‘The blessed life’

Luke 6:17-26

~ I wonder what you would say makes someone ‘a **success’**?

Think of the comedian Michael McIntyre (image of MM) for example. He has a fortune estimated in excess of $80million. His ‘stand up’ shows sell out quickly, and his tv programmes get huge audiences. His fame and fortune mean that he can go anywhere and do anything he pleases, and he is in the fortunate position of being able to incorporate his experiences in his comedy routine😊

He’s rich, popular and funny – someone who enjoys the finer things in life.

**Most** people would describe him as a success…

But what about **Jesus**? What would his verdict on a person like McIntyre be?

Or bringing it nearer to home, what would his verdict on **your** life – **or mine**- be?

Today’s passage will help us understand whether our lives are considered ‘**successes**’ by the only person whose verdict is a true one, the Lord Jesus Christ.

So do turn up the reading – Luke 6v17 on p1033 of Bibles and let’s ‘tune in’ to the word of Jesus. He has just chosen 12 people to be his apostles, his right hand men, and here he gives a ‘team talk’ to them, and to other followers too. Jesus wants to set out before them his core values, the message they will in due course pass on to others about the Kingdom of God. Jesus’ words then are important for us, if we’d call ourselves ‘Christians’…

But did you notice that also there that day were people gathered from all over the country. The curious, the hopeful, the unconvinced heard Jesus as well that day. So- if that describes you, then Jesus has something important to say to you too.

Let’s listen in to Jesus carefully, for he wants our lives to be a success, a success in God’s sight, and the surprise is in how he defines success. He looks beneath the glitter of fame and fortune, pleasure and popularity, and turns worldly standards upside down and inside out. Jesus wants to show us who – and who alone - will be blessed by God.

3 surprises, and here’s the first:- (1) It’s better to be poor than rich

We see this taught in v20, where Jesus says that ‘blessed are those who are poor’

And then in v24, Jesus warns about the dangers of those who are rich, pronouncing a ‘woe’ upon them.

So, both positively and negatively, Jesus teaches about the blessings and the woes that flow onto us according to whether we are poor or rich.

This ought to alert us then to the dangers of simply equating riches in the bank with blessing from God. That was a danger in Jesus’ time, and why people were so surprised when he taught at other times about wealth being a barrier to entering God’s kingdom. They’d thought the opposite. They’d thought that wealth was a sign that God had smiled on that person. Similarly today, most people think it would be utterly bizarre not to describe someone with the wealth of a Mcintyre, a Musk, a Branson, a Sugar as a success.

So, is Jesus making a simple contrast – poverty is good, wealth is bad - in God’s eyes?

Well, no, I don’t think that can be what he’s intending, since it’s possible for poor people to become bitter through their poverty, and resent God like crazy at the hardship they experience. It’s too broad to say that all poor people come under God’s blessing.

Equally, it’s too broad-brush to say all rich people are bad, since we all know of rich people who see themselves as stewards of their wealth, and desire to use it for good. Like Bill Gates setting up his foundation to combat diseases, or Christians using their wealth to support the spread of the gospel.

I think we need to look a bit deeper into this issue of poverty and wealth to come to understand what Jesus means.

When Jesus started his ministry, he described it in this way

‘The Spirit of the Lord is on me

Because he has anointed me

To proclaim good news to **the poor’**

The words had first been used by a prophet called Isaiah, over 600 years earlier on, to describe his ministry, and the one that God’s coming king, Jesus would exercise.

It was a ministry to ‘**the poor’**. And in Isaiah’s day, the poor were those who had been booted out of the land of Israel because of their sin, and who had no hope - other than throw themselves on the mercy of God.

‘The poor’ in Jesus time were the same. They weren’t primarily people with no shekels in their wallets or purses, they were those who realised that they had no resources to buy favour in God’s sight, and so they needed to throw themselves on God’s mercy.

So ‘the poor’ would include a fisherman like Simon Peter (Image of Simon with phrase I am a sinful man’) and a stinking rich tax collector like Levi. We saw how both of them realised in the previous chapter, their utter need for mercy and cleansing faced with the white hot purity of Jesus’ presence.

So, what Jesus is urging people to do here is to realise the danger of devoting your energies on simply trying to become rich, for riches can blind us to our own moral bankruptcy before a truly holy God. We need – like Simon, like Levi- to realise that we are spiritually poor, and throw ourselves on the God who is in rich in mercy

If we do that, see what we become- v20- Blessed for we become NOW part of the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom he (Jesus) had come to establish.

This is a great blessing because the ONLY kingdom that will ultimately last is this KOG, and we have the privilege now of being part of that kingdom, indeed we know God the Father not just as absolute monarch, but as our loving heavenly father.

‘Blessed are you who are poor in this sense’, says Jesus- what a comfort this is, particularly if like Simon Peter and Levi , we have left everything to follow Jesus.

‘*It’s better to be poor than rich’*, Jesus assures us…..

(2) It’s better to be hungry and weep, than to be well fed and laugh

This comes in v21 and – as with the phrase about the poor and rich, it could be thought of in literal, material terms.

* Blessed are those with no food in their tummies or in their fridges
* Blessed are those who are constantly crying..

The problem with this sort of literal reading is that it is quite obviously untrue!

The hungry often don’t have their needs satisfied, and peoples’ tears are often not dried .

What are to make of this?

Well it seems safest to let the Bible provide its own clues

Listen to what that OT prophet Isaiah said

On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare  
    a feast of rich food for all peoples,  
a banquet of aged wine—  
    the best of meats and the finest of wines.  
**7**On this mountain he will destroy  
    the shroud that enfolds all peoples,  
the sheet that covers all nations;  
**8**    he will swallow up death forever.  
The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears  
    from all faces;  
he will remove his people’s disgrace  
    from all the earth.  
The Lord has spoken.

**9**In that day they will say,

“Surely this is our God;  
    we trusted in him, and he saved us.  
This is the Lord, we trusted in him;  
    let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.”

Isaiah was able to look into the far future, and see that there would certainly come a day when the needs of God’s people would be fully satisfied, and every tear in their eyes would be wiped away.

Even though we WON’T have all our desires satisfied now, there WILL certainly come a day of feasting and celebration that will more than compensate for anything we feel we’re missing out on now, and the grief we often feel.

Jesus is preparing his disciples – then and now – for the fact that our Christian experience may well be very mixed this side of the grave…..

* There will be glorious and inexpressible joy at being part of the Kingdom of God already;
* There will be a sense of loss- as we are conscious of desires that are currently unfulfilled and mourn the sin that is all around us and sometimes drags us down;
* There is the living hope inside us that makes us pant eagerly for all the glories that are to come.

‘Don’t give up’ Jesus says to us ‘don’t give yourselves greedily now to satisfy every bodily appetite you have. Don’t expect life to be one long round of laughter. Look forward to the feasting and celebration that is certainly to come.

* What a comfort this is to Christians, as we wait
* What a challenge this is to us not to give up, or just to plod on rather grumpily in our faith
* What a call this is to us to pray for people who realise what a difference it will make to them if they turn to follow Christ….

(3) It’s better to be excluded than to be popular

Tune in to one final surprise that Jesus has for his followers and would be followers.

**22**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.

**23**“Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

I guess that all of us from school playground to workplace to clubs to our senior years, all love to be loved and respected by others. We fear being unpopular and will do that we can to avoid it. So Jesus’ words here strike us as very hard to swallow.

Jesus piles up 4 words that we would do anything to avoid - namely being hated, excluded, insulted and rejected as evil and says that when that happens we can rejoice and leap for joy, like a new born lamb leaping in the field

Surely, we think, this is a truly hard ask!?’

Or if we’re looking in this morning, we say to ourselves ‘This proves that the Christian life is not one for me!’

But bear with it, and look at the logic of what Jesus is saying….

He is saying that when we suffer harm because of our loyalty to him, there is great blessing for us, for such hostility shows us to be one of God’s genuine people, since throughout the OT God’s genuine spokesmen – the prophets – were pretty constantly mistreated and abused by the people, whereas the false prophets – those who said what people wanted to hear- were often popular.

‘Don’t hoist the white flag and give in when you receive flack for your faith’ Jesus is saying’ for such suffering reveals the genuineness of your faith and guarantees that great is your reward in Heaven..

* How we need to pray for Christians who are being persecuted for their faith, or risk persecution should they say true but unpopular in Christ’s name…
* How we need to pray for courage for ourselves in our country where increasing opposition is coming to Christians
* How we need to be willing to be faithful to Christ rather than merely popular if we want to live under God’s blessing

Well, I wonder how you are going to respond to this very clear call from Jesus to embrace the values of his kingdom. You almost certainly won’t hear it in the papers or on tv or in the workplace or in the clubs you belong to, but I pray that you will respond to it like Simon Peter did in another place. When many disciples deserted Jesus, Jesus asked Simon (Image of Simon Peter and Jesus) whether he might leave too, and he said ‘*Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy one of God.’*

May we respond - like Simon – either by holding tight to Jesus and his values , or perhaps embracing him and them for the first time today. It may not make you a national treasure like Michael McIntyre, but it will be the best decision you’ll ever make!

Some questions on passage Luke 6vv17-26

**Getting going**

1.Who do you think would be considered to be ‘successes’ in our country at the moment? Why?

2. How would you define what makes someone a success?

*Today we are going to see what Jesus says about what makes someone a ‘success’ in God’s eyes*

*Read Luke 6vv17-26 please*

**Into the text**

**3.** What is the basic structure of vv20-26? What do you think Jesus wants his newly appointed apostles to grasp right at the start of their ministry? What does he want the crowds to grasp?

**4.** There’s a blessed pronounced on the ‘poor’ and a woe on the ‘rich’. To whom do these terms refer? Is it just how much money we have in the bank?! Look back at Luke 4vv18 & 19 where Jesus started his ministry, claiming to fulfil Isaiah 61v1,2. Who were ‘the poor’ in Isaiah’s day? Who have we seen as being poor in Luke 5 (vv8, 27-32). For an example of why Jesus warns about the danger of riches see Luke 12vv13-21.

**5.** Next up is a blessing on those who hunger and weep now, and a woe on those who are well fed and laugh now. How are we to understand these words? In what sense can Christians be expected to hunger and weep now? Have a look at Isaiah 25vv6-9. How do God’s promises here link with Luke 6v21? For an example of why Jesus warns about the dangers of people living sensuous lives, careless of other’s needs, look at Luke 16vv19-31.

**6.** Lastly, Jesus pronounces a blessing upon those who are hated and persecuted because of their allegiance to him, and a woe on those who are well spoken of. Why is such a person blessed, according to Jesus? Had you ever thought of this when you get flack for being a Christian? (See also 1 Peter 4v14 for another encouragement)

**Thinking it through**

**7.** What effect do you think Jesus’ teaching here would have had on a person like Simon Peter, who had left his business to follow Jesus, and embraced a life that would include hardship, weeping and exclusion?

**8.** What impact do you think Jesus’ words would have had on those curious people who had come out to listen to Jesus, and experience his powerful hand?

**Going personal**

9. How do **you** respond to the comfort of God’s promised blessing for all who follow his Son, and yet also the ongoing challenge to keep on this hard path that leads to glory?

10. **Who** could you pray for in the light of this passage- either Christians who are struggling in the face of the hardships faced by those following Jesus; or enquirers who are not willing to embrace this new life, preferring to pursue riches, satisfaction, entertainment and popularity in the world?