

A sermon in the Series "Following Christ's Call:
A Journey of Transformation – Live the Kingdom"
Luke 6:17-26
Plymouth Presbyterian Church
St Helens, Oregon
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The other day, I asked a woman I knew as I was passing in the Post Office, "How are you?" She smiled and said, "I'm blessed, thank you!"

It wasn't the time for a deep discussion, but I wanted to ask, "What do you mean by that?" What does it truly mean to be blessed?

Most of us define blessings as health, prosperity, and good fortune. The old hymn reminds us:

*"Count your blessings, name them one by one,
Count your blessings, see what God hath done!"*

We often think of blessings as life's comforts—a steady job, a loving family, good health. But what if blessings aren't just about ease and abundance? What if they sometimes wear the disguise of hardship?

Luke 6:17-26 provides a radical perspective on blessings and woes. Jesus speaks to the crowd, turning worldly expectations upside down:

*"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."*

But then comes the warnings,

*"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."*

An ancient Chinese parable tells of a young man whose horse ran away. His father simply said, "*You never know, it could be a blessing.*" When the horse returned with a fine stallion, everyone celebrated. Again, his father warned, "*You never know, it could be a curse.*" When the young man broke his leg riding the new horse, people pitied him. "*You never know, it could be a blessing,*" his father said again. When war broke out and all able-bodied men were sent to battle, the boy was spared because of his broken leg. (A story by Liu An)

Life is full of reversals. Jesus taught that the kingdom belongs to the poor, the hungry will be filled, and those who mourn will laugh. What the world values often proves empty, while struggles shape us in ways prosperity never could. **To truly live the kingdom is to embrace this paradox, trusting that even in difficulty, God is at work.**

Consider the man who wins the lottery, only to watch his life unravel. Or the high-powered promotion that steals time from family. What looks like a blessing can become a burden.

Pastor Philip McLarty tells the story:

When I was younger, my children found a skateboard in the underbrush near a river. They had wanted one for months, but my wife believed skateboards were trouble. Yet, it had washed up as if by fate, so she let them keep it. What seemed like a lucky find quickly turned sour—constant arguments, scrapes, and bruises. One day, after yet another fight, my wife had enough. “You were having such a good time before you found that skateboard,” she said. The boys thought it over and, without a word, walked back to the river and tossed the skateboard in. They watched it drift away, realizing that what had felt like a blessing had really stolen their peace.

It’s a pattern we see over and over. Someone gets a dream job, but the stress and long hours take a toll. A family moves into a bigger house, only to be burdened by overwhelming debt.

But if a blessing can turn out to be a curse, the opposite is also true.

Garth Brooks sang about *unanswered prayers*—the love he once begged for would have kept him from the life he was meant to have. The lyrics say:

“She wasn’t quite the angel that I remembered in my dreams,
And I could tell that time had changed me
In her eyes, too, it seems.
We tried to talk about the good old days,
There wasn’t much we could recall.
I guess the Lord knows what he’s doin’ after all.

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers.
Remember when you’re talkin’ to the man upstairs
That just because he may not answer doesn’t mean he don’t care;
Some of God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers.”

It’s a truth we often realize only in hindsight. How many times has a lost job led to a better opportunity? A heartbreak paved the way for real love? A setback forced a redirection that turned out to be exactly what we needed?

There is an old saying:

*"I asked God for strength, that I might achieve;
I was made weak,
that I might learn humbly to obey;
I asked for health, that I might do greater things,
I was given infirmity,
that I might do better things;
I asked for riches, that I might be happy,
I was given poverty,*

*that I might be wise;
I asked for power, that I might have the praise of others,
I was given weakness,
that I might feel the need of God;
I asked for all things, that I might enjoy life,
I was given life,
that I might enjoy all things;*

*I got nothing that I asked for,
But everything that I had hoped for;
Almost despite myself, my unspoken prayers were answered,
And I am, of all people, most richly blessed."*
(Creed: Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine, NYC)

Paul, battered and rejected, still proclaimed:
*"Suffering produces perseverance;
perseverance, character;
and character, hope."* (Romans 5:3-5)

OT Joseph, the favorite son, was betrayed by his own brothers and sold into slavery. Yet, through a series of seemingly cruel twists of fate, he became the second-most powerful man in Egypt and saved an entire nation from famine. When confronted by his brothers, he said, *"You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."* (Genesis 50:20)

Jesus' words in Luke 6 challenge us to rethink what it means to be blessed. **He calls us not to seek comfort but to live the kingdom, embracing a reality where hardships refine us and where true blessings come not in wealth but in faith, perseverance, and love.**

God weaves our triumphs and trials into something greater. *"All things work together for good for those who love the Lord."* (Romans 8:28)

We live in a world that often measures blessings in wealth, success, and comfort. **But to truly live the kingdom is to recognize that real blessings shape our character, deepen our faith, and bring us closer to God.**

A friend named Gene puts his own twist on it when he's asked, "How are you? He no longer drives. Cancer is slowly taking more from him. When asked, he says, "I am Blest by the Best!"

A failed plan, a loss, a challenge—these may feel like curses in the moment, but they can lead us to greater wisdom, deeper gratitude, and unexpected joy.

So next time someone asks, "How are you?"—smile and say, *"I'm blessed, Blest by the Best!"*