

A Sober Warning to the Worldly-Contented, Part 1

Luke 6:20-6:26

Take a look at the four woes in Luke 6:20. This is ah four corresponding woes to the four beatitudes he gave in, we'll look at that whole section, Luke 6:20 to 26. Interestingly, this is how Jesus finishes his introduction to his sermon with four woes, which really you could consider a, a gospel call to all the non-disciples in the gathered crowd. Each woe that he gives matches or corresponds directly to a beatitude and provides, really, a warning. A warning to the lost.

So let's take a look there in Luke 6:20 and following. It says, "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 satisfied. 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 spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man. 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."

As an introduction to a sermon, that introduction certainly arrests the attention, doesn't it? I have no doubt that for those who originally heard this message, this was shocking. This, this introduction is so completely opposite of all human worldly expectation. Everyone wants to be rich, not poor. Everyone wants to be full and happy, not hungry and sad. Everyone wants to hear good, favorable words from other people. Nobody wants to be despised and rejected and castaway, but everyone wants to be rich. That is such a common sentiment that it's all almost axiomatic among mankind that everybody wants wealth. From the beginning of time all the way to this present moment, and I can assure you all the way through the Book of Revelation. I see in Revelation Chapter 18, when God brings judgment on Babylon, the woes that come on Babylon are the woes of those who are losing their wealth. They're sad because the world and its economic system is judged.

So it's axiomatic among mankind that everybody wants to be rich. And I, I find it actually ironic, maybe. You could say that all the rebellious rock bands of the sixties, seventies,

and of every decade, really, they, they became popular by decrying and denouncing the wealthy establishment, yet they become the wealthy establishment. Once they gain their wealth, they don't hand it all away and say, "Oh no, no, no, this is what all my rock music is all about." No they take it for themselves, and they go buy their toys, do their vacations. Why? Because as much as we like to say that money doesn't matter, it does matter. It matters to many, many people. And it touches us here in the church as well, and that's why we need to listen carefully to what Jesus has to say in these four woes.

I'm reading a fascinating book called *The Silk Roads* by Peter Frankopan. It's a retelling of the history of the world from the perspective of the economic interests that created and established the Silk Road. You may have heard of the Silk Road. It's the ancient trade, refers to the ancient trade routes that used to connect East and West, from China and Japan on the east all the way into Europe on the West. And that is what drew the world together. And what drew the world together really from a Biblical theological perspective was really greed and covetousness. As the West cast its greedy eye on the East, desiring things like silk and spices, the East did the same to the West, wanting all the things that it didn't yet possess.

In fact, while Jesus was preaching this sermon, Tiberius was on the throne of the Roman Empire. And it was only called the Roman Empire because of his predecessor Caesar Augustus, who died in AD 14. He rose to prominence by seizing and annexing Egypt. By taking Egypt, Augustus was the hero of Rome. He was no longer called Octavius, the Roman general. He's Caesar Augustus. The Roman Senate was all too pleased to bestow upon him the title emperor, bringing an end to the Republic and establishing the Roman Empire. Very pleased with the annexing of Egypt. Frankopan writes this, he says "The capture of Egypt transformed Rome's fortunes. Now that it controlled the vast harvests of the Nile Valley the price of grain tumbled, providing a major boost to household spending power. Interest rates plummeted. This in turn quickly fueled the familiar boom that accompanies a flood of cheap capital, a surge in property prices. Disposable income increased so sharply that Augustus was able to raise the financial threshold for qualification for members of the Senate by 40%. As Augustus himself was fond of boasting, he found Rome a city built in brick, but left it in marble. This surging wealth," the result, "was the result of Rome's ruthless expropriation of Egypt's tax revenues, and of its enormous resources." End Quote.

Not only did Augustus tax Egypt and turn Egypt's wealth into Rome's wealth but, as Frankopan acknowledges, the process of appropriating revenues was repeated elsewhere as the tentacles of Roman economic and military expansion extended further. Just north of Egypt he extracted taxes from Judea, which Luke recorded in Luke 2:1 through 3. He extracted taxes from Syria as well. And those revenues funded his desire for even more, more, and more, and more, for the fortunes of the empires to the east, like the Persian Empire.

At the same time, rulers in China were expanding their economic interests as well, coming east toward Persia. Merchants brought their coveted silk to trade creating new markets along the way that they themselves could supply. Which would increase not only their own wealth but also increase the wealth of the rulers who sent and subsidized those expeditions. So thus the trade routes were created by the expansion of empires driven along by the desire for more, and more, and more. And you might think that all this empire expansion served the interests merely of the rulers and the super-rich. And that's certainly true, it did that. They were all increasing their fortunes to a ridiculous degree.

But, back to Ronald Reagan's trickle-down economics. Though there was still a vast divide between the rich and the poor, there was a growing middle class. The potential for many for upward mobility in society. The rising tide of surplus lifted all the boats. For those who listened to Jesus that day pronounce his woes on the rich, they themselves were at that time being tempted toward the pursuit of wealth. There's a poignant excitement in the air beckoning to them from the culture in which they lived. Come, get your fill. Come, fill your pockets. The desire to pursue the, the wealth, the ostentation, the extravagance of the super-rich, was a powerful elixir that summoned all classes of people.

Frankopan writes this as well. He says quote, "This is captured perfectly in Petronius' *Satyricon*, whose most," that's a that's a work of literary fiction, "whose most famous scene is the dinner party of Trimalchio, a former slave who had gained his freedom and amassed a fortune. Trimalchio wanted only the best that money could buy. Pheasant brought in specially from the eastern coast of the Black Sea. Guinea fowl from Africa rare and expensive fish, plumed peacock, and much more besides, presented in excess. The grotesque theatre of presenting dish after dish. Live birds sewn inside a whole pig, that flew out the moment the ham was carved, or silver toothpicks being given

to the guests, was a remorseless parody of the vulgarity and excess of Rome's new wealth. One of the major booms of antiquity, produced one of the great literary expressions of bitter jealousy toward the nouveau rich." End quote.

And that's why Jesus' introduction to the Sermon on the Mount, with these beatitudes favoring the poor and pronouncing woes upon the rich, they reach so deeply into the covetous desires of the human heart, for rich and poor alike, and everyone in between, Jesus has flipped the world and its aspirations on its head. Those who enter the kingdom of God are not the rich but the impoverished. Those who will be satisfied and laughing in the kingdom are those who are currently languishing and weeping.

Those who will be accepted and embraced are not those with stellar reputations among people of this world. Instead, it's those who are the excluded, the reviled, the spurned of this world. They are the ones, and they alone, who have a reward in heaven, a great reward. And one day they will meet the God who will crown them with exceedingly great reward when they arrive there. Total reversal of fortune. Total reversal of expectation, and acutely convicting to Jesus' original audiences. Especially, especially because in their heart of hearts his words resonated

in their conscience. They knew he was right. He'd exposed them as covetous and jealous, longing for riches, just like everyone else.

Now, as we've said before, the main targets of Jesus' sermon are the disciples. We've pointed this out before, but look back at verse 20, Jesus lifted up his eyes, on whom, on his disciples. He's speaking to them. They are the poor, the hungry, the weeping, and the despised. But, keep in mind, while the poor and the rich provide vivid illustrations, it is not financial condition, per se, that Jesus is talking about here. Jesus is here confronting and exposing a spiritual condition. Rich and poor has to do with one's attitude toward wealth or the lack of wealth.

Whether in plenty or in want, everyone is tempted toward greed. Everyone is tempted to trust in money to solve problems, to satisfy desires, to buy your way out of things. So Jesus is confronting and exposing the very truest desires of everyone's heart. So when Jesus said blessed are the poor, he's confronting the human tendency to rely on material privilege, to look to things to satisfy. To spend your life trying to find happiness in the stuff that money can buy. When he says, woe the rich, he's confronting that tendency. All the while ignoring spiritual



realities that lie in wait around the corner of a very few short years, that's the rich. They ignore that. They indulge in what their money can buy.

The poor of whom Jesus speaks. We said that's the word *ptochos*. As we said, it's not just a matter of money, how much someone has, or does not have, his bank account. The condition of being a *ptochos* person is about one's attitude toward money. The poor person has cut off and given up all hope in money. He puts no trust in money, but he looks upward to God, like a beggar, looking for nothing but mercy. That is a perfect picture of God's people and of Jesus' true disciples. The poor here, that Jesus ascribes blessedness to, this is the kind of person who, like a destitute beggar, he possesses no self-reliance whatsoever. The rich, all self-reliance. The poor has no reliance on material or financial advantage. The rich, that's what he hopes in. That's what he relies on.

For the poor, in his heart, everything has been stripped away. He relies upon God and God alone. But the rich, the rich is clouded in his judgment, in his thinking, because he doesn't just rely upon God, he doesn't just desire God and God alone. Everything has not been stripped away. He has other little idols. One in particular called Mammon. The poor realizes though

that all his joy, all his future, all his satisfactions are found in God and God alone, and he will only gain them in right relation to God. That is the poor.

Now in contrast to the poor are the rich, and theirs is a sad, sad condition. You're probably not accustomed to thinking about the rich and the super-rich as being in a sad, lamentable, pathetic condition, but I want to disabuse you of that notion Biblically. And I want you to think about the rich in a much different way than you have in the past. I want you to lament and be sad over their condition, in hopes that they might be saved, even though it's like a camel through the eye of a needle, that they too might be saved and to come into full possession of an eternal kingdom while their earthly wealth burns and is destroyed. I hope you think that way about the rich after this sermon is over.

That's really the first point. Notice the sad condition of the rich, the sad condition of the rich. Just going to give you two points, but the first one I can just guarantee you is a long point, Okay? It's a long point. The sad condition of the rich. Again, we're talking about a spiritual condition. The super-rich, their extravagances provide us with an illustration. They expose the desires of the heart, but really this is about the

heart, not about the bank account. Okay? After all there were wealthy people in Scripture who belonged to God, weren't there?

In the Old Testament, certainly Abraham, the father of faith, he was wealthy. Isaiah frequented the king's court, probably a man of means. Nehemiah, he was cup bearer to the king of Persia, became the Governor of Jerusalem. Go into the New Testament men like Nicodemus, and Joseph of Arimathea. Certainly not poor men. Levi and Zacchaeus, both of them had been tax collectors, made a fortune. We read of wealthy women, Mary of Bethany, holy women who accompanied Jesus and his disciples, probably provided some funding for that itinerant ministry. Women like Lydia of Philippi who was a wealthy textile merchant. These are all wealthy people. But they do not fall under the pronouncement of these woes, they're counted among the poor. Why? Because they put no trust in riches. Their hearts are not attached to what they have. They find no hope in wealth like the poor. They consider themselves destitute beggars before God. They invest their earthly wealth into the advancement of a future heavenly kingdom.

But among the rich as a class of people, we do have to acknowledge, as Jesus said, there are very few Abrahams, very few Nicodemus. Remember Jesus' words to his disciples, Matthew

19:23, after the rich young ruler walked away from Christ? How difficult it is for wealthy people, for those who love money to separate from their money and to love Christ and Christ alone. Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I tell you, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God." It's difficult. In fact, it's so, so difficult it's impossible. It's exceedingly difficult because it's impossible. Like the salvation of any of us, impossible. But it's not impossible for God because God can save rich and poor alike. He saves. His power is unlimited.

But for those whose hearts are fixed on riches, no matter what their bank account looks like, as we've said, some of those greedy money loving people, or those who don't have it. Those who love money, that's something that doesn't pay attention to class. It doesn't pay attention to economic status. It doesn't pay attention to bank account. The love of money, the love of wealth, the love of riches is in any human heart, rich or poor. And that's why there are so many get rich quick schemes, multi-level marketing schemes, lotteries, gambling, Las Vegas. All of that is targeted not toward the extremely wealthy, but to the poor and the ignorant. All those schemes prey upon the foolish.

Why do those schemes succeed? Because there are many poor who love money just as much as the rich love money.

The word here used for the rich is the word *plousios*. And you can think of them in stark contrast to the impoverishment of the poor, and that's, that's the picture. Think of the, the Bill Gates of this world, or the Jeff Bezos, or whoever is the next billionaire trillionaire, whatever, that's the idea here. The word goes beyond simply being well supplied and having enough. Refers to having an abundance of earthly possessions that exceeds normal experience. The rich are those who look to money to deliver them, to please them, to buy whatever they want, so they'll never have to want again. That's the idea.

This is in direct contrast, by the way, to the godly who say, along with Agur in Proverbs 30:7 to 9, he prays this very pious prayer, "Two things I ask of you God; deny them not to me before I die." He says, "Remove far from me," remove far from me, "falsehood and lying; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God." That right there is the attitude of the Godly. Don't give me too much, don't give me too

little. Give me this day my daily bread. That's the attitude of the godly. A singular concern to be in right relation with God.

In that passage, though, in Proverbs 30, we can hear that fundamental danger of pursuing wealth and riches. Because the rich, there's the danger of becoming full and denying God and saying, who is the Lord? It's called suicide by wealth, isn't it? One more thing to point out, before we get into some of the detail here. When Jesus described blessedness to those who are the poor, hungry, weeping, and despised, just to be clear, he's not talking about four different kinds of people here. He's describing one kind of person, the poor, hungry, weeping, and despised, though, those are four related characteristics of the same person, his true disciples. And in the same way when Jesus pronounced woes upon the rich, the fool, the laughing, the, the popular, the well-spoken of. Again, that's not four different kinds of people, it's the same kind of person. Those are the people who do not possess the kingdom and never will. Thus the reason for the woe.

So for our purposes, we're just going to call these people the rich, having made our qualifications. These are the rich because their hearts are tied to this world. They seek wealth. They find wealth and contentment in this world, happiness,

treasure on earth instead of treasure in heaven. They seek to fill their bellies now rather than wait till then. They, they laugh themselves silly because they love their fun. They want to avoid all kinds of pain, and hunger, and sadness, all emptiness and crying. In the words of one of today's false prophets, they want their best life now. They don't want to wait for it until later. They look for comfort, security, happiness, and temporal wealth with very little thought, or concern for eternal wealth, kingdom concerns, God's interests, not theirs. All their interests and their efforts are in this life right now and not in the life to come.

Now if you look at those three verses, you'll see in verses 24 to 26 how Jesus describes the sad condition of the rich. The rich here love money. They love to be full. They love to be happy, laughing. They love flattery. Just briefly we'll walk through each one of these points to see why those descriptions there, describe the rich trapped in such a lamentable condition. And hopefully it will evoke your sympathy for them as well, a gospel-oriented compassion. Do you wanna bring them the gospel?