

Blessed Be

Preached FCCW on February 17, 2019

Jeremiah 17:5-10 and Luke 6:17-26

When I was a kid, my parents gave me a subscription to *Highlights for Children*, a monthly magazine for kids. Other than the grown-up feeling I got from having magazines delivered in the mail just for me, there's not a lot else I can recall about the magazine's content.

Except for Goofus and Gallant.

Goofus and Gallant were the names of two characters who appeared in a comic strip that ran in every issue of Highlights. The intent of the Goofus and Gallant page was to prompt kids like me to think about right and wrong behaviors and hopefully to help us make good choices in life. The comic was always divided into two separate panels presented side by side. One for Goofus and one for Gallant. Neither one ever crossed over to interact with the other one. It was like they dwelt in two totally separate universes. Gallant's actions were always virtuous and respectful. Goofus' actions were always rude and selfish.

Each panel contained a caption that explained what was going on in the picture. For instance, a panel showing Goofus sitting in front of the TV, ignoring visitors, would be captioned "Goofus turns on the television when there are guests." While an adjacent picture of Gallant sitting with his back to the TV and his attention directed to the visitors would say, "whenever guests arrive, Gallant turns off the television at once." The hope was that kids would compare the actions of Goofus and Gallant and make judgments for themselves about right and wrong.

Interestingly, something that was never shown were the outcomes of the boy's behaviors. There were never any rewards or punishments connected to their actions. It was assumed, I guess, that the values of good or bad were self-evident in the observation of the acts themselves and that kid's like me were capable of making the correct conclusions based on that evidence without consequences being part of the equation. The lesson was that doing the right thing was its own reward.

Another unspoken assumption embedded in the Goofus and Gallant examples is that correct moral choices made by individuals eventually offered a hope for a better world in general.

The Bible is full of Goofus and Gallant style messages. Sometimes they can be read into the actions of the characters of the sacred narratives. Other times they need to be teased out of parables such as Jesus told. Occasionally, they are delivered with the directness and clarity of moral pronouncements. Both our readings this morning fall into that third category.

The prophet Jeremiah distinguished between people who are blessed and those who are cursed. In Luke's rendering of the Beatitudes Jesus draws a dividing line between people who experience God's blessings and others who are dealt woes. You don't have to be a Biblical scholar to deduce that blessings are good and curses or woes are not good. Like rewards and

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punishments. You can read into those statements that God blesses “good” people like Gallant, and curses or sends woes upon people, like Goofus, who behave badly.

There are multiple problems with those interpretations.

Beginning with the fact that a relationship with God based on a system of rewards and punishments is inconsistent with the core teaching of the Bible; which is that our relationship with God is founded on grace – on God’s unconditional love and mercy – and not on deserving God’s love by what we do.

The second inconsistency arises when we admit that, if this *is* how God operates – on a system of rewards and punishments -- He is not very good at enforcing His own rules. We don’t have to look very far to notice that woefully bad things happen to good people; and that unethical people often seem to reap big rewards.

If all we had to go on was the evidence of our own eyes it would appear that the Beatitudes have it backwards when they tell the poor, the hungry, the mournful and the persecuted that they are *blessed*; while declaring that the rich, the well-to-do, those who have everything their hearts desire and have the world’s stamp of approval are actually living *woeful* lives.

A better understanding of blessedness and woes, begins with the acknowledgment that our actions, our words, and even our thoughts, produce their own consequences. Whatever we do creates chains of reactions and responses and sets in motion patterns that lead to outcomes – for better or worse. That is not the same thing as divine rewards and punishments.

The Bible frequently points to God blessing people. But it also speaks of people blessing God in return, or blessing others with the blessedness they have experienced. Blessedness then, is mainly about making choices based on an awareness of the blessing of God’s love for you, and responding by extending blessing to others.

There is a surprising symmetry between blessings and woes in the Beatitudes. Each blessing and each woe are mirror images of each other. Blessedness is promised to the poor and woe to the rich. Those who are hungry will be filled, while those who are full now will be hungry. Those who weep now will laugh while those who laugh now will weep. Framed in those terms, the Beatitudes seem to describe a universe that is presently out of balance, and waiting for God to correct the iniquities that exist.

There is only one Blessing among the Beatitudes that is not matched with a corresponding woe. It is also, the only blessing or woe that is not presented as a future promise. That is the first blessing. “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours *is* the kingdom of God.” Present tense. Not yours *will be* the kingdom of God. Yours *is* the kingdom of God.

To appreciate the significance of that difference, it helps to clarify what the Bible means by “the kingdom of God.” You can’t really understand Jesus and his ministry without a grasp of this expression, because the kingdom of God was central to everything Jesus taught and did. Jesus

spoke of the kingdom of God in two ways. The first is as God's original and ideal intention for humanity. God's intention for humanity always revolved around a universal blessedness, where every person shares a relationship with God and the fruits of that relationship. In that sense, the kingdom of God is already a present reality, if only in the heart of God. But until it is also a reality, or even a genuine desire, in the hearts of men and women, the kingdom of God remains a future promise only.

Poverty, suffering, persecution – in short, all the conditions described in the Beatitudes -- are all symptoms of the as yet unfulfilled reality of God's kingdom on earth. Jesus considered the closing of that gap to be so important that he taught his disciples to pray for God's kingdom to come, *"on earth as it is in heaven."* The Beatitudes are Jesus' vision of what God's answer to that prayer will look like. What it looks like, is a level playing field for all.

If the Beatitudes identify the problem of some going without while others have too much; it also portrays the day when the hungry will be filled and the full will be hungry. In other words, we will know the kingdom of God has arrived when all things have become equal for all people everywhere.

For Christians the beatitudes are a compelling motivation to work towards a fair and just society by pursuing policies that address the needs of the poor, provide equal access to opportunity, and reverse existing inequities. For those who have been denied, these steps will be cause for rejoicing. But for those who have trusted in material blessings and neglected to be a blessing to others, there will be a sense of woe and reactions of resistance to the sacrifices needed to make all things equal.

Which is why the transition to God's kingdom on earth -- from a future promise to a present reality -- will really come down to a spiritual transformation.

Jeremiah hit the nail on the head when he said that "the heart is devious above all else; it is perverse – who can understand it?" That's not a line that you will find on any Valentine's Day card, but it is a helpful reminder of where the coming of God's kingdom must begin.

With a change of heart.

The difference between blessed and cursed is not determined by divine rewards or punishments. Neither is it marked by what one possesses or what one lacks. It is revealed in where one's heart lays. Where trust is placed.

Jeremiah warns, "Cursed are those who trust in mere mortals and make mere flesh their strength, whose hearts turn away from the Lord." The consequence of their turning from trusting God is that they become like a desert shrub that doesn't let itself receive the refreshing rains that God sends. Ironically, it is not a curse from God that they suffer. It is a curse that comes from turning away from the blessing God offers them.

Meanwhile, the blessed are those who trust in the Lord. Their trust in God makes them like a tree planted by a stream, which sinks its roots deep to drink from what God offers. The dividing line separating the blessed from the woeful is as complete as the division that keeps Goofus and Gallant from ever crossing the line between their comic strip panels.

But the truth is, that we are all a conflicted mixture of Goofus and Gallant ourselves.

And our cooperation in the bringing the promise of universal blessedness into present reality rests on our ongoing commitment to having our hearts in the right place, and our roots sunk deep to receive the life-giving waters of God's presence. So that, when praying, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven, we don't forget to add, and let it begin with me.

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