

**Blessings and Curses Be Upon You**  
**Jeremiah 17:5-10, Luke 6:17-26**  
**Hilary Kearns McIntyre**  
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“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.”

The gospel story in today's lection sounds like it should be an easy sell for any pastor—blessed are the poor, the hungry, the mourning, the hated, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven; so just be humble, have faith, and everything will be fine. Anyway, none of us are rich or famous enough to have to worry about any sort of punishment. Phew, I get to stay in the shallows, as Kathryn preached last Sunday, and I don't have to worry about anyone else because I am the main character in this narrative. But, uh oh, I just got a big tax refund, I'm heading to a large Sunday lunch with all my friends and family, and they think the world of me as a person. Guess I'm going to Hell. Yeah, maybe not such an easy sell after all.

I've been wrestling with this one, y'all. It sounds like Jesus is saying that the pain and suffering in this world is all okay, that it's justified since those people have a big prize waiting after death. In fact, that is exactly how I've heard this scripture preached before, and you know what? That has worked and continues to work for a lot of people. But, personally, I have never had to endure suffering so great that the only consolation would be dying and going to heaven. I have been extremely lucky. Or, maybe not "lucky," but privileged. Yes, I've been through hard times, I've dealt with sickness and death, I've battled anxiety and depression before I even had the words to name those particular demons, but I was born in a specific place, in a specific time, where the way I present—as a cis/white/non-disabled/protestant person—has allowed me to go through life without much friction. For those who don't fit that same mold, life has many more speed bumps, dead ends, and sharp edges, so this scripture can provide some of the comfort that is otherwise lacking. And that is a totally valid reading of the Sermon on the Plain as it is called.

What do I do with it, though? In its traditional context, there isn't much here for someone like me, unless I trick myself into thinking that I'm truly a victim of the systems of power in the world. Sure, I'm not rich, I weep sometimes, and I'm certain there are people who hate me, although the specific reasons are maybe not so Christ-centered, but overall I have had a comfortable life. But this text can still preach to me, and probably to you, too.

In this sermon, Jesus is preaching to a troubled group. There are people from all over who sought him out because they wanted to be healed. His words are a balm. For us, they can be a call to action, calling us to be "copy-cats" of Jesus as Tillie puts it.

To bless something is to "hold it in reverence," to revere it, to honor it. We bless, and are blessed, when we acknowledge and hold space for someone or something. God's justice, the ultimate goal we profess to work toward, comes from performing the verb of blessing—not simply praying for and holding these things in our hearts, but working to bring God's kin-dom into the world. We must "bless" those with little to no material wealth by sharing ours. We must "bless" the hungry by feeding them. We must "bless" those who weep by listening to them, hearing their voices, and responding in ways that honor the needs they share with us. And, best of all, we "bless" those who hate us because of this work in the name of the "Son of Man," by rejoicing. By shouting back at them that this work is the true love of God that we are making manifest in the world.

“This is what the Lord says:

“Cursed is the one who trusts in man,  
who draws strength from mere flesh  
and whose heart turns away from the Lord.

That person will be like a bush in the wastelands;  
they will not see prosperity when it comes.

They will dwell in the parched places of the desert,  
in a salt land where no one lives.

“But blessed is the one who trusts in the Lord,  
whose confidence is in him.

They will be like a tree planted by the water  
that sends out its roots by the stream.

It does not fear when heat comes;  
its leaves are always green.

It has no worries in a year of drought  
and never fails to bear fruit.”

Strong words from Jeremiah, one of those ancient prophets Jesus mentioned that was reviled in his time, yet who certainly rejoices in heaven now. Jesus knew these words forward and backward, and he is in conversation with them

in the Sermon on the Plain. Those “blessed” people he was preaching about, and to, had so much faith in God that they were literally grabbing at Jesus’ because they believed that a single touch would cure them of all their ills. To me, to us, Jeremiah says that trusting in the powers of the world is a losing strategy. Seeking power and accumulating excess in a corrupt system is corrupting in and of itself. When one has more than they could ever need or even begin to use in one lifetime and hoards it, whether that thing is power or money or stuff, they actively deprive the people with the most need of it.

“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.”

Maybe Jesus is preaching to us! Maybe he’s saying that if we bless the ones that he calls blessed, we get to forget about the people at the top. They don’t care about us, so we have Jesus’ permission to ignore them. We certainly don’t have to “bless” them, except maybe with our thoughts and prayers, “bless their hearts” and all that. To that end,

“The heart is deceitful above all things

and beyond cure.

Who can understand it?

“I the Lord search the heart

and examine the mind,

to reward each person according to their conduct,

according to what their deeds deserve.”

1 Corinthians 2:11 says, “For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them?” We can’t read each other’s minds, we can never truly know what someone’s motivations are or what drives them. What we can know is what they choose to do in the world—how they treat us and others. We can’t control anything but our own actions, and neither can they.

“A person may cause evil to others not only by his actions but by his inaction, and in either case he is justly accountable to them for the injury.”

John Stuart Mill, On Liberty

These are fitting words for an English philosopher who was an ethical theorist but who worked 20 years for the British East India Company in charge of relations with the Indian states and who only left that position when the

company dissolved and ceded power to a newly formed British colonial government. He did condemn this action, but the harm done to the country of India by the British is still with them to this day.

Mill, just like us, was complicated. Humanity is complex and multi-faceted. We have the power to change or stay the same, we get to choose. And if everyone has the capacity for change, that means we can't leave the rich, the well fed, the laughing and adored out of our hearts or our good works. We have to "bless" them, too.

To bring about God's kin-dom, we have to follow Jesus' command to "love our neighbor as ourself" and everyone is our neighbor, we are all the same. We have to treat people with respect, but that doesn't mean we can't speak truth to power. Love isn't the same as a tacet endorsement of everything someone chooses to do: we can and should call them out. We must "bless" them with our protests, "bless" them with our phone calls, and "bless" them with our votes.

We can choose to stay silent, to allow evil free rein in the world, or we can go do some "blessing." May it be so, and may it be soon.