

## An Ideological Analysis of the Blessings and Woes in Luke 6:20-26

### Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to perform an ideological texture analysis of the Blessings/Woes portion of the Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:20-26. This analysis yielded the conclusion that the behaviors upon which blessings (*makarios*) are pronounced are to be understood both in literal terms *and* as a call to Christian action. God really does have special care for the poor and the marginalized and so should followers of Christ. In the process of caring for others, we must engage in countercultural behavior which moves us closer to being poor, hungry, weeping, and hated on account of Christ.

### *Keywords:*

Ideological Analysis, Beatitudes, Blessings, Woes, Luke 6:20-26, Sermon on the Plain

And [Jesus] 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 [filled].

“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 [cast out] your name as evil, [for the Son of Man's sake]! Rejoice in that day, and leap for joy, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for so their fathers did to the prophets.

“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.” (Luke 6:20-26).

The above translation was arrived upon by using the English Standard Version of the Bible as the baseline, then comparing that particular translation to the original Greek. Bracketed words are words which differ from the ESV translation and which I felt better captured the original language used in the Greek New Testament. The changes which have been made will be discussed in the body of this report.

It is important to note that the sermon in which this passage is contained, the Sermon on the Plain, is one which was primarily intended for the disciples – not just the twelve apostles, but the wider group of disciples.<sup>1</sup> In fact, “this is the first teaching Jesus specifically directs to his disciples.”<sup>2</sup> Whereas this fact does not necessarily impact the interpretation of the individual facets, it does help to inform the larger picture of this passage.

As the introduction to the Sermon on the Plain, the Beatitudes can, in a sense, be thought of as the introduction to Jesus’ ministry. In the Blessings and Woes found in Luke 6:20-26, Jesus preached a fundamental reversal of the way in which the world functions, both for that time and the eschatological future.<sup>3</sup> It is clear that Jesus’ words are countercultural – both during

---

<sup>1</sup> Craig A. Evans and W. Ward Gasque, *Luke* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1990) 107.

<sup>2</sup> Arthur A. Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 1996), 283.

<sup>3</sup> Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1997), 263.

his time and our time – and it is sometimes difficult to decipher how the Blessings and Woes should be interpreted and applied. There are a number of facets to the ideology of this pericope, and this article seeks to analyze and apply that ideology.

Robbins defined ideology as “the biases, opinions, preferences, and stereotypes of a person or a group; a systematic or a generally known perspective from which a text is written, read, or interpreted.”<sup>4</sup> Robbins stated that ideological texture occurs at four different “locations:” in authoritative traditions of interpretation, in texts themselves, in modes of intellectual discourse, and in individuals/groups.<sup>5</sup> In this paper, an ideological analysis of the Blessings and Woes found in Luke 6:20-26 is performed.

### **Background Information on Luke 6:20-26**

The gospel of Luke was written to a primarily Gentile audience in order to “give an orderly account” of the life and ministry of Jesus Christ.<sup>6</sup> Luke was hired by Theophilus to do this in order to “confirm the commitment made by Theophilus and other [Gentile] readers like him as they joined the Christian movement.”<sup>7</sup> The date of composition for this gospel is generally placed around the year 70 CE and would therefore have addressed many of the issues with which the early church was dealing.<sup>8</sup> Many scholars argue the third gospel and the Acts of the Apostles – both of which are believed to have been written by Luke – constitute not two separate works, but rather one larger volume. This gives the reader an even broader understanding of the goals of the author in the narrative.

---

<sup>4</sup> Vernon K. Robbins, “Dictionary of Socio-Rhetorical Terms.” Department of Religion Emory College of Arts and Sciences, accessed November 5, 2014, <http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/SRI/defns/index.cfm>.

<sup>5</sup> Vernon K. Robbins, *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse Rhetoric, Society, and Ideology* (London: Routledge, 1996), 193.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 1:3, ESV.

<sup>7</sup> David A. DeSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 309.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

The gospels of Luke and Matthew are thought to use as primary sources both the gospel of Mark and another source commonly referred to as “Q” which is not available to contemporary scholars.<sup>9</sup> This is important because, particularly in the accounts of the Beatitudes, Matthew and Luke differ greatly, with the Matthean version often being more popular. The significance of these differences is discussed in greater detail below as part of the discussion of the ideology in the text.

It is important not only to understand the context of the larger work of the third gospel, but also to understand the particular context of the Sermon on the Plain as recorded in Luke. This Sermon was addressed to Jesus’ disciples: not just the twelve apostles, but rather a wider group of disciples. In fact, “this is the first teaching Jesus directs specifically to his disciples.”<sup>10</sup> This was not a small group of people. Rather it was “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.”<sup>11</sup> The fact that this sermon was primarily addressed to Jesus’ disciples does not change the understanding of the individual components of the Blessings and Woes, but rather helps the exegete to understand the larger picture. In the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus primarily addressed his disciples, and Luke wrote for Gentile Christians. This begins to give the reader the idea that the Blessings were not directed towards the Christians while the Woes were directed at the pagans. Rather, the use of the second person tense (“Blessed are *you*,” “Woe to *you*” as opposed to “Blessed are *those*,” “Woe to *those*”) indicates that Jesus was directing these remarks to those among the crowd of disciples who fit these categories. With this background

---

<sup>9</sup> Yolanda Dreyer, "The tradition history of the Sayings Gospel Q and the Christology of Q3," *Neotestamentica* 34 no. 2 (2000): 273.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur A. Just, *Luke 1:1-9:50* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 1996), 283.

<sup>11</sup> Luke 6:17, ESV.

understanding, I now turn to an analysis of the ideology in authoritative traditions of interpretation.

### **Ideology in Authoritative Traditions of Interpretation**

The theme of reversal of fortune is a major one in the gospel of Luke (e.g. Mary's Magnificat in 1:46-55, the Rich Man and Lazarus in 16:19-31, the Pharisee and the Toll Collector in 18:9-14, and the exaltation of the crucified Christ in chapters 22-24).<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the entirety of the gospel of Luke calls upon believers to care for the weak and marginalized.<sup>13</sup> Scholars have pointed out that the parallel structure of the Beatitudes and Woes in this pericope is reminiscent of the Old Testament theme of a way of life and a way of death,<sup>14</sup> the Blessings and Curses outlined in Deuteronomy, and the admonitions of the prophets.<sup>15</sup> This concept of Two Ways was also a major theme of the Didache which was written as a "community rule" for early Christian communities towards the turn of the first century, making it concurrent with the later books of the New Testament.<sup>16</sup> In fact, some scholars have argued that it is probable that Luke chose to add the Woes of his own accord in order to continue these themes.<sup>17</sup> Interpreters believe then that Luke's gospel intentionally addresses this concept of the two ways and reversal of fortunes. Any interpretation of the ideology of the text should be consistent with these very important themes.

As mentioned above, the gospels of Matthew and Luke are highly correlated in a number of ways, but also have a number of very important differences. The account of Jesus' teaching

---

<sup>12</sup> Green, *Luke*, 263.

<sup>13</sup> Noel Woodbridge and Willem Semmelink, "Wealth and Poverty in Luke's Gospel and Acts in Terms of Brewer's Analysis and its Challenge for Today's Church," *Conspectus* (2014): 67.

<sup>14</sup> Just, *Luke*, 284.

<sup>15</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), 111.

<sup>16</sup> DeSilva, *New Testament*, 744.

<sup>17</sup> Joel B. Green and Scot McKnight, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 737.

of the Beatitudes is one of the areas of profound difference. It is generally accepted that Luke's version of the beatitudes is a much more accurate account of the original event than is Matthew's account.<sup>18</sup> When these two accounts of the Beatitudes are compared to the literary form of beatitudes in other Jewish literature though, it becomes clear that the Matthean and Lukan Beatitudes have more in common with each other than with other sources of beatitudes.<sup>19</sup> This only serves to make their differences more pronounced. It is clear that whereas Matthew attempts to "spiritualize" the Beatitudes for his Jewish audience ("Blessed are the poor in *spirit*," "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for *righteousness*"), Luke's Beatitudes refer to those who are literally poor, hungry, weeping, and reviled. Therefore, most scholars agree that the Blessings and Woes in Luke should be read literally rather than spiritually. Abraham Kuyper, the famous theologian, once wrote in respect to this pericope, "One can hardly approve of the constant spiritualization of all these statements in today's preaching such that every connection with life is eliminated from them by ignoring the social meaning implicit in them."<sup>20</sup> If we are going to read and understand this pericope literally then we must examine the meaning of the words used in the text itself.

### **Ideology in the Text**

The most important place to begin in examining the meaning of this pericope is to define the words "blessing" and "woe" to determine exactly what each entails and what it does *not* entail. After establishing the meaning of these two words, we can examine the characteristics of each individual Blessing and Woe pairing to determine the ideology of that phrase. In the

---

<sup>18</sup> Dan Cloete, "In the meantime, trouble for the peacemakers: Matthew 5:10-12." *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 52 no. 1 (1985): 42.

<sup>19</sup> James W. Thompson, "The Background and Function of the Beatitudes in Matthew and Luke." *Restoration Quarterly* 41 no. 2 (1999): 109.

<sup>20</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *De Christus En De Sociale Nooden En Democratische Klippen*, ed. Harry Van Dyke, trans. Herbert D. Morton (Amsterdam: J.A. Wormser, 1895), 27.

sections that follow, I utilize the original language in order to contextualize these pronunciations of blessing and woe in the text.

### “Blessed”

The word glossed as “blessed” in this pericope is the Greek word *makarios* which is an extremely difficult word to translate into English. Many hear the word “blessed” and immediately envision some sort of tangible reward, but that is not at all correct in this context. Aristotle made a distinction between *makarios* and *eudaimonia* which is used to connote human happiness.<sup>21</sup> Therefore we cannot simply understand *makarios* to mean “happy” either. Rather this word is best understood as a “congratulations!” to those who are living a life that is righteous in the eyes of God.<sup>22</sup> By using this word to describe the behaviors which are “blessed,” Jesus was indicating that those behaviors were actions which God deemed to be righteous.

The question which this inevitably raises is whether this “blessing” refers to those who *choose* to pursue these behaviors or if it refers to those who have found themselves in this state through no choice of their own. I propose that the answer to both of these possibilities is affirmative. We are to understand these as highly concrete states of being as well as test cases for the Christian faith.<sup>23</sup>

In the spiritual beatitudes of Matthew, it is easy to say that people will not attain the behaviors described unless they are actively seeking those behaviors. In reading Luke’s words however, we are painfully aware that there are those who are poor, hungry, weeping, and hated who certainly did not *aspire* to such states of existence. Some would argue that such a state of existence is not sufficient to gain a blessing. However, Luke does not include any other

---

<sup>21</sup> Thompson, “Background of the Beatitudes,” 110.

<sup>22</sup> Johnson, *Gospel*, 41.

<sup>23</sup> François Bovon, *Luke 1: A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*. Edited by Helmut Koester. (Minneapolis, MN, Fortress Press, 2002), 224

prerequisite or modification to these straightforward statements. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that those who find themselves in these states of being through no choice of their own are *not* included in this blessing.<sup>24</sup>

On the other hand, some would argue that seeking to be poor, hungry, weeping, and hated is hardly a virtuous act. Furthermore, how could seeking such things be prerequisites for blessings? Here again, we must have proper understanding of *makarios*. The virtues of seeking these states of being is not because there is value in strict self-inflicted asceticism, but rather because it shows the mindset of the individual who no longer requires such things for satisfaction.<sup>25</sup> This mindset is reminiscent of the words of the Apostle Paul who claimed, “Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”<sup>26</sup> Therefore, seeking these states of being does not grant one membership in the Kingdom of God. Rather, people seek these states of being as an outgrowth of their relationship with Jesus Christ because they are *already* members of the Kingdom of God.

#### “Woe”

Just as important as understanding the true connotation of “blessing” is to understand the meaning of the word glossed as “woe,” *ouai* in Greek. This word can be defined as “an expletive for disfavor or calamity either described or desired”<sup>27</sup> or “an interjection denoting pain or displeasure.”<sup>28</sup> Just as “blessing” is not to be thought of as indicating material blessing or

---

<sup>24</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 224.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Philippians 3:7-8, ESV.

<sup>27</sup> Johnson, *Luke*, 108.

<sup>28</sup> Frederick W. Danker, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 735.

admission into the Kingdom of Heaven, neither does “woe” indicate a material curse or automatic eternal damnation.<sup>29</sup> Essentially “woe” in this pericope should be thought of as a warning and a call to repentance.<sup>30</sup> I propose that with these woes, Jesus is making the claim not only that these individuals put their hope in material things rather than God, but also that these individuals have been neglecting a responsibility to care for their fellow humans.<sup>31</sup> Unlike those mentioned in the blessings, it is clear that the individuals described by the woes did not arrive at their current state through no choice of their own. Indeed, it is comical to think that through no choice of his/her own that one could become rich, full, laughing, and spoken of well. Jesus is offering these individuals the opportunity to repent for their misplaced trust and their neglected responsibilities. If those to whom these woes are addressed choose to continue to neglect these responsibilities then they are setting themselves up for destruction.

#### “Poor” vs. “Rich”

As was noted above, it would be incorrect to think that we should somehow spiritualize these words from Luke as does the Matthew account. Indeed, there is no more reason to assume that “poor” here refers to the “poor in spirit” than to assume that “rich” refers to the “rich in spirit.”<sup>32</sup> While it is true that Luke’s words here should be understood literally, it is also important that we do not interpret them in too narrow a manner. These words do not refer solely to those who experience economic poverty and economic wealth, but also refer to all those have been socially marginalized (poor) and those who enjoy high social status (rich).<sup>33</sup> Because of God’s great love, we must not understand this to indicate a divine hatred against the rich, but

---

<sup>29</sup> Bovon, *Luke 1*, 225.

<sup>30</sup> Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1*. (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker, 1994), 582.

<sup>31</sup> David Bartlett "Woe to Us" *Journal for Preachers 31*(2) (2008), 34.

<sup>32</sup> William Domeris, "Biblical perspectives on the poor." *Journal of Theology For Southern Africa* no. 57 (1986): 60.

<sup>33</sup> Green, *Luke*, 267.

rather God's displeasure with the oppression which these individuals bring about.<sup>34</sup>

This Blessing/Woe pairing is particularly interesting because the promised reversal departs from the pattern of the remaining pairs in two ways. First, in each remaining pair, the individual is simply promised the opposite of his/her current state (i.e. the hungry will be full and the full will be hungry). Second, the reversals in the remaining pairs indicate a *future* reversal (i.e. "you will be filled") while this pairing indicates a present occurrence. Here, the poor are told "yours *is* the Kingdom of God" while the rich are told "you *have received* your consolation." The poor, who have been marginalized on earth, are already accepted within the Kingdom of God. The rich have already received their payment in full, at the expense of their fellow humans, and thus should not expect anything further. Followers of Christ then must not concern themselves with attaining high social status, but rather ensure that they are fulfilling their responsibilities to care for their fellow humans.

#### "Hungry" vs. "Full"

As with the first pairing, this refers literally to those who do not have enough to meet their daily needs contrasted with those who have more than they need, but also refers to the social ranking that goes along with these characteristics.<sup>35</sup> The promise is that those who are marginalized to the point of not having enough to survive will be filled, while those who selfishly hoard their goods will find themselves empty. Some translations use the word "satisfied" instead of the word "full." I propose that the word "full" is a better translation, because it is possible for hunger to be sated without being completely full. In order for the juxtaposition to make sense, we must understand the woe of being "full" to indicate those who have hoarded more than they need while the blessing of being "full" indicates the complete

---

<sup>34</sup> Woodbridge & Semmelink, "Wealth and Poverty," 64.

<sup>35</sup> Bovon, *Luke*, 226.

abundance offered by God.<sup>36</sup> In other words, Jesus is not merely promising that those who hunger will get enough to satiate their hunger, but rather that they will be abundantly filled!

Many scholars have pointed out that this pairing is wonderfully illustrated in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus found in Luke 16:19-31. While on earth, the Rich Man hoarded possessions and gorged himself while Lazarus struggled to survive. Upon their deaths, Lazarus was carried away to Abraham's side while the Rich Man went to a place of torment. The rich man did not receive eternal torment because of how he acted on earth, but rather due to the manner in which he *failed* to act.<sup>37</sup> Again, this is a warning that followers of Christ must not seek to accumulate worldly possessions, but rather that we should focus on ensuring that those around us have what they need to live. Kuyper boldly proclaimed that there is "no deeper mark of disgrace on Christendom than . . . 'practicing Christians' who live off their wealth year in, year out, constantly laying up treasures on earth while hunger and poverty continue to inflict suffering."<sup>38</sup>

#### "Weep" vs. "Laugh"

This Blessing/Woe pairing is far from being a call to be sullen while denouncing those who have joy in their lives. Those who weep now are those who have suffered in real and painful ways as a result of their marginalization or persecution.<sup>39</sup> Those who laugh now are individuals "who are self-satisfied and indifferent to the needs of others."<sup>40</sup> Upon reversal however, those who have been weeping will laugh with the joy given by God. As was mentioned above, there will be no more marginalization, only acceptance and therefore there will

---

<sup>36</sup> Bovon, *Luke*, 225.

<sup>37</sup> Woodbridge & Semmelink, "Wealth and Poverty," 67.

<sup>38</sup> Kuyper, *Christus*, 37.

<sup>39</sup> Bock, *Luke 1*, 577.

<sup>40</sup> Howard I. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1978), 256.

no longer be any reason to weep.<sup>41</sup> But for those who laugh now, they have once again received their consolation and will weep when they are no longer able to achieve their own enjoyment at the expense of others.<sup>42</sup> Once again, we see this theme of a responsibility which is neglected in favor of serving one's own interests. Followers of Christ cannot seek enjoyment of their lives to the point that they neglect being faithful to God and this responsibility which He has established: to meet – rather than be indifferent to – the needs of others.

“Hated” vs. “Spoken of Well”

The blessing portion of the final pairing is multifaceted (“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!”). While each facet certainly has its nuances, for the sake of space it is appropriate to discuss all of them under the umbrella phrase of “when people hate you.”<sup>43</sup> This is the only one of Luke's beatitudes which contains a qualifying statement. In order for this suffering at the hands of others to be seen as blessed, it must occur on account of Jesus Christ himself.<sup>44</sup> An individual who is hated because of bad moral behavior does not qualify. Jesus goes on to say that the prophets of God have always been persecuted and His followers would continue to be persecuted in this way. Yet they are to respond to such persecution with joy, not because it brings a tangible blessing, but rather because it confirms that they are truly doing the will of God and following Christ.<sup>45</sup> In other words, if individuals are truly following Christ then persecution *will* follow and in such situations those individuals should rejoice that they were

---

<sup>41</sup> Marshall, *Luke*, 251.

<sup>42</sup> Marshal, *Luke*, 256.

<sup>43</sup> Bock, *Luke 1*, 579.

<sup>44</sup> Bernardo Estrada, "The last beatitude: joy in suffering." *Biblica* 91 no. 2 (2010): 192.

<sup>45</sup> Green, *Luke*, 268.

counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name of Jesus.<sup>46</sup> Followers of Christ should expect nothing less than to be hated by those who hold steadfastly to the society of humankind. In fact, this goes so far as to say that that such people will “cast out” the name of the followers of Christ; this phrase implies an exorcism directed at those who follow Christ!<sup>47</sup> This is the reason for translating *ekballō* as “cast out” rather than “spurn” as the ESV does.

The woe in this pairing is directed to those who are spoken of well. These are people who seek to construct a good reputation among humankind rather than seeking to be faithful to God.<sup>48</sup> Jesus likens these individuals to false prophets: individuals who tell people what they want to hear in order to gain popularity. In the midst of Jesus preaching this message of radical change, these individuals would be the ones affirming the status quo. Just as persecution in the name of Jesus is a confirmation that an individual is following him, so is unrivaled popularity a confirmation that an individual is *not* following Jesus. The epistle of James puts it this way: “Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.”<sup>49</sup>

This beatitude does not indicate that we are to actively seek suffering.<sup>50</sup> It means that followers of Christ should not be surprised when persecution *does* come and that they should receive such persecution as a confirmation of their walk with Christ. To continue the theme of responsibilities met and neglected, followers of Christ have a responsibility to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ – it is *not* their responsibility to be liked by humankind. Those who solely seek approval from their fellow humans are necessarily rejecting their responsibility

---

<sup>46</sup> Acts 5:41, ESV.

<sup>47</sup> Johnson, 107.

<sup>48</sup> Bock, *Luke 1*, 585.

<sup>49</sup> James 4:4, ESV.

<sup>50</sup> Gary P. Liaboe & James D. Guy. "Masochism and the distortion of servanthood." *Journal Of Psychology & Theology* 13 no. 4 (1985): 259.

towards God.

### **Ideology in Intellectual Discourse**

In addition to authoritative interpretations and the text itself, ideology also exists “in the context of other influential *modes of interpretive discourse* available to interpreters at a particular time and place in the world”<sup>51</sup> Some common modes of intellectual discourse are “historical, social, cultural, rhetorical, ideological, aesthetic, and theological.”<sup>52</sup> The mode of intellectual discourse most beneficial for interpreting Luke’s beatitudes is socio-cultural discourse. In order to truly discuss the ideology of this pericope through a socio-cultural lens, we must have at least a cursory understanding of the social and cultural texture of the text. Using Robbins’ method social and cultural texture analysis, I will briefly touch on what Robbins refers to as specific social topics, common social and cultural topics, and final cultural categories.

There are two specific social topics outlined by Robbins which apply to this pericope: conversionist and thaumaturgic responses. The conversionist response to culture “considers the world to be corrupted because humans are corrupted. If people can be changed then the world can be changed. It takes no interest in programs of social reform or in the political solution of social problems.”<sup>53</sup> Jesus is not calling for political or social reform, but rather calling for people to repent of their negligence. The thaumaturgic response “insists that it is possible for people to experience the extraordinary effect of the supernatural on their lives . . . [and] encourages people to come together to affirm a special exception from everyday realities which assures individuals and their loved ones of perpetual wellbeing in the next world.”<sup>54</sup> Whereas it is not stated

---

<sup>51</sup> Robbins, *Tapestry*, 230 (Italics mine).

<sup>52</sup> Robbins, *Tapestry*, 214.

<sup>53</sup> Robbins, *Tapestry*, 147.

<sup>54</sup> Robbins, *Tapestry*, 149.

explicitly, it is understood that God is the agent of change in the reversal of fortune – the extraordinary effect of the supernatural – spoken of in the Blessings/Woes.<sup>55</sup>

In terms of common social and cultural topics, the struggle between the rich and poor and powerful and weak was a well-known struggle in Jesus' time. In fact *every* Greek and Roman city in this period of time experienced these tensions between the haves and have-nots.<sup>56</sup> This was not a new topic of discussion, but Jesus was preaching a radical solution to an age-old problem.

In light of the above factors, the best way to sum up Jesus' message in the Sermon on the Plain as relayed by Luke is that it was countercultural. A counterculture “arises from a dominant culture and/or subculture and rejects one or more *explicit* and *central* values of the culture from which it arises . . . the theory of reform is to provide an alternative, and to hope that the dominant society will ‘see the light.’”<sup>57</sup> The dominant culture of the time was the Roman Empire and the *Pax Romana* (“Roman Peace”) in which the emperor supposedly spread peace and well-being to all who were within the empire.<sup>58</sup> However, Jesus' message went directly against these supposed values of the *Pax Romana* by claiming that there were still those who were poor, hungry, weeping, and hated. These words would have been understood as a direct challenge to the dominant culture.<sup>59</sup> To ignore these socio-cultural aspects of this pericope is to misunderstand the ideology of this pericope. There are those however who choose either to ignore or misinterpret these socio-cultural characteristics.

---

<sup>55</sup> Green, *Luke*, 264.

<sup>56</sup> David L. Balch, David L. "Rich and Poor. Proud and Humble in Luke-Acts." In *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, edited by L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough, 198-213. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 232.

<sup>57</sup> Robbins, *Tapestry*, 169.

<sup>58</sup> deSilva, *New Testament*, 335.

<sup>59</sup> James D.G. Dunn, "The Gospel and the Gospels." *Evangelical Quarterly* 85(4) (2013), 291.

### **Ideology in Individuals and Groups**

Every interpreter has a set of preconceived notions through which he/she reads the text.<sup>60</sup> However, some interpreters use an eisegetical approach in order to interpret the text to reinforce these preconceived notions. Robbins refers to such interpretations as “eclectic” and/or “subdisciplinary.”<sup>61</sup> I would like to briefly touch on two different groups that have done this with this pericope.

The first group that I would like to discuss is those who refuse to take the Lukan Beatitudes in a literal sense and instead want to spiritualize them to make them like the Matthean version. As I illustrated above, there is no reason *not* to take Luke’s Beatitudes in a literal and concrete manner. Though the majority of the scholarly research bears this out, there are some who are still unwilling to grant credence to what they would call a materialistic focus. One scholar claimed that this pericope must be understood in spiritual terms because there is no spiritual benefit to being poor and hungry.<sup>62</sup> It is certainly uncomfortable, especially for those from wealthy nations, to read this pericope as literal. Whatever discomfort we may experience however does not give us license to modify the text. When we do this, we are making the dangerous mistake of reinterpreting the words of Jesus to fit our lifestyle rather than reading the words as Luke intended them.

The second group which needs to be mentioned is a group that not only takes the Beatitudes literally, but also makes this pericope the *locus classicus* for their theology, which has become known as Liberation Theology. Liberation Theology, which emerged in Latin America

---

<sup>60</sup> Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 470.

<sup>61</sup> Robbins, *Tapestry*, 232.

<sup>62</sup> William F. Arndt, *Bible commentary - The Gospel according to St. Luke*. (Saint Louis, Mo: Concordia Publ. House, 1956), 187.

and is still most profoundly connected with that area of the world, is “an interpretation of Christian faith out of the experience of the poor. It is an attempt to read the Bible and key Christian doctrines with the eyes of the poor. It is at the same time an attempt to help the poor interpret their own faith in a new way . . . The poor learn to read the Scripture in a way that affirms their dignity and their right to struggle together for a more decent life.”<sup>63</sup> Many aspects of Liberation Theology are valid and even admirable. The problem is that it is too narrowly defined. As we have seen, especially in Luke’s gospel, Jesus expresses special care for the poor and the marginalized. However, to build one’s entire theology tends to cause one to focus more on the oppression than the liberation, more on social and political actions than on preaching Jesus as the changer of hearts, even hearts of the oppressors.

Therefore, these alternate understandings of the Lukan beatitudes are incorrect because they emphasize the wrong aspects. As was made clear above, there is no reason to believe that the Blessings/Woes should be taken in any other way than referring to those who are *literally* marginalized and *literally* of high social standing. To spiritualize these beatitudes – to make them non-concrete and non-literal – is to make a grave mistake. However, it is also an error to understand these beatitudes to be *solely* literal and outside of the context of Christian instruction and a call for repentance.

### **Conclusion**

Luke's Gospel displays a perspective of God's compassion for those who are poor and marginalized, a perspective which is certainly the backbone of this passage. Those who are poor, hungry, weeping, and hated are given a unique blessing because of their circumstances.

---

<sup>63</sup> Phillip Berryman, *Liberation Theology*, (Bloomington, IN: Meyer Stone Books, 1987), 4-5.

This particular truth of this passage should never be lost in an attempt to “spiritualize” these words.

Yet this passage is not just for the poor and marginalized, but also for all followers of Jesus Christ. This is far from saying that one must be poor, hungry, weeping, and hated in order to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven and be a follower of Jesus Christ. Rather these are the results of behaviors displayed by those who are *already* following the commands which Christ gave. The Kingdom of God which Christ preaches is radically different from the society of humankind; in the Kingdom of God, we are not ruled by social stratification of the haves and the have-nots. Rather, we are all children of God and followers of Christ.<sup>64</sup> Therefore the types of behavior described in the first three blessings should be displayed by followers of Christ. And, of course, the persecution described in the fourth blessing is to be expected.

“Blessed” does not connote material wealth, but instead describes righteousness in the eyes of God. “Woe” does not indicate instant damnation, but instead describes a denunciation and a warning that one is not fulfilling the responsibilities given in the commandments of Jesus Christ. For we cannot forget that these words were addressed to the disciples of that time, but should also be extrapolated to all followers of Christ. Once again, this passage is eschatological in nature, but should not be thought of as only applying to the future. These blessings and woes are applied to people displaying the respective behaviors on this very day. And yet, this passage is not about who will receive blessings and who will be denounced. What this passage truly describes is those who are willing to endure hardships in this life in order to follow in the footsteps of the Messiah.

---

<sup>64</sup> David Berg, "Blessed Are They Upon God's Holy Mountain." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 29, no. 4 (2002): 455.

## Bibliography

- Arndt, William F. *Bible commentary - The Gospel according to St. Luke*. Saint Louis, Mo: Concordia Publ. House, 1956.
- Balch, David L. "Rich and Poor. Proud and Humble in Luke-Acts." In *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks*, edited by L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough, 198-213. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.
- Bartlett, David. "Woe to Us." *Journal for Preachers* 31, no. 2 (2008): 33-34.
- Berg, David. "Blessed Are They Upon God's Holy Mountain": Reflections on Luke 6:17-26." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 29, no. 6 (December 1, 2002): 452-455.
- Berryman, Phillip. *Liberation Theology*. Oak Park, Ill: Meyer Stone Books, 1987.
- Bock, Darrell L. *Luke 1*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker, 1994.
- Bovon, François. *Luke 1. A Commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1:1-9:50*. Edited by Helmut Koester. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002.
- Cloete, G Daan. "In the Meantime, Trouble for the Peacemakers: Matthew 5:10-12." *Journal Of Theology For Southern Africa* no. 52 (September 1, 1985): 42-48.
- Danker, Frederick W., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
- DeSilva, David Arthur. *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation*. Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
- Domeris, William. 1986. "Biblical Perspectives on the Poor." *Journal of Theology For Southern Africa*: 57-61.
- Dreyer, Yolanda. "The tradition history of the sayings gospel Q and the "Christology" of Q3." *Neotestamentica* 34, no. 2 (January 1, 2000): 273-285.
- Dunn, James D. G. 2013. "The Gospel and the Gospels." *Evangelical Quarterly* 85, no. 4: 291-308.
- Estrada, Bernardo. 2010. "The Last Beatitude: Joy in Suffering." *Biblica* 91, no. 2: 187-209.
- Green, Joel B. and Scot McKnight. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1992.
- Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1997.
- Hertig, Paul. "The Jubilee Mission of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke: Reversals of Fortunes." *Missiology* 26, no. 2 (1998): 167-179.

- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *The Gospel of Luke*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991.
- Just, Arthur A. *Luke 1:1-9:50*. St. Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 1996.
- Kuyper, Abraham. *De Christus En De Sociale Nooden En Democratische Klippen*. Edited by Harry Van Dyke. Translated by Herbert D. Morton. Amsterdam: J.A. Wormser, 1895.
- Liaboe, Gary P., and James D. Guy. "Masochism and the Distortion of Servanthood." *Journal Of Psychology & Theology* 13, no. 4 (1985): 255-262.
- Marshall, I. Howard. *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978.
- Miller, Amanda C. 2014. "Bridge Work and Seating Charts: A Study of Luke's Ethics of Wealth, Poverty, and Reversal." *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible & Theology* 68, no. 4: 416-427.
- Osborne, Grant R. *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, 2nd ed. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006.
- Robbins, Vernon K. *The Tapestry of Early Christian Discourse Rhetoric, Society, and Ideology*. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Robbins, Vernon K. "Dictionary of Socio-Rhetorical Terms." Department of Religion Emory College of Arts and Sciences. Accessed November 5, 2014.  
<http://www.religion.emory.edu/faculty/robbins/SRI/defns/index.cfm>.
- Thompson, James W. 1999. "The Background and Function of the Beatitudes in Matthew and Luke." *Restoration Quarterly* 41, no. 2: 109-116.
- Woodbridge, Noel, and Willem Semmelink. 2014. "Wealth and poverty in Luke's gospel and Acts in terms of Brewer's analysis and its challenge for today's church." *Conspectus*: 59-78.