reflect the contributions of the Presbyterian Church in Taiwan in support of democracy, freedom, and human rights during times of turbulence. They represent ways the church collectively sought to be a prophetic voice for the current generation, all based on an understanding of Christ's vision in the Sermon on the Plain—that God's Kingdom will come into the world.

In the end, this is what the Sermon on the Plain calls us to do—to truly understand what God's reign looks like, to recognize that God sees all of His creation as beloved and blessed, and to be called into a community that exemplifies this perspective. Luke's words are not of a comforting Gospel, but a challenging Gospel, one that calls us to embrace the world through Jesus' love and vision. For those who have lost the opportunity to be a part of such a world, they are truly unfortunate. Blessed are those who can live in God's upside-down world, for the Kingdom of God is revealed to them. Amen.