A cynic might criticize Jesus for pandering to the crowd. If this is a gathering of poor folk, then what better way to curry favor than to blast the rich? But truthfully, Jesus is doing more than simply telling the mob what they want to hear; he is imparting a great spiritual truth about the nature of blessings.

The world has its own set of beatitudes, which stand in stark contrast to Jesus’ list: Blessed are the rich; the famous; those who have sports cars and cabins at the lake. Blessed are those with perfect children; those who move and shake even among the movers and shakers; those who get their photo on the cover of amagazine; those who vacation in exotic places. Blessed are those who know what they want and take it! But, as Luke tells it, Jesus has no time for any of this. Jesus turns the world’s values upside-down. He blesses those whom the world calls cursed, and he preaches woe upon those whom the world admires.

Jesus’ words may pinch at times, they may smart or sting, but in our deepest moments of clarity, we realize he is right. Money cannot buy happiness. Harmonious family life, a meaningful job, creature comforts, and leisure time to pursue hobbies do not guarantee happiness either. You can have all of them and still feel empty inside. When Luke reports Jesus saying, “Woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation,” it is a very unusual Greek word he uses for “consolation.” It is a commercial term that means, “having received what is due.” It is the rubber stamp at the bottom of an invoice: “Paid in full.” The self-satisfied high rollers received much in this life, but they will not receive anymore.

There is an old parable from the Jewish tradition about the prophet Elijah visiting a wealthy farmer. (In Judaism, Elijah is something like the Holy Spirit; he can drop in and visit anytime, anywhere which is why, at the Passover meal, a seat is always left empty for him.) On this visit, Elijah is accompanied by a young rabbi, who wants to observe how the prophet dispenses divine justice. The two arrive at the farm disguised as poor, weary travelers. The farmer banishes them to the barn, with only bread and water for supper. He has no time for visitors, he gruffly explains, because he must dig a well the next day.

After a cold, sleepless night, Elijah arises before dawn, goes out from the barn, and digs the farmer’s well. “Why did you do that?” the young rabbi asks him. “Our host is cruel and heartless. He neglects the sacred laws of hospitality. But you have blessed him by digging his well!”

“It’s true that I’ve dug his well,” Elijah admits. “And the place where I have dug it will yield sweet water for many generations. What you don’t know is that this farmer was planning to dig the well in another place: a few feet below the ground in that location lies a secret treasure. Because I’ve dug his well, rather than he, that treasure will go undiscovered for a hundred years: long after our host has gone to his grave. What seems like a blessing is not always a blessing!” Elijah’s methods seem a little underhanded to me, but his point is clear. The rich farmer received his consolation. In this life, he is paid in full. That is all there is. Beyond his present wealth, there is no promise of future blessing.

It like that classic beer commercial with a group of men sitting around a campfire, doing the male-bonding thing. Their canoes are pulled up on the beach, their tents are pitched, their dinner is cooked, and there is a gorgeous sunset on the horizon. “It doesn’t get any better than this,” one of them contentedly exclaims as he cracks open a beer. At that moment, life is good. Yet, if it truly *doesn’t* get any better than that, if there is nothing more to life than a tasty meal, a fleeting sunset, and cold beer with friends, well, woe to them, for they have received their consolation!

Oscar Wilde once quipped: “In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants; the other is getting it.” The farmer got his water supply but missed out on a greater treasure. The beer buddies had a fun day, but such moments do not last. The trouble with modern society is that we want immediate results, instant gratification, blessings on our terms and on our schedule. But Jesus reminds us that God’s terms and schedule look very different from ours.

The wonder of God’s power to bless is that it happens regardless of our circumstances or desires. It was Helen Keller, the blind and deaf mute who triumphed over her disabilities, who wisely pointed out, “Although the world is full of suffering, it is also full of the overcoming of it.” God’s way of blessing us, sometimes, is not to remove the cause of our complaint, but to give us power to prevail over it. As the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson remarked: “It is the wounded oyster that mends its shell with pearl.” Who is to say what is a blessing and what is a curse in the great scheme of things? From our human perspective, what looks like the greatest of calamities may, in a God’s view, really be our salvation.

It really does no good to count our blessings. Nor does it help to count our misfortunes. When Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor…the hungry…and those who weep,” he is bearing witness to the truth that God oversees creation, and that God is not finished with us yet. God will inevitably bless us, for it is in God’s nature to bless. God may bless us some day with what we most desire. Or, perhaps more likely, God may bless us *through* what we desire but do not receive. It is not counting our blessings that is important. It is the blessing itself that counts. It is God’s blessing, which sojourns with us through wealth and poverty, health and sickness, laughter, and tears, that sustains us. Truly, we are blessed, despite it all! All praise to God who knows us better than we know ourselves and blesses us in every circumstance!

Prayer: Dear God, thank you for your great love and blessing over our lives. Thank you that your favor has no end, but it lasts for our entire lifetime. Forgive us for sometimes forgetting that you are intimately acquainted with all our ways, that you know what concerns us, and you cover us as with a shield. We ask that we may walk in your blessing and goodness today. That your face would shine on us. That you would open the right doors for our lives and for our loved ones, that you would close the wrong doors and protect us from those we need to walk away from. Establish the work of our hands and bring to fulfillment all that you have given us to do in these days. We pray that you would make our way purposeful and our footsteps firm out of your goodness and love. Give us a heart of wisdom to hear your voice and make us strong by your huge favor and grace. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

**The Blessing That Counts**

Sunday, February 13, 2022 [Luke 6:17-26](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke+6%3a17-26&language=en&version=NIV)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Have you ever walked into a convenience store and found an unexpectedly long line? Chances are good people are not lined up because there is a sudden rush for milk, bread, doughnuts, or overcooked hot dogs. They are probably there to buy a lottery ticket, forking over their hard-earned dollars for a slip of paper with numbers and the hope of hitting it big! When lines stretch around the block, you can bet that the jackpot is probably in the hundreds of millions of dollars. Mathematically speaking, the more people who buy tickets, the more likely it is there will be more than one winner, splitting the jackpot two or more ways. For the lucky winners, that huge payout may not prove to be as mind-boggling as advertised.

But lottery tickets are not about reality. Lotteries are about fantasy: the pipe dream of instant, undeserved wealth. Dollar for dollar, they are one of the worst investments you can possibly make. 45 U.S. states operate lotteries, and each one is counting on many residents sharing fantasy of getting rich, quick! Whether or not you ever lined up to purchase a ticket yourself, I bet you daydream about what it would be like to win $100 million. How different life would be! Oh, the things you would buy, the places you would go! Oh, the taxes you would pay, and the long-lost friends who you would find!

Most of us think wealth is a blessing, but Jesus sees it differently. “Blessed are you who are poor,” he says, “for yours is the kingdom of God.” Then he offers these words to the wealthy: “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.” This is Luke’s version of the Beatitudes, which is strikingly different from Matthew’s better-known version because Luke includes statements of woe. In Luke’s version, Jesus blesses certain people, and he curses others. Jesus blesses the poor, the hungry and those who weep; he preaches woe to the rich, the satisfied, and those who laugh. Luke’s version raises troubling questions: Is it wrong to be rich? Is it a sin to be successful? And what has Jesus got against laughter, anyway?